Mr Vishal Wilde – written evidence (CCE0010)

Vishal Wilde FRSA is writing in a personal capacity and his views do not necessarily reflect any of the organisations he is affiliated with. He is on the list of approved parliamentary candidates for the Liberal Democrats and is an incoming Civil Service Fast Streamer (on the Generalist scheme). He writes on economic, political and financial topics as a Featured Columnist for The Market Mogul. He has written for think tanks such as The Cobden Centre, the Center for a Stateless Society (C4SS) and the Adam Smith Institute on a broad variety of topics. He is also Co-founder and Chairman of Project Shanthistan, a very nascent think tank and movement which seeks to foster peace, prosperity and cooperation in South Asia with an eventual aim of unification through promoting peoples’ social, political and economic freedoms. He also conducts independent, (academic) policy-relevant research on various topics of interest.

At the time of submission, he is in the final stages of studying for an MSc in Advanced Computer Science with Internet Economics at the University of Liverpool and holds a BSc (Hons) in Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Economics major) from the University of Warwick.

4.

- **Laws**, by their very nature, encourage political engagement – whether it is *active* engagement or not is up for debate (dependent upon how one defines ‘active’) but living under the rule of law means that everything personal becomes political and, as such, some degree of political engagement will always be encouraged by their very existence and enforcement.

- Extending the franchise in national and/or local elections in national or local elections is desirable – the UK should extend even greater voting rights.
  
  o When considering that we are already unusual amongst most countries for offering not just British citizens but also Irish and Commonwealth citizens the right to vote in these elections, for ‘Other EU’ citizens to be barred from voting at national elections (especially when they pay taxes) simply runs counter to democratic values. Similarly, Non-EU and Non-Commonwealth citizens should also be allowed to vote in all elections (since they are currently barred from doing so) since there can never be adequate justice for the disenfranchised if there is no equality in the eyes of the law. Up to 3.35 million people living in the country (based on a very rudimentary, rough estimate) could immensely benefit from extending the franchise. Furthermore, if they contribute taxes to exchequer, it is only fair that their interests be formally represented when it is spent. Since the franchise is already available to non-citizens in the UK, this would merely be a logical extension that is consistent with the principles of democratic justice and equality.

  o Given that Britain has gained a markedly increased reputation for xenophobia and racism since the Brexit referendum, extending the franchise to all taxpayers in Britain (regardless of citizenship) would be a strong commitment for democratic equality and against xenophobia whilst also ennobling the fact that ‘citizenship’ does not merely consist of voting rights. This would also strengthen Britain’s position as a global leader in human rights and democratic values.
In these uncertain times, it would also help ensure that skilled, productive workers are not discouraged from working here due to our especially heightened reputation for xenophobia and racism that the Brexit referendum and its aftermath has undoubtedly intensified – indeed, extending the franchise would give Britain a comparative advantage (in the sense of political institutions) over most other countries when it comes to guaranteeing the rights of those talented workers who are looking to emigrate from their home countries.

- Lowering the voting age is not only desirable, it is necessary if we are to achieve a democratically equitable society. What we have right now is nothing less than systematic, democratic discrimination in terms of age.

- Children are significantly affected by government policy since they are part of households and, therefore, they should have their interests formally represented. The franchise should be extended such that the voting age is not only lowered but it is extended to all children whenever they feel fit to claim their right to vote and engage actively.

- Indeed, when considering that poorer households tend to have more children than richer households (both within and across countries), a higher voting age means that poorer households are disproportionately under-represented in parliament whilst richer households are disproportionately over-represented (and, as such, this is a political factor that contributes to various inequalities).
  - The most obvious inequality here that this reinforces is the divide between the rich and the poor and, more broadly, the perennial class divide.
  - From an ethnic and racial perspective, it also means that certain groups are disproportionately under-represented versus others (since, to give just a couple of examples, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis tend to have higher fertility rates than the average population, this means that their households are significantly under-represented when taking this democratic discrimination by age into account – Professor Melinda Mills at Nuffield College, University of Oxford would be able to provide more information on studies of fertility according to ethnicity).

- Another possibility is to allow parents/legal guardians to act as the ‘custodians’ of children’s’ votes and to vote on their behalf (dividing their votes between them) until the children choose to claim their votes from their parents or when they turn 16 (whichever comes first).

- Changes should be made to the voting process because many people simply do not want to turn up to vote because they may feel that their vote hardly matters. Additionally, people are incentivised to ‘vote tactically’ and thereby misrepresent their true preferences which is problematic for democracy. A holistic reconsideration of voting processes and elections is required but to thoroughly investigate and explore the bases and possibilities for this, is probably beyond the scope of this inquiry.

- Establishing a ‘Ministry of Democratic Innovation and Reform’ as a permanent arm of government dedicated to democratic innovation and reform may be a desirable
option (for the time being) to have voting process reform always firmly on the agenda.

5. The role of education in teaching and encouraging good citizenship is important but it must not be compulsory but, rather, only made available. Especially when it comes to citizenship and political participation, the ideas of previous generations must not be unduly privileged even more than they currently are – this will only serve to indoctrinate younger generations and this is, quite clearly, a slippery slope.

- Furthermore, anyone who has been even somewhat politically active will know that the ability to influence outcomes and galvanise/change views to bring about a good change is not a straightforward case of ‘do A to get B’; this cannot be taught but, rather, are generally learnt by people who are keen to engage politically. After all, as society continuously evolves, the optimal mode of political engagement is likely to evolve as well and it is unlikely that a static, compulsory curriculum will aid in this process of discovery and experiential learning. Indeed, rather than making children apathetic to politics within the compulsory education system (the time they spend by compulsion within the education system could, after all, sap many of the energy and will required to politically participate), it is important that they are given adequate time and have adequate energy to directly learn about it (experientially or otherwise). Ultimately, education is far broader than simply that which is taught in classrooms.

- Returning to the point about extending the franchise to all children, if children were allowed to claim the vote whenever they felt like it, this may work to increase their active political participation immediately and, by implication, improve the relatively low turnout of young adults also since they would have had access to voting rights for longer. Thus, obtaining these rights sooner rather than later would institutionally incentivise greater deliberation and active, positive political engagement.

- Given that a compulsory education system is imposed upon children, it is this which is primarily at the root of a political socialisation that is not inclusive and, given the state of current affairs, a compulsory education system forces children to experience all sorts of discrimination (besides racism – faced by both students and teachers – and xenophobia, it also includes homophobia and transphobia, for example) and could even encourage bullying and increase suicide risk which is clearly not conducive to social cohesion and integration.

7. Government should allow civic engagement to evolve naturally with minimal or no interference. There are several institutional factors that constrain this but some relatively straightforward ones to address are as follows.

- To begin with, charities should no longer be constrained regarding the political nature of their purposes and activity. If pre-existing charities are constrained in the political nature of their activities and new charities can be completely prevented from forming if their entire purpose is political, it makes it harder to find other vehicles by which to encourage civic engagement. Indeed, the alternative for many people is to fund and/or support political parties to help people become more politically active but political parties are inherently
institutions that will collectively encourage political engagement in so far as it benefits their respective parties.

- The best thing government can do is realise that political activities and purposes are often meant for ‘public benefit’ (even if the prevailing animosity and divisiveness in politics may give us good cause to think otherwise) and, as such, should come under the remit of charitable activities – of course, many (possibly most) political activities also cater for special interests but many charities that are not overtly or inherently political also only cater for narrow sections of the population; this does not make their activities any less legitimate.

- Indeed, allowing explicitly and overtly political charities will help ‘out’ charities that currently seek to be ‘covertly’ political and, through an increased amount of transparency in the political system, civic engagement will generally improve. There is no need to institutionally discourage/constrain political activity in the third sector.
  - Furthermore, given that there is a plurality of views and ideas in society, some efforts would simply not be financially feasible to undertake without the tax breaks afforded to the third sector and, as such, this restriction on political activities and purposes crowds out less well-resourced viewpoints and perspectives – this helps reinforce a hegemonic oligarchy of certain ideas, ideologies and interests.

- The funding and spending restrictions on political parties should also be reviewed and probably lifted since, essentially, although funding limits are well-intended, all that happens is the institutional incentivisation of money being spent in more dubious ways. It also restricts political participation to those who are time-rich and/or cash-rich since those who are time-poor and/or cash-poor will face a far greater and more substantial opportunity cost in active political engagement. Thus, this is not democratically just and it is certainly not equitable. Another way to address this fundamental problem of the high opportunity costs associated with political activity is to consider the introduction of a Universal Basic Income.
  - Restrictions on foreign funding should also be abolished and this would help enable the aforementioned benefits of allowing non-national and non-resident politicians to stand for election. Indeed, where political parties previously lacked personnel on this front, lifting these restrictions would feedback into encouraging positive political participation.
  - Indeed, given that personnel can be a significant issue for many political parties (especially when it comes to fielding candidates), the residency and nationality restrictions on running for election should be abolished (since they deny voters choice and are, therefore, inherently undemocratic in spirit) and Britain can lead the way globally in this in order to reap the benefits that enabling non-national politicians can allow. This will also help unshackle the potential of civil society.

- Notably, the USA has fewer restrictions surrounding political spending and funding and its citizens tend to be far more actively engaged in the political process than we generally are here. Of course, the USA’s political climate is clearly not without its problems but fewer
restrictions surrounding political spending and funding are not inherently problematic.

9. 

- Essentially, people feel that their interests are being inadequately translated, represented and implemented by their various representatives – this failure, however, is certainly not peculiar to Britain.

- A key way in which this would be tackled is through improving candidate-quality preference-specification mechanisms to enable a more democratically-just and holistic voting system that incorporates (gender-empowering) voter-chosen political quotas (in this way, the intersectional experiences and concerns of individuals in society may be better addressed). The aforementioned voting system is intended to promote representation along many lines (including gender identity, class, ethnicity, race, ideology, income, profession, (geographical) community, sexuality, education, disability and much more). However, this idea is still very much at a conceptual stage. Nevertheless, it must be said that the contemporary privileging and reinforcement of a geospatial-constituency paradigm of representation subtly enables a modern variant of historical feudalism in contemporary democracies.

  - The problem here is that the actors who most vehemently seek systemic political reform are usually those who are not in power and, thus, systemic political reform is usually not wholeheartedly pursued or enacted until long after it was needed (by which time much damage has already been done and the adage ‘better late than never’ offers mild respite at best).

  - Thus, it may be worthwhile establishing a ‘Ministry of Democratic Innovation and Reform’ as an arm of government that is permanently devoted to the purpose of innovating and reforming our democracy so that more efficient and effective ways to translate, implement and represent peoples’ interests are always sought and are permanently on the government’s agenda.

- The relics of Colonialism (such as in the honours system where one becomes ceremonially a part of the ‘British Empire’, for example) also consistently perpetuate a divisive mentality, subtly reinforces racial and neo-colonial hierarchies. This serves as a constant reminder of atrocities committed by Imperial rule in the countries of origin of many British citizens.

  - Amartya Sen, a Nobel-laureate at Harvard University, wrote in Development as Freedom that the causes of the Irish potato famine and the Bengal famine were a direct result of Imperial rule as opposed to democracy – it is important that the necessity of democratic values both in principle and practice are not overlooked if/when one is looking to justify and teach democratic values. This also relates back to question 5 of the inquiry (regarding the role of education and teaching). In a similar vein, the transatlantic slave trade, its legacy and it being made possible because of a lack of adherence to the democratic values of intrinsic equality between and amongst peoples must be sufficiently acknowledged rather than an Imperial history being unduly glorified. Any benefits of Empire can only be sufficiently appreciated after its drawbacks and harmful impacts are thoroughly accounted for (and the latter is far from being the case).
With regards to the ‘honours’ system, many undoubtedly worthy people have sought to disassociate themselves from it, outright reject it, openly criticise it etc. on the grounds of staunch republicanism and/or disdain for colonial legacies (to give just two prominent, recurring examples of rationales). This creates an unnecessary divide between monarchists and republicans within society whilst also unnecessarily burdening the contemporary monarchy with the associations of historical atrocities from Imperialism. There have been calls to change the name of the honours from ‘Empire’ to ‘Excellence’ and these are very fair and reasonable calls – it is but one word and it is a significant step in the right direction for healing historical wounds and enabling a cohesive, peaceful and united society through showcasing commitment to it. An alternative is to change the word to ‘Kingdom’ which would help shed some (though perhaps not all) of the brutal connotations that ‘Empire’ carries – however, the most significant limitation with this alternative suggestion is that it does nothing to ameliorate the social divisions between republicans and monarchists.

There is a general lack of appreciation for the historical reasons for the myriad of inequalities in British society but, then again, there is often a lack of understanding and consensus on this front as well.

- Given that citizenship and active political engagement has become increasingly shaped by the internet, the lack of fast internet access acts as a significant barrier to active citizenship and positive political participation. If the benefits of the internet are disproportionally reaped and unfairly distributed then it works to further divide people socially, politically and economically and this will only become further exacerbated as the importance of the internet to the economy continues to increase.

- Misbehaviour on the internet (especially with police being generally under-resourced and ill-equipped to deal with this) which is intended to harass or intimidate people along the lines of gender, sexualities, race, religion, ethnicity, professions or otherwise must be examined in that this can only inhibit incentives for positive, active citizenship and political participation. Perhaps the government can work together with social media entities and internet companies to verify whether various online profiles are ‘real’ as opposed to ‘fake’ so there can be a greater degree of accountability (of course, companies and individuals will likely be wary of government involvement so perhaps cooperation through some form of Blockchain technology could be used but this may also become computationally expensive).

- Relating back to question 4 of the inquiry, young people would feel less “left behind” if the franchise were extended to them since, currently, older generations are making decisions on policies that will disproportionately impact younger ones and young people have limited to no formal say in how their interests are represented.

- This sentiment of feeling left behind can also often stem from being subject to a restriction of opportunities due to circumstances beyond peoples’ control (being born in a poorly-resourced, rural environment vs growing up in a well-resourced, urban one or, for young people, having less choice in educational opportunities, for example). For young people, one way to address this could be to empower them to have more say in the direction of their education (through increasing school choice, improving curriculum choice, liberalising
student loan use etc. or even making schooling non-compulsory entirely so young people have the freedom to live their lives how they want) and, for rural people, it could come in the form of a liberalisation of land-use restrictions (these suggestions were also included in written evidence this author submitted to the Lords Committee on Artificial Intelligence).

10. 

- People are better citizens and are more likely to engage positively when they experience greater social cohesion, integration and trust in society. Those who feel they owe less to a society that has generally marginalised them and systematically denied them of opportunities may be more likely to contribute less to the general interest. On the other hand, there are those who justifiably see a lack of social cohesion and integration as problems to be solved and their seeking solutions to it may be their means of promoting active citizenship and engagement.

- Integration works best when there are fewer inequalities between peoples and a prime way to tackle this is to alleviate educational and workplace outcomes. Educational outcomes exert, on average, especially significant influences upon peoples’ future career trajectories, lifetime earnings, opportunities, etc. and, as such, whether it be at school or university, these outcomes need to be improved.

- Introducing school vouchers could not only improve outcomes for various sections of society (by helping to improve outcomes for poor students, many middle class families, students from minority backgrounds, etc.) but also help organically combat radicalisation and terrorism – the hyperlinked RSA article is but a particular example of how diversity and integration (since radicalisation is the most extreme symptom of a lack of integration and it is a two-way street) can be increased concurrently through the introduction of school vouchers.

- Liberalising the student loans market in Higher Education so that student can spend their loans abroad if they desire would entail greater competition in the Higher Education sector, potentially less debt for those students who do engage in higher education (and who study in countries with lower tuition fees/living costs) and thereby empowering those who do feel “left behind” (relating back to question 10) with more choice. With less debt and similar qualifications as well as having been exposed to diverse perspectives and experiences from foreign countries, these graduates will also return to Britain and contribute to greater social cohesion and integration whilst also improving economic productivity. This would also allow British universities to increase their intake of international students to not only increase their funding in these uncertain times but also to improve the local population’s perception of foreign-nationals.

11. What follows here includes personal, anecdotal evidence.

- Writing as a 23-year-old male who immigrated to the UK from India with his family when he was five years old (initially to Scotland before moving to England when eight years old), I cannot sufficiently stress the importance and value of English proficiency in social cohesion and integration. When I arrived, I recall being barely able to read English (although I could speak some, I recall a memory where, when I arrived in Glasgow, I opened my mother’s Gynaecology textbook and asked her whether certain words were the word ‘the’ and ‘a’ before formally learning more English in Scotland). I recall, in a predominantly white
primary school in Scotland, sitting in English support classes before making rapid progress.

- My English continued to improve rapidly but I should say that not everyone is as fortunate to have a relatively ‘good’ education and, from Year 9 – 11, I attended a private day school (Birkdale School in Sheffield, where I took my GCSEs before leaving for Kodaikanal International School in India to study the IB Diploma Programme). This day school was predominantly white and, as such, when I did excel in English classes, I was regularly derided by peers along the lines of “how can you get such high grades in English? I mean, you’re not even English” and I suspect that this is not an uncommon experience for many non-white (and, more broadly, non-English) students and teachers. Although I have relatively fond memories of my school, I cannot deny that there was undoubtedly a racial dimension to my experience that was adversely felt (although I did graduate with the joint-top GCSE results in my year, alongside a friend of Ghanaian descent). In High Storrs School (a state secondary school that I studied at in Year 8 and 9 before Birkdale), matters were also complicated by even greater ethnic and racial division owing to the much greater diversity (which had its benefits but also its notable drawbacks) but the race aspect was not felt as acutely as in a predominantly white school. Nevertheless, it is also deeply worrying that, despite (unconscious) segregation in schools (which has, however, improved over time), white British pupils are the lowest achieving group at GCSE level; it is crucial that white British students are not “left behind” because this will only serve to increase animosity within society and the introduction of school vouchers could significantly help improve outcomes for poor families in particular.

- Particularly significant barriers faced by newcomers coming to Britain include xenophobia and racism (and this is not restricted to particular classes of society) but I do believe that the situation here is better than in many (possibly most) other countries in the world (though, given the current state of global affairs and increasingly rampant xenophobia, this is an inappropriate standard of comparison).

- Regarding the naturalisation process, if the UK is particularly keen to ensure it remains open to talent, one thing to note is the role of permanent residency in the naturalisation process. One suggestion here is that the Tier 1 (exceptional talent) visa could have restrictions removed, the quota for it could be significantly expanded (since there are limited places available in this category), it could be better advertised (with applications even being solicited by our diplomatic missions) and holders could have the right to apply for permanent resident status immediately (and be granted it) akin to holders of the USA’s O-1 visa being able to apply for Green Card status immediately (and, therefore, significantly hastening the naturalisation process).

- A citizenship test is demeaning and an insult to democratic principles – if ‘natural-born’ British citizens do not have to pass one, ‘naturalised’ British citizens should not have to either. Freedom is an inherently democratic value – to seek to impose conceptualisations of citizenship upon aspiring/prospective citizens is inherently undemocratic. Furthermore, elevating certain ideals of a ‘model’ citizen or trying to rigidly define and impose ‘citizenship’ values can constrain the optimal evolution of citizenship in our ever-changing society – a citizenship test is essentially a tool of reactionary conservatism as opposed to the far more rational and benign, organic variant of conservatism. For the committee’s information, I am a naturalised British citizen (naturalised around the age of 16) and I did
not have to take a citizenship test. Indeed, I would have found it thoroughly insulting if I was made to.

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