I write as the Joint Principal Investigator of a collaborative project involving (i) The Temple and the Temple Church and (ii) the Theology and Law departments of King’s College London: 21st century Britain: Moral Sources of the Common Good. We are taking up the challenge laid down by the Woolf Commission, Living with Difference, 2015, and The Casey Review: a Review into Opportunity and Integration, 2016: to mount and sustain a national conversation on British ideals and aspirations and the ways to realise them. These notes come from myself and from my colleague, Joint Principal Investigator Dr Daniel DeHanas, Lecturer in Political Science and Religion at KCL.

The project’s Steering Group at the Temple is chaired by Baroness Butler-Sloss. Our Co-Investigators at KCL include Lord Judge.

We respond here to the Committee’s questions only where we believe we can add most value: at Questions 7, 8 and 9.

Dr DeHanas and I will be glad to elaborate any of our points to the Committee, and are willing and ready to offer oral evidence if that would be helpful.

[Question 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?]

1. A central challenge underlies these questions. Only central government can conceive, design, realise and sustain the genuinely nationwide promotion of citizenship and civic engagement. To be practicable, such a campaign must be centralised and, at least to some extent, ‘top-down’. On the other hand, it is widely suggested that distrust of our political, economic and cultural élites – and not least, of government itself – is discouraging ordinary people from civic engagement: it seems impossible to have any influence upon or make any difference to these élites, their perceived remoteness, indifference and self-seeking. The distance in power between different groups in British society has been on view this summer, with totemic clarity, in the relationship between Council and tenants in Grenfell Tower. In the promotion of civic engagement, then, central government needs to encourage a decentralised, ‘bottom up’ movement.

2. Westminster naturally and rightly thinks on a capacious, national scale. Most ordinary people are energised by local issues, of personal concern to themselves, in which they can imagine having some palpable effect.

3. There is a widespread impression that our civic life has been hollowed out: that the organisations which once provided local cohesion and a shared sense of belonging have faded away, leaving no intermediate civic layer between the individual and the state. Our own consultations have testified to this: in our interlocutors’ concern not just that they live in fractured communities but that within each there is often no ‘community’ at all, just isolated individuals and families.
4. It is in this context that our élites – not least, in Parliament – have been calling for a ‘national conversation’: a conversation that will bridge both (i) the lateral and (ii) the vertical divisions that seem to threaten the unity represented by the very structure of the House of Commons and by the responsibility of national government for a whole nation.

5. It is symptomatic of these divisions that our nation’s leaders more often speak precisely about such divisions to each other than to those on the other side of the divides. Cumberland Lodge and The St Paul’s Institute organised an important evening at St Paul’s Cathedral this spring. The principal speakers were Lord (Rowan) Williams, Baroness Butler-Sloss and Lord Stern. The audience was 700 leaders: peers, judges, politicians, clergy. The Leitmotif of the evening was the alienation of ordinary people from our national élites – precisely the élites represented there in the Cathedral. Asked how this alienation was to be overcome, the speakers admitted candidly that they did not know.


> At a time when so much is dominated by the sole value of individual choice, faith leaders and other opinion leaders need to initiate discussions on the values, political and personal, they have in common with each other and with the humanist values of the Enlightenment. A national conversation should be launched across the UK by leaders of faith communities and opinion leaders in other ethical traditions to create a shared understanding of the fundamental values underlying public life. It would take place at all levels and in all regions. The outcome might well be, within the tradition of Magna Carta and other such declarations of rights over the centuries, a statement of principles to guide the development and evaluation of policies relating to the common good.

- *Living with Difference*, 3.14


9. We might go further. Many of us are likely to value the conviction that our polity is indeed a ‘deliberative democracy’, run through ‘government by discussion’. Without some such sustained conversation, it is not clear that ours is in fact such a polity at all. There are moments of intense and widespread public involvement: in the Scottish Referendum, 2014 (turnout 84.6%); in the Brexit Referendum, 2016 (turnout 72.2%); and in the General Election, 2017 (turnout 68.7%). But such campaigns are intermittent and almost febrile. Voters may seem susceptible to wild claims on all sides, and elections to be, in consequence, worthy of a ‘mature democracy’. More sustained, local conversations will better equip us, as a nation, both to address the major issues that will continue to face us
as voters and to listen respectfully to – and even to learn from – those with whom we disagree.

10. At issue, ultimately, is the character of the democracy that we wish to sustain. Post-Brexit, we do well to acknowledge that there are two honourable but divergent principles on which a democratic polity can be built. In 2004 a Constitution for the European Union was drafted. It included a Preamble, which was headed by a quotation from Thucydides, from Pericles’ great Funeral Speech: *Onoma men dia to mé es oligous all’ es pleionas oikein dēmokratia keklētai* (2.37.1) This was mistranslated in the Constitution’s English version: ‘Our constitution is called a democracy because power is not in the hands not of a minority but of the greatest number’ (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment.../5872.pdf, at p. 14). But Pericles in fact says that the constitution is called a democracy ‘because it is run for the benefit not of a few, but of a greater number.’ Pericles’ definition is consistent with a benevolent oligarchy or bureaucracy.¹ There has forever been an ambiguity in the conception of power within European ‘democracies’. We need local devolution and engagement, to ensure that power in Britain is to be both (i) more robustly and responsibly placed ‘in the hands of the greatest number’ and (ii) used for their benefit.

11. We return at the end (para 21) to some of the challenges that will face those mounting such a conversation. It will be no surprise that so many groups have called for a national conversation and so few, it seems, have launched one. At this point we suggest one refinement to the proposal of the Woolf Commission: that we do better to propose a large number of locally generated ‘mini-Cartas’, which it may never be possible or desirable to redact into a single, nationally endorsed ‘statement of principles’.

12. It will already be clear to the Committee that the process of such conversation is as important as the outcome.

13. To mount such a conversation will be to survey at the outset the inspiring wealth of civic engagement already locally under way. Here we can adduce just two examples well known within the Church of England: the – sometimes confrontational – broad-based community organising undertaken by Citizens UK; and the quieter but equally sustained promotion of neighbourliness by Near Neighbours. Civic engagement typically grows from success in addressing one small local cause into addressing a second, larger but still local cause; and so on. The capacities, confidence and dedication of a small core-group, often including professional and/or experienced field-workers in such engagement, can be essential to success. (Among the divergent agencies and models available for community action, the Government appears to have been comfortable working with Re:generate and its methods known as *Root Solution – Listening Matters*. Saul Alinsky’s approach, made famous in Chicago and beyond by President Obama, may have seemed too combative for the UK, see L. Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 2015.)

14. We believe that there are many organisations of various and sometimes unexpected kinds that could be acknowledged, encouraged, brought together and fortified in the civic engagement that they already undertake. Schools and faith-bodies are ubiquitous and already do extraordinary work ‘on the ground’. For the responses of local faith-bodies to

¹ The German translation was, of course, accurate.
the Grenfell fire, see e.g., *The Guardian*, 19 July 2017. We might fruitfully look around at less obvious ‘mediating’ structures which will also rise to such a challenge. One of the big five supermarkets had food-vans on the Tower’s estate by 3.30 a.m. on the night of the fire. Brentford, Chelsea, Fulham and QPR Football Clubs came together over the summer to provide football for the children of the estate (*The Times*, 15 Aug. 2017). There are depths of concern and goodwill to be tapped without any challenge to the commercial priorities driving such organisations.

15. We take a particular personal interest in the contribution of local churches and other faith institutions. We acknowledge the care with which their engagement must be sought. They are already stretched, in their promotion of a devotional life within their (sometimes small and aging) congregations. Bretherton reports the reluctance of some activists to engage with bodies so appreciably religious (*Resurrecting Democracy*, pp 99-105). Lord (Jonathan) Sacks has recently delivered a powerful speech invoking the classic Jewish emphasis on belonging over believing (http://standpointmag.co.uk/node/6938/full). We note, by contrast, that Protestantism has over centuries stressed believing as the condition necessary to belonging; ‘unbelievers’ do not find it easy to feel at home in such a setting. One of us remembers the churches in East Germany, before and after 1988-9: empty for years; suddenly vital to the protesters, and offering shelter and brave witness; within days of the Wall’s destruction, empty again. Our own churches and other religious communities would need to be more fully resourced and enabled, in order to sustain, medium- to long-term, the wide-based conversations needed.

16. We believe that such existing local engagement can be the basis for the reflective articulation, by its participants, of their own ideals and aspirations for their neighbourhood; and can become thereby the template for a scaled-up, aspirational and articulate ‘neighbourhood nationalism’. (The term coined by Les Back, *New Ethnicities*, 1996.) This is not to underestimate the difficulties in generating and sustaining such reflection even where there already an impressive pattern of local engagement: there will be no discernible point in devoting yet more time and energy to such engagement on anything abstract and seemingly ineffective.

17. One example will suffice here, of local engagement that can already exhaust – as well as inspire – its protagonists: Credit Unions. It is in the areas of greatest need that Credit Unions find it hardest to recruit the necessary 22 sponsors; and such sponsors can then find themselves trapped into an involvement longer – and over time, more wearingly – than they had ever expected. (Policy Studies Institute, *Credit Unions in the UK*, 1989, ‘Running a Credit Union’; CUs have been more easily sustained when the common bond is a large-scale and supportive employer.) It would be hard to imagine, in such areas, engaging such volunteers in yet more and seemingly less practical work.

18. It is within Government’s power to make such reflective articulation of ideals a standard component of education and of local government: by its introduction into the National Curriculum and into the relationship between local government and localities’ residents, businesses and the third sector.

19. It is also within the Government’s power to promote such reflective articulation of ideals through existing patterns of civic engagement. The Coalition Government allocated £20 million to the admirable *Community Organisers Programme in England*. It was known from
the outset that the 500 Trainee Community Officers would be in post only for one year. One year’s engagement with a community, however, was – as experienced community-workers will no doubt have told the Government – never going to be enough to generate long-term momentum. It remains to be seen whether the 4,500 Volunteer Community Officers will have acquired sufficient confidence and dedication to sustain their work without their TCOs’ tutelage and support. (Evaluation at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/488520/Community_Organisers_Programme_Evaluation.pdf; cf. R. Fisher and K. Dimberg, Journal of Community Practice, 24 (2016), 94-108. The Government has a wealth of experience on which to draw, with other such initiatives and their evaluation: such as the £80 million Community First project (evaluated at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-first-neighbourhood-matched-fund-evaluation); or indeed, in a more robust localising intervention, the Neighbourhood Planning policy.

20. We live, however, in straitened times. Any initiative dependent on Government support must not rely upon its permanence.

21. Tight budgets put a strain on all involved: there is too much already to be done, for statutory bodies to be burdened with new requirements from Government or for the third sector to load yet more upon their paid workers or dedicated volunteers. Any proposal must show local benefit within the existing remit of all those organisations ordered or invited to be involved.

22. We endorse, then, the recent calls for a national conversation, in order (i) to acknowledge, promote and enhance the civic engagement already under way and (ii) to help local communities to articulate their own ideals for themselves and indirectly for the nation at large. We acknowledge that large questions loom unanswered here. What constitutes a national conversation? Who takes part in it? Not just with a single submission and extracted sound-bites but with sustained personal engagement in the discussion. Who is going to moderate, minute and condense all the actual conversations into some final manageable form? Who will have the right to redact those conversations if some of them turn out in ways that seem unpalatable to those managing the conversations? In the terms of the Woolf Commission, who will assume the authority to formulate and disseminate any future ‘statement of principles’ and in whose name? Who, lacking any democratic mandate themselves or any political machinery, will try to persuade parliamentarians of both Houses, Government, Whitehall, agencies, churches and others to take note of these deliberations and of any such document, and to act on them? In Rawlsian terms, who will do the deliberating, and to what effect? In Sen’s, who will be part of the discussion, and who in Government will care?

23. We should also be braced in any such conversation for the emergence of deep differences in outlook and aspiration. Not everyone in Britain, we suspect, would welcome the tolerant and cohesive society which we might hope that the conversation would adumbrate and help to realise; nor that those who would welcome it will ever agree how to define or attain it. The very passion for local change that is likely to energise such conversation may sometimes also be the passion that clouds judgement with suspicion and anger. And if such conversation ever gains traction, it is certainly possible that politically motivated activists will try to hijack it.
24. In summary, we suspect that top-down initiatives to promote citizenship and civic engagement are no longer likely to be effective. There may have been a time when large-scale reports on our national life, seeking consensus on broad directions (the ‘middle axiom’ approach) would percolate in detail or outline or by osmosis through central and local government, and via the broadsheets to policy-makers in all fields, and so in time affect the lives of millions who had not heard of the report, let alone read it. (William Temple’s Christianity and Social Order, 1942, has been described as ‘one of the foundation piers of the welfare state’, D. Munby, God and the Rich Society, 1960, p. 157. Faith in the City, 1985, was perhaps met with more anger than approbation; but it did stir a lasting reflection, both within and beyond the Church of England, on our nation’s ideals and a patent failure to realise them.) We fear that even the most authoritative and thoughtful ‘middle axiom’ report, submitted to a Government and to other agencies each burdened with its own pressing priorities for action, now sinks too readily from view.

25. We suggest, therefore, that the Committee will make an immensely valuable contribution to civic engagement by recommending to Government the ongoing ‘national conversation’ sought by successive reports, to be engendered and sustained through DfE (in the National Curriculum), DCLG (in the relationship between local government and its constituents) and other Departments; and to be fostered locally, within and around agencies that are already active, with local issues and concerns to the fore.

[Question 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?]

26. We recommend less emphasis on values (which can seem retrospective and defensive) than on ideals and aspirations. Crudely phrased: what will make Britain the best Britain that Britain can be? We do not assume that everyone in Britain would welcome the tolerant and cohesive society that we hope our project will help, in a modest way, to realise; nor do we expect that those who would welcome such a society will fully agree how to define or attain it.

27. However, we do expect that holding a locally-led national conversation on ideals and aspirations can leave us changed as a nation – even if only subtly – in ways that will bring us closer to the aims of cohesion and tolerance.

[Question 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?]

28. We hear on all sides that poverty undermines engagement. Few people can commit energy to civic concerns, even at a local level, if their daily lives are dominated by the urgent demands of providing for their families.

29. Poverty itself is not to be divorced from poverty of education, experience, skills and confidence. Inequalities tend to persist in durable, inter-linked structural forms (see C. Tilly, 1998, Durable Inequality).
30. We all know of divisions between neighbouring communities which are remote from each other in culture, ethnicity and first-language. We have heard, however even greater regret that there is no longer any meaningful ‘community’ at all, and that ever more people are isolated in consequence.

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