Ms Julianne Viola – written evidence (CCE0103)

Reason for Submitting Evidence

- I am a doctoral researcher and civic studies scholar at the University of Oxford. The evidence presented here contains unique insight into the thoughts, experiences, and needs of the youth population related to the concerns of citizenship and civic engagement. This evidence has been taken directly from the in-depth interviews I conducted with adolescents for my Ph.D. thesis from 2015-2016 in the United States, a nation that has recently experienced similar political and technological tensions to those within the United Kingdom.

Questions to be Addressed

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?
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?

Executive Summary

- Citizenship in the 21st century means a legal status, sense of belonging, or both, and these meanings carry weight in how people identify as citizens.
- Sense of belonging a key factor for any individual who is, or seeks to become, a citizen. Fostering a sense of belonging is critical to welcoming into Britain immigrants and naturalised British citizens alike.

Evidence

Citizenship in the 21st century constitutes a legal status, sense of belonging, or both, and these meanings carry weight in people’s identities as citizens. Each person’s definition of citizenship is directly related to whether and how they identify as citizens themselves: for some young people, citizenship is a legal status, while for others, it is a sense of belonging, regardless of legal status (Viola, 2017). This corroborates findings from Osler and Starkey (2006), who note, citizenship goes beyond legal status and political activity - it is also a “sense of belonging” (p. 441). Primarily, the sense of belonging in a community is a key component of feeling like a citizen – whether a natural-born citizen, a naturalized citizen, or a person living in the country and not yet a legal citizen. The ceremonial aspect of becoming a citizen may serve as a welcoming gesture to new citizens, but may not be as important to some people as the rights and responsibilities that come with this legal status of citizen.

For people living in the country but not yet naturalised citizens, there may be some frustration in feeling like a citizen through a sense of belonging, but not yet having the legal status. Several participants in my study had immigrated to the United States in infancy or early childhood, but after spending 14 – 16 years in the country, still are not yet naturalized (Viola, 2016). These young people expressed frustration for being a part of the state school system and active members of
their communities, yet still unable to have the same rights and privileges as their natural-born citizen peers. One participant noted that she does not take citizenship for granted, and realizes it is a legal status to be attained and worked for. It upsets her that her natural-born peers do not have to work for their citizenship, and they take it for granted (Viola, 2016). Improving the legal pathways by which individuals can become legal citizens would ease this frustration, and provide soon-to-be citizens with a greater sense of efficacy and continued contributions to British society.

To strengthen people’s identity as citizens, Britain must make all people feel like they belong, regardless of religious, ethnic, or socioeconomic background. In my study, some young people, though becoming naturalized American citizens, felt a closer connection to their home country, and still wished to enjoy the cultural practices, dress, and communities of those home countries, while also embracing the new culture and traditions of America (Viola, 2017). While some naturalized citizens do feel proud to become citizens of their new country, it is also important for Britain to encourage and appreciate expression of the new citizens’ home country and culture in everyday life.

Civic engagement also has different manifestations. For some peoples, civic engagement constitutes voting in elections, when one has reached the legal age to do so. For others, civic engagement means any activity that would improve the community, including picking up litter, volunteering in a soup kitchen, or petitioning against the closing of a school (Viola, 2017). As social media has become ever present in daily life in the 21st century, it has also become a means for people to interact with other people and content through social media (Viola, 2014). Many people are now learning about and coordinating protests – such as the Women’s March on 21 January 2017 – through their social media networks.

Recommendations for Action by the Government

- The British Government must embrace differences among members of its population – citizens or not – and talk to the sections of society that are deemed “left behind.” Engaging with these communities directly can help to build bridges within and between communities, and support civic engagement in throughout the entire country. By directly engaging with these “left behind” communities, as I did in my research, Britain can better understand the needs of these communities and what might foster a greater sense of belonging and desire to engage civically.
- Ensuring a sense of belonging is to welcoming into Britain immigrants and new British citizens alike. At the same time, Britain should embrace naturalized citizens’ home countries and cultures that they have brought to the United Kingdom. There is great social and economic value to diversity and inclusion in society.

References


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