Deal Or No Deal? The Rights, Responsibilities and Returns of the Citizen and the State

Introduction

Research that colleagues and I have conducted including on behalf of the Electoral Commission, local authorities and the Economic and Social Research Council directly addresses a number of issues under consideration by the Select Committee on Citizenship and Citizen Engagement. This submission is a summary of published and ongoing research into: young peoples civic engagement, religious identities and rights claims, Muslim political participation, citizen involvement in governance and the responsiveness of the democratic political system. The full references to the research are given below.

There are three key themes: 1. Competing rights claims and the recognition of different aspects of identity including British values; 2. An unresponsive political system – deal or no deal; 3. The citizen and state information gap.

The views expressed here are those of Dr. K. Purdam.

Research Evidence Summary

(1) What does citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st century? Why does it matter, and how does it relate to questions of identity? (8) What are the values that all of us who live in Britain should share and support? Can you identify any threats to these values, which affect the citizenship of, for instance, women or various minority groups? If so, how can their citizenship be strengthened?

Britishness – Research with religious groups in the UK suggests that the sense of citizenship in terms of values and attitudes including Britishness is variously interpreted. Overall the policy emphasizes of citizenship, community cohesion, multiculturalism, equal opportunities and freedom of speech were seen as more helpful than Britishness in supporting religious groups participation in society. The research found that Sikh, Muslim and Jewish organizations were more likely than Christian respondents to view the policy emphasis on Britishness as helpful. This is a challenge to the popular representations of the attitudes of religious groups including in the media.

Competing Identity Rights Claims – This research suggests that despite the multidimensional nature of identity, aspects of identity are increasingly in competition in terms of legal protection in the UK. As a result, there are concerns about a developing legal hierarchy of identity characteristics including in relation to religion and sexual orientation. There is a heightened sense of equality rights claims amongst, and between, different populations and this includes concerns and claims that are not actually reflected in the present legal framework. This may reflect a detachment from the changes in the law and the rights of different religious groups, and in the short term it may be contributing to increased tensions. It is clear that identity based rights claims need to be in the context of the acceptance of the equalities legislation.

Civic Engagement and Persistent Poverty - A further aspect of the issue of civic engagement is the persistent poverty many people in the UK face. An estimated 13.5 million people live in relative poverty (60% of the median income) and 19 million people do not have an adequate standard of living according to the Minimum Income Standard. Moreover these may be underestimates given the impact of the poverty penalty and the additional costs people with limited financial resources can face for essential goods and services. This means that financial survival can take precedence...
over civic engagement and greater involvement in governance and decision-making. Until the levels of poverty are fully understood and effective policies introduced to reduce them the levels of civic engagement are unlikely to increase in the UK.


(2) Citizenship is partly about membership and belonging. Are there ways we could strengthen people’s identity as citizens, whether they are citizens by birth or naturalisation? Could citizenship ceremonies or events throughout the educational process play a role? Should pride in being or becoming British be encouraged?

Belonging and Engagement - Research I co-led suggests that rather than a primary focus on ‘Britishness’ or ‘British values’ a focus on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship underpinned by commitment to community cohesion, multiculturalism, equal opportunities and freedom of speech could be effective.

An aspect of this relates to the importance of citizens having a sense of belonging including being part of the decision-making that can affect their local area. Many communities feel disempowered, let down by the political system, misled by the claimed value of public consultation and ignored by politicians. For example, our research suggests that during the last two general elections only around 50% of electoral candidates replied to enquiries from the electorate. Less than a third of responses directly answered the question posed. Even so there is an interest amongst citizens in being part of the decision making in their local area as part of governance partnerships - if real power is devolved. This is the deal or no deal approach - where rights, responsibilities and returns equally apply to the citizen, politicians and the state.


(3) Civic engagement can be seen as both a responsibility and a right of citizenship. Beyond the existing legal framework, should citizens have additional formal rights and responsibilities? How do you see the relationship between the two? Should they have the force of law individually or be presented as reciprocal duties between citizen and state? How should they be monitored and/or enforced? (7) How can society support civic engagement? What responsibility should central government, devolved and local governments, third sector
organisations and the individual have for encouraging civic engagement? What can the Government and Parliament do to support civil society initiatives to increase civic engagement?

Decision Making and Responsibility - This research examined the role citizens can take in local decision-making including through the use of community contracts working alongside local politicians and council officers. The research highlighted how citizens can feel a greater sense of being part of a community by being involved in the decision-making. A key aspect of this was the mutual commitment and shared responsibilities between citizens and policy makers. However the involvement of citizens must be directly linked to the policymaking process and decision making in order to ensure public engagement. Again this is an example of the deal or no deal approach and has implications for both the citizen and the state.

Helping and Reciprocity – This research examined the extent to which citizens help other people in their local area and the role reciprocity has in pro-social behavior. Helping other people is a key component of civic society. The research found that those people who reported helping other people were less likely to expect help in return. The local context of helping was also shown to be important. People who live in an area where they perceive other people help each other are less likely to expect help in return for helping. However younger people compared to older people were found to be more likely to expect help in return for helping. This suggests the developing role of conditional helping in local communities. This may be a long-term issue for community cohesion. There is again a direct link here to deal or no deal approach to civic engagement and citizenship.

The Language of Governance and the Recognition of Citizens - There is a disjunction between the language of governance and everyday life. For citizens and the state the language of governance needs to evolve. For example, if paying tax is a ‘contribution to society’ then it should be named as such. If helping a neighbor is contributing to well-being then it should be recognised and measured as having a value. Many of the valuable everyday voluntary activities of citizens often go unmeasured in official statistics. This is part of the public information gap or what can be termed the citizen and state information gap.


(9) 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 these barriers be overcome? 10. How do you see the relationship between citizenship and civic engagement on the one hand and social cohesion and integration on the other? What effect does the level of diversity in schools and workplaces have on integration in society as a whole? How can diversity and integration be increased concurrently?

Diversity, Civic Engagement and a Sense of Place – This research highlighted the challenges people can feel about increasing levels of diversity and change more generally. For example, most people over estimate the level of ethnic and religious diversity in the area where they live. This is
part of a wider problem of how informed people are about population change. This extends to other issues such as the levels of crime and anti-social behavior in their area. This is another part of the citizen and state information gap. Knowledge about your local area and the UK population as a whole should be part of the responsibilities of citizenship. But it also applies to the state including politicians who should ensure they have evidence-based knowledge about the circumstances, experiences and attitudes of citizens.

Research with Muslim local elected councilors highlighted their diverse and multiple identities including having critical views towards some mosque leaders. Their political concerns were dominated by the politics of everyday life such as local planning issues and refuse collection. In many ways Muslim councilors were typical of local politicians in the UK in terms of predominantly being older men. However there was also evidence of the electorate contacting Muslim councilors from outside their ward in order to seek out councilors who had an identity who they felt more closely matched their own. The essentialising of identity can create barriers. It would be of value to follow up this research and examine if, and how, the councilors political attitudes and experiences have changed.

Understanding Change - A key issue in relation to civic engagement is how people understand and respond to change. For example, in relation to cultural identities people can often be searching for, and feel more comfortable in, an authenticity that never truly existed or which was partial and transitory. These ‘imagined authenticities’ can become a barrier to social change and integration. This can be addressed through a focus on a better understanding of identities and global values. This is again linked to the citizen and state information gap described above.


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