The Student View – written evidence (CCE0122)

Introduction

1. The Student View (TSV) is an education and media charity founded in 2015. The Student View aims to create a newsroom in every school and our site offers young people a platform to share their world through words. We combat three social malaises: youth alienation; a narrow national conversation and low literacy levels. Our work would not be possible without the commitment of over 40 leading journalists from more than 20 media organisations, who co-deliver workshops alongside The Student View team, training secondary school pupils, particularly from low-income backgrounds with weak literacy skills as journalists.

2. The Student View welcomes the opportunity to share its thinking and evidence with the House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement in 2017. The evidence we are presenting will draw on our experiences of working with hundreds of secondary school children across Inner London since June 2015.

The Student View’s recommendations to HMG Government:

(i) Introduce a mandatory voting system including active abstention to transform civic engagement levels.

(ii) Reduce the voting age to 16 for local and national elections to kickstart a lifetime of democratic action.

(iii) Trial online voting with a small section of the electorate.

(iv) Place voter registration responsibilities for first time 16-year-old voters with schools or alternative education providers.

(v) Incorporate a practical element to the GCSE Citizenship specification within which pupils enact ‘real-life’ actions to benefit society. This should involve local and national politicians either in a mentoring or assessment capacity.

(vi) Implement an equality levy paid by large employers to boost the diversity of organisations across all sectors.

What does citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st century? Why does it matter, and how does it relate to questions of identity?

3. Political scientists John Baylis and Steve Smith term citizenship as "the status of having the right to participate in and to be represented in politics."\(^1\) With voter turnout at 68.8% at the last general election, over thirty percent of voting age citizens did not act on their right to participate in the electoral process, an essential part of civic engagement.\(^2\) The Student View feels that this stubborn disengagement is partly due to the lack of diversity among current MPs. The House of Commons Library reported in July 2017 that only 8% of MPs in the House of Commons and around 6% of Members of the House of Lords were from an ethnic minority background. The result is a

---


percentage gap of 5.6% and 7.6% respectively, based on the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Annual Population Survey 2016 which calculated the non-white population of the UK to be 13.6%. Unequal representation also exists in the sphere of gender presently only 32% of MPs are female. If the makeup of MPs, who work at the highest level of civic engagement in British politics does not reflect the society it represents, our elected representatives will always find it difficult to generate widespread confidence in the political system.

4. Mass civic engagement is essential for a prosperous democracy but this is inhibited by a lack of basic citizenship knowledge. The young people we train initially do not possess an adequate understanding of their rights, responsibilities and position as a citizen within modern British society. It is not uncommon when we first meet our TSV journalists to not know who their constituency MP is or in some cases the current Prime Minister. This alarming reality suggests a bold approach to encourage civic engagement in the UK is necessary. With one-third of UK citizens describing themselves as solely English or more English than British, ‘Britishness’ is under unprecedented pressure and needs more opportunities for practical expression to create a more united nation. This report outlines that ‘Britishness’ does not exclude modern Britain’s diverse identities. We must emphasise and celebrate the fluid property of ‘Britishness’ and accept its openness to constant evaluation and evolution. It is important to note that a robust British identity must be underpinned by the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith.

Do current laws encourage active political engagement? What are your views on changes to the franchise for national or local elections, including lowering the voting age? Should changes be made to the voting process or the voting registration process?

5. Our current system of voluntary voting does not encourage mass political engagement. The voluntary principle that has existed for close to a century allows citizens to easily relinquish their responsibility to participate in the political process. British citizens who have religious or any other objections should be allowed to abstain but must register their decision to abstain by informing their electoral office before polling day or in person at their respective polling station. The Student View recommends HMG adopts a mandatory voting system to involve traditionally disengaged sections of the electorate.

6. The Student View also recommends changing the franchise for local and national elections by lowering the voting age to 16. Since 1924, Australia has employed compulsory voting in national and local elections. Supporters of the system say Australia boasts some of the highest civic participation levels in the world, with a reported 95% voter turnout in the last federal election in 2016, compared to 68.8% in the UK’s 2017 general election. Critics argue this does not lead to a genuinely engaged electorate. The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee reported in 2014 that a mandatory voting system "would be politically very difficult to introduce in a country where it has no precedent". Yet, adopting a mandatory voting system will make elected representatives formulate policies to serve a more diverse electorate. Mandatory voting alongside

---

4 House of Commons Library (2017). Online, Available at: http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN01156
7 House of Commons Library (2017). Online, Available at: http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7979#fullreport
8 The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (2014). Online, Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmpolcon/232/23202.htm
reducing the voting age to 16 could alter disengaged citizens’ perception of voting by viewing it as a worthwhile civic duty.

7. In the 2016 Australian federal elections there was an 86.7% participation rate among 18-24-year-olds compared to 59% of 20-24-year-olds during the last UK general election.\(^9\)\(^10\) Rather than seeing compulsory voting as antithetical to a western liberal democracy and contradictory to living in a free and fair society, it should be regarded as a progressive step, empowering marginalised citizens to exercise their right to vote thus increasing the intensity of their civic engagement. This view is supported by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) who suggested in 2013 that first-time voters should “be required go to the polling station to vote and fined if they didn’t. But they would they would be given a "none of the above" option so they were not forced to vote for a party.”\(^11\) Currently, 16-year-olds can work full time, pay taxes, leave home, get married and join the armed forces. These responsibilities require a high level of maturity – extending the franchise to 16-year-olds should be included in this list of adult rights.

8. To accommodate a significantly larger electorate, a mandatory voting system must exist digitally. Estonia is the only nation to use online voting permanently in national elections. Criticism has been raised particularly about the security of the system. To ensure a smooth transition to online voting in the UK, the Digital Democracy Commission recommended in 2015 to begin this process “with a manageable segment of the electorate” such as “people with disabilities and those who live a long way from a polling station.”\(^12\) We recommend that HMG pilot this innovation previously outlined by the Digital Democracy Commission, doing so would represent a radical attempt to re-energise our democracy.

What should be the role of education in teaching and encouraging good citizenship? At what stages, from primary school through to university, should it be (a) available, and (b) compulsory? Should there be any exemptions? Should there be more emphasis on political participation, both inside and outside classes? How effective is current teaching? Do the curriculum and the qualifications that are currently offered need amending?

9. The Student View’s journalists are trained how to interview, decide what makes a news story, write headlines, spot fake news and create feature and opinion articles. We use the medium of journalism to nurture a community of online writers and develop their critical literacy skills. The Student View’s work complements the Department for Education’s approach to promote British Values as part of pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 4 by placing inclusion at the centre of our practice. The Student View also promotes fundamental British values through our values of community, truth, open-mindedness, balance and purpose. We welcome Andreas Schleicher’s, Director for the Directorate of Education and Skills at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) decision to introduce written tests on global competencies in 2018 to determine whether the young people examined are prepared for an "interconnected world".\(^13\) Highlighting our interdependence as members of a wider network of online and offline citizens with local, national and global responsibilities is essential to creating a modernised citizenry.

---


10. While the teaching of citizenship is effective across all Key stages, the subject should be made statutory at Key stages 1 and 2 to offer a continuous civic pathway up until registering to vote at 16.

11. The Student View recommends that HMG via the Department for Education compile a public database of approved civic engagement organisations for schools to collaborate with to complement their respective SMSC strategies.

12. The Student View recommends that the GCSE Citizenship specification must be extended to include a practical ‘real-life’ component rather than the current planning task to deliver a citizenship action to benefit society. Matching local and national politicians to a local partner school to take part in this process either in an assessment or mentoring capacity would add a captivating dimension to the present GCSE Citizenship specification. With around 20,000 councillors in England and 553 English MPs, there are a plethora of elected representatives for England’s 3,268 state-funded mainstream secondary schools to join this powerful non-partisan project. This exciting innovation alongside voter registration, being overseen by schools or alternative education providers for Year 11 pupils could end civic apathy and alienation within a generation.

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?

13. In the wake of the London Bridge and Manchester terror atrocities, Theresa May declared: “We need to live our lives not in a series of separated, segregated communities but as one truly United Kingdom.” These abominable acts of cowardice once again displayed the need to promote unity over division and challenge inflammatory rhetoric legitimising the latter. Dame Louise Casey’s damning verdict of successive central government attempts to promote integration as ‘sarís, samosas and steel drums for the well-intentioned’ stressed the urgency to introduce an active and muscular integration policy.14 Diversity and integration can be increased concurrently but to work it must be a collaborative process between native and newcomer. The British Integration Survey 2016 conducted by The Challenge found that White Britons take up 38% of the opportunities open to them to mix with others from a different ethnicity in their local areas. There was not much difference among Black and Asian Britons who took up 42% and 41% of such opportunities.15

14. Opportunities for young people from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds must be promoted to strengthen social bonds. The Student View has partnered with King’s College School, Wimbledon and Coombe Boys’ School in 2017-8. This project creates a mixed private and state school group of TSV journalists who collaborate to create joint articles. King’s College School’s Community Projects Programme repeats this cross-sector collaboration with several other state school partners. Projects bringing together pupils from the private and state sector could combat the pervasiveness of ethnic segregation in schools. A 2013 Demos study found in that year, over 50% of ethnic minority students were in schools where ethnic minorities were the majority.16

16 Demos Integration Hub, Education (2014). Online, Available at: http://www.integrationhub.net/module/education/
15. Diversity and integration could be catalysed at the same time further through an equality levy paid by large employers to boost the diversity of organisations across all sectors. The revenue generated could increase the funds available to current diversity departments or initiatives working towards the aim of a workforce that is truly reflective of modern Britain at all leadership levels. The harm caused by a lack of diversity was outlined by the McGregor-Smith Review of 2017 which suggested black and minority ethnic individuals could contribute £24 billion to the UK economy each year if members from those groups were allowed to fulfil their full potential. The Student View recommends introducing an equality levy to ensure central government and civil society combine purposefully, championing inclusivity through action. Such a move could disrupt perennial problems such as the gender executive crisis. Currently, less than 10% of executive positions in FTSE 100 companies are held by women.

16. Overall, social integration and diversity in Britain is a narrative of positivity. This viewpoint is supported by a finding in The Casey Review which found that 89% of people interviewed felt they belonged "very or fairly strongly to Britain." A rise of nine percent since 2003. This evidence supports our view that it is possible to fully belong to Britain and maintain a separate cultural or religious identity. Yet there is no room for complacency. Social integration is far too often impeded by a chronic lack of visible role models from underrepresented groups, low literacy levels and the fact that historically disenfranchised groups feel their voices do not matter. This results in apathy and alienation ultimately blocking the liberating pathway to a lifetime of constructive civic engagement.

8 September 2017

---