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

1. This is a significant question for the United Kingdom in the 21st Century, especially at a time of major political upheaval over membership of the European Union. UK citizens have also, wittingly or unwittingly, been citizens of the European Union for many years, but on the basis of a particular application and interpretation of one form of civic engagement, the 2016 referendum, this second citizenship is likely to be removed from those of us who have it, and denied to future generations.

2. At the same time, the UK has not been, and hopefully will not become exclusive about dual citizenship or nationality,1 so whilst for particular political and ideological reasons dual UK/EU citizenship may no longer be the norm post “Brexit”, many UK citizens will still have dual citizenship with other nations, and thus be able to move freely to and from other countries, live in the UK and elsewhere, and enjoy the rights and responsibilities that accompany their different citizenships.

3. The question is also important because citizenship is not something that is particularly taught or acknowledged as a part of growing up or engagement for anyone who is born in the UK. There is an assumption for many that you are a British citizen2, and possibly the most obvious “formal” reference to citizenship appears for those who apply for and receive a passport, because of the language in which it is couched and its purpose of permitting return to the UK.

4. In my recent experience of helping a member of my family from another country to prepare for UK citizenship, I have been struck by the information he has been required to learn3, and the processes he has to go through, including a ceremony, which are not applied to those of us born as UK citizens. It therefore seems to me that migrants to the UK may have a better appreciation of citizenship and what it means than those of us who acquired it at birth.

5. Unfortunately, those who pursue citizenship in 2017 Britain not only have to learn facts about the UK (which may or may not be useful), but also frequently experience a darker side of life in this country, including a culture of hostility and inefficiency from the Home Office and the related approach that everything has a price that is more important than its value.4

6. In this respect we seem to be on a par with the Roman empire, as evidenced from the experience of the apostle Paul described in Acts chapter 23 (New International Version): The commander went to Paul and asked, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” “Yes I am,” he answered. Then the commander said, “I had to pay a big price for my citizenship.” “But I was born a citizen,” Paul replied. On this occasion Paul’s citizenship spared him from being flogged, but he was probably threatened with that because he didn’t behave as, or appear to be a Roman citizen. I suppose that the current UK equivalent of the brutality of flogging for those who are not accepted as UK citizens is detention in Immigration Detention and Removal Centres, such as Morton Hall5 or Brook House6.

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1 Unlike, for example, Japan, which does not accept dual nationality for adults.
2 Although arguably this assumption is still most consistently applied to people of white European appearance.
https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/sep/01/home-office-makes-800-profit-on-some-visa-applications
5 https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jan/13/investigation-after-third-death-in-uk-immigration-detention-
7. Key factors in the consideration of citizenship and identity are family and residency. Many people who are part of an established family in the UK, or the immediate family of a UK citizen, and others who have lived and perhaps worked in the UK for many years, identify themselves by their relationships, residency and/or actions as de facto UK citizens. Nevertheless they are denied citizenship because they do not meet arbitrary criteria set for political reasons by a Government that gives these a higher value than familial relationships, love, compassion, community or even civic engagement.

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?

8. To be a member and to belong there has to be something that attracts you and that is of greater intrinsic value or value to yourself than the alternatives. I think that those who have sought naturalisation have some sense of identity as citizens here, either because they see it as providing the freedoms to maintain their family relationships; they respect what they have seen and heard of our constitution and values; or because (in some cases) there is no alternative citizenship available to them because of war, persecution or other catastrophe.

9. One of the strengths of the UK is that it does not have a single homogenous identity, so the very notion of citizenship to which all (or at least a significant majority) can subscribe should be pursued to identify its essential elements – its purpose, values, and structures.

10. A friend who is a church leader notes: I think the desire [for identity as a citizen] comes from that ‘echo’ of God’s design that ‘there is something within all of us that desires to be connected to something bigger than our individual selves’. People’s past cultural experiences, principles, ideas and expectations hugely shape a person’s identity and allegiances. My experience of other cultures is it enables you to ask the questions of ‘what can I readily let go of from my own cultural background?’ and ‘what am I inspired to pick up from the new cultural experience?’, and identifying how much of the current is holding us back or propelling us forward.

11. Mechanisms that help people to reflect on these would help, through story perhaps etc., telling your own, hearing others, identifying changes on the journey.

12. However, change requires a process and takes time, and some UK citizens would be surprised and even puzzled to hear the rationale for seeking UK citizenship that might be expressed in these stories.

13. In the short term, this could be helpful for citizens by birth as well as for those who are naturalised, as I wonder how much appreciation and hence response to the essence of a uniting UK citizenship there currently is in the UK.

14. This is where the education system could perhaps help, as it appears that the notion of citizenship and civic engagement has not been taught in any depth to several generations of children.

15. There is also surely a parenting responsibility, and behind that support and guidance for parents who as they grew up perhaps never learned what would help them to be responsible and engaged citizens.

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[7] Citizen: Your role in the alternative kingdom; Rob Peabody; 2014
16. However, before burdening schools and other front-line establishments with more pressures, a change in culture throughout Government and the public sector is required, to reflect a value system that follows good governance; respects citizens and people who aren’t but might like to be; understands a public service ethos; and observes the rule of law at all times. From my perspective as a former public servant, all these appear to have been in decline in recent years, but if citizenship and civic engagement are to flourish they must be exemplified and nurtured from the top.

17. The idea of citizenship ceremonies, perhaps as coming of age events – could be worth considering. (They could be of more value and less expense than the imported Prom Parties!)

18. It is strange that as part of the naturalisation process people have to attend a citizenship ceremony, but that is not the norm for citizens born here; we are allowed to drift and at no time in our lives are we guided or inducted. Is this because we do not take it seriously until we want to keep people out?

19. It is perhaps ironic that there is an option for people to book a private citizenship ceremony (at double the fee), which surely works against integration and civic engagement and reinforces individualism, which is the antithesis of citizenship.

20. My friend adds another comment that could be helpful here: I also think sport has a very influential role on people’s local and national allegiances and cannot be underestimated or alternatively used to leverage changes where possible – e.g. the way people get behind things like UK athletics/Olympics/Football/Rugby etc. When people from other nations have a strong sporting allegiance (e.g. cricket) that’s unlikely to change – but even a hardened Scot like myself can support the British Lions, but the passion for the sport comes from the original allegiance.

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?

21. It is helpful to start with some sort of definition of civic engagement, and this seems reasonable: Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.

22. There is a balance to be struck between an understanding of responsibilities and legal coercion. The ideal is that citizens so identify with their communities that they contribute to the wellbeing and development of those communities, without the need for the force of law. Unfortunately, what we are seeing at times is people being unwilling to contribute to wellbeing, and others destructively undermining wellbeing by their behaviour.

23. In my community I attended a meeting with my MP, at which, inter alia, there was discussion about the amount of rubbish in the streets and open spaces. As we have become accustomed to a transactional basis for service, whereby we pay the local authority and they clear up the rubbish, the solution was seen to be more work by the council, even though

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8 It could perhaps be argued that paying a larger fee is a practical form of civic engagement, in that it helps to fund local authorities that are short of cash.
everyone knew that their funding had been cut by central government. I suggested that my MP organised something like Umuganda, to bring people together to clear up the neighbourhood. (I came across Umuganda in Rwanda. It can be translated as 'coming together in common purpose to achieve an outcome'. Umuganda is a communal act of assistance and a sign of integration in a country still recovering from a Government-inspired genocide. It is undertaken on the last Saturday of each month, when everyone aged 18- to 65-yrs-old is expected to do yard work or help the community in some other way.) My MP, knowing his constituency, was horrified at the prospect of suggesting a requirement for people to be involved, and told me he did want to be re-elected!

24. On the other hand there are a large number of voluntary groups that bring people together to improve the quality of life in their communities – including the constituency where I live.

25. However, in or close to my community, there appear to be enough people without a sense of identity or civic engagement to discard their rubbish in the streets, to fly tip, and to steal cars, break into houses, and to ride unlicensed motorcycles in large noisy groups without regard to law or safety. These appear predominantly to be “born-in-the-UK” citizens who have lost touch with the responsibilities of citizenship, if they were ever aware of them. Their younger siblings, or the next generation, are also in evidence, preparing for their adulthood of counter-engagement.

26. Before even suggesting extensions to the force of law, it is clear that the existing legal framework is not effective in upholding responsibilities and maintaining the rule of law. This is in part because the police force is under-staffed and also ill-equipped or prevented from carrying out all the functions that the law provides for – and so the well-being of communities tumbles.

27. In terms of additional rights, my inclination has been to consider that we have enough rights. However, at the present time it is evident that rights that we take for granted could be undermined in the proposed transition to a post Brexit UK. There have been disturbing signs of a tendency by the Executive to seek more power, and thus to bypass Parliament in making or amending legislation. One of the most disturbing suggestions is that citizens may lose some of their ability to challenge the Government. We have already seen reductions to legal aid, considerable obfuscation in dealing with Freedom of Information requests, frequent referrals to “Remainers” as disloyal (when surely we still have “Her Majesty’s Most Loyal Opposition” in the House of Commons), and so on.

28. We have a parliamentary democracy which means that Parliament should have more say over legislation than advisory referenda or an Executive that seeks to be unaccountable. It is ironic that the unelected House of Lords and Supreme Court have at times recently led the way in looking after the rights and responsibilities of citizens by securing the rule of law and the ongoing effectiveness of Parliament. May this continue until we have an Executive (and a press) that understands the nature of our constitution in protecting citizens.

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?

29. I think that consideration should be given to lowering the voting age to 16 for national and local elections. So many decisions affect the lives of your people who will soon be adults.

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9 See, e.g. European Union Withdrawal Bill 2017 Section 5(4)
10 See e.g. European Union Withdrawal Bill 2017 Sections 7-9;17
Strong governance should be maintained in the voting registration and voting processes. Consideration could be given to electronic voting systems, as long as the secrecy of the ballot is preserved; there are cast-iron assurances that the systems will not fail or be compromised; and implementation only proceeded following a rigorous procurement process with fixed costs to public funds.

30. On the other hand, it is worth noting that visiting a polling station is itself a tangible expression of civic engagement and integration, and this should not be lost.

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?

31. I have noted above the desirability of encouraging good citizenship through the education system, but do not have enough knowledge to comment on when it should be compulsory, or on the content of the curriculum.

32. I also think that ways should be explored to encourage a parental role in the encouragement and development of good citizenship, so there could be a role for employers, parent groups and other organisations. Guidance could be more valuable than coercion, e.g. in a similar way that charities help people with financial or relationship difficulties.

33. Interestingly there appears to be a rise (certainly amongst younger people) to get involved in volunteering in some way, which is a move towards civic engagement. Some of the motivation for this will come from schools, or youth groups, churches and other networks.

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?

34. I have sought to discover a comprehensive list of “British values” from different Government departments, but there does not appear to be a consistent set of values applied across government.

35. I would comment on Freedom of Speech as a value that is under threat, for example: as I have noted above, in the current Brexit political climate, those who challenge the Government’s approach are not just disagreed with, but branded as disloyal, undermining the will of the people and the like. It feels as though those who voted to Remain have lost their voice as a more than significant part of the British people. This challenge to freedom of speech is being modelled by government ministers and MPs, amongst others, who, in a Parliamentary democracy should know better. Their behaviour appears to be thoroughly unparliamentarily. For example: it has become increasingly difficult to express any opinion other than the current “received wisdom” on anything to do with gender politics, such as abortion, same-sex marriage, or gender identity, without being labelled as a bigot. Some aspects of liberalism are extremely illiberal. For example: there appears to be an unwillingness to allow freedom of speech in some areas of university life, for fear of offending the sensitivities of some students. Universities should be the very places to speak freely and explore ideas. I grew a lot through the challenges to my ideas and world-view that I experienced at university, and it is there that my civic engagement developed.
36. I would also comment on a **right to family life**, because I think that this is one value area in which the current and previous government have been the most perniciously hypocritical, notably in their dealings with migrants. When David Cameron was promoting same sex marriage, he argues that “when people’s love is divided by law, it is the law that needs to change”. But the Government’s family migration rules and other hard-line approaches to immigration policy have done precisely the opposite, and divided thousands of UK citizens from the partners they love, and their children. Furthermore, marriage, and remaining together for a UK citizen and a non-EU spouse (and before long potentially an EU spouse too) is made subject to means testing, excessive and repeated profit-making fees, and a form of marriage probation, all of which show an amazing contempt for British citizens who love someone from another country and yet want to live here.

**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?**

37. My observation on this relates to the Home Office’s oft-repeated claims that its family migration rules are designed to assist integration, and that people who are not allowed into the UK because of a low sponsor income, or inadequate language skills would not be able to integrate. I would say that one of the best ways to integrate into UK society is by being with a UK based family, and also by engaging with community-based organisations such as churches and schools. Furthermore, the best place to become competent in spoken English is an English-speaking country, as I believe is acknowledged by the Australian government.

**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?**

38. Levels of English proficiency are very important, without decrying the use of other languages in the home and elsewhere, where appropriate. ESOL classes are helpful, but so is immersion in a community that speaks English – see my observation on integration in paragraph 36.

39. The citizenship test is a mystery to those who have never taken it – and even to those who have come across it. There is much in it that we have not been taught, and that has very little bearing on life in the UK today. I have encountered many UK born people who have tried test papers and failed. It takes no account of the differing ways that people learn, and for the most part is redundant the moment a pass has been granted.

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11 David Cameron; 29 March 2014
12 https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/sep/01/home-office-makes-800-profit-on-some-visa-applications