Both Houses of the UK Parliament have made huge strides in outreach and public engagement in recent years but need for deeper citizen engagement in politics remains urgent. These observations and suggestions are based on in-depth research on the House of Lords and House of Commons and on Parliament and public engagement in other countries (see E Crewe’s Lords of Parliament, 2005, and House of Commons: an anthropology of MPs at work, 2015 as well as SOAS/Hansard Society project). I am only addressing the questions you pose in your call for evidence that relate to my research.

1. Conceptualising citizenship and engagement

Our political rhetoric often focuses on either individuals (e.g., citizens) or on structures and systems (e.g., society) rather than on what connects them (e.g., processes and relationships). Implicit in some of your questions is the idea that you are asking us to identify problems and solutions that will be delivered by Parliament or government in consultation with the public. But some aspects of citizenship are beyond your (and anyone’s) control. Asking what values we ‘should’ have as British people conveys the idea that if we can name them, and promote them, people will fall into line. But ‘values’ do not develop in cultures in this way; they emerge over time in relationships between people. Unless we develop more sophisticated processes for improving the relationship between Parliament and citizens, we will remain a shallow democracy.

2. Innovating processes of engagement – Parliament

Parliamentary outreach has been transformed. The House of Commons website, outreach programme and education work are outstanding and their public engagement is innovative and world-leading. Parliament Week has 100s of partners and events throughout the UK. Committees in both Houses expanded their outreach, holding sessions around the country, partly thanks to officials. Connections with higher education institutes have become far stronger, with at least two academic fellowship programme being established in recent years. The handling of the media (both traditional and digital) by Parliament has vastly improved, with far more and better informed coverage. All of these deserve still more investment.

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However, the potential for a deepening of the relationship between citizens and politicians in both Houses is clear within all these activities. To take Committees as just one example (because I have observed them over some years):

2.1. Parliament aims to be inclusive. However, it was only when the LSE reported on the identity of witnesses to Parliamentary committees that details about progress on this aim became publicly available. In 2013 only 25% of witnesses to Parliamentary committees were female.\(^2\) Looking at academic witnesses specifically, 83% were male (and as many as 44% of them came from London). When committees in both Houses take evidence from witnesses they should monitor their not only their gender but other aspects of their identity such as, but not only, religion, age, ethnicity, where they travelled from, and profession. They should set targets to improve and report on progress.

2.2. Parliament has stepped up its efforts to broadcast calls for evidence across society. I would encourage both Houses to expand their partnerships to encourage other organisations not only to alert people to opportunities to express their views but also offer advice and guidance.

2.3. Inclusion is not just a question of numbers. How people engage should be considered also. Parliament should learn from witnesses about how they experience the process of engagement. The scholarly literature about the existing limits to participation and consultation in general points to its superficiality and tendency to collect opinions in lists, rather than enable discussion and debate. Participation tends to be dominated by elites. Furthermore, in my observation of encounters between politicians and citizens during the scrutiny of law, it was informal APPGs that often achieved far more useful discussions rather than formal committee sessions. While the court-style interrogation of witnesses is entirely appropriate for holding Ministers to account, a more gentle and (where possible) discursive style generates more interesting engagement. It is only lawyers who appear to be totally at ease in the court-like atmosphere.

2.4. In my personal experience of giving evidence to committees, the tone of the committees members has ranged from respectful to the opposite, despite my status as a ‘friendly witness’. In one case this arose when I was expressing an unpopular opinion. Such bluntness is uncomfortable even for those accustomed to public speaking, which discourages further participation.

2.5. Committees could engage more openly with witnesses about the source and rigour of their evidence. Knowledge and evidence are produced in different ways by scientists, lawyers and social scientists, as examples, and they all tend to denigrate the kind of evidence produced by others. Flawed assumptions are often made about the value of evidence: e.g. randomized control trials are often described as the ‘gold standard’ but they are appropriate for some situations (e.g., testing medicines), and unsuitable for others; and personal testimony is treated inconsistently (sometimes as the only valuable knowledge, at other moments as invalid and partial). Officials, library researchers and committee specialists do an incredible job weighing up different types of evidence. But time allocated for politicians and citizens to debate and compare the value and rigour of evidence is inadequate.

3. **Innovating processes of engagement – constituencies**

Representation of up to 70,000 constituents by Members of Parliament is taken for granted by politicians and citizens. With MPs visiting their constituencies far more frequently than they did up until the 1970s, opportunities for new kinds of engagement have opened up and innovation is needed in how they engage with those they represent. MPs not only hold surgeries, and visit organisations and groups in their area, but some increasingly prioritise specific issues and discuss these with those concerned. However, they rarely account for how they spend their time in their constituencies, how they find out what their constituents need, want or demand and what they are doing to further their interests and concerns. Bearing in mind the fabulous diversity in any community, never mind a whole constituency, we need to know: who are they talking to and how and why are they prioritizing some issues above others? Explaining themselves to their constituents, and being available to debate progress and setbacks on their efforts both in the constituency and in Parliament (or, if relevant, government), could be relatively easily achieved through meetings, digital media and facilitation by partner organisations (such as schools, colleges, charities, enterprises and so on).

4. **Innovating processes of engagement – schools**

Citizenship and political engagement should be taught from primary school upwards and it should be compulsory at all levels (not just secondary). Some aspects of ‘promoting good citizenship’ are less contested. Young citizens recognising the rights of others is already in the curriculum and getting more practice at doing so in discussion would be an obvious place to expand further. Teaching people from a young age to learn about how to test the rigour of claims, and understand more about the source of different types of knowledge and evidence, is essential. The digital revolution has meant that far more information has suddenly become available, but our curriculum needs to ensure careful explanation throughout our education of the relationship between politics and knowledge. Young people need the skills to navigate the increasing complexity of plural and conflicting views and deal with uncertainty, accelerating change and the pressures of social media. But other aspects – such as what responsibilities we have to each other and how we deal with conflicting rights – are so complex and contestable that teaching could only be done by facilitating debate. MPs, peers and academics could be encouraged to support citizenship education in centres of learning even more than they do. As the world becomes more unpredictable, globalized and conflict-prone, learning how to develop democracy so that it keeps the peace rather than inflames tension, will become increasingly vital. A deeper democracy will not be possible until our education catches up with our aspirations and expectations.

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