1. The question of citizenship and civic engagement revolves around an issue of representation. A huge element of citizenship is a sense of belonging, and without this, there is unlikely to be any civic engagement. Whether it is feeling a sense of belonging to a street, an area or a country, if you lack that feeling then you are unlikely to engage with it, care for it and do anything other than just get by. This means that those who feel disenfranchised will struggle to feel that sense of belonging and this comes to a secondary issue of visibility. Whether its rural communities, young BAME children or those who identify as LGBT+, if these communities cannot see themselves in the books they read, the TV they watch, the systems that they interact with then they are likely to feel marginalised.

We especially see young people claiming that they don’t feel represented by those systems which they have to work with, whether that be government or civic society – this only leads to disillusionment with the society in which they find themselves, shamed by those around them and unable to break through the various glass ceilings that they feel encased by. Once marginalised this leads to upset, discord and potentially apathy, and once apathy has set in, that is incredibly hard to break. Therefore, citizenship and civic engagement are inherently bound to the idea of identity.

2. Unfortunately, we seem bound up with the obsession of formalising membership and citizenship. The fear of the stranger and foreigner has fuelled the Brexit debacle and this came from a need to find a neat solution to appease the disgruntled public over the issue of immigration. So we continue to searching for a piece of paper or a strategy to make it all better and make everyone “feel” British, as if by telling the public that its ok, those people you were worried about, well they are British now will somehow solve the issues. It has only led the upset public to demand a whitewash “get them all out” mentality, which is so upsetting to see in a nation that in inherently built on diversity.

It is sad to reflect back over the years and months and see that currently in the United Kingdom the only thing that seems to unite us all regardless of faith, race and identity is tragedy. Tragedy seems to be the only thing that brings us together, whether the outpouring of grief after terrorist atrocities, the public reaction to the London Riots or a charity drive. If you look over the past years, despite financial crashes and crises, the amount given to charities continues to rise. We give when there is cause to give to. However, uniting us is the UK is difficult; the only time in recent memory that brought the nation together without tragedy was the London Olympics in 2012. The summer when people smiled at each other on the Tube. There is not one single thing that can be done to strengthen belonging, a piece of paper will not help, and a test or ceremony will not solve it either. Moments of unity need to be created, where people can come together and simply be. These events need to be based around sharing, whether that is stories, food, or time, otherwise the only time we join together is to grieve or protest both of which are raw emotions that are not creative.

3. Huge leaps and bounds have been made through education; however, this is undermined by then telling children and young people that their views or voices are not worthy or important because they are too young. This means that we work hard through youth groups and schools to motivate and engage children in the political process, in citizenship and each other and then say but now you have to wait a few more years because you are
not ready. Most schools foster a sense of community and togetherness, yet once we end this education process, we turn young people out into a world where the sole goal is to compete for jobs, wages and attention. Social media is instilling this sense of competition amongst young people, despite being framed as “groups” where people can share. They instead become platforms to shame.

It is only a handful of young people that leave schools, which act as centres of community that have belonging and choose to continue to give something back. This might be through a charity, campaigning or a sport but few have that sense of togetherness as they head into a world, which is designed to be insular. The results is that children feel disenfranchised, which again only leads to disengagement and therefore apathy. Lowering the voting age would go some way into capitalising on a sense of excitement at school about things political, perhaps this would in turn bring young voices into politics and let young people see themselves amongst those who purport to represent them.

4. The role of education is vital and it should be available at every stage of education. My personal view is that education has come a long way in this regard. Perhaps I am biased, but I feel that citizenship education in the school in which I work is excellent. I teach at a rural state comprehensive in Lincolnshire, William Farr School. Here citizenship, while being compulsory in our curriculum, is valued and curated by staff who are enthusiastic about its role in education. For example, the students at William Farr have, regardless of age, have been given the opportunity to vote in conjunction with the two most recent General Elections. Sixth Form students held Question Time debates, all students watched Party Political broadcasts and older students led hustings to present the three main political parties. This obviously pertains to the political element of citizenship, but students are encouraged to give back to their community through charitable works and events that promote cohesion. Subsequently I feel that citizenship should continue to be compulsory, however I would urge that schools are continually squeezed with regards to provision whether this be monetary or simply in terms of time. Elements like citizenship are the first to be marginalised or rushed as teachers clamber to change to new specifications as the government continually tinkers with the education system. It is only through dedicated members of staff at William Farr School that the citizenship element has become so strong, yet we have no dedicated time, staff, or department that is responsible for its teaching – we simply do not have the time.

8. I would like to think the British people are kind; I would like to think the British people are united by their differences, but there are too many recent examples that trouble this view. As a result, the only value that British people share, other than our love of the weather, is a stoic outlook on life. Whether born from our history or the constant battles with the atmosphere, British people carry on. It is interesting to have seen the rise and popularity of the “Carry On” poster campaigns from World War II. Entrained on our little island we just get on and hence, when there have been recent threats to this nature from terrorist atrocities, the reaction has always been that we will carry on, we will show them, and we will do the exact opposite of what they want. This stubbornness is Britishness.

Yet, perhaps that is our deepest flaw, because when change is forced upon us – we resist. Look at the recently celebrations of the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967, where historically when first proposed there was outrage. Yet with a slow accretion of time, several tragedies and continued upset, shame and hatred placed upon the LGBT+
community (albeit diminishing) there has been a huge change in the views of the public. This took time and therefore anything forced upon the public as a change will be greeted with the same stoic nature. Strengthening the marginalised returns to the idea of visibility for if we do not see ourselves in society, we will continue to hide and lose our voices.

9. Again the answer to this question representation and visibility. I personally think that in a world of instant connections, social media and seeming availability we are the complete opposite, the vast majority of people are lonely. This is especially true of those communities who feel marginalised, not represented or forgotten. The rural feel left out and distant, as they are the last to receive adequate broadband connection, sexual health services and smart meters from their energy companies. The urban feel lost in the din of expansion and rising property prices, which forces them into difficult areas as gentrification, takes over the cities. BAME communities cluster and feel disenfranchised. Speaking myself as a gay man, despite being in a caring relationship, I feel lonely. I experienced an education and youth where I did not see anyone like myself. It was not talked about in schools thanks to Section 28, and it was only recently that I realised that this was only abolished a year after I completed my formal education. I grew up in a society where I was made to feel ashamed for who I was. The media reviled the LGBT community as perverted and as a result, I grew up with the feeling I was wrong. This left me behind and continues to leave many within the LGBT+ community behind, despite the progress that has occurred.

This lack of visibility and representation forces those who do not see themselves to go find themselves, often in places where the information is dark, extreme or what we have been told both others that we are. For instance, take a young gay child, who doesn’t see themselves in the books they read, the lessons they are taught and then is told repeatedly that being LGBT is wrong and you’ll die alone and ill. In the modern age, they will turn to the internet and if they search for support, they are likely to find extreme pornography and an image that being gay is about being promiscuous. The shame experienced and the lack of role models leads to a dangerous outlook. Take this exact example and change it to a question of faith, a young Muslim child who does not see themselves on TV, in the books they read and constantly hears through the media that Muslims are bad and terrorists. Some of those disenfranchised children will go and search for an antidote to this message of shame that allows them to feel valued and wanted.

10. If I were to quote again an example from the school, at which I work. I helped to create a support group for students who identify as LGBT+. Formed with the help of students, named and run by them, the LGBT+ Space (@WFS_LGBTSpace – on Twitter) offers a space for them to just be. To converse, see one another and feel valued. The school in which I work is very accepting and tolerant of differences and when it was first proposed by a student the initial answer was that we didn’t need a group, children were openly LGBT. Yet, with perseverance, the group has flourished. It is not an advocacy group, but simply somewhere for young children to have a voice and see themselves. Since its inception the group has run assemblies, offered support to other local schools in creating their own Spaces, we have worked with the local NHS Partnership Trust to improve their services for LGBT+ students and are heavily involved with the Stonewall Charity. The students offer email support to those students who do not feel ready to come to a public group and offer this email support to others across the county.
My role in facilitating this group has led to myself being able to be open about my sexual orientation at work after teaching in the School for 10 years and feeling that I could not because I would be risking my career. The realisation that my invisibility was causing young children to continue to have no representation in their formal education and so the greater good was the imperative. I was raised in an education system where my identity was missing. The society in which I grew told me at every turn that I was abhorrent and would be cast out and therefore it is my duty to make sure, that in my little corner, my school, that this group of identities is represented. I need to make them see that they are wanted and need, to catalyse them to help others, to be proud and get out there because ultimately they make society.

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