Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira, Professor of Politics, University of Leeds – written evidence (CCE0154)

Summary:

- Citizenship is shaped by multiple factors;
- Citizenship education can contribute towards fostering political engagement, but it is only one factor;
- It is useful to identify specific characteristics of a legislature as an institution likely to affect public engagement, in order to foster more effective engagement initiatives;
- Parliamentary public engagement encompasses a wide range of types of activities from the provision of information to the actual integration of the public’s views into parliamentary business;
- Effective political engagement should be issue based, relevant and integrative of feedback;
- Civic and political engagement should be actively encouraged and promoted at central, devolved and local level.

1. I’m submitting this evidence as Professor of Politics, whose research has centred on the relationship between Parliaments and citizens. This has recently led me to focus in particular on parliamentary public engagement and petitions, particularly in the UK. My submission addresses mainly Questions 5 and 7 of your call.

2. Citizenship is a complex phenomenon and no single cause is likely to foster it on its own. Likewise, its relationship with political engagement is not as straightforward as one might think in the first instance. Importantly though, citizenship should not be conceived merely from the political realm.

3. Research shows that citizenship develops through a combination of individual interest (how will this benefit me), sense of shared experience with others (being part of a community) and mobilisation (being part of a collective action, with a clear lead).

4. Research also shows that Citizenship education can affect key constitutive variables of political engagement, such as political literacy and interest; and that political knowledge, political interest and political engagement are closely linked. This would suggest that citizenship education can help to foster political engagement. However, citizenship education can also be very badly delivered and so its potential impact on enhancing political engagement would

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3 See, for instance, the Audits of Political Engagement series of Hansard Society (all accessible from https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/research/audit-of-political-engagement).
depend on the quality of its delivery. More importantly, whilst citizenship can lead to more political engagement, it is not by itself the only factor in promoting it.

5. It is also important to consider what actions political institutions can develop to engage the public. In the next few bullet points I do a summary of what my research has found in relation to the development of public engagement by parliaments.

6. Before we consider these actions, it is useful to take stock of the characteristics of a legislature as an institution and reflect on how this affects public engagement. Parliaments have never been popular and never will; they are institutions destined to be unloved. Besides generic phenomena (such as how people view politics in itself), three key characteristics of the institution explain this: the fact that parliaments are highly visible, collective institutions and accountable. In short, visibility breeds vulnerability; this is particularly so when this visibility enhances the sense of distance between the individual and the institution. As collective institutions, legislatures do not have a clear lead, unique identity, personified in a leading figure (as governments do with a Prime-Minister, for instance); legislatures are constituted by collectives of different groups and actors, who lead different, and often opposing, agendas. Besides this, parliaments’ accountable nature means that each and every one of us thinks we have a stake in it and that it should be meeting our own needs and preferences; this means that for every single decision taken in parliament, someone somewhere will be unhappy with this decision.

7. Recognising that legislatures are destined to be unloved is no excuse to hinder the development of public engagement, on the contrary. It is simply about identifying key characteristics of the institution and bearing these in mind when developing specific initiatives to foster political engagement. For instance, breaching the distance of the institution by bringing individuals to the building, or taking parliamentarians to individuals, is a way of demystifying stereotypical assumptions forged in the public discourse through its visibility; it’s a way of developing personal/individual imageries of the institution rather than letting the public discourse shape individuals’ perceptions. Likewise, a focus on key leading figures such as the Lord Speaker, Speaker or Presiding Officers, helps to personalise the institution, giving it a more identifiable voice.

8. Ever since they have existed, legislatures have played some form of public engagement/education role. But this has only become an actual major activity for legislatures since the turn of the 21st century. This is particularly clear in the UK (though also visible elsewhere). Its devolved legislatures have pioneered some of the most innovative forms of parliamentary public engagement and, particularly since 2005, the Houses of Parliament has also developed impressive public engagement initiatives. As with everything, far more could still be done however. Effective parliamentary public engagement should enable some form of connection from the public to the institution, it should also, where possible, be integrated into parliamentary business rather than being seen solely as a parallel activity.

9. Parliamentary public engagement encompasses a number of different activities: information services (which would include from information on a website to visiting services), education services (both linked with the schools/education system, and for a wider public, separately to

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the education system), and involvement in parliamentary business. Whilst the first two areas have seen considerable development, the latter – integrating the public into parliamentary business – has seen the least development.

10. Three key factors help to promote effective engagement: it needs to be issue based (rather than procedural), relevant to those potentially engaging and include a form of feedback from the institution.

11. People engage mainly through issues, not because they’ve woken up in the morning with a burning desire to participate in politics. Focusing only on the value of politics and the duty of being involved in politics risks to miss out on a large proportion of the population who would never be interested in being involved in politics – even if they may vote. They expect others, those they voted for, to do the politics. However, if the political matter is presented as an issue of great importance to them, then they are likely to become involved simply because they have a very strong interest for that issue. This has been clear in the interviews I have developed with petitioners. 6

12. Linked to this, citizens are more likely to get involved, and feel that their input is of value, if the initiative is somehow relevant to them. This was clear in the research I developed with Dr Thompson (University of Surrey) on the Public Reading of the Children and Families Act, where participants overwhelmingly participated because the bill would affect them very directly7. Likewise with petitioners, they are more inclined to sign a petition or to become involved in its campaign, if it is of direct relevance to them. Demonstrating the relevance of parliament to the public is therefore an important part of parliamentary public engagement.

13. Finally, feedback from the institution is key, due to the abstract nature of the institution and the fact that the vast majority of the people have not been in contact with it. This feedback can be as simple a parliamentary official acknowledging the contributions of a group of 16 year olds in a general outreach session. It can also mean simply being listened to; it can also mean an explanation of how an individual’s input has been received. For instance, my research with petitioners has shown that one of the main benefits of the new e-petitions system in the House of Commons has been the actual contact with the Committee’s team. Likewise, those individuals who do become involved in a public engagement initiative, but then never hear back from the institution feel a double sense of disappointment, that they have wasted their time. Developing public engagement with no outlets for feedback can often result in strengthened disaffection to the point that not doing anything may have been better. This explains why the integration of parliamentarians into public engagement is very important; individuals need to feel there is a real purpose in getting involved.

14. Political engagement can and should be promoted by formal institutions; this can be done at local level, devolved and/or central. One solution and one perspective are seldom sufficient. Political engagement needs to be flexible to fit a range of contexts and purposes. It should definitely be promoted through education, but it should also be part of routine parliamentary business. Examples of excellent practice in political engagement at local level can be found, for example, through the recent Kirklees Council Democracy Commission,8 and at devolved level through the work the Welsh Assembly has been developing with Committees.

7 C. Leston-Bandeira, L. Thompson and W. Mace (2016), Letting the Public in on the Act, report, project funded by British Academy/Leverhulme Trust (Ref: SG141934), Online at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318109261_Letting_the_Public_in_on_the_Act
15. Overall, political engagement that works is: specific, issue-led, relevant, integrating contact and feedback with formal institutions, with a specific purpose, integrated with politics/politicians, flexible to suit different audiences, taking place in a range of places rather than at the main institution and integrating active learning techniques.

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8 See http://www.democracycommission.org.uk/