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Difficulties Even in the Best of Circumstances: Britain

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Dr Johnson, the great eighteenth century author and talker, was once asked to consider the deep question 'why were we born?' He replied that the real question was 'why were we not born before?' Those who looked West after the fall of Wall may have been surprised to find that citizenship education of some kind was on the national curriculum of every country in Western Europe, notably in several different varieties in the German Laender, except in Great Britain. Was not Great Britain supposed to be the 'mother of parliaments', the exemplar of representative government? It was partly this very reputation and a certain self-conceit that made all British governments and all but a few educationalists think, until as late as 1997, that citizenship education was unnecessary. But in 1997 the New Labour government, was well aware that fewer people had voted in that general election than at any time since 1924; and that less than half those between 18 and 25 years old entitled to vote had voted. Also, for some years public concern had been growing about the behavior of the young, both delinquency and apathy (often exaggerated by the popular press certainly, but worrying none-the-less).

The new government set up an advisory group (which I chaired) to recommend the form and content of citizenship as a compulsory subject in the national curriculum. Coming last we were able to learn from the mistakes of some others. And not having a written constitution we were unable, even had we wished, to recommend learning it by heart, and thus boring rather than attempting to stimulate young people. The stress in our report was on participation: pupils must discuss really issues and must be given opportunities to work together in the local community and even to be responsible for some aspects of running the school. One reason why we put so much stress on participation, and thus on skills and attitudes as well as, perhaps even more than, knowledge, was because we knew that one sector of British schools, the private schools with a mere eight percent of young people, had been extremely successful in shaping the mentality of most government and nearly all higher civil servants throughout the last century and a half. They had a most effective ethos of education for leadership – in the army, the imperial and home civil service, parliament and the church. Some still think they have, even if most of their products now head for 'the square mile' of the finance houses of the city of London rather than the parade ground. The ethos had stressed habitual loyalty and instinctive obedience to rules, call it at best respect for the 'rule of law', rather than critical thought and democratic practices. The idea of the *good* citizen could be found in this, certainly, but rarely the idea of the *active* citizen—that all subjects of the crown should think of themselves as citizens with rights to be exercised as well as agreed responsibilities. The English idea of public service was, in other words, top down. Richard Hoggart, a profound commentator on British culture, had recently written, in sorrow more than anger, that not educating our young for the modern world through citizenship and critical thought was to hurl them 'into shark infested waters unprepared'.. We need both 'good citizens' and 'active citizens'. And citizenship is not just the assertion of individual rights, important though these are, it is acting together to achieve a common public purpose. That indeed is unique

cultural inheritance of European civilisation from the world of the Greek city states and the Roman Republic (never quite forgotten even in the darkest times).

So the advisory group's report, *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools* (QCA 1998) stated: "We aim at no less than a change in the political culture of this country: for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting; to build on and radically extend to young people the best in existing traditions of volunteering and public service, and to make them individually confident in finding new forms among themselves.' But that is, indeed, an aim more than a definition, still less, as yet, an achievement.

We in England have considerable difficulties about the very concept of citizenship, let alone peculiar inhibitions. (I say 'England' deliberately because Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own education system, and different cultures). English politicians never say 'Fellow citizens...', and when nineteenth century radicals did, it was meant to sound *almost* republican.

So we had to try to be clear what we were talking about before making detailed proposals for the curriculum. Important social and moral concepts always get defined in different ways by different groups for different purposes. They are what a philosopher has called 'essentially contested concepts'. That is why attempts to establish by social surveys what people think are moral virtues end up at least very ambiguous, almost meaningless if the observations cannot be correlated with behavior. And definitions, whether by individual thinkers or by committees, do not settle arguments. 'Citizenship' can carry significantly different meanings. It has no "essential" or universally true meaning, but one can attempt some reasonable understanding of the main usages of the term in our societies and the great moral force behind what has come down to us historically. We can offer a working definition that will include the main contested usages. If no one can agree on any identical list of the virtues that might be thought, either to constitute citizenship or, to the preconditions for it, yet the activity is not obscure. In the report we quoted Professor David Hargreaves of Cambridge University:

"Civic education is about the civic virtues and decent behaviour that adults wish to see in young people. But it is also more than this. Since Aristotle it has been accepted as an inherently political concept that raises questions about the sort of society we live in, how it has come to take its present form, the strengths and weaknesses of current political structures, and how improvements might be made... Active citizens are as political as they are moral; moral sensibility derives in part from political understanding; political apathy spawns moral apathy."

Indeed, Aristotle had remarked long ago that whoever could live outside the *polis*—the city, or the civic relationship, or the community of citizens—was either a beast or a god. Although both the Greek city states and the Roman Republic were destroyed, the memory and the ideal of free citizenship endured, just as 'democracy' in our times can be mentally understood, valued and envied even where physically it is repressed or has never before existed.

So we aimed at a flexible national curriculum that laid down principles and guidelines but left the detail to teachers. Teachers as well as the pupils would have to think and to innovate, above all to avoid the boredom and authoritarianism of the rote teaching and learning of institutions (and even arbitrary lists of values can be learnt by heart, to no effect – what we merrily call the 'in one ear and out the other' type of teaching. Knowledge of institutions is important but we argued that the use of institutions is best

learnt by discussing issues and problems and how to resolve them – then institutions become relevant not learnt in the abstract. .

But what had happened in practice? In a country of 50 million inhabitants, even with what has become a highly centralised system of government creating national targets for educational performance, it might not be easy to tell if participation and attitudes could be measured as easily as knowledge. So my colleagues and I succeeded in persuading the Ministers to find two and a half million pounds to get up a longitudinal study over eight years to report, using a large sample and a control group, on changes in knowledge, participative activities and attitudes. Why eight years instead of the six of compulsory secondary education? About half of young people at the end of compulsory schooling go on to some form of higher or further education or training. But about half do not, and among them are found most of those prone to delinquent behavior and/or complete cynicism about politics ('what's in for us?' 'They are all in it just for themselves.'). So we need to know if by the time those not in education reach eighteen (the voting age), they have been positively influenced (or not) by the citizenship they did in school compared to those interviewed as a control of bench mark four years ago who had not experienced citizenship education.

In England we are now in the fifth year of the new curriculum and there have been three reports from the National Foundation for Educational Research on the longitudinal study. (NFER can be found of the web). The latest report shows that about a third of the schools studied tackled the new curriculum willingly and well, and about the same number unwillingly ("detracting time and effort from real subjects", they say); and a middle third are hard to judge. The middle third are hard to judge because a bad mistake was made by the Ministry at the beginning. While they insisted that Citizenship must be taught, assessed and reported upon in equal value to the other compulsory subjects, they allowed it to taught through other subjects rather than as a discrete subject with its own timetable. The NFER surveys and the national school inspectors all agree that citizenship needs its own time. If taught only through other subjects it becomes, at best, incoherent, at worst, simply evaded. So much depends on the leadership and example of the head teacher. Also, since 1986, when a Conservative government brought in for the first time the national curriculum in all traditional subjects, teachers in training have not be trained how to hold discussions on contentious issues. So many of those trained in the last twenty years are nervous and uncertain about how to conduct such discussions. Furthermore, as has often happened, the government supported the new ideas but (as with language and citizenship education for immigrants) but did not fund it adequately. There are too few places for citizenship specialists in initial teacher training and too little funding for in-service teacher training for existing teachers. Not anyone can teach citizenship well without training and resources, nor without considering the government of a school as a whole (does it set a reasonably open and democratic or an authoritarian example?). So even in the best of circumstances, the effectiveness of citizenship teaching is a mixed picture.

There may be a paradox here. When circumstances are too easy, the pressure can be off. Great changes often occur when authoritarian regimes collapse, although authoritarian styles of teaching can continue. Teaching democracy in an authoritarian and prescriptive manner is far from unknown, and then almost always self-defeating. It is not easy for many citizenship teachers who believe in what they should be doing, and others are frightened of losing their authority if they allow discussion and contradiction. Pericles of Athens said: 'the secret of liberty is courage.'

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