Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement

Uncorrected oral evidence: Civic Engagement

Wednesday 22 November 2017

12.05 pm

Listen to the meeting

Members present: Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbots (The Chairman); Baroness Barker; Lord Blunkett; Baroness Eaton; Lord Harries of Pentregarth; Baroness Lister of Burtersett; Baroness Morris of Yardley; Baroness Newlove; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Redfern; Lord Rowe-Beddoe.

Evidence Session No. 15 Heard in Public Questions 129 – 132

Witness

I: Lord Phillips of Sudbury.
Examination of witness

Lord Phillips of Sudbury.

Q129 The Chairman: Lord Phillips, welcome, and thank you very much for coming along to see us to give us the benefit of your knowledge and experience. If I describe you as “one of the usual suspects”, I do so with affection, and not in any way as a criticism.

As you know, I have to begin by reading you some words, which I will now do, and then we will proceed with the session. A list of the interests of Members relevant to the inquiry has been sent to you and is available. The session is open to the public and is being recorded for BBC Parliament. A verbatim transcript will be taken of the evidence and will be put on the Committee’s website. A few days after the session, you will be sent a copy of the transcript to check it for accuracy. It would be most 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 welcome to submit supplementary evidence to us. For the record, I will ask you to introduce yourself, and then we will crack on.

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: When you say introduce myself, do you want three lines or—

The Chairman: Three lines.

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: Right. I am Andrew Phillips, Lord Phillips of Sudbury. I came here in 1998 and resigned at the last election. Is that enough?

The Chairman: That is fine. Thank you very much. Could I begin with the opening question? What is your overall view of the current state of civic engagement in the UK?

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: I will preface my answer by saying that I have been deeply and totally personally involved with citizenship education since the late 1960s. For two years, I taught in a state secondary school, one class a week, just to see whether one could interest young people in citizenship and law-related issues. I then got the Law Society to give me a third of a million pounds—and this was 1975—to set up the Citizenship Foundation and go ahead with a big programme in conjunction with what was then called the Schools Council, because there were few, if any, teaching materials to buttress this. I set up the charity the Citizenship Foundation in 1975 to take on the work that we had been doing with the Schools Council. It has bounded along ever since. Obviously, in my 79th year, I have pulled back from everything and I am now merely the president.

All I can say is—and I will get it off my chest, and forgive me—that I feel as passionate sitting here as I did before my first class of bemused 16 year-olds in 1969. Why? Because I believe that democracy is a wonderful thing. However, it does not work if the people supposedly in charge of
it—namely, the populace, the citizen—knows insufficient about its functioning to become enthused, engaged and part of it. My experience in the intervening nearly 50 years is that it has done just that. Democratic virility has declined. It is a deeply complex set of issues—I readily accept that—but I remain here and now, as convinced, and probably more convinced because the situation has got more complicated year by year. We are passing 18,000 to 20,000 pages of new statute law a year. What the heck does anyone think in terms of citizen appreciation and absorption of all this? At the same time, we have become a much more centralised country, with huge companies, where impersonality and bureaucracy rule—the EU being the greatest bureaucratiser of all. The impact on the man and woman in the street, and the young person, has been little short of catastrophic. I feel—

Lord Blunkett: Do you feel better now?

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: I do—a bit. I am sorry, David, but you are one to talk. I am sorry.

The Chairman: When you talk about a decline in democratic virility being complex, could you sketch out two or three themes that you think we should aware of, and the reasons for that decline?

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: You are probably well aware of them. Many sitting around this Room now know as much as I do—and some more, no doubt. I was in a class of randomly selected 15 and 16 year-olds on Monday at the same school that I went into in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I just wanted to try them out, so to speak. It was as clear as clear can be that there is a detachment of young people from, if I can so put it, the establishment. If I take my home town of Sudbury, we are now subject to five tiers of government. I left questionnaires for these kids and they filled them in and sent them back. They do not understand anything about three of those tiers. They understand a bit about the local council and a bit about Westminster, but they do not know how the parish or town council interacts with the district council, county councils, Westminster or Strasbourg. Most of them do not have the vaguest idea. That's one of the fruits of us not getting to grips with citizenship education so that they have a basic floor and a realisation of how it works; very basic but something—

The Chairman: That was f-l-o-o-r not f-l-a-w.

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: Good one. The impact of that, unconscious though it may be, is that a lot of them say, "If they can't be bothered to tell us anything about this, it probably doesn't matter and I'm not going to put myself out".

Q130 Baroness Lister of Burtersett: Andrew, you probably know that one of our concerns is what the barriers are to active citizenship and civic engagement. Which groups do you think are most disengaged? What are the key barriers and how can they be overcome? You talked a bit about knowledge, but put that to one side.
**Lord Phillips of Sudbury:** I am still very involved, incidentally, in the voluntary sector. I am still president of the Citizenship Foundation and of another charity I started called the Legal Action Group, and another one, which is now called LawWorks—the Solicitors Pro Bono Group. My experience is unequivocal: give young people a chance, take them seriously, ask them—instead of constantly telling them—what they should do, think and believe. You will get a ready response from them. It is amazing. If you want to get helpers for your local charity, for example, if you can get a group of young people and talk with them in an unpompous way, as I say, my experience is that most people are ready, willing and, in a quiet and unconscious way, keen to get engaged.

One of the very major drawbacks of our current society is in relation to community. The strength of communities has diluted steadily over the last 30 or 40 years everywhere and has been undermined. In the age I grew up in, during and after the war, there was a huge sense of citizenship, of loyalty to your village or town or city, of a willingness to engage with it and—and I do not think this is much talked of, and should be—the question of exemplars was vital. Most—in the case of my town, over 90%—of the shops, professional offices and factories were locally owned and run. If you were running a shop, a profession—less so a factory, but a factory—for you not to engage in local affairs, and to say, “Well, I’m sorry, I’m too busy”, or whatever, and just go on earning more and more money, you would be written off in short time. Word of mouth was so strong and it would go round the town, “That bloke Phillips, he’s a bastard; he turned my mother away from the office last week because she couldn’t put £200 up front”. Today there is semi-anonymity so that huge impulse towards volunteerism, and the leadership of volunteerism, is not there. If you see the local leaders—and we know what I am talking about—getting their hands dirty and plunging in, it is an encouragement, is it not?

**Baroness Lister of Burtersett:** You talk about young people, but, obviously, young people are not a homogenous group. We heard in our first session today how those in low-paid, insecure zero-hours-contracts-type jobs, say, find it very difficult to get engaged, even if they wanted to. Are there material barriers and are there practical steps? I absolutely accept the point about talking to people and not at them and so forth, but what are the practical things that we might recommend to try to reduce the barriers that some groups face?

**Lord Phillips of Sudbury:** I am sorry, when you first put the question, I thought you were talkng about people who were still at school but you are talking about—

**Baroness Lister of Burtersett:** Anybody.

**Lord Phillips of Sudbury:** If you are talking about the young post-school lot—

**Baroness Lister of Burtersett:** We are talking about not just young people; we are covering the whole age range.
Lord Phillips of Sudbury: I am sorry, I misunderstood you. This could sound a bit wishy-washy, but I cannot find a better word, my feeling is that—and, again, your Committee cannot do anything about it—materialism has now become such a dominant force in our society, at all levels, on all occasions. It is, “Me, me, me. Money, money, money. More, more, more”, and if you take the City, where I worked for nearly 50 years, it is a tragedy to see the decline in engagement by the City in the wider world. Everybody is now working ludicrous hours and not just in the City. Employees are spending more and more time at whatever they are supposed to be doing, which leaves less energy and time to contemplate devoting to the local community if you have any feel for it. Most of the people who come into the new estates in Sudbury, for Pete’s sake, do not feel any strong relationship with the community because they are commuting to work all the time, and what little time they have to themselves, they want to replenish their souls and devote to their families. Dealing with those sorts of issues is immensely difficult. If I were Martin Luther or even old Cranmer, I would be talking about the need to revive our communities; to recover our soul and our spirit. As I say, it is very deep.

In all this miserable stuff, I have huge faith in the average Brit. The decency, kindness and integrity of the average man and woman in the street are formidable. That is partly why they currently have such dismally low opinions of what is going on in big business and big politics. The figures on trust in politics are really worrying. In a recent Hansard Society report, only 15% of people think they are honourable and straightforward. As I say, in other times of great crisis in our nation’s history—say, the period 1720 to 1730—when there was an appalling state of affairs in the country, what saved the day? It was the rise of nonconformism and that really offered a different, new path for them and their communities in the country. It was partly why the Church of England virtually collapsed by 1800. Many churches were closed and not visited.

I am not going to pretend that just by passing a couple of new statutes, one can deal with all this. Most of it has to come through involving large and small organisations in the country, getting them to agree the analysis and to really look into their own country and see what they can do to help. Some statute changes may be necessary. As I say, this is one of those difficult situations, particularly for parliamentarians, where it has got to come from the bottom up, but then, parliamentarians can be more influential than they know.

The Chairman: We must not add to the statute book. You have already told us that we are passing too many statutes.

Q131 Baroness Pitkeathley: Andrew, I know you have strong views about citizenship education. Can you tell us briefly what you think about the current state of it and what can be done to improve it?

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: I think at the moment it is in as poor health as it has ever been. I wrote down one or two statistics. You know, do you
not, that the A-level is being abolished next year? Since 2010, the number of teachers being trained to teach citizenship has halved so that we now only have 5,000 teachers a year training. The training can take place in only one of four centres; formerly it was more. The most striking statistic of all, I think, is that the number of trainees in that same period has fallen to just 40 a year. The figure I gave before was of teachers teaching citizenship. This figure—40—is the number training now to be citizenship teachers. That is a sixth of what it was in 2010. The number of people taking citizenship GCSE is down 80% since 2009. In a recent Hansard inquiry, over two-thirds of 18 to 34 year-olds purported to know little or nothing about Parliament, and so on. Those are some of the statistics.

Baroness Pitkeathley: What can be done to improve it?

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: One has to try to persuade schools and heads of schools that they really must provide citizenship education on a bigger scale and an attractiveness that will get to the young people. I know from what I have done that it is a very sexy subject if you teach it in a way that gets through to them, if you know what I mean. You can make it dry and boring or you can make it the reverse. I also think that your report could be very influential if you really put your foot on the accelerator and did not hide the peril in which I believe we stand, because this is working out in profound ways. I have never been so anxious about our own democracy. I have never been so anxious about the ludicrous tiers of local government. It really is not working. I will not go on about that because there is not much time and it is another subject on its own. You are a very influential lot of individuals and collectively I think you can be more influential than you realise, as long as you bring out a summary report, because at the moment all one ever gets is a big document and people say, “It’s on the internet”. Can you believe my home town of Sudbury has just been the subject of a report by the Babergh District Council on the development of Sudbury and it is 371 pages long? You cannot get one in hard copy form.

Q132 Lord Harries of Pentregarth: Are you as depressed about civic engagement as a whole as you are about the state of citizenship education? What on earth do you think the Government should be doing to improve it?

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: No, I am not quite as dismal about that, although it is not a bright subject. In my home town of Sudbury, every two years, we have a huge fair of voluntary organisations called Sudbury on Show. It lasts for a day and it takes over the biggest church in the town and the town hall. We have, typically, 200 stalls of voluntary organisations. When you think of a town of only 12,000 or 14,000 people, to have 200 voluntary organisations wanting to show their wares is wonderful, but, as with everything else, the habit of young people engaging has declined and quite a number of voluntary organisations have been lost. Since we started this about 15 years ago, when there were about 260 voluntary organisations, we have lost, in the interim, 80 of those. Most of them will tell you that they do not have the youngsters
coming through: “We can’t get the younger volunteers because they don’t want to take responsibility”. I am not pessimistic about that—well, a bit—but, as I say, their lives are so much more pressured, are they not, than even 40 or 50 years ago? That is the main reason. Having said that, there are lots of voluntary organisations in the town, and everywhere else, that have young people coming through. They have woken up to the fact that they have to be much more proactive in getting out and asking people: “We need you. How about it, Charlie? You like stamps; we need somebody”. You know what I mean.

The Chairman: You have knocked around the charity sector long enough to know that quite a lot of voluntary groups are established in a way that does not encourage people to join. The trustees and people at the top are set up in a certain way and, essentially, it is built around the golf club and lunchtime meetings and they wonder why young people do not join up.

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: I agree with you. Spot on.

The Chairman: What can we do about that?

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: Your report could trumpet some of these things and get through to what I call the big media. I do not see why you could not start a national debate. It will be inconsistently debated across the nation, but I think people are ready, willing and able to do something about this because in their guts they chime with it. They realise it. I talk to a great number of people and you only have to speak with a couple and they will say, “You are quite right”, and they will go on, and it goes on. I hope you do not think I am avoiding the issue—I am not—but I am very wary of assuming that Governments have powers where they often do not. They have to put more money into citizenship teaching, for a start. They have to make sure that all secondary schools are required to have citizenship on the curriculum and not exclude academies and free schools, because at the moment only 30%-odd of secondary schools are required to teach this watered-down form of citizenship. Did I answer your question, Richard?

Lord Harries of Pentregarth: Half, yes. Have you got anything else you wanted to say?

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: What was the other half?

Lord Harries of Pentregarth: Basically, what should the Government be doing about civic engagement?

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: All departments could be given a command from No. 10 Downing Street to look at these issues and assess how well or badly they are contributing to the relief of this crisis. I think it is a crisis. We had the Big Society initiative—and I do not want to run that down—and we have got the thing where they go and camp.

The Chairman: National Citizen Service.
Baroness Pitkeathley: NCS.

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: That is fine, but they do not get near the size of the problem, which is total. More could be done to get individual departments together, and I mean getting the people at the bottom of the department together with the top dogs, and talking about this, because it affects all of them equally. Wisdom does not reside in the top tier. They think it does half the time and it bloody does not. Sorry, you were a bishop.

Lord Blunkett: Chair, can I say something here, if you do not mind? I think that Andrew—Lord Phillips—is one of the top three or four people over the last 50 years who has had the greatest impact in this area, particularly in citizenship education, and he deserves a medal.

Baroness Pitkeathley: Hear, hear.

The Chairman: Thank you very much for coming along and giving us a diatribe or two, which we have welcomed. We shall certainly bear your thoughts in mind.

Lord Phillips of Sudbury: I meant to start by thanking you for doing this. I know it is a lot of work, but it is hugely important. I wish you all strength and fulfilment, because there is a lot of that in it. If you want anything more at all from me, just let me know and I will do my best to supply you with it.

The Chairman: Thank you very much, Andrew.