Ms Lorna Hughes – written evidence (CCE0132)

This submission is made by Lorna Hughes as an individual expressing personal views held. It does not represent the views of others – though probably does! I have chosen to answer some of the questions posed.

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?

Citizenship and civic engagement must mean mutual respect for difference. The respect of ‘difference’ is critical – as we live in a much divided society, where our connections are built on the differences we share – race; class; economic status; housing tenure etc. These differences have been allowed to become entrenched lines of conflict and form the key points of identity we recognise.

Sadly, there is little evidence of mutual respect and citizens have withdrawn from civic engagement – leading to a governance structure that does not understand and cannot relate to the people that it serves. Citizens engage within and amongst themselves – the governance struggles because it is no longer integral or relevant to everyday lives. For example, it is now acceptable to mock poverty and deprivation in TV programmes such as ‘Can’t pay we’ll take it away’, ‘Benefit Britain’ and many others. While the TV is not controlled by the state, – such offensive programmes reflect the lack of moral compass throughout the nation.

It matters because we now have a situation where public services are disconnected from the people they are paid to serve – and unable to determine how, or support the way communities function. The recent Brexit vote demonstrates the state is unclear of its role (having whipped the nation into a frenzy) and has unleashed violent responses by people who believe they have no channels to express their views; and the governance structures cannot deal with it.

The state does not identify with its people and is unable to dictate an identity to people who it does not understand. The state created deep divisions in which people’s views and beliefs have been formed. It is the belief system that directs behaviours – in my view, the only thing to change beliefs is through action – the state must act to update its services, its officers and its systems so that we live in a fairer society that enables communities to share more platforms rather than share what has been divided by the state.

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?

As said above – the state cannot dictate identity through a 2 hour event or session! Pride comes through having a decent standard of living, equal access to education and employment, a home that meets your needs – the question in itself proves the complete lack of understanding of how people grow and develop.

I do not believe that further pressures on the school curriculum is the answer – the answer is much more about addressing the systemic failure to treat people equally and the creation of an underclass made strong through state policy that has bonded people through negative facets of their life – race, place and economic ability. No one off ceremony is going to cure what people
believe – people believe in their experience and reality. To change peoples sense of belonging requires a change in peoples experience – which will take time and a radical change in how people are treated.

This inquiry needs to be based on honesty – these questions do not relate to everyone – they relate to ‘some’ people – people of colour, people of working classes, people of poverty and deprivation. These people largely reject the state for years of failure to address their problem – change needs to address root causes, not be over layed with more bureaucracy that people do not want to hear. The inquiry should focus on where the real problems are – outlined above, and not attempt to pretend this is a matter for everyone. It needs to be focussed on changing the experience of life before attempting to muster false pride that will not be consumed by the people you need to target.

If the desired outcome is pride then people need to be treated with pride every step of the way.

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?

I believe there needs to be better opportunities to hold public services to account. There needs to be a better understanding that public services are supposed to meet the needs of the public, and the public will. I believe there is a need to refresh public services to deliver from a stronger civic perspective rather than an enforcement perspective i.e Policing. If anything, we the public should be given a stronger role in monitoring public services including monitoring the police.

4. 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?

My view is this is not limited to law – it is about the behaviours of those voted to serve. One example is I have left messages for my local MP – who has never returned my phone call! They need to serve the people not themselves.

Creating a space for more people to vote and more people to be let down is not the answer in my view!

5. 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?

If we are taking an approach of honesty here, why should working class state school pupils of colour be made to spend their time studying how to conform to the perceived ‘british way’ – whilst private school children are allowed to focus on achieving good exam grades to support their lives long term.
It's ironic that there is a suggestion in the question of ‘optional’ civic education – further proof of the lines drawn by the state to inflict on some – diverting valuable educational time to try and change beliefs of experience, which will result in the continued poorer outcomes for certain groups, and continued acceleration of others.

Schools are struggling already – despite not being fit for purpose. Why does it take 11 years to get 5 low grade GCSEs? The whole curriculum needs radical improvement – but I do not think that this inquiry should burden schools with this topic – this inquiry should focus on the structural problems rather than utilise schools as the solution – they are not the only tool the state has to encourage greater citizenship.

Good citizenship is based on experience not taught by rote like the Victorians taught in the early days of free schools.

6. Do voluntary citizenship programmes such as the National Citizen Service do a good job of creating active citizens? Are they the right length? Should they be compulsory, and if so, when? Should they include a greater political element? Should they lead to a more public citizenship ceremony? Are they good value for money? What other routes exist for creating active citizens?

I have only seen NCS advertise job vacancies in the Guardian!. I have raised 3 children – youngest 21, and they have never been offered anything from this organisation. I do not believe that citizenship should be externalised from public services and therefore it is not possible for these programmes to be effective at all. How can so much money be invested in one organisation that is clearly scared of black young people – they do not enter black or deprived communities. NCS is white middle class and operates from the fear perspective – not tackling difficult issues.

This inquiry must be bold, brave and honest – who are you really talking about, and how can a distant group like NCS, with no connection or understanding of the lived experience of the inequality of the true target cohort, make any difference at all.

The millions of pounds wasted on externalising civic activity should be reinvested to change peoples lived experience – i.e housing and education. It is only when people experience better that they feel better and they can be engaged. I believe that civic ceremonies are a waste of time that does not really impact on the way people feel. It may well be a process for some people to obtain papers to stay in the UK – but it does not change the experience or living her – and certainly does not make people engage positively with the state. A six week course and a piece of paper does not stop you being arrested because you are black, not given a job because you did not achieve, or housed on a ‘sink estate’ because the state drew those lines previously.

Creating active citizens requires creating equality – it requires support of deprived communities, it requires access to better housing, it requires meaningful education, it requires access to better employment. It's not enough to tick the box with a 6 week programme followed by an awards ceremony; then a return to inequality albeit with papers to stay. Fundamental changes are needed and that could start with diverting the money wasted on these programmes to changing peoples experiences long term.

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?

Respect differences – fully and wholly. Provide and support people to change their lives. Stop criminalising young black boys – and lead them to a path of long term criminal lives – stop excluding young black boys at school. Stop the racist Police practices; stop the racist jailing and sentencing. Stop the bad housing, b & b, overcrowding. It is only when communities basic needs are met can they begin to engage honestly with you.

The Government should admit and reverse the racist foundations that services are delivered from; and then an honest conversation can be held.

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?

See above. The biggest threat is the services that are delivered from state lines drawn on race, class, and economic ability – people are not being supported to meet their needs, which has resulted in a range of violent reactions. Strengthening citizenship means strengthening peoples ability to access resources to live an equitable life. The gap between citizen and state is worsened by the gap in wealth creation.

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?

Throughout my response I have referred to race, class and economic ability. These factors are seen in the way that services are delivered – racist policing that seeks to criminalise young black boys, racist education that excludes black children, bad housing given to deprived communities. There needs to be an introduction of civic responsibility to the very people providing services – it is not something to be ‘done to’ communities as a programme of education – that they lack they ability to be active citizens; rather the public sector lacks the ability to approach the true cohort you are discussing.

The Government – national and local needs to deliver citizenship itself, not seek to teach it. Overcoming barriers, requires the state to understand the lived experience of its citizens and act to improve that. Opportunities to do this are missed through engagement initiatives that are woefully delivered in fear of the communities they seek to reach. One example is the practice that by listening to well behaved middle class young people is representative of all young people – really not the case. I believe that people practising ‘engagement’ should be fully trained, and have a clear understanding and practice of equalities. Too many times we see engagement initiatives delivered by people with no idea of the lived experience of the people they say they want to engage with – and no idea how to access them. Active citizenship must be embedded in the way services are delivered – in which case, services would reflect the people they serve – such as education, policing and housing. A review of staff demographic will tell you a lot about who is delivering what to who; and then you can begin to understand why civic engagement is disabled by the public sector.
11. How important are levels of English proficiency for first and second generation immigrants and what could be done to increase them, including through support for ESOL classes? Are there particular barriers faced by newcomers to Britain? Could the naturalisation process, including the citizenship test, be improved and if so, how?

Newcomers to Britain face racism – look at this question from a different lens and you will see how someone who speaks a different language is immediately positioned as ‘other’ and different. This inquiry needs to be honest in what it seeks to find out about who. Of course, speaking English makes a difference to the lived experience – but this should be positioned positively, rather than enforced functional learning of a language. ESOL classes can teach people to say the right answer – but it does not teach a positive experience of the place.

The citizenship test should include a test of the ‘system’ – people should be asked are you treated with respect; has your housing enquiry been dealt with; are the children settling well in school – real tests that matter to peoples lives are needed. The test should be of our society to embrace new people, not just the test to conform in situ.

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