My name is Rona Topaz. After almost 3 decades of living in the UK as an indefinite resident, I finally decided to apply for naturalisation as a British Citizen, in order to stand for public office, and engage in the voting process. It is as a result of undertaking this momentous decision that I felt encumbered to submit an evidence paper on the theme of civic engagement for those left behind by modern UK society.

As a differently abled woman, I have consistently felt on the fringes of society, as life is geared towards the able bodied on a daily basis. Evidence of this being found in everything from ancient railway stations that can only be accessed via stairwells, to parties and concert halls with no seats provided. Disabled people are marginalised and made to be almost invisible. This has gradually improved with slightly greater visibility in the entertainment industry, but even after two decades of concerted efforts on the part of casting directors, the end results still appear tokenistic, as it is rare to see a disabled person cast in a role in which their disability is not alluded to in the script. This has long ceased to be the case with BAME actors and entertainers.

I have chosen to address the question: Why do so many communities and groups feel “left behind?” Are there any specific factors which act as barriers to active citizenship faced by different communities or groups-white, BME, young, old, rural, urban? How might those barriers be overcome?

Linguistically for starters. I began this paper by discussing disabled people- one of the most marginalised groups in 21st century society-and yet you fail to mention us in your question about marginalised groups....!

I will be focusing my evidence around disabled people, non-native English speakers and those who identify as LGBTI.

Civic engagement discouragement for disabled people starts at a practical level. My local political party, for example, only allows canvassing on foot, and discontinued phone canvassing. They barred someone on the autism spectrum form attending meetings. They have a profoundly deaf member who cannot attend meetings as they meet in a room with no induction loop. There is a society affiliated to my chosen political party run for and by disabled people, yet they refused to Livestream their AGM for disabled people unable to attend the meeting. This of course also excluded them from standing as an executive committee candidate.

People with learning disabilities can engage with civic life via a course run by Parliament’s Outreach. However, few people know that Parliament has an outreach service, it is very poorly publicised. I only discovered it after being invited on to the mailing list by a Member of Parliament. It is generally understood that people with learning difficulties receive a poorer standard of education, and with the welfare reforms employed by the incumbent government removing the Independent Living Fund and making benefits such as ESA almost impossible to claim, the standard of living for disabled people in general has significantly worsened, as they are ill prepared for the job market and pushed further into poverty and suicidal despair. There are no additional provisions, such as support workers trained in behaviour therapy-for people with mental ill health, dementia, or those on the autism spectrum, who would like to
attend a rally or visit Parliament. It is only recently that signers have been involved in large civic gatherings.

Similar principles apply for people for whom English is a second language. Translators are not freely available in many shops, cafes, libraries or doctor’s surgeries. There is little to no support given in certain communities, as immigrants are stigmatised by a hostile right wing media given to jingoistic, xenophobic mind-sets which fuel their own agenda and create a less than welcoming and supportive environment for the non-English speaker fleeing war and terror in their own country.

Compared to countries such as Russia and Uganda, the LGBTI community has it relatively easy in the UK. However, although there have been great strides forward, it is still difficult to a degree for the transgendered, for example, to engage in civic life, owing to the same issue that plagues disabled people- a lack of a public role model, a lack of visibility. It is no longer an issue in this this country to have an alternative sexual nature, but it remains more of an issue to have had a change in gender. This can only be overcome by a shift in society’s mind-set towards even greater inclusion and tolerance. We are as a country, further along this path which is one of many reasons why I personally will be proud to eventually become a UK citizen.

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