

PRACTITIONERS

Citizenship and Political Engagement Among Young People: The Workings and Findings of the Youth Citizenship Commission

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ABSTRACT

In 2008, the Labour government established the Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC). The (independent) Commission, staffed by individuals of varying backgrounds and serviced by the Ministry of Justice, was asked to examine how young people define citizenship and to explore how that citizenship might better be connected to political activity. Additionally, the YCC was required to lead a consultation on whether the voting age should be lowered. From the perspective of two participants, this article examines the key debates which exercised the YCC and discusses some of its most important recommendations, but also looks at its workings. Could the Commission (or other independent Commissions) operate differently in terms of evidence-gathering, deliberations, recommendations or implementation of proposals?

Youth disengagement: the rationale underpinning the creation of the Youth Citizenship Commission

EVIDENCE of disengagement of young people from conventional political activity has become apparent in recent years. Perhaps most strikingly, voting in UK general elections among 18–24 year olds amounted to only 39 and 37 per cent of those eligible in the 2001 and 2005 elections, respectively. Only half of schoolchildren declare an intention to vote in general elections when they become eligible.¹ Other evidence suggests serious supply side problems. Politicians are the most mistrusted category of persons in the perceptions of young people and political institutions are not held in high regard.² The term ‘politics’ elicits negative reactions from many young people, who tend to associate the term with national government and leading politicians. Although the need for the invigoration of politics is one without demographic boundaries, the problem is often seen as being particularly acute among young people.

A body of literature has developed on why the term ‘politics’ has invited derision and scorn.³ However, although cognisant of the acuteness of the problem among youth, this research has tended (with exceptions) to scrutinise attitudes among the entire population. Research on disengagement has often conflated young and old. There is a lack of

segmented research beginning at first base, examining how young people themselves conceptualise 'citizenship' and 'politics', moving through the other bases of connectivity, interaction beyond peer group, communication to civic and political participation, beyond the current (and growing) debates on volunteering or compulsory civic service.

Although it overlooked the need for young people to consider electoral participation as a civic duty, the Power Inquiry⁴ was correct in its contention that young people are not apathetic towards politics *per se*. However, this grouping seems less persuaded of the utility of some conventional forms of political activity. Perceptions of active citizenship appear detached from political participation among young people. This highlighted the need for further segmented quantitative and qualitative research among teenagers to ascertain how they define citizenship and politics; how to better connect each and what might practically be done to improve political engagement. Audits of young people's supposed lack of conventional political activity have been criticised as overly reductionist.⁵ Although this criticism may be merited, youth disengagement from voting or participation in representative institutions undermines democracy and threatens to become serial abstention, rather than a transient feature dismissed as a mere generation effect. Moreover, such disengagement is not easily attributable to an 'expectations gap' based upon 'disappointment' with politicians felt by young people,⁶ as expectations are low from the outset.

The focus of state attempts thus far to rectify the separation of certain types of political activity from the concerns of young people has been largely focused upon improving political knowledge. This has involved, firstly, the introduction of compulsory citizenship education within schools; secondly the extension of citizenship within the curriculum to A level and, thirdly, the incorporation of a new 'political literacy' dimension to citizenship tuition, based upon a broad notion of making a person effective in public life. Nonetheless, the new orthodoxy of efficacy as a promoter of action and participation among young people is itself problematic. It is subjective (who defines 'effective'?); difficult to measure (how is civic participation properly assessed?) and may not provide coherent grounds for participation in the political sphere, not least because voting is non-rational rather than efficient, given the slender chance of an individual vote determining the outcome.

Among young people, there is considerable confusion over what constitutes citizenship and how 'good' citizenship is to be exercised. Definitions of citizenship tend to remain grounded in national identity, although the act of being a good citizen tends to be minimalist, grounded in obeying the law, without wider communal or national political cognisance. Conceptually, there is little clarity as to what constitutes the ideal citizen and what passes muster as active citizenship and what is properly defined as political activity. Without this clarity and

bereft of a clearer understanding and articulation of how citizenship is necessarily linked to political involvement, the teaching of citizenship may have little impact upon political life. Equally, there is little precision among young people over what constitutes 'politics', often viewed in reductionist terms as primarily (and remotely) 'politicians' or 'parliament'.

In attempting to clarify and address some of the above difficulties, the Labour government under Gordon Brown established the Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC) in 2008. The YCC's establishment was first signalled in the *Governance of Britain Green Paper*.⁷ The Green Paper was introduced by the government as an attempt to 'forge a new relationship between government and citizen, and begin the journey towards a new constitutional settlement'.⁸ The YCC's establishment was confirmed by the Prime Minister in parliament in March 2008, partly because of the government's intention to address the overarching issue of youth disconnection from politics and also in response to Labour backbench pressure on the issue of lowering the voting age.⁹ Its launch produced a flurry of pressure group activity, sustained throughout the life of the Commission, but little from the political parties. The YCC gathered evidence and deliberated for one year, producing final reports in June 2009.¹⁰

The formation of the commission and its terms of reference

The YCC was established by the government, its Chair being selected by the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Justice and its members appointed by the Ministry for Justice. The selection of the Chair arose from his then status of the Chair of the Political Studies Association, even though its published response to the *Governance of Britain Green Paper* was fairly critical.¹¹ The Commission was ably serviced throughout by the Democratic Engagement Unit within the Ministry of Justice. The role of government in appointments might seemingly ask a lot of the word 'independent' in respect of the Commission, but there was never any pressure to reach particular conclusions. 'Road-testing' of ideas via government departments, conducted in the latter stages of the Commission's life, nonetheless yielded suggestions for amendment from civil servants.¹²

It was perhaps the intention of the Government of All the Talents (GOATS) to produce the Commission of All the Talents (COATS).¹³ The 13 Commissioners were drawn from a wide range of backgrounds. They included academics, teachers, youth workers, trade unionists, a paralympian, the President of the National Union of Students, a young mayor, a journalist and a chief executive of a young peoples' organisation. With the exception of a solitary member who appeared determined to demonstrate youth abstention from engagement and activity, the Commissioners approached their tasks with enthusiasm. Additionally, an Experts group and Youth Advisory Board were both

formally established. The former comprised a range of individuals with useful practical or academic knowledge within the terms of the Commission's remit, although the latter contained young people from a range of backgrounds.

The lack of powers accruing to the Chair in terms of Commission and advisory appointees, the framing of the terms of reference by the government and the knowledge of existing youth initiatives already held by the permanent civil servants within the Democratic Engagement Unit of the Ministry of Justice all increased the prospects of Commissioners following the steers provided by those civil servants. Imbalances in knowledge resources did not, however, equate to control over the policy proposals initiated by Commissioners.

Permitted a lifespan of only one year (a tight timetable) before it was required to report, the YCC's terms of reference were:

- (1) To examine what citizenship means to young people;
- (2) To consider how to increase young people's participation in politics; the development of citizenship among disadvantaged groups; how active citizenship can be promoted through volunteering and community engagement; and how the political system can reflect the communication preferences of young people;
- (3) To lead a consultation on whether the voting age should be lowered to 16.

Consideration of the voting age may have appeared as a 'bolt-on' to a more conceptually oriented remit, but a Commission charged with the task of increasing young people's involvement in politics could hardly ignore the growing debate over when one of the most visible manifestations of interest—a vote—should be permitted. The terms of reference tacitly acknowledged that active citizenship and political participation were not seen as synonymous by young people. The YCC's creation was part of an effort by government to make the link between the active citizen and the political contributor. The task set for the Commission implicitly acknowledged the division between community action and political engagement. Voluntary action may be apolitical and fail to bridge the gap between the civil activist—best represented by community volunteering—and the civic activist. The YCC wished to encourage young people to engage in civic contributions and recognise links between civil and civic actions, blurring the civil–political boundary.

An obvious initial concern of the YCC was to distinguish its remit from those of other bodies which had reported in similar fields concerning voting, volunteering and the citizenship curriculum. The impact of reports from other bodies does not appear to have been quantified, a serious omission. It was helpful for the YCC, in terms of

finding new space for examination, to have a specific focus upon young people. The YCC's demographic remit and concentration upon citizenship distinguished it from the Power Inquiry into democratic engagement, which did argue for a reduction in the voting age. The Yvote/Ynot? Project examined the problem of voter disengagement among young people¹⁴ and the Electoral Commission previously rejected lowering the voting age, albeit with a recommendation for the issue to be reviewed within five to seven years from the date of its 2004 report, which is where the YCC entered.¹⁵

The Russell Commission advocated a national framework for youth action and engagement, primarily volunteering.¹⁶ However, as the YCC noted, although the organisational coherence suggested by the Russell Commission is welcome, getting young people to volunteer is not a major problem. There has been a tendency to steer the concept of 'good citizen' towards action in the voluntary sector. Many young people still tend to perceive good citizenship as primarily a negative duty to not break the law. Some see citizenship more positively in terms of volunteering and 'doing good', but often young people do not see active citizenship in terms of engagement with politics, even at the basic of level of voting.

The YCC attempted to avoid a further review of the citizenship curriculum in schools, given that this had been the subject of the Ajegbo Report only one year earlier.¹⁷ Perhaps surprisingly, a report for the Department for Constitutional Affairs in 2007 made few connections between active citizenship and political participation.¹⁸ The YCC was anxious to avoid the Goldsmith Commission's linking of citizenship to British identity.¹⁹ Instead, the YCC wished to confine its remit to the bolstering of citizen engagement, not the development of a Britishness which might impinge upon political values, particularly in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Indeed the 'Britishness' word was banned throughout the Commission's proceedings.

In moving debates on from 'Britishness', the Commission wished to avoid defining citizenship in terms of *who we are*, instead placing emphasis upon *what we do*. The promotion of citizenship within an identity context contains the risk of failing to promote the proactive, politically engaged individual. It also risks recurring tension between the celebration of collective identity and the multicultural, regional or local celebration of difference. Commissioners were anxious to strive for the inculcation of a more pro-active, effective citizenship, incorporating extra-curricular community action and the encouragement of political debate and activity. Only when political activity is promoted as a central aspect of citizenship can the distinction between 'us' (the non-political citizenry) and 'them' (politicians) be shaped in favour of a more organic relationship. The Commission wished to ensure citizenship went beyond associations with national identity, by recognising the diverse range of civic, cultural and political identities which allow

younger people to connect their positions in local communities with the wider polity.

Organising the commission's work: a privatised research agenda

The Commission's work programme was to a considerable extent 'privatised', in that organisations with expertise in the areas of market research, quantitative data gathering or qualitative research, involving young people, were invited to tender for aspects of programmes of work. Only the Chair of the YCC attended these sessions from the Commission and it was left to the civil servants, mainly from the Ministry of Justice, to determine the short-lists of organisations for interview and to have the largest say in which organisation should be awarded the contract. It was evident from the process of presentations that the civil servants were familiar with the organisations contesting the appointments. These comments should not be construed as criticism of the process; at no stage were the appointment decisions regretted. These observations are made merely to emphasise that from the outset the civil service, rather than the part-time commissioners (none of whom were on secondment) held the greater knowledge, time and resources.

The 'privatised' programmes of work by commercial organisations included a literature review of existing work in the fields of enquiry; the conduct of deliberative qualitative research with young people, including hard-to-reach groups, plus similar research, of lesser volume, with mixed age groups and segmented research across different age groups. In addition, the media and PR aspects of the Commission's work were put out to commercial tender, although, with hindsight, media aspects might have been handled more productively by the commissioners themselves. Indeed, most publicity generated for the Commission was elicited by the Commissioners.

In addition to these programmes, the YCC secretariat undertook extensive consultations with non-governmental stakeholders. These were defined as a wide range of interested parties involved in the promotion of youth activity. A core of these groups, such as the British Youth Council, the Princes' Trust, the Hansard Society, the UK Youth Parliament and the Citizenship Foundation, were consulted at the beginning of the YCC's deliberations and re-visited to gauge their views on some of the YCC's outline proposals. Unfailingly, these consultations proved useful in giving a more practical bent to some of the YCC's draft ideas. Other stakeholders included academics, pressure groups, trade unions and various youth agencies. In total, the YCC received 84 submissions from stakeholders on aspects of the YCC's work beyond the voting age issue.

Input from parliamentarians proved disappointingly low-key. The establishment of the YCC and the delivery of its final report were both

marked by PMQs from Julie Morgan MP²⁰ but the Commission elicited scant material from MPs or peers to aid its deliberations, despite writing to all to solicit input. Among MPs, other than Julie Morgan, only David Howarth and David Blunkett wished to meet to the Commission (their input was incisive and helpful) although representations were also received from John Denham and Patrick Cormack. Among peers, Baronesses Folke and Greengross made contributions. Lord Tebbit wrote to dismiss the idea of the Commission as a waste of time and the Conservative Shadow Secretary of State for Justice, Eleanor Laing, asked a parliamentary question of how much the Commission was costing.²¹ Given that the only subsequent question from the Opposition concerned supposed interference from government departments in the Commission's deliberation, the lack of positive contributions to the debate on the nature of youth civic and political engagement was disappointing, suggesting that issues concerning youth citizenship and political participation continue to be viewed as peripheral by many politicians. It is little wonder therefore that the main subjects of our research feel neglected by politicians. Young people often feel that politicians and decision-makers do not take them or their concerns seriously.

The issues addressed by the YCC are not unique to the UK. Many democracies share concerns regarding youth citizenship and political participation. There were examples of delineated research to be found abroad, which the Commission ought to have utilised. Bennett and Xenos have produced very useful work on youth political web spheres in the USA, which may have some relevance for connecting youth citizenship to political engagement in the UK²², as might Liesbet van Zoonen's Dutch work on political communication and preferences.²³ As Commissioners we were concerned that the tight timetable and a somewhat insular approach to the research, which tacitly assumed youth disengagement ended at Dover, inhibited proper international comparisons being made, fears which did not dissipate.

Analysing the research findings; from scrutiny to decisions

The in-depth qualitative interviews with young people (and in a smaller number of cases with mixed age groups) yielded much useful information. The organisation charged with arranging this task, 2CV, were impressively thorough in requiring participants (generously rewarded with cash payments) to prepare for the prolonged group discussion sessions with 'homework'. Moreover, participants were drawn from the full social spectrum. What findings were drawn from these sessions?

Presently, citizenship as interaction with various institutional, cultural and social layers appears disaggregated into distinctive spheres. These spheres are the individual (an 'I' conception of citizenship barely cognisant of others); family and friends (the 'we' conception which

may be exclusionary for others); the community (a sphere which straddles the us/them divide depending on the nature and extent of young people's involvement) and the formal political world (conceptualised very clearly as 'them' by young people in terms of politicians, parties, government and political systems). The fragmentation of this engagement ladder leads to the disconnection of young people from political action. Although audits of political engagement suggest that connections can be made²⁴ it is far from apparent that even citizenship-rich classes can connect young people to the 'them'. The YCC's research investigated what more could be done to better connect young people's sense of citizenship to political engagement by exploring the extent to which participation in political action can be promoted as part of societal capital and a 'moral good' and the manner in which political rights—and their exercise—should form part of a coming-of-age for young people.

Stakeholder submissions and interviews yielded much in highlighting what has already been attempted regarding greater connectivity between young people and their polity. The key themes which emerged were, firstly, that a myth of political apathy had developed, which wrongly conflated disenchantment with certain politicians and aspects of the political system with a mass political 'switch-off'; secondly, that young people were often unaware of the political aspects of the decisions they took and thirdly, that there was a lack of knowledge of political opportunity structures for young people within existing institutions.

Decision-making based on evidence to the YCC was hampered slightly by the sheer volume of information gathered. Edcoms, responsible for the literature review and 2CV, in respect of their qualitative in-depth research, produced their own detailed summaries of findings. The YCC published the segmented research of Jigsaw, which placed young people in different categories according to their level of connection with politics, but found generally that politicians were regarded by young people as in their outer circle of influence.²⁵ These self-contained reports were digestible for Commissioners and contributed much to the final recommendations. The sheer volume of stakeholder submissions meant that not all could be read in detail by the Commissioners, who were reliant upon summaries of key regular points produced by the Democratic Engagement Unit team.

After seven months of evidence-gathering, the Commission moved towards construction of its final reports. The key 'rules' established by Commission members were that two reports would be produced, one dealing with the voting age consultation and the other containing the recommendations addressing broader questions. Proposals needed to be concise and obtain, after discussion, unanimous support. A residential weekend in London was the setting for the majority of decision-making, with Commissioners set the task of coming up with 12–14

key ideas, a manageable number which would allow the final report to have a clear focus. This decision-making process worked well and virtually all those ideas survived, albeit in sometimes heavily modified form, rigorous testing—from fellow Commissioners playing Devil's Advocate; from the Democratic Engagement Unit, highlighting possible problems and, at the immediate pre-report stage, from discussions with stakeholders and via informal commentary from civil servants.

The key issues

LOWERING THE VOTING AGE. From the outset, the YCC feared that debate over what they said on the voting age issue would dominate other findings or recommendations. The YCC received 509 responses from 489 organisations on this topic alone. Adjusting the voting age would have little utility without a clearer conception among young people of the role of the political within a conceptualisation of citizenship. Moreover, the YCC's remit to lead a consultation on whether the voting age should be lowered was misinterpreted (sometimes deliberately) in several quarters, including those of certain pressure groups, politicians, bloggers and journalists. As one of several examples, a *Guardian* columnist accused the Commission of attempting to lower the age of franchise 'by stealth'.²⁶ The requirement to 'lead a consultation' on whether the voting age should be reduced was ambiguous. The YCC did indeed lead the largest segmented such consultation ever undertaken; beyond that, the YCC, in formal terms, was not required to do anything other than present the rival arguments with clarity.

Although the Labour government asked the Commission to explore the voting age issue, the Labour Party had apparently already made up its mind. Its National Policy Forum in Warwick and annual conference later in 2008 both supported a lowering of the voting age, although it was unclear whether this policy would appear in the election manifesto. With the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru all favouring a lowering of the voting age and with support for change apparent within the devolved legislatures of Scotland and Wales, party political pressure for a reduction in the age of franchise has increased markedly in recent years.

Nonetheless, the quality of 'evidence' in favour of change submitted to the Commission was sometimes poor, occasionally grounded in arguments concerning human rights or based upon pressure group polemic rather than reasoned case. The human rights argument was that the denial of votes for 16 and 17 years olds breached one or more of Articles 2 and 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child or Articles 3 or 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights.²⁷ Yet all these conventions provided obvious grounds for national governments to not permit voting until the age of 18

(adulthood) had been reached. On the 'human rights' argument offered by votes-at-16 lobbyists, every government except those of Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua, Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man would be deemed to be in breach in not permitting voting for 16 year olds.²⁸ The Commission looked in some detail at the evidence from the Isle of Man, where only half of 16 and 17 year olds bothered to register to vote and only one-in-four of that age category actually voted.

The second line of attack from supporters of change was that, at 16, citizens were already permitted to engage in a range of activities. The Commission acknowledged the difficulties created by differing ages of responsibilities and an important recommendation was a government review of these variations. However, the emotional 'you can join the armed forces and be killed' type argument for voting at 16 was no longer accurate (frontline service does not arrive until 18) and the 'youngsters work and pay tax' argument was also unconvincing. The school leaving age has been rising steadily, as have many ages at which actions, such as purchases of certain goods, are permitted. There is not a fixed age at which citizenship rights accrue; instead the picture is one of variable geometry.

Opponents of change were fewer in number in terms of submissions, indicative perhaps of the unrepresentative nature of some pressure group politics. Advocates of change could legitimately claim to represent the desires of the yet-to-be-enfranchised. In the segmented research conducted for the Commission (the largest survey of public opinion on the voting age yet conducted) 64 per cent of 16 and 17 year olds backed a reduction in the age of the franchise with 32 per cent against and a majority of 11–17 year olds were in favour of change (YCC 2009a: 6). However, all categories aged above 17 years of age opposed a lowering of the age of franchise. This confirmed the earlier work of the Electoral Commission that the electorate is satisfied with the voting age.²⁹ Indeed only one-third of 18–24 year olds favoured change, falling to 5 per cent among those aged 65 and over (YCC 2009a: 12).

Although opponents of change sometimes based their argument a shade too heavily on the likely negative effect upon turnout, it was indeed virtually unarguable that a reduction in the age of franchise would indeed lead to a fall in the percentage of the electorate voting. This argument was countered by the reasonable contention of articulate supporters of change, such as the MPs, Julie Morgan and David Howarth, that the reduction in the voting age from 21 to 18 in 1969, or the much earlier extension of votes to women were not measures whose potential quality could be judged on turnout effects. These backers of a reduction argued that there was a 'bigger picture'—that it was the right thing to do. Indeed, the Commission could not depend simply upon evidence—by definition, votes-at-16 were a leap in the dark, but its task was to weigh the claims of those asserting that it was somehow a human right, or the 'right thing' to reduce the voting age,

against public hostility to the measure and reasonably convincing evidence that it would impact negatively upon election turnout, harming rather than bolstering electoral politics. No 'knockout' blows were scored by either side and the Commission argued that if political parties in future do wish to change the voting age, they need to argue their case and put it to the electorate. Our terms of reference did not require a formal recommendation.

The YCC's position amounted to the status quo by default, but this did not prevent an important recommendation connected to the issue of voting age. Given the presence of devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and their adoption of alternative voting systems, it makes sense for Westminster to consider whether further electoral powers should be devolved, in terms of the age of franchise. In recommending that Westminster could consider this, the Commission spent longer determining a precise form of words to determine the strength of recommendation than arguing the wisdom of the proposal *per se*.

Additionally, the Commission's recommendation that electoral registration takes place within schools was one of the most crucial aspects of our work, a recommendation which ought to be acted upon with speed by the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Under household registration, the estimated non-registered rates of 16–18 year olds is 28 per cent.³⁰ Using schools and colleges to enlist all electors should reduce the level of non-registration, allowing those institutions to promote a clear practical example of good citizenship.

IMPROVING YOUTH CITIZENSHIP. Since its introduction as a statutory foundation subject in English secondary schools in September 2002, the position of *Citizenship* within the National Curriculum has proven contentious. A number of reports have highlighted issues concerning the quality of provision, resource allocation and assessment, stimulating often impassioned debate concerning its position in the curriculum.³¹ The Commission's remit and timescale did not facilitate detailed research in the areas of quality and unevenness of citizenship education, nor its direct impact upon political engagement. Equally, the Commission's research did not quantify the extent to which citizenship education influenced political literacy and its impact upon political engagement among young people.

Nonetheless, the variable quality of citizenship teaching was a recurring issue, teased out by the Commission's qualitative interviews and by some quantitative findings, both of which highlighted young people's experiences vary considerably. The impact of citizenship education appears low, given that 65 per cent of 11–13 year olds and 45 per cent of 14–15 year olds involved in our segmentation research stated that they were not aware they had received statutory citizenship education in

school.³² This stark result may be affected by the delivery of citizenship education under other names but the underlying issue of lack of awareness of the subject chimes with earlier reports. Our research also highlighted spatial variations of participation, given the different delivery of citizenship/PSHE classes in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, which were encouraging nationally divergent perceptions of citizenship amongst young people across the UK.³³ We were concerned that current arrangements across the UK could potentially encourage two or three tier provision of citizenship education that disadvantaged some young people and limited their opportunities to engage at a local and national level. With this in mind, we asked that the government and devolved assemblies should ensure that the delivery of citizenship education is consistent and effective across the UK.

Although citizenship education is still an emergent subject within curricula across the UK, young people in our research raised pertinent questions about its purpose and delivery. The Commission was aware that the curriculum for *Citizenship* in England and elsewhere had already been reviewed on a number of occasions and it was felt that a further review would be unproductive. Nonetheless, there were a number of areas where provision could be reviewed to improve the consistency and effectiveness of citizenship education. One issue which emerged when consulting with stakeholders, teachers and young people was that of the lack of trained and motivated specialist citizenship teachers in schools. Citizenship education was often marginalised and young people noted that some teachers appeared unsure as to the purpose of the subject. This problem was sometimes compounded by the lack of support from senior staff, particularly heads, within schools. Our recommendations urged government to address such shortcomings and to encourage citizenship education not merely as a discrete subject but as a 'whole school ethos'.

Commissioners strongly believed that citizenship learning and experience needs to be embedded from a young age and we recommended that government consider the introduction of statutory citizenship education in primary schools. Our research also suggested that young people want practical experience of citizenship to be the major part of their citizenship education. Young people who have had a positive experience of active citizenship are more likely to participate again, and in different activities. We agreed that citizenship education should have a greater focus tying political literacy to experiential learning, giving young people opportunities to accept the responsibility of active citizenship in their schools and local communities. We therefore sought to develop practical experience in order to support classroom learning and give young people the encouragement and knowledge to allow them to participate later in life.

Our recommendations reflected this shift in focus and potential empowerment of young people. Schools have a key role to play in

promoting a positive, participative democratic culture. We recommended the introduction of a universal system of strong, supported School and Class councils which link to student representation on School governing bodies with some responsibility for budgets were relevant. This would strengthen democracy within schools, empowering young people and encouraging knowledge of and experience in the processes linked to debate and decision-making. We believed this would provide a foundation for adult democratic participation. Schools should be available for use as polling stations where possible and remain open. In sum, we were convinced that schools had an important role to play as 'sites of democracy' and young people should be involved in the promoting of active citizenship and democratic participation.

However, we were keen to ensure that young people made links between schools, their local communities and democratic institutions at all levels. Our research highlighted that, although there were a considerable range of opportunities to volunteer and participate in local communities, information was often limited and coordination absent. This meant that many young people were unaware of how they could get involved. We therefore recommended that local authorities should develop and synchronise youth citizenship opportunities for young people and establish clear lines of communication for their promotion.

Key to the promotion of active citizenship 'beyond the school gates' was the development of opportunities for young people to shape their local political and social environments. As our research highlighted that many young people strongly associated citizenship within local communities, we were keen to build and sustain participative relationships which would develop in adulthood. With this in mind, we sought to encourage greater recognition of young people's role in policy-making and scrutiny. Although Youth Councils are established in some local authorities, such opportunities are not universal. We recommended that such schemes were extended to provide equal access for all young people. We also proposed that the UK Youth Parliament should be funded by Parliament to coalesce and coordinate youth representation at a regional and national level. Furthermore, we recommended that youth advisory panels, comprised entirely of representative samples of young people, be established to scrutinise relevant policy at local, regional and national levels at least twice a year. Young people should also be co-opted onto annual scrutiny panels in nominated government departments to advise on relevant issues. Government should also introduce an equality impact assessment criterion to consider the impact of new policies on young people. Though these proposals would only involve limited numbers of young people, they would highlight they can have a direct impact on policy at all levels and that machinations of government are open and accessible to their views and interests.

TOWARDS A NATIONAL CIVIC SERVICE?. Although the consideration of some form of compulsory civic or citizen youth service was not specifically identified within the founding remit of the YCC, and was not raised by stakeholders during our consultations, the idea of civic service emerged via politicians during our consultation and could hardly be ignored. Political and public opinion suggests support for its introduction; a recent YouGov poll indicated that 64 per cent of electors back some form of compulsory programme.³⁴ Recent proposals have emanated from across the political spectrum. The Conservatives have suggested that their voluntary National Citizen Service programme was the first such proposal, mooted by David Cameron as early as 2005.³⁵ They have been less clear on the detail. In 2007, the Conservatives suggested that such a programme would run over a period of six weeks, including a one week residential, and could have input from the Armed Forces, although it was unclear whether they had been consulted on the idea.³⁶ Recently though, Tim Loughton, Shadow Minister for Children, suggested that this 'flagship' programme would run for only three weeks over the summer holidays and would not involve a residential or military dimension.³⁷ In March 2009, Labour MP Frank Field and Prospect magazine's James Crabtree published proposals for a mandatory National Citizenship Service programme of at least six months, but preferably for a year.³⁸ They suggest that every British young person aged 16–25, should be paid a modest amount (minimum wage) working on projects supporting Britain's children, the sick and elderly, the environment and international development. Gordon Brown also announced plans for a National Youth Service scheme whereby every young person under the age of 19 would have to meet a minimum requirement of 50 hours community service.³⁹ Pilots of the programme will be rolled out in September, with some suggestion it will become compulsory at an unspecified future date.⁴⁰

Each proposal acknowledges young people are already active citizens and many also volunteer. However, there is a shift in focus towards the development of a universal compulsory programme, designed to foster a sense of belonging and community and address public concerns about the discipline and citizenship of young people. During our deliberations, a number of common criticisms emerged though. Concern was expressed concerning the myopic founding of such proposals in England with scant regard to the implications of devolution. The civic service proposals also conflate volunteering and citizenship, given that volunteering is explicitly non-paid, non-compulsory and does not necessarily engage with or promote democratic citizenship. The idea of incentivised or 'paid' service was thought similarly problematic as is suggest that citizenship can only be effective and meaningful if rewards are offered.

The Commission agreed it was highly likely that a prolonged period of compulsory service would be unpopular with many, potentially seen as restricting the political, economic and social rights of younger citizens. We therefore identified a number of key questions which we felt proponents of compulsory national schemes need to address. First, what are the implications for those under the age of 19 who are already economically active? Will they be compelled to complete a period of civic service regardless of their economic and social circumstances? There is potential that compulsory programmes could restrict employment opportunities for young people who are most vulnerable and can least afford to become economically inactive. Second, will some view such service as merely providing state services on the cheap? In Germany, criticism has focused on the lack of quality opportunities, meaning some are compelled to undertake unchallenging and menial roles within the public sector. Third, will such programmes be egalitarian in their compulsion? Compulsory programmes have proven problematic in many countries because those with access to resources and/or influence have found ever more sophisticated ways of avoiding service. There is a great danger that compulsory programmes simply become short-hand for a 'Poor Corp'. Finally, what are the potential repercussions for those who deliberately avoid service without good reason or who do not meet the requirements of such programmes?

Many of these issues are also relevant for those promoting voluntary programmes. How many young people would take up opportunities voluntarily during their summer break, particularly if it impinges on holiday or working plans? How would such programmes successfully involve those from disadvantaged backgrounds where levels of social capital are low? The Commission agreed there was significant potential for voluntary schemes simply to provide opportunities for those already active. However, a common feature of all proposals was the absence of costings; implementation and management infrastructure could prove expensive, potentially drawing resources away from existing provision.

There was a lack of clarity identified in how compulsory programmes would mesh with established volunteering activities. Focus on young people could have implications for long-term volunteering strategies, restricting funding and access for others in society. There is little to suggest that the third sector at present has the capacity to provide enough opportunities to meet the demand of compulsory programmes regardless of their length. Attention must be given to ensuring that choice and quality of opportunities are equitable and universal across the UK as a whole. Failure to define challenging and positive experiences for all could have significant implications as public resentment grows at the cost, contribution and effectiveness of such programmes, with young people increasingly viewing compulsory service as at best a 'necessary evil' and at worse some form of civic penal servitude.

The Commission agreed that any voluntary or compulsory youth civic service programme should consider embedding a number of important features. It should emphasise the distinct but interdependent life-long connections between civic and civil participation, engaging explicitly with issues of active citizenship, volunteering *and* democracy. We believe the development of sustainable citizenship is best located within local communities and should link school and community-based projects with third sector stakeholders, elected bodies and representatives. It should run for a period of no more than four weeks, thus limiting the impact on the freedoms of young people whereas also providing a worthwhile range of experiences. Some Commissioners suggested such a programme could potentially be introduced after young people complete their GCSE exams in mid-to-late May. Current regulations mean they cannot leave school until the last Friday of June of the school year in which they are 16. Building on some of the ideas within the Goldsmith report,⁴¹ we suggested that a civic service programme should end with a citizenship ceremony which is attended by local politicians etc. (which could be hosted at the school or town hall) involving registering on the electoral roll and a 'passing out' citizenship award.

Civic service has much to offer, but the potential difficulties outlined are significant and the Commission took the opportunity to highlight these problems. It is vital that such proposals are grounded in the building of positive relationships with young people that encourage volunteering and participation in local and national democracy. Those promoting compulsory programmes should be mindful of the implications for developing a coherent and inclusive approach to understanding and engendering active citizenship. On their own, compulsory or voluntary programmes are not a panacea to concerns about youth citizenship and can only be effective if part of a comprehensive approach.

Conclusions: the potential impact of the YCC

The establishment of the YCC was a laudable attempt by the government to undertake investigations into the concepts of citizenship and political activity held by young people. Inevitably, however, public interest in the Commission was largely confined to the symbolic issue of whether it would 'go for' votes at 16. The YCC's work is better viewed as a staging post along a continuing agenda. The constructivist and interpretive foundations of the research, the facilitation of youth input and qualitative engagement, the framing by young people of research agendas (via e.g. the YCC's advisory board) and the shift away from pre-ordained locations of citizenship within spheres of national identity suggest considerable novelty to the research agenda and methodology of connecting young people to political citizenship.

Further work is needed in terms of exploring the conceptual definitions of 'citizenship' and 'politics' among young people; diagnosing

the reasons for the lack of connectivity between the two concepts and assessing whether the YCC has helped bridge the gap. Moreover, the YCC could usefully have undertaken more international comparative research rather than concentrate on evidence exclusively based in the UK, votes at 16 apart. This was the only serious gap in the evidence-gathering, which was otherwise organised, via a competitive tendering process, with comprehensiveness by the civil service secretariat.

Although a minority of pressure groups struggled to distinguish assertion from evidence, others supplied useful, measured evidence. The YCC's open call for submissions was the correct approach, regardless of this unevenness. There was also a strong case for the Chair of the Commission being seconded from his permanent job to allow more time for strategic direction and examination of the submissions. Certainly this would be a recommendation for any future commission working in this field. Throughout the process, the Commissioners were the well-meaning amateurs, reliant upon information gathered by the professionals—the civil servants and private organisations—to inform their decisions. There is nothing intrinsically wrong in this, but Commissioners were subject to information overload.

The YCC made the connection between active citizenship and political participation more explicit. The Commission highlighted the need for better connections between citizenship and political life within the educational curriculum; in the promotion of voting and participation; the removal of technical barriers to voting; the devolution of legislative responsibilities for the voting age and the facilitation of youth engagement in decisions made by schools, local councils and government departments. These and other YCC recommendations were presented to the Democratic Renewal Council in June 2009. The impact of the proposals cannot be fully gauged at this stage, but it will be a major disappointment if the vast majority of recommendations are not acted upon. The Commission took care to ensure that proposals were specific and measurable, rather than mere aspirations. In future years, we thus expect, among other things, to see electoral registration in schools, the devolved institutions determining the age of franchise in their countries; improved and effective citizenship education; formal channels of communication established between local authorities and young people, replicated at national level by government departments and movement towards a programme of civic service.

The need for government to activate these recommendations leads us to our final points. The YCC was dissolved immediately after the launch of its reports. Although this was understandable, it would have been useful for an advisory body to be retained, to assist future governments in the development and implementation of the proposals. Most recommendations have at least been approved 'in principle' and we want to track progress regarding its implementation and wish to assist further where possible. Yet there are no formal mechanisms for such assistance.

A problem with previous reports on democratic politics and engagement is that their impact has not been audited. When the government commissions independent reports such as those offered by the YCC, it ought to facilitate parliamentary time to debate the contents of the study. The launch of the YCC's reports was both preceded and accompanied by invitations to 10 Downing Street for commissioners and its findings were presented to the Democratic Renewal Council and Cabinet Office. What is now needed for this, and for similar types of commissions, is a three-stage follow-up process of debate, acceptance of recommendations and implementation.

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- 6 M. Flinders, 'Bridging the Gap: Revitalising Politics and the Politics of Public Expectations', Revitalising Politics Conference, November 2008.
- 7 HM Government, *The Governance of Britain*, HMSO, CM 7170, 2007.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.5.
- 9 *Hansard*, 5 March 2008, Col. 1743. The announcement of the YCC's creation was made by the Prime Minister at PMQs, in response to a question from Julie Morgan (Lab) on the lowering of the voting age.
- 10 Youth Citizenship Commission, *Old Enough to Make a Mark? Should the Voting Age be Lowered to 16?* YCC, 2009a. Youth Citizenship Commission, *Making the Connection: Building Youth Citizenship in the UK*, YCC, 2009b.
- 11 A. Russell and G. Stoker (eds) *Failing Politics? A Response to the Governance of Britain Green Paper*, Political Studies Association, 2008.
- 12 A Parliamentary Question tabled by Tim Loughton, Shadow Minister for Children, Schools and Families asked the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families 'if he will publish each (a) letter and (b) email sent from his Department to the Youth Citizenship Commission since the Commission was established. *Hansard*, HC Deb, 2 July 2009, c369W. As the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Department replied, there had been no such correspondence. 'Road-testing' of Commission ideas was confined to informal discussions between civil servants. Two Sunday newspapers also contacted the Chair of the Commission asking if there had been 'interference' from the Department of Children Schools and Families. There had not.

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- 18 Department for Constitutional Affairs, *The Future of Citizenship*, DCA, 2007.
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- 26 M. Berlins, 'If 16-year-olds cannot buy cigarettes, surely they shouldn't be allowed anywhere near a polling booth', *Guardian*, 29 October 2008. Even the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, appeared to forget the precise terms of reference for the YCC in claiming it had 'couldn't make up its mind' on the voting age issue. See <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/2009/07/24/gordon-brown-impressed-by-rap-music-idea-91466-24227764/>.
- 27 See Youth Citizenship Commission *Old enough to make a mark?*
- 28 Some German municipalities also allow 16 year olds to vote.
- 29 Electoral Commission, *Age of Electoral Majority*.
- 30 Youth Citizenship Commission, *Making the connection*, p. 50.
- 31 See, for example, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, *Citizenship: 2004/5 Annual Report On Curriculum and Assessment*, QCA/05/2165, QCA, 2005; Ofsted, *Towards Consensus: Citizenship in Secondary Schools: HMI 2666*, Ofsted, 2006; National Foundation for Educational Research, *Vision versus Pragmatism: Citizenship in the Secondary School Curriculum in England*, NFER, 2007.
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- 33 See also R. Andrews and A. Mycock, 'Citizenship Education in the UK: Divergence in a Multinational State', *Citizenship Teaching and Learning*, 3.1, 2007, 73–88.
- 34 Yougov/Prospect Poll, 'Britain's fear of unrest and support for civic service', 23rd February 2009 (available at <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2009/03/the-prospectyougovpoll/>).
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