

Citizenship in a Democracy

Have you noticed that *'the duties of being a citizen'* have almost completely changed in the last thirty years?

The old kind of Citizenship

This idea was that there was a *'Social Contract'* between government and the citizens. Those who want to form a government published a manifesto – a bit like a contract – about what they planned to do in the next 4-5 years, and spoke about it to the crowds before an election. Then we, the citizens, voted for the one we preferred. If it turned out that we did not like what happened, we just had to wait patiently for nearly five years until the next election. Then we could vote for another would-be member of parliament and more manifestos (from the individual candidate and from the party).

In exchange for this *'representative democracy'* operating occasionally through the ballot box, we were all expected to be law-abiding citizens. Indeed J.J.Rousseau who wrote about *'The Social Contract'* just before the French Revolution, thought that the reason why there was such anti-social behaviour amongst the poor – violence, murder, theft etc – was because they felt disenfranchised. They had no power and no wealth.

However the French Revolution and general experience has proved that conclusion is not always right. Democracy at the ballot box does not decrease crime, nor does greater wealth. After a while people, especially the young, do not bother to vote. Only in countries where the right to vote is new, as in South Africa, is it practised with real enthusiasm.

The new idea of Citizenship

Nevertheless, it is a mistake to think that not voting during an election is the same as not caring about others in the community. People have been exhorted by religions to carry out good deeds, and care for the poor and the orphans, and indeed many have done so. They gave charity to the poor; that was uncomfortable and patronising, and it ignored the civic rights of the poorer citizens. Nevertheless there are good and imaginative ways to help the disadvantaged in the community. By planning such actions and carrying them out, we may become *'active citizens'*. You could say that was a way of being moral, although not necessarily religious as well.

Another, different way of being a good citizen in the new *'Civil Society'* (through what Bernard Crick calls *'civil republicanism'*) is to take part in the public debate about important issues¹. To do that citizens need to be well informed, and that is far more possible now than in it was in earlier times. We have a free press, universal schooling - both essential human rights in a modern democracy - and now the Internet. Information is available to almost anyone. So in addition to **morality** we have **information** and **knowledge** to help us think about any new issues that turn up, as they do from time to time. Do our pupils also have all the necessary **skills** as well? We will come to that in a minute.

¹ Crick, B. *Essays on Citizenship*. (2000) London, Continuum.
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Active citizens now actually participate in the exercise of political power by studying some special issues which interest them, like environmentalism or health, and taking part in schemes to protect the environment or finding ways to improve health care for the aged who are so often neglected. This is how Ernest Gellner² put it in his book *Conditions of Liberty. Civil Society and its Rivals*, 'The Civil Society is that set of diverse non-governmental institutions which is strong enough to counterbalance the state and, while not preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests, can nevertheless prevent it from dominating the rest of society.' (page 5).

'Non-governmental' can mean almost any group, from Friends of the Earth to those who want more humane treatment for a local family of asylum-seekers, or protection for trees round the common land next to the school. In both these cases waiting for the next election would be far too slow. The asylum seekers might have been shipped back to the oppressive regime, the trees might all have been cut down.

Young people used to be told not to 'make waves', and to leave things to the government, or their elders, or the scientific experts who 'know best'. Education for citizenship in the new 'Civil Society' is different. It asks us to teach young people the skills of being active citizens. When they see a problem, like the need to reduce the price of solar panels sold to schools, or the pros and cons of donating your kidney to someone who needs it desperately, our pupils should be encouraged to do three things. Firstly they need to collect information, scientific and other, and then to see how it applies to the situation, if they can. Secondly they need to make up their minds on what seems to them to be the moral course of action - weighing up evidence, and evaluating moral positions. That needs classroom practice in discussing issues, and sometimes also in acting out a role-play to see what it feels like to be in a difficult situation. Finally they need to know whether to approach local government or central government, and how to do it, in order to make changes.

This is what the QCA wrote in their document *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools* (1998):

'We aim at no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally: for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacity to weigh evidence before speaking and acting; to build on and to extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of community involvement and public service, and to make them individually confident in finding new forms of involvement and action among themselves.'

² Gellner, E. *Conditions of Liberty. Civil Society and its Rivals*. (1994) London. Penguin.
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