

THINKING ABOUT A WRITTEN CONSTITUTION AND A REVIVAL OF POLITICAL EDUCATION: A PROJECT.

When it comes to political education all are teachers and all are learners.

For me political education does not mean pouring approved knowledge into human receptacles and then measuring the rate of regurgitation. It is an interactive human activity in which teachers are learners and learners are teachers. I propose that we stimulate such political education and build it into a live written constitution.

The Political Education and Literacy Working Party reported in 1978. As a member of that Working Party I believe that, despite much effort to sustain political education, various governments have worked to diminish it. An attempt by a Tory minister to influence a new A-Level Politics syllabus and shrink its inclusion of women and feminism is just one demonstration of how we are perceived to be receivers of policy made according to the values of very few people. We can learn a lot from reading books and from attending courses. We can also learn from and with each other. What we learn might be who to phone when our dustbins are not emptied. It might be how to probe and question government about why it makes building Trident submarines a higher priority than building council houses. Whatever we learn can lead to greater public participation and more accountable and responsive government.

PURPOSES OF THIS PROJECT

1. Encouraging inclusive discussion of and consensual arrival at public values.

Politics is not the clever manoeuvring of political parties offering policies and personalities as commodities for sale. It is, first and foremost, about public values. The public should take part in deciding those values. They can change. The question is: who is allowed to influence change?

2. Generating relevant knowledge and understanding.

The public are entitled to real knowledge and too often our understanding of it is manipulated to our disadvantage..

3. Fostering participation and engagement.

Can we really call ourselves a democracy when participation and engagement are confined and limited to the occasional X on a ballot paper? What do we do between elections?

TAKING PART MEANS

1. Critical sense making. Participation involves sharing the critical sense that we make of government and politics and growing our knowledge and understanding.

2. Age is irrelevant. Everyone has a voice. That voice does not have to wait for an arbitrary age in order to be expressed and listened to.

3. No political traffic wardens. We need no-one waiting to catch people out when they ask awkward questions or question an orthodoxy.

4. Expressing values, views and arguments. This requires and can generate respect. Challenging and being challenged are part of the political education project. We also learn from losing arguments. Our different cultures, backgrounds and identities are a positive.

AREAS FOR DISCUSSION

Classifying or categorising areas for discussion needs a health warning. The walls that we erect between classes and categories are often very porous. The concept of fairness, for example, leaks through the wall between it and the concept of justice. There are lots of other examples. Nevertheless, classes and categories help to frame learning and they do get discussion going. I suggest the following as particularly useful starters and have included some questions that I hope might help. Part of political education is thinking up questions and areas for discussion so my list is by no means exhaustive. Respond to it; adapt it; or think of something better. I do not expect my suggestions to have an indefinite shelf life.

Representation

Who represents us? How are they chosen? Who by? How do representatives consult us? Do we expect them to agree with us on every issue? What are the laws on this? Is the system of electing representatives fair? What makes us vote the way we do? What makes us not bother to vote?

Decision-making

How do governments, local and central, make decisions? What powers do they have? What limits those powers? How are they advised? What are the laws applying to this? Who makes the laws? How do we find out about mistakes? Are there groups and organisations making decisions affecting us without us knowing?

Accountability

Are governments accountable to the people or are the people accountable to governments? By what means do the people hold governments to account? How do the media play a part in this?

Issues

What is an issue? Is it all big stuff? How can something go from being generally accepted one day to being an issue the next? Can you think of any examples? How are issues resolved? Do we argue enough? Do we need more knowledge in order to discover hidden issues?

MAKING THIS PROJECT HAPPEN

We need both to reach people and to provide space for what they have to say. The project may fall on its face and it may take some experimentation before the practicalities are settled. I have ideas about getting started but would like to hear from others. How might such a project be organised and operate? A Facebook group? We shall need from time to time to collect, assess, analyse and summarise what is being said in order to prod politicians to respond. Tony Blair made great use of Focus Groups and well controlled consultation events. I suggest that this was ersatz politics designed to ensure that the public were responsive to government. This is a proposal to reverse that.

As the Chief Examiner I drafted the last GCSE syllabus (now called specifications) for Government and Politics for AQA. One quarter of the syllabus was given to Accountability: the accountability of government to people. It took me too long when later dealing with New Labour on behalf of UK universities to realise that it was the public that were being held accountable to government. Since Kenneth Baker and the National Curriculum governments have preferred young people to study citizenship. Despite what it says on UK passports we are not citizens. We are subjects and that is how too many governments treat us.

My last point is that as someone who spent many years setting and examining questions on Government and Politics at CSE, 16-Plus and GCSE I learned that setting closed questions with right/wrong answers was unfruitful. It was far better to set open questions, see where candidates took you when they responded and then try to make critical sense of what they wrote. I learned a lot that way. Political education is not a one-way process.

Looking at post Trump USA and at the dysfunctional government of the UK plus many other countries throughout the world it seems to me that government and politics has been perverted to create disadvantage and chaos for the many and untold wealth and power for the few. The above is my attempt to reverse this. If you wish to, do let me know what you think and I shall attempt to respond by writing an article based upon your thoughts which I shall submit to The Word Newspaper <https://thewordmedia.org>

GUESS WHAT

Peter Loo of that very newspaper has jumped the gun and already told me what he thinks. Here, in the form of a Chartist set of demands are his six requirements for good government.

- 1. Free State-provided Fuel, Food and Housing.**
- 2. One term only for all Elected Officials.**
- 3. A Fairer Voting System.**
- 4. An End to Monarchy.**

5. A True Nationalised NHS.

6. Free Education For All Regardless of Age.

Cliff Jones, 07/07/2022.

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