

Prospect

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Should citizenship be taught in British schools?

BERNARD CRICK

Dear Damian Green

19th July 2002

I first discovered your doubts about citizenship becoming a new subject in secondary schools (starting in September) from an article you wrote in the Observer, about the experience of teaching for a few days in Southfields College, Wandsworth. You were impressed with how hard teachers work, and with their grasp of difficult issues, from Aquinas's "first cause" doctrine to hard drugs. But you said of one meeting you attended: "I wish that all those congratulating themselves for adding citizenship to the curriculum could have heard the discussion about what would have to make way for it... Overloading the compulsory parts of the curriculum is not a sensible policy." I think that the discussion may have been staged for your benefit.

In any case, the point is easily answered. The guidance on teaching citizenship (from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) says that while a school may choose to deliver it as a separate subject, most of it can be delivered through other subjects with only minor adjustments. Geo-graphy stresses environmental and resource problems; history deals with conflicts of interests and values; English literature deals with moral problems of the use and abuse of power, from Julius Caesar to Lord of the Flies. The Association for Science Education has developed materials for discussing the issues raised by new scientific discoveries which it sees as a way of motivating 11 to 14- year-old science pupils. The advisory report on teaching citizenship, which I chaired, suggested no more than 5 per cent of curriculum time for citizenship. David Blunkett was right to say that it is a matter of timetable management. It is absurd for teachers to say that another subject would have to go-that is either bureaucratic rigidity or intellectual sloth.

Issues of timetabling aside, do we differ on the principle? Kenneth Baker, the former Tory education secretary, was on my committee. He told us that he had wanted citizenship in the new national curriculum, but that you-know-who said no. By 1997, it was clear that anything judged to be of national importance had to be part of the

national curriculum, assessed and examined, or it would be neglected, especially by the schools and pupils who need it most.

Is it not of national importance that we prepare all our young to be informed and active citizens? Look at the youth vote, or at the low esteem in which politicians are held generally—partly your own fault in parliament, and partly the cynicism of the press. This spills over into a contempt for political activity in general and for acting politically—negotiating, compromising, mediating. We are the last country in the civilised world to think that we need not prepare our young to act like citizens but only for the worlds of work, personal success or consuming pleasures. The tradition of free politics in the western world is in danger of becoming the plaything of political parties with dwindling memberships; and the smaller they are, the higher the proportion of office-seekers or extremists. The fewer people interested in politics, the easier it is to govern this country, but the harder to change it.

We have tried to construct a curriculum that will not bore the kids, as old-fashioned civics did. Rather than learning facts about institutions, it encourages discussion of "events, issues and problems" and suggests that pupils learn about institutions best when they want to know how to get something done. They are to be given opportunities for group activities both in school and the community. Difficult? Yes. Worrying to some teachers? Certainly. But they have had nearly three years to prepare for this September and quite a lot of support. Some teachers are enthusiastic—they have wanted something like it for years; some have stuck their heads in the sand. Most have seen the need and have been preparing.

I hope your worries are just practical. You have been reported as calling citizenship "mumbo-jumbo." Do you think that words like rights and duties, responsibilities, tolerance, freedom and understanding diversity are waffle? I did not think you were that sort of a Tory. When teaching citizenship was raised in Parliament your party did not raise old bogies about indoctrination. I thought this was now a matter with cross-party agreement. There are many safeguards against political bias: the law, governors, inspectors and the sheer professionalism of nearly all teachers. What is this "mumbo-jumbo"?

Yours sincerely

Bernard Crick

Dear Bernard

21st July 2002

The staff at Southfields school were not staging a show. Citizenship was one item on the long agenda of a meeting which started at 6pm. Some teachers had been at the school since 6.45am, to help run the breakfast club. I am sure that they were not delaying their return home for my benefit. What they had to do was decide between careers advice and an IT class as the likeliest victims to allow for the inclusion of citizenship.

This is the heart of my objection to the citizenship bandwagon. It has taken a desirable, if slightly vague idea, and turned it into a compulsory part of an already overcrowded curriculum. You say that your final territorial demand is just 5 per cent of the school week, and that you agree with David Blunkett that it is merely a matter of timetable management. Of course it is. Schools will just excise one twentieth of what the pupils are already taught, and if that means we become even worse at foreign languages or slightly more backward at design technology, then so be it. I had not known that Lady Thatcher took it out of the original national curriculum, so I am thrilled to be able to shock some of my colleagues by saying how right she was.

British schools are suffering from far too much micro-management by government and your own pet project has, I am afraid, become part of the problem. The inevitable consequence of making compulsory all that might be desirable is exam overload. As you say, "Anything judged to be of national importance had to be part of the national curriculum, assessed and examined, or it would be neglected." My solution to this is to give schools the space to teach subjects that might not be compulsory, in a way they think would benefit their pupils. Your solution is to make the curriculum even more top-heavy.

You say that young people ought to be interested in the society around them. Who could disagree? My point is that the virtues of citizenship are already delivered by good schools in a variety of lessons and other activities. If good schools can do this, don't interfere with them. If bad schools can't or won't do it, let the inspection process point this out, and provide them with materials which they may want to use. Instead of that, I foresee the introduction of another period rather akin to an uninspiring religious studies lesson, which leaves no trace with the pupils once it is over. Anyone who thinks that making a difficult subject compulsory is the way to inspire young people should track the downward slide in religious observance in this country. If citizenship becomes a lesson delivered by the bored teacher as the last period on a wet Tuesday then it is doomed, and so is the prospect of levering up political interest.

What will actually happen in the name of citizenship? Pupils will be taught how to "feel positive about themselves?" Then why not let them do something useful, something they are good at, based on their individual talents? It also says in the guidance that "It is essential that pupils develop their own ground rules rather than be presented with

ones produced elsewhere." No it isn't. You could perfectly well present pupils with a set of ground rules based on the institutions of our democratic society, and let them discuss whether they want to change them, and if so why. I fear that the doctrine that teachers must not teach but "facilitate" has wormed its way in. This will not promote citizenship, but rather entrench the old-fashioned progressive notion that challenging and undermining authority is the way to the good society. Please let us not go round that course again.

I am also indebted to the IPPR think-tank for a chapter by Tony Breslin in a book on the future of the teaching profession which confirms my Tory prejudices on this matter. Breslin discusses "the potential for citizenship education to fundamentally change the ethos of the school both as a community and in the community." What is this fundamental change that citizenship can achieve? "The need is to consider new and progressive models of professionalism, with teachers as the legitimate experts, facilitators and co-ordinators of a less age-related 'just in time' graduation based accreditation structure. The commitment to the 'subject' must be abandoned." You ask for evidence of "mumbo-jumbo" on citizenship. I rest my case. Please tell me that this is at least not your intention, and that your brainchild has just fallen into dangerous hands.

Yours

Damian

Dear Damian

22nd July 2002

I am flattered that you think that citizenship as a subject of study is my "brainchild." When I taught politics in university, I saw it as the brainchild of Aristotle and as part of our whole tradition of constitutional government and free politics. To my mind, what has to be explained is not why it is now entering into the national curriculum in England, but why we were the last country in the civilised world to think that we needed it. One reason is that our independent schools created a very definite political ethos, an ethos for leadership: for us leading them, for the gentlemen and the players, albeit at a time when gentlemen were more dedicated to public service-in the empire, church, army and parliament-than the boardroom.

You raise the crux of the issue: not whether citizenship should be taught, but need it be compulsory? You say, "the virtues of citizenship are already delivered by good schools in a variety of lessons and other activities." True in some cases, but usually only in the sixth form, and only rarely in a manner systematic enough adequately to

prepare young people to be active and informed citizens. The ethos of these good schools is one of responsible leadership or, if no longer leadership, at least of social responsibility towards others.

But what of the others? About half our nation's children still leave school at 16. But they can vote at 18 and before then will have formed habits of voluntary service, or not. I am an Aristotelean. I believe with him that preparation for political life, in its broadest sense, is part of education, and that freedom depends on widespread participation, not just good leadership. Some politicians are fond of praising volunteering among the young. But not all volunteering involves active citizenship. Some volunteers are just cannon fodder, and are never given the chance to influence the activity.

I too favour authority in education. It is an abnegation of authority not to prepare all our children for life in the real world: the worlds of employment, of family life and friendships, leisure and of politics.

By the way, I am responsible for my own words, but not for those of my friend Tony Breslin. Actually, Tony is the least dangerous of men. If he is saying that schools should be democratic, he is wrong; but if he meant that many schools should be more democratic, he is right.

But it is not dangerous extremism that is the enemy here, rather the alienation and despair towards public life. Citizenship education for all might help a little; a necessary-though far from sufficient-condition for a citizenship culture.

Best wishes

Bernard

Dear Bernard

23rd July 2002

Ofsted reported in July that "just over half of secondary schools... have made effective use of the two-year lead-in time to implement citizenship as a statutory subject." So nearly half the schools in the country haven't bothered to prepare for C-Day. Some of these, no doubt, are just being short-sighted. But my guess, based on the many schools of different types I visit in the course of my job, is that the majority have not done the preparation work because they do not think it is a high priority.

Some of Ofsted's sample thought "they were already providing much of the statutory

programme. Some had assumed that citizenship is simply a part of personal, social and health education." Ofsted tuts at this insouciance. I would be more charitable. Many of these schools probably do inculcate a proper regard for the benefits of active and informed citizenship, and do not need the full panoply of regulations to enforce it.

I am not saying that everything about the citizenship curriculum is bad, or politically correct, or subversive, or any of the things you might expect a Tory to say. I am not even arguing that no good will come from the citizenship curriculum. Rather, I believe both that the displacement of the other subjects and the distraction of hard-pressed teachers from their core work will do quiet but long-term harm to schooling.

My main fear, looking at Britain's schools since we introduced mass education in 1870, is that we have never properly catered for the less academic. This is a genuinely urgent issue, from which citizenship is in danger of being one more diversion. However much we wish children to volunteer for work in the community, they will not be able to do this (or anything else) effectively if the school system has not given them the basic skills and self-confidence to know how they as individuals would best be able to use their learning. Concentrating time, energy and resources on non-essentials is itself a damaging act in the current fragile state of our schools. It is at best a luxury, at worst a futile diversion.

Yours

Damian

Dear Damian

25th July 2002

Politics has become too much the possession of professional politicians. This may be one reason why politicians rank so low in public esteem and why only 25 per cent of those aged under 25 entitled to vote last time did so. Something needs to be done. Citizenship classes may not succeed. Many things are against it: some teachers are frightened of discussion of real issues among pupils; the dumbing down of the media does not help. But the DfES has funded a seven-year study to see if this September's 11 year olds will, by 18, know more about the political, economic, social and voluntary institutions of this country and will be more involved in community and voluntary work than at present. If the results are negative or inconclusive, then compulsion should be ended. But the only test is over a school generation, and the benefits could be great-even if the political parties might find a better informed, more active public more difficult to handle.

Some readers may still be puzzled. What is this all about? Let me just summarise the relevant part of the curriculum. "Pupils should be taught about: legal and human rights, the criminal and civil justice systems; the diverse national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in Britain; the work of parliament and government; the importance of being active in democratic, community and electoral processes; how the economy functions; business and financial services; the importance of a free press and the media's role; Britain's relations with Europe, the Commonwealth and the UN; issues of global interdependence and sustainable development." And then two other headings: "developing skills of enquiry and communication" and "developing skills of participation and responsible action."

Much of this can be absorbed into other subjects. But it is not knowledge that floats in the air or can be picked up on the street. I find it hard to believe that you really think that this should only be in schools if particular heads want it. The national curriculum was a Conservative innovation and quickly became bi-partisan. And now everyone involved has taken care to keep citizenship bi-partisan. "Luxury?" "Futile diversion?" No, a national and universal need.

Best wishes

Bernard

Dear Bernard

26th July 2002

The national curriculum was indeed a Conservative invention and became bi-partisan because the idea of a core curriculum, which every parent could be confident their child was learning, is a good one. The problem with the current national curriculum is that it has spread beyond that core, and is filling up too much of the school week. The addition of compulsory citizenship is one more bale of straw on this particular camel's back.

As an avid reader of these Prospect exchanges over the years, I am often irritated at arguments which bypass each other, rather than address the key differences head on. I fear we are heading the same way. You argue the virtues of citizenship education. I am saying that everything that is desirable should not be compulsory. You are most concerned with the subject, I am most concerned with the wider educational perspective.

Having made that point, I will move on to your ground. You argue that politics has become too much the possession of professional politicians. I think the trend is the

other way. In matters such as environmental action, or the virtues and vices of the WTO, or how many houses we need to build on green fields, the main terms of debate are often set by non-politicians. If you are arguing a narrower point, that parliamentary politics has lost status, then that is both true and worrying. But the solution is in the hands of the politicians, especially with regard to young people. If we address the issues they care about in a language they understand, in forums they find themselves in anyway, we can engage them. Too often we fail in all of these.

However well you teach children about citizenship, if you have not passed on the academic and vocational skills they need to find a rewarding role in the adult world they are unlikely to turn into model citizens. I am more trusting of head teachers than you. Heads will know better than politicians, officials or academics what mix is right for their school. The greatest test for the modern leader is to know the limits of politics. In education, more damage is done by meddling and micro-management than by neglect. I fear that from this September, another bout of well intentioned meddling is about to disturb our schools.

Best wishes

Damian