



LONELY CITIZENS

REPORT OF THE WORKING PARTY ON ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

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Many inside and outside government argue that we need to do more to engage citizens in politics and governance. Others, however, contend that the attempt to promote active citizenship will fail, or will not have the effects its champions claim. The working party on active citizenship was set up by the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) to explore what 'active citizenship' means, what it adds to our individual lives and what could be done to promote it.

This report focuses on active citizenship as civic participation in politics and governance rather than volunteering or acting as a good neighbour. Its argument starts with the claim that whilst the UK and democracies like ours rely on expert representatives and professional civil institutions to defend the public interest, they also require active citizens. These citizens play an indispensable role in holding power to account and ensuring that public

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services and government are responsive to the views and values of citizens.

Disconnected citizens

All is not well with active citizenship in Britain today. Active citizens used to play a vital part in civic affairs. Political parties, trade unions, clubs, churches and other civic organisations held together a highly-active civil society. Yet many of these have declined dramatically. Some argue that people are no longer interested in getting involved, that they have become 'apathetic'. Interest in politics remains high, some forms of engagement – boycotting goods, going on protests, organising petitions – are on the increase and the evidence suggests that many people would be willing to take a more active part in civic life. The balance of evidence suggests that, far from being satisfied or apathetic about our political system, citizens feel mistrustful, powerless and frustrated. It is this that deters people from taking on governing positions or otherwise getting involved and justifies our claim that we are increasingly a nation of lonely and disconnected citizens.

Rivals to active citizenship

Some question the need for active citizens. They claim that governance can be left to elected representatives. Or they argue that the extension of individual choice and markets in public services will diminish the need for collective choices, for governance, altogether. However, representatives can't govern in a vacuum but only through dialogue and engagement with active citizens. Indeed, as deference declines and the public becomes more questioning of authority, so politicians and public officials will have to work harder to win the trust and cooperation of the public. While there might be space to extend individual choice in some public

services, this will not diminish collective or political choices, the outcome of which effect us all.

There is a pronounced and growing class profile to active citizenship. The better educated and wealthier people are, the more likely they are to be active.

There is a danger that public choices will, as a result, be biased towards the better off. Far from this being an argument against promoting active engagement, it means that more needs to be done to promote engagement among disadvantaged groups.

Only connect: changing the terms of engagement

Citizens are ready and willing to engage but only if the terms of engagement are improved. A variety of forms of engagement must be available. People have different skills, resources and interests and will want to be involved in different ways. We distinguish, in particular, between structural and cultural factors affecting engagement.

Citizens will not engage with organisations which don't have the structural power to bring about the changes they want to see. Differences in turnout for national, local and European elections accurately reflect the different powers that national, local and European representatives are perceived to possess. Reforms are needed that will strengthen the powers of parliament over the executive and increase accountability, especially local accountability of the police, prison and probation services, the NHS and other public services. Power needs to be devolved from central to local government and from local government to ward and neighbourhood levels.

Structural reform, however, will not be enough if citizens doubt that their contribution will be valued or supported. We distinguish four cultural factors likely to encourage active citizenship.

The ask: A wide variety of evidence and experience shows that people will not participate unless they have been asked to do so. 'The ask' is particularly important in communities where the habit of participation is not widespread. Most middle class people have extensive networks of relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues, which will ensure that they are frequently asked to participate. This is much less true of poorer, less well-networked groups.

The talk: People will only engage if they believe that those in power will listen to them and communicate with them. Politics and governance needs to take a 'deliberative turn' and give citizens more opportunities to listen and debate. Politicians may need to learn new skills and to work in different ways. Leadership will be less about persuading people to follow a given line and more about the ability to communicate, to facilitate and to broker between different groups.

The setting: The very processes of engagement and governance often feel stuck in the past. The most common democratic forums – the public meeting and the committee meeting – were invented more than a hundred years ago. New democratic procedures – citizens' juries, deliberative polls, youth parliaments, online parliaments – have proved their worth. They can ensure that people who are not usually heard *are* heard. Government, especially central government, needs to make greater use of them.

The support: When citizens become active they need to be supported. This can take various forms: providing training and mentoring; ensuring that the work demanded of active citizens is not unnecessarily burdensome or demanding and providing material support, rewards or compensation.

Making connections

State bodies cannot foster and support active citizenship on their own. It is vital to find ways of rejuvenating or inventing anew the high-membership civic and political organisations that once served to mobilise people into civic life, taught them civic skills and connected representatives and voters. Political parties should continue to experiment with ‘primaries’ and invite registered supporters to choose candidates for election. State funding of political parties, if proportional to levels of membership, could encourage rather than undermine party efforts to increase membership. Where possible voluntary organisations should encourage grassroots membership.

Conclusions and recommendations

While we have argued that people are still interested in political issues, there is currently not much interest in active citizenship in UK society. We are naturally tempted to turn inwards to our private worlds. But there are limits to the extent to which we can create the sorts of world that we want for ourselves and others in this way. The case for active citizenship in the abstract, however, is not enough. People’s willingness to take a politically active role is determined by the effectiveness of the system. The system has to be responsive, inviting and supportive.

This report highlights the innovations and reforms that we think most promising. Some involve changes to the way we – and especially those in power – think. Some are more practical and involve changes to the way organisations are governed and power structured and how those organisations engage with the public. That combination is important. We have to change norms and to reform institutions.

Recommendations

- As citizens, we should play an active part in governance at some point in our lives, but only where our contribution is valued and we have the training and support we need. Government and non-governmental public agencies should view active citizens as their life blood. They need to develop the habit of inviting people to take part at every turn and supporting and rewarding those who do so.
- The public are turned off by ‘yah boo’ oppositional politics. The way in which the media treats politicians as knaves and fools – and politicians impugn their opponents’ characters – undermines trust in the political system. Politics should focus more on substantive issues and less on ‘character’ and ‘trust’. By the same token, politicians must avoid any taint of spin or sleaze.
- Politicians need to talk less and listen more. Successful politicians will increasingly be facilitators and brokers: able to help communities find their own solutions, rather than simply announcing a party solution. They need to learn new skills and parties should select representatives that are capable of engaging with an increasingly diverse and independently-minded electorate.

- Representative government cannot function without mass membership political parties. All parties should embrace a system of state funding which reduces accusations of cash for influence and rewards activism. Funding should vary with the size and activity of membership, giving parties an incentive to cultivate and involve members.
- The Government should pilot an official 'democracy day' before important national polls, such as referenda and general elections, giving citizens a chance to deliberate on the choices before them. Some have suggested that this should take the form of a public holiday. We suggest, as an alternative, that students and employees should have an opportunity, in the working day, to research the issues and hear debates. Another alternative is to follow other European countries that have weekend voting. Widespread introduction of postal voting would affect the timing of a democracy day but not pose an insurmountable hurdle to it.
- The Government has already introduced citizenship into the school curriculum and a citizenship programme for new UK citizens. It should build on these good foundations by developing a national strategy for adult citizenship education. Local councils should work with the Learning and Skills Councils, colleges and local public bodies to ensure that would-be active citizens are given the direction and training that they need. Following the example of schools, colleges should not merely teach citizenship but actively encourage its practice, by supporting students in campaigning, deliberating and governing.

- Central government, in particular, needs to learn from best practice in local government and the NHS and be more ambitious in its attempts to involve citizens in exploring solutions to difficult social problems. Deliberative techniques – open space events, ideas laboratories, consensus conferences, citizen juries and deliberative polls – have proved their worth.
- Guidelines to benefits agencies need to be clarified in order to ensure that people claiming benefits know that they will not be penalised if they participate in civic activity.
- The Government should explore whether the Child Trust Fund and other asset-based welfare programmes could be developed so as to encourage and reward active citizens. Tuition credits, business start-up credits and other non-cash rewards could also be offered as incentives.
- Power and control over resources should be devolved further to local authorities. Where possible and where local people want it, this should be to neighbourhood level.
- Public bodies should experiment with ‘invitation by lot’, asking people at random to take up public positions. Citizens could be invited, for instance, to join local government scrutiny panels, or grant-making bodies. The Communities Fund, one of the grant-making bodies of the national lottery, has appointed panel members in this way since 1999.
- Voluntary organisations should cultivate a grassroots membership where possible, and use civic forums and community conferences to involve citizens in campaigns. Charities play an

important role in mobilising and training active citizens. The Charity Commission is currently reviewing its guidelines on campaigning; these should work to allow charities to campaign on political issues.

- The roles and responsibilities of governors of public services of all types should be made more explicit, so that governors (and potential governors) understand what is being demanded of them. The OPM/CIPFA Commission on Public Sector Governance should help in this processes.
- Socially-responsible businesses already recognise the benefits of promoting volunteering among employees. But they could do more to foster civic and political engagement. Employees should be encouraged to improve their understanding of civic affairs and engage in public debate. In return, government should champion those businesses that take a lead, and examine mechanisms - including grants and tax relief - to compensate employers for time taken off for civic activity.