"Citizenship classes" to become compulsory in English schools

Liz Smith
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"Citizenship" is to become a compulsory subject taught in all English schools from 2002. It will be introduced as a distinct subject in secondary schools, and will be integrated within existing lessons on personal, social and health education in primary schools.

Explaining the government's decision to introduce the new subject, David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, said: "In England, we have tended to downplay our traditions and identity and our culture in a way that other people do not. We need to reinforce our pride in our culture and welcome other people's cultures, because we have strength and confidence in our own identity.... [It will] help young people develop a full understanding of their duties and responsibilities as citizens in a civilised and mature democracy."

Most schools already teach much of the material contained in the citizenship proposals, but the commitment and quality vary widely. An overriding concern of the government—which was highlighted by its Citizenship advisory group—is the enormous alienation, cynicism and apathy young people feel about the political set-up.

According to the advisory group, voter abstention amongst 18 to 24 years old in the 1997 general election was 32 percent. The pollsters MORI have put the figure even higher, at 43 percent. This reflected the national trend, which saw the lowest turnout for a general election in the post-war period at 71 percent. The group also cited a 1995 pamphlet by Helen Wilkinson and Geoff Mulgan, *Freedom's Children: work, relationships and politics for 18 year olds in Britain.* Commissioned by Demos, the Labour think-tank, this noted that "disrespect for the way Parliament works doubled in four years after 1991, and that trust in society's core institutions has been falling steadily, leaving only minority support for the way that national government works (15 percent) and local government (25 percent)." The authors concluded that "in effect, an entire generation has opted out of party politics," and that it was urgent that a different approach to politics be developed.

For many years, there was no consensus on what such a syllabus should contain. As far back as October 1996, the Tory government had proposed to teach citizenship in schools, as part of its programme of enhancing "family values" and strengthening law-and-order and personal responsibility. This was never realised due to the change in government in 1997.

However, Labour's proposals go much further. Last year, the government set up the Citizenship advisory group led by Professor Bernard Crick, and Betty Boothroyd MP, Speaker of the House of Commons. Its report emphasised the need to develop a "national identity" in a "pluralist" society.

Following the series of nail-bomb attacks last month in London—directed against blacks, Asians and homosexuals—Prime Minister Tony Blair called for a new nationalism, "an identity, limited by the geography of the country, but within that country, open to all, whatever their colour, religion or ethnic background."

This has become particularly important as Labour devolves certain central powers to the new administrative structures it has created in Scotland and Wales. The government claimed that the creation of a Parliament in Scotland and an Assembly in Wales was not only aimed at giving local people "more democracy" but was in keeping with the distinct "national culture" in these two countries.

In the last months, there has been much discussion on the need to create a specifically "English culture".

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Various writers have justified this as the necessary accompaniment to devolution in Scotland and Wales. The government also plans to create nine new regional assemblies in England, but opinion polls found that just 11 percent of the population were in favour.

Without doubt, the new citizenship subject to be taught in English schools will be directed along these lines. But to elaborate this too overtly would leave the government open to criticism for racism—especially following the Macpherson Report into the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence. That report had placed a particular emphasis on the role of the school curriculum in encouraging what it defined as “cultural diversity”.

Great efforts have been made to portray the “new nationalism” as inclusive, harmonious and multi-racial. Cultural differences are to be placed in their global and European context, the government claims. But what is an English culture, and what is the purpose of emphasising it in the first place? As soon as one starts to explore the question, the entire premise breaks down. By stressing such “differences”, the end result can only be to enforce the divisions between peoples and inculcate nationalism.

Another feature of the government's proposals is the great stress it lays on the fact that a citizen's “rights” are dependent on them fulfilling certain responsibilities. This has been a basic feature of the rightward shift that the Blair government has led in the erosion of democratic rights. The advisory body on citizenship placed great importance on this aspect, by quoting a speech given to the Citizenship Foundation (27 January 1998) by the Lord Chancellor. “Citizenship education must give people confidence to claim their rights and challenge the status quo while, at the same time, make plain that with rights come obligations. It should foster respect for law, justice and democracy,” he said.

Further on he remarks, “But, since we learn by doing, the practical experience of citizenship is at least as important as formal education in its principles. One of the best ways of putting the theories of citizenship into practice is through voluntary work in the community.”

Consequently, the government proposal on the new subject states, “Between the ages of 5 and 16 pupils will develop progressively the skills of: enquiry and critical thinking; discussion and debate; negotiation and accommodation; participation in school and community based activities.” Professor Bernard Crick has explained, “We're thinking much more generally, building up from the neighbourhood—kids learning what the local voluntary bodies are, what the local social services are—yes, what the local parties and pressure groups are doing—broadening out onto a national field. But also having a learning experience in the community, the idea of having active citizenship rather than passive learning.”

According to reports, the government intends that those children aged 14 and over facing difficulties in their schooling will be released from study for “work experience”. An element of work experience is already incorporated into the curriculum, but the new proposal would effectively mean schools taking the decision that certain pupils are inadequate for further education. School exclusions have risen rapidly over the last years as schools—faced with larger class sizes and the competitive pressures of league tables—have been unable to deal with the range of social and personal problems many of their pupils confront.

Far from resolving the difficulties confronting schools and their pupils, Labour's “citizenship classes” emphasising “rights and responsibilities” learnt through voluntary work are a preparation to transform large numbers of pupils into sweated labour.

Whilst the response from the largest teaching unions has been cautious, their comments have focused solely on the purely sectional implications of the proposed changes. Doug McAvoy, general secretary of the largest teachers union, the National Union of Teachers, said they will “resist any attempt to worsen teachers' working hours.” Nigel de Gruchy of the NASUWT said, “If the Government wants to add to the national curriculum it must stipulate the subjects to be dropped. The National Curriculum is already overloaded. Taking on more cargo could sink the ship.”

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