Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement

Uncorrected oral evidence: Citizenship and Civic Engagement

Wednesday 13 September 2017
11.40 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts (Chairman); Lord Blunkett; Lord Harries of Pentregarth; Baroness Morris of Yardley; Baroness Newlove; Baroness Redfern; Baroness Stedman-Scott; Lord Verjee.

Evidence Session No. 3 Heard in Public Questions 25 - 34

Witnesses

I: Michael Sani, Chief Executive, Bite the Ballot; Ashok Viswanathan, Deputy Director, Operation Black Vote; Professor Jon Tonge, Professor of Politics, University of Liverpool; Matteo Bergamini, Founder and Director, Shout Out UK.

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Examination of Witnesses

Michael Sani, Ashok Viswanathan, Professor Jon Tonge, Matteo Bergamini.

Q25 The Chairman: Thank you all very much for coming along; we are very grateful to you for giving up the time to help us in this inquiry. Can I just remind you that a list of interests of Members relevant to the inquiry has been sent to you and is available? This session is open to the public, it is being broadcast live on our website and it is being recorded for BBC Parliament. A verbatim transcript will be taken of the evidence and we will put it on the Committee’s website. A few days after the session, you will be sent a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy and it would be helpful if you could advise us of any corrections as quickly as possible. If, after this evidence session, you wish to clarify or amplify any points made during your evidence or have additional points you would like to make, you are most welcome to submit supplemental evidence to us. Could I begin by asking you all to introduce yourselves? If you wish to make a personal statement about this evidence session, please do so, but, with an eye on the clock, could any such statements be brief, please? Perhaps we can start with Mr Sani.

Michael Sani: I am Mike Sani, chief executive of Bite the Ballot.

Ashok Viswanathan: I am Ashok Viswanathan, deputy director and co-founder of Operation Black Vote, which was founded in 1996.

Professor Jon Tonge: Jon Tonge, professor of politics at the University of Liverpool, former chair of the Youth Citizenship Commission.

Matteo Bergamini: My name is Matteo and I am from Shout Out UK. We try to get more young people engaged and involved in politics and we run political literacy courses in schools.

Q26 The Chairman: We will go straight to questions, and can I start by asking you to provide the Committee with a brief statement of your views on the current state of democratic engagement in the UK?

Matteo Bergamini: I am quite new in this space as Shout Out UK was started in 2014, but, based on my own experience and dealing with this space, I would say it is disjointed at the moment. Citizenship education is often treated as second-class in schools and a lack of a political literacy in schools means that that automatically lowers the engagement level of young people, partly because they just do not have the knowledge when they come out of school and get to voting age to be able to actively engage with the system.

I would say that there has been fantastic work done around voter and democratic engagement from the organisations which are here today, from Bite the Ballot with voter registration and so forth, but I would say that the core issue for myself and, I think, others is that there is a very low level of political literacy at the moment in schools and in regard to democratic engagement in general. Obviously, voter registration and so forth is incredibly important, but we need to give young people an
understanding of how the system works, how to engage with it and how democracy works. At the moment, I do not think that is happening in our schools or in society as a whole. That is my view.

**Professor Jon Tonge:** The picture is mixed in terms of democratic engagement. If I were a glass-half-full person, I would point to the increases in turnout for which there has been evidence since the nadir of 2001 when only 59% of people voted. We were up to almost 69% at the recent general election, we had a high turnout for the EU referendum and we have had a very significant increase in the percentage of young people, 18 to 24 year-olds, voting. I think that citizenship education, notwithstanding the problems of delivery which have been associated with that, is beginning to make a difference in youth political engagement and we are seeing the results of a decade and a half, so I am an optimist in a lot of ways. The level of democratic engagement is probably improving, but there are still some huge gaps, most notably in terms of local government where, frankly, there is very little democratic engagement of young people, in particular, but not exclusively young people, and we still have a problem with those who are hard to reach who do not democratically engage at all. Even with the increased turnout at the last election, only 32 million of a potential 47 million people voted, and 80% of those who do not vote in one general election do not vote at the next, the serial abstainers, the hard-to-reach groups, and we still have not really tackled that problem.

**Ashok Viswanathan:** When we set up the organisation Operation Black Vote in 1996, one in four people from African, Caribbean and Asian communities were not registered to vote and over half were not turning up at polling stations and exercising their vote, and I believe that that situation has not changed a great deal since 1996. In other areas, our work has excelled. When we set up the organisation, there were only five black minority ethnic MPs in Parliament and today there are more than 50, so we have seen moves in some areas, but I would say that there still remains a great challenge around increasing BME voter registration and voter participation, and that, for us, is the biggest challenge moving forward. Some of the challenges have already been outlined—political education, political literacy—but the elephant in the room on this is the lack of funding within local authorities, education authorities and from central government to promote this sort of work, which is important not just in the election cycle but outside of an election cycle.

**Michael Sani:** It could certainly be improved. There is immense potential to increase the civic participation of young and, especially, socially excluded citizens. However, I do not think there is a silver bullet for that and it needs to be carefully thought out. The goal is to ensure that people can play an active role and understand the responsibilities of playing an active role. Much of that starts within education, but we should not overlook the family home. There need to be greater efforts to increase cross-sector collaborations, but that normally comes down to financial support, especially for NGOs.
Ultimately, we are at a time now where the increase in the youth vote in the last election is definitely putting their demand for their vote on the table. I think we will see more parties trying to actively canvass for that vote. Greater communication will, essentially, lead to more participation. The work of the Select Committee last year, which Graham Allen led, was fantastic, but we did not see any of it come to fruition and a lot of work went into that, so I am curious to know if the recommendations that come from this will actually lead to something.

**Lord Blunkett:** So are we.

**The Chairman:** We hope so.

**Q27 Baroness Morris of Yardley:** In your responses to that question, each of you in your different ways mentioned reforms to the electoral process, whether it is registration, finance or all the rest of it. Is there anything else you want to say on that, and is there any particular change to the machinery of voting and participation? Also, what none of you mentioned were politicians, political parties and manifestos. I suppose there might be an argument that voter turnout drops when there is not much difference between the parties—and I can see that there might be a responsibility—and there is not much there worth going out for. 2001 could be explained by the fact that there was not likely to be a change of Government. We have had a lot of discussion about 2017 and the Labour manifesto being very attractive. There are two bits to that question really: is there anything particular in the electoral machinery; and do you have a view on the role of the political parties in encouraging people to vote?

**Professor Jon Tonge:** On the parties, that is where I am again optimistic because there was an awful lot of literature in political science not that long ago about the death of political parties, but most political parties in the UK have seen a very substantial growth in membership in recent years, which has hopefully put that to bed.

In terms of the mechanics, I understand why the Government moved from household to individual electoral registration, because there was far too much pressure placed upon the leader of the household registering the family and, in a lot of cases, that was not being done. However, individual registration, to me, is not the optimum option. I think the best method would be to have automatic electoral registration based upon your national insurance number.

If we are not going to have that method, schools, colleges and universities should, as part of the enrolment process, put people on the register when they come to 16 or 17 years old. It should be automatic, when you turn up at university, that you are enrolled with an opportunity to vote at home, if so preferred. I do not understand why it is not an automatic part of the enrolment process. It also would be an act of citizenship within schools or colleges which would be quite a ceremony and, when someone goes on the electoral register, why not make that part of a citizenship class? I really cannot understand why it has not been done already.
Michael Sani: That is in the works though, is it not? The Government, prior to the announcement of the snap election, made possible amendments to the Higher Education and Research Bill where universities will have advice to enrol students at the point at which they enrol on their university course, so it will be interesting to see if that is maintained on the agenda.

Lord Blunkett: People may have thought that that was a bad idea in view of the result of the election.

Michael Sani: Yes. I think there needs to be an increase of digital democracy. I know that we are far away from ever allowing voting to be done online, but there could be an increase of digital democracy. There are fantastic tools out there which enable citizens to share data based on their views and opinions, and that could be a great asset to political parties, when writing manifestos—to be able to look at data and see where there is demand for particular pledges. I think we will see a natural advancement there.

Lord Harries of Pentregarth: Do any of you have any views on compulsory voting and, looking at the experience of other countries, do you see both advantages and disadvantages?

Ashok Viswanathan: I am very much against compulsory voting or anything punitive around citizenship education or increasing political literacy. You really have to change attitudes and I do not agree with anything that is punitive. To add to what has been said, and I obviously agree with everything that has been said so far, I have found that one of the biggest hurdles in the 2015 election and the 2017 snap election was voter registration. We had a mobile bus which went around the country and registered people to vote, using the gov.uk site, and the biggest hurdle was when we got to national insurance. I simply do not understand why it is necessary and why there cannot be alternatives, for example, that people cannot take their passport to the polling station on the day or why we do not have early voting, like they have in a lot of American states. When I say early voting, I am not talking about postal voting but about having a polling station open. You could have a central polling station open for two or four weeks before election day with people able to go in and vote early, which gives that flexibility that people do not have in the UK. Obviously, in many countries, they do not use a Thursday for election day. There are a lot of things around flexibility and access which are lacking at the moment in the mechanics of our current system.

The Chairman: If you are doing that, are you restricting postal voting?

Ashok Viswanathan: No.

The Chairman: So you would not be changing any of the existing system, just adding an early-voting facility.

Ashok Viswanathan: Yes.

Lord Blunkett: I was going to ask about auto-enrolment for registration
and compulsory voting, but it has obviously been well covered, so perhaps I can just do a sort of off-ball googly and say that, 17 years ago, quite a lot of research was done by the Government in relation to the stake that people had in society determining their willingness to engage in all sorts of ways, not just voting but in participating as active citizens. Part of the consequence of that was the development of the Child Trust Fund, which was abolished in 2011, for new youngsters. The idea of that was that people would have some asset when they became adults and transcended to adulthood in a world where the divide between those with and without assets is growing by the day, not least because of house prices in London and the south-east of England. Do you have any thoughts about the connection between engagement and some form of asset and stake in society?

**Professor Jon Tonge:** It is not a panacea, but there is citizen education. When we controlled for social class and for a whole range of socioeconomic indicators, it showed that that made a difference and that properly delivered citizenship education helped people’s propensity to democratically engage and to go and vote, regardless of their social class. There is still an imbalance and, clearly, those who are better off in society are more likely to go and vote and to democratically engage. That comes across in every study that has ever been done. In terms of remedying that problem and improving political engagement among those who are less well off in society, I would argue that citizenship education is beginning to make a difference. It will not completely redress that imbalance and we should not pretend that it can, but it does aid participation across the social classes.

**Matteo Bergamini:** I fully agree with what has been said, but I would add that there is a danger in linking engagement and participation with having assets because, if you look at the current price of properties and young people being able to buy a home and so forth, that is not a possibility for a lot of young people. The main way of engaging people who are not already engaged is by giving them those tools to be able to understand how the system works because, whether or not you have an asset within society, a direct financial stake or whatever else, politics affects you, and it is making sure that people know and understand, regardless of where you are socially, economically or whatever else, that politics impacts your life.

For me, that issue starts with schools as well as voluntary organisations, local councils and so forth. It starts in education where you get young people engaged or get people talking about it and understanding even something like this, understanding what a committee is and how they can start to engage with the actual process. A lot of people do not have a clue what a committee like this does or what first past the post is or what an MP does and the difference between an MP and a councillor. We are talking about very basic things, which are required for people to actively participate in our democracy, which people just do not understand or do not get.

**The Chairman:** We will get to Baroness Redfern’s question on that point,
but, Professor Tonge, did you have something more you wanted to tell us about the technical processes of voting, because I think we cut you short?

**Professor Jon Tonge:** There are only 11 democracies in the world that now use compulsory voting and it has not really acted as a panacea. If you look at the percentage of Australians who will take the 20 Australian dollar fine—and maybe they could raise the fine—that has not worked. Regarding the technicalities of voting, postal voting has been the one experiment that has improved participation. I remember the era when it was very difficult to get a postal vote and you had to prove why you were away. Postal voting is the only experiment that has offered a sustained increase in turnout. The other experiments did not work. Electronic voting did not work. When I chaired the Youth Citizenship Commission, we asked a lot of 16 and 17 year-olds and then 18 to 24 year-olds whether they thought it archaic to go to a draughty church hall and probably use a pencil for the only time in their lives and put their cross. They wanted that to be retained and they did not want text voting, which they thought was fine for “X Factor”, but too gimmicky for an election; they regarded elections as too serious for that. I am all for looking at technocratic solutions to how we vote, but I do not think that they would make a great deal of difference.

**The Chairman:** Lord Harries, have we bottomed out this compulsory voting for you enough?

**Lord Harries of Pentregarth:** Yes, but I have another supplementary and I would like to ask a bit more about the black community. Are there differences in the percentage of people who are registered to vote on age between older people, more settled people and younger people? What about the black churches, many of which of course are flourishing: how do they rate on registration and voting?

**Ashok Viswanathan:** Yes, there is higher voter registration and a higher voter turnout rate as the age groups increase. That is particularly the case with African-Caribbean communities and the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities. The Indian community seems to be pretty stable all the way through from a younger age going upwards.

The black churches, the African-Caribbean churches, have a huge sway now in voter registration and voter turnout. At every election since 2010, we have held rallies in megachurches around the UK, and not only do they have the facilities and the resources to assist in voter registration and voter engagement but they also have an immense amount of influence in their congregations and how their congregations vote, similar to the American models of black churches. There is a big argument for not just NGOs such as ours to engage with the black churches en masse on such a large scale but for political parties and leaders to do so. Some political leaders have understood this since 2010, but there is a lot more work that could be done with political parties and black churches, particularly on increasing engagement.
Baroness Redfern: I heard Matteo when he was talking about low-level engagement in schools, et cetera, but how do you think we could change that?

Matteo Bergamini: With regard to?

Baroness Redfern: Citizenship education.

Matteo Bergamini: For me, the ideal would be that it is made a compulsory subject in all secondary schools across the country, and that would include citizenship, the way the system works, our democracy, et cetera. Obviously, that is the ideal which may or may not happen. For me, there needs to be created almost a framework from central government which details key things that all schools need to cover throughout any academic cycle with specific points when it comes to general elections or major highlights in the political calendar. For example, when a general election comes by, it should not be just down to one or two teachers in a couple of schools who are really keen and interested themselves and, therefore, they set up mock elections or they start to look at manifestos and so forth. Schools should have a framework for this which they prepare for and where they know, if there is a general election, “This is what we will be doing throughout this time and, if there is not any major event in the political calendar, we should be using form time to discuss current affairs topics and we should be using certain lessons to look at different sections of how to engage”. Maybe they should use the connections with local MPs and have more engagement around that, not just talking about the issues but going into the systems in place around how that works essentially, so looking at councils, councillors and so forth. Although it may sound boring or something that young people are not interested in, they are interested in that because they are interested in current affairs and issues that obviously affect them and they want to understand how Parliament and government shape the society they live in.

Baroness Redfern: In my authority, we have a strong youth council and a very active young mayor engaging with MPs, which works really well and it engages young people. I think that is really important.

Michael Sani: Echoing Matteo and not to repeat what he has said, there are opportunities to ensure there is a greater social action element to schools. The NCS is now growing and becoming even more of an opportunity for young people to go on. Tying in to voter registration, it would be great if we could pilot automatic voter registration for attainers, which would go out with the NI number and references to the NCS. I know that HMRC wants to send a letter to every young person about the NCS, so let us also let people know that they can register to vote or tell them that they have been put on the register.

There are a few things to plug which we have done across the third sector such as the national voter registration drive, which is a fantastic call to action where private, public and NGO spaces come together around a key time in the calendar year. It is a great opportunity for
students to actively get involved and share why it is important to register to vote. The strongest examples are when students in year 9, who cannot even register, are running events to register the sixth form and talking about the benefits of jury service and credit rating and making it real for people. There are great opportunities to ensure that education offers that first step into active citizenship so that it becomes real.

Q30  **Baroness Newlove:** We have just been talking about national citizenship and my question is about volunteering. Do you believe that voluntary citizenship programmes, such as the NCS, should have an element of political education, as you have just discussed? Would this be effective in increasing democratic engagement? What do you see as the effect of volunteering on democratic engagement? I declare an interest as an observer of the National Citizen Service for OnSide Warrington Youth Club.

**Michael Sani:** With the NCS, there is a change in the royal charter that democratic engagement and the invitation to register to vote should be happening on the residential. I know that many participants enjoy the sessions that currently go on in the NCS around voter registration. Recently, the Cabinet Office tweeted with the Minister for the Constitution around young people telling him that they had registered to vote while on the NCS programme. However, I do not know the extent to which that has been rolled out or the standards to which it is being rolled out. Is there a certain programme that people must follow and is it down to the individual providers? Obviously, when you get into the detail, you might have an excellent provider in Liverpool who registers everyone and other people might not build it into their programmes, so it will be interesting to see how the royal charter is taken forward by the NCS itself.

**Professor Jon Tonge:** I am a fan of the National Citizen Service and I would like to see it better integrated into existing citizenship education. I would like to see a more political dimension to it. Part of the problem with citizenship education is that it has gone through different phases. You had the initial phase, the Crick/Lord Blunkett phase, when there was quite an emphasis on political engagement within citizenship education. We have rowed back from that slightly and it has been more about civil engagement and not mentioning the politics because it is a bit frightening and teachers do not want to touch it. The thirst for personal knowledge is clearly there. If you look at the fastest-growing A-level in the country, it is political science with a 13% increase in take-up for A-level politics from 2015 to 2016. We do not have a GCSE in politics, so how will we inculcate political knowledge in people if we do not embed it into such things as the National Citizen Service? You would not let people go out on the road and drive a car without giving them some lessons first, yet we expect them—particularly if we lower the voting age to 16—to go out and vote without giving them any training in what our political systems are about. It seems perverse.

Q31  **Baroness Stedman-Scott:** To what extent might the concept of the civic journey through life add to democratic participation? Do you support the idea of some sort of ceremony celebrating the citizen’s first vote or
other elements of symbolism that could be added to the democratic process?

_**Matteo Bergamini:**_ I am a big fan of ceremonies and all that kind of stuff; they make it more of a journey for people. Let me take a personal example of something that we do with our political literacy course. The course is six weeks and we go through the different processes within politics and, at the end, each of the students has to give a speech about something they feel passionate about. Their parents get invited and it is a little event, which is quite nice for them. It makes them strive for something at the end and it empowers their voices because they get to talk about something they feel passionate about to an audience. Small symbolic gestures such as that, for them, are quite empowering. It could be included in our civic journey so that, when you vote for the first time, there is some sort of ceremony—although I am not entirely sure how you would roll it out—that emphasises the importance of that and how precious that vote is. Often, we forget about it, and you can drill it down to just putting a cross in a box in a booth, but the reality is that the symbolism of the vote is important, but it is often left out of what we do. Democracy is not just a right but a responsibility and it requires all of us to maintain democracy, so any sort of civic journey in which you have milestones or some form of engagement where it becomes more than just a tick-box exercise every five years is something that definitely should be considered.

_The Chairman:_ Do any other of our witnesses wish to come in on that?

_**Professor Jon Tonge:**_ Yes, I think we should do much more to celebrate. We should issue certificates to celebrate people coming on to the register in the first place and certificates to celebrate your first time of active voting, one of the most important things you will do in your life. There has been talk about having more public holidays. I would not make them necessarily saint feast days, but how about celebrating the 1918 or the 1928 Representation of the People Acts? Let us celebrate democracy far more than we currently do.

_Q32_ _Lord Harries of Pentregarth:_ To what extent does a lack of integration in society hinder democratic engagement? Do you think that perceived differences with other members of society hinder people’s engagement with the democratic process?

_**Michael Sani:**_ I do, yes. I think communities are divided far too much, fuelled in many instances by the media, and we need to tackle the root cause of that and there needs to be far greater integration within communities, but we need to give people the skills to be able to do so. One of the biggest things that shocks me is the lack of empathy sometimes and that, when you meet people, they feel a lack of empathy for anyone who is different from them because they have too much pressure in their own lives and empathy is seen as a luxury.

WE Day, for example, is fantastic where children start at a young age to begin to understand differences and what is happening around the world
and begin to respect just how lucky and fortunate they are to be in this country. It needs to start a lot younger and we need far greater opportunities for our communities to interact. You see it first-hand where people will come together and talk about an issue. It is brilliant when they come to the conclusion that they can have a different outcome—and they might want a different outcome—but the best thing about it is listening to and hearing each other’s point of view, which we have not done enough. That can start by creating a safe space within education where people can debate issues and they are not taboo. The Prevent programme around extremism has not been well thought out; teachers getting emails saying, “If you hear these words, contact the community police officer” just drives communication underground. You need to create a safe space for people to talk about what they are worried about and explore it, so yes, I would say that integration is a huge factor.

Q33  Lord Verjee: Are there any other major issues relating to democratic engagement which you feel we have not covered yet? To me, the really complex problem here is how we find the solution to involve in the democratic process the people who need it most—the people who feel unrepresented and locked out of society. How do we get them to engage more with the democratic process and with the community as a whole?

Professor Jon Tonge: I suppose voting at 16 is an issue which we have not really covered. I think the pressure is increasing, and I am someone who is agnostic on this. The 16 and 17 year-olds may feel excluded by the fact that they do not have the vote and yet that age group has the vote in Scotland. You see the imbalances now in political and democratic engagement across the UK and it is an issue that will not go away, especially as every single political party or the powers in Westminster, except the Conservatives and the DUP—important though they are—now favour lowering the voting age, and I can see both vantages. I do not think anyone in Scotland would want to re-raise the voting age for devolved elections, but I also see some anomalies. There is a need for a holistic review of rights and responsibilities because those who voted on the independence of their country in Scotland in 2014 could not then go and buy a beer or cigarettes or even drive to their friends or buy a firework to celebrate the result either way, which suggests that there is an asymmetry of rights and responsibilities that needs addressing. If you are going to lower the voting age, it may well boost democratic engagement, but it begs wider questions about when rights and responsibilities of citizens should begin.

Lord Blunkett: I think that is crucial. Your review of it, which was a decade ago, had a draw, if my memory serves me correct; young people themselves were not entirely sure whether they wanted to vote at 16 and 17.

Professor Jon Tonge: Yes, they were split almost equally themselves, and the now-dated evidence from the Electoral Commission suggests that a majority of those 18 and over were against lowering the voting age, and I suppose that does beg the question of to what extent should that
majority view among the existing electorate be factored in: should it be factored in at all or not?

**Michael Sani:** There is an opportunity in that, though. If the Government or whichever relevant department were to announce that they would lower the voting age if the demand was there, then you put the onus back on the 16 and 17-year-olds themselves and they know, “Okay, if I want the vote, I need to register and I need to demonstrate that I want it”, in the same way that the vote was given to the suffragettes and everyone else where people actively campaigned for it. I do not think it is anyone’s place to say that we all put our names on a co-signed letter and expect the Government to lower the voting age. We should empower 16 and 17 year-olds to actively win the right to vote and then they will get their first of change-making and, from then on, it could be habitual. If you stand there and you know that you are one of the first attainers to campaign actively and encourage others and the result changes, I think you would see a natural increase in other areas where they want change.

**Baroness Newlove:** I am quite interested in 16 and 17 year-olds as I have three daughters, so I am coming from that angle, and my other role is as the Victims’ Commissioner. Social media presents a horrible platform and, if we give 16 and 17 year-olds the vote, if they know that their peers are not voting, then it interacts at another level, “Why are you not using your vote?”—they are very vocal, yet they do not have the life skills to understand that there is a choice in this. For me, it is about ensuring that we have a safety mechanism and that they understand it. As adults, we all have the right to vote and we know about the history of why we are voting. With social media, my concern is that that is 24/7 and it creates this different level which they do not understand and their choice is taken away because the mantra is “You are 16 and you must vote”. For me, it is about looking more deeply and protecting the ones who are not ready to do that and saying it is not essential that you must. We all know with politics that there are different levels of education and understanding.

**Michael Sani:** Much of that comes down to what people have said today, that you cannot have one without the other. There is political education, and the understanding of the entirety of the system and your role within it need to come hand in hand if you are ever to lower the voting age. For the record, I just point out that not every adult knows the history of voting. I did not; I registered to vote at 27.

**Baroness Newlove:** No, and I am not saying you do but, as you grow older, you get life skills and you have other conversations. In school, it is in a straight line, in a sense, and you get very vocal ones who do the youth politics and some have the ability to have the conversation, but they lack the confidence to do so, and I just do not want to dismiss that; I think we should cherish that and nurture them for when they are ready.

**Michael Sani:** Yes.
Matteo Bergamini: To add to what Mike said, social media present 24-hour news or opinion sites, if you want to call them that. Before social media, we still had the media and so forth which have their own opinions, advice and whatever else, and that has always existed ever since the media have been around. Obviously, social media have intensified that, but a lot of the articles and so forth which are being shared on social media come from the main newspapers anyway, so there is that information. I stand by what the panel has said, that to lower the voting age to 16 would mean that we need to start thinking seriously about improving political literacy education or citizenship education in schools. My argument is based on what I do, dealing with young people, but we could have the same conversation about 40 and 50 year-olds as well. Yes, they are slightly older, so they have had a potential chance to engage with the system. So, if you work for yourself, you engage a little bit with tax and you start to understand it a little bit more, but not necessarily, and sometimes you may have biases which you may have learnt or picked up from somewhere because you have never had a grounding in political education when you were in school, so you have to pick up things as you go. There is always that kind of case.

Baroness Newlove: Yes, there is always that, and I agree that the media are not always objective. There have always been media, but, as young people in schools say, it is 24/7. Years ago, you could have a weekend break and you could have a discussion with your parents or someone in a safe environment, but, unfortunately, there are not a lot of safety mechanisms on social media, which we had a discussion about earlier with the other witnesses, and we need to protect that. It is easy to say it, but it is the individual who is going through it at the time which is the bit I am really concerned about and we need to look at it in more depth before we go out there and do it.

The Chairman: Mr Viswanathan, we have not heard from you for a bit. Is there anything that you want to add to this?

Ashok Viswanathan: No, not particularly; I think it has all been covered.

Lord Verjee: We talked about lowering the voting age, but one area which we have not covered at all, and which I would be interested in your views on, is whether we should have increased democratic engagement through more referendums. That debate does not seem to be out there at all, and we have just had a very important referendum which is changing the history of the country. Do you have any views on that?

Michael Sani: If a particular party wants a referendum on a particular issue and it goes in their manifesto, we will know if the public are in favour. I do not know if it as simple as just saying that we should have more or, no, we should not. Prominent events may call for a referendum more so than other issues.

Matteo Bergamini: To add to that, referendums are a tool that we have as a democracy and I would not say that we necessarily need more or
less of those. Obviously, if there is a massive societal-changing event, then potentially a referendum is required, but I do not think having more of them is the key to having more participation and more civic engagement.

Professor Jon Tonge: Clearly, there is a temporary effect where people engage in democracy, but it is not always healthy. If you talk to Scots, they do not cite the Scottish referendum as an example of a particularly healthy democracy as it was hugely divisive, as referendums tend to be. I can see the case for referendums to effect great constitutional change, and they were necessary to introduce devolution for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but overall I would not be a fan of them for day-to-day decisions. I would limit them and the only way you can limit them really is to have a written constitution which formalises their use, and I think we are still some way from that, unfortunately.

Q34 The Chairman: Some of the changes that we have been discussing which might be made will, of course, require the active co-operation and help of Whitehall and central government. You have had a lot of experience of working with Whitehall, so perhaps you would like to give the Committee your view of how effective, how easy and how engaged it has been.

Professor Jon Tonge: In terms of Whitehall and democratic engagement?

The Chairman: Yes, as it is important in the areas that we are discussing here.

Professor Jon Tonge: One of the areas we have discussed is the National Citizen Service and, clearly, there have been severe cost implications of that, which is part of the reason it has not been rolled out. In the first speech I ever heard David Cameron give, he was banging the drum for the National Citizen Service and was very keen for it to be a fully costed national programme in which all young people would engage for six months. There are obviously cost implications and Whitehall has had to put the brakes on for financial reasons for some of the programmes.

In terms of the backing for citizenship education, that has remained underfunded, and there are issues with the status of it. It is probably the least developed statutory subject—well, non-statutory these days—that we have on the school curriculum. As ever, a lot of these democratic engagement initiatives come down to how much we can afford to fund them. In an ideal world, quite clearly, the National Citizen Service would be rolled out on a far more extensive scale.

The Chairman: It is about economics, not about the willingness to get involved.

Professor Jon Tonge: As I said earlier, there has been a slight row-back with the current Conservative Government from being in favour of civic engagement to volunteering and the promotion of community good,
which has perhaps been emphasised slightly at the expense of political engagement and democratic practice. I would not overstate that, but I think there has been a shift in emphasis. I would like to see them as co-equals; I see them as complementing each other.

**Michael Sani:** I would just raise a point about local authorities and the pressure they find themselves under. It is a point that needs to be made, and there are some solutions. Last year, I brokered a conversation between Experian and the Electoral Commission to explore a data sharing arrangement. Experian holds far greater detailed data on the local community than the local authority does, and it needs to be written into law apparently, according to the Electoral Commission, for Experian to be able to share that data. There is a demand for it from the local authorities, but it got caught up with the legal team at the EC. If local authorities are going to be held to account to increase the register, the greater the information they have to understand where unregistered parts of the community are the better, because there is still a lot of money wasted on blank letters that go to people who are already registered to vote telling them to register to vote. There are huge amounts of money wasted and that needs to be addressed.

**Lord Blunkett:** Perhaps we could ask you, if there are two or three examples of practical change which you feel would be helpful, to let us have them, because at the end of the day that is what we may have to recommend.

**Michael Sani:** Can we do that in writing, David?

**Lord Blunkett:** Yes.

**The Chairman:** Thank you all very much indeed for coming along; we are most grateful to you.