

Renewing democracy for the next generation

Oona King

Renewing democracy for the next generation

Oona King

A woman walked into my constituency office on crutches. She had 'fallen' from her second floor flat on one of Tower Hamlets' pre-war housing estates while being treated for depression following her husband's suicide. "He set himself on fire. The children had to put out the flames." She looked down at her broken legs. "Now they have to look after me. They have asthma because the damp in our house is terrible, they're always ill." She looked at me with dead eyes. "Ms King, why don't you politicians care?"

If you pass this family in the street, you might mistake their despair for apathy. The eldest son, eighteen years old, hangs around the stairwell on his housing estate, smoking a bit of hash and staring sullenly at passers-by. He lives in an area where gang activity is increasing, and pensioners won't go out after dark. He is not in education and says he will never vote. He's not the only one. Across the country young people tell us that they feel alienated and excluded from the communities they live in. In contrast to the growing cyber communities that many inhabit, a sense of having a stake in real life is much weaker amongst young people.

Last year, the Make Space Youth Review – a one year enquiry into the lives of young people in the UK – consulted 16,000 young people and found that less than a quarter of 11-16 year olds felt they had a say in the world around them, in the services and activities aimed at them. Instead they reported a growing sense of irrelevance. It's not just disaffected, disadvantaged young people who are kicking the voting habit. Those at the sharp end of poverty share something with those in the leafy suburbs: a distrust of politics and politicians, and disdain for the democratic process.

The general elections of 2001 and 2005 had the second and third worst turnouts (60% and 61%) since 1900 and an increasing generation gap – with only 39% of those aged between 18 and 25 voting in the 2001 general election, compared to 75% of those over the age of 65. And while over 90% of 65+ year olds see voting as a civic duty, only 56% of 18–24 year olds do. This is not simply a trait which young people 'grow out of'. The British Elections Survey suggests that if you don't vote when young, then you don't vote when old: non-voting becomes a lifelong habit.

Two and a half millennia after the birth of participative democracy in Ancient Greece, our modern polity needs an urgent health-check. Disaffection threatens to choke the system. Yet people aren't

apathetic, they're more often angry. "Anybody can become angry," said Aristotle, "that is easy; but to be angry with the right person, and in the right way, that is not within everybody's power – that is not easy."

Why is this battle to engage so important? Firstly because without action this democratic deficit will grow – turning disaffected young people into disaffected adults, and ultimately cutting government adrift from a democratic mandate; secondly because a failure to effectively engage people leaves a gap which extremist groups find it increasingly easy to fill; thirdly because the involvement of a greater and more diverse community creates better policy, more likely to meet people's needs and more likely to work in practice; and fourthly because we are beginning to understand that participative democracy is a key weapon in the battle against poverty and widening inequality, particularly in breaking entrenched deprivation.

# Democracy as a springboard to equality

Democracy itself can be a springboard to equality. Why? Put simply, empowerment increases life-chances. It's not just that active citizens make a healthier democracy; it's that redistributing influence to disadvantaged groups helps them outwit their disadvantage – in a way that redistributing wealth alone has signally failed to do. The potential of the approach was highlighted by tenants in what was previously one of the most disadvantaged estates in Britain, with a startling infant mortality rate. Instead of Whitehall drawing up regeneration plans, the residents were asked to do it. One of the young women who came to the meetings soon learned to master budget proposals, and within two years had set up a women's association that now runs employment training programmes, English language classes, and a fresh food co-op.

In other words, participative democracy can help reach the places the Welfare State cannot reach; it can help change the mind-set of people, raising their expectations and achievements. Moreover the shared endeavour of local action helps bind communities together, generating that elusive policy-wonk gold-dust known as social capital. A little bit of gold-dust makes even the most disadvantaged communities more resilient, more able to deal with problems ranging from graffiti to gang-violence, race-hatred, and even climate change.

So the time has come to grasp the missing link between inequalities in wealth and inequalities in influence. Inclusive governance and active citizenship may yet prove more effective in reducing poverty and inequality than increasing the top rate of income tax; we don't know because we haven't really tried it. The symbiotic link between governance and policy must be explored further.

This requires citizens to give away some of their time to engage in the future of their communities and their country – as in the recent proposals around Citizens Juries. A vital first step for the Government is to engage the country in its proposals for 'The Governance of Britain'. Young people are not known for their love of government Green Papers. But if a British statement of values is to have meaning, it must be relevant to the next generation. If new forms of engagement are to be effective, it's not just citizens that must give up some of their time; politicians must give up some of their power. This means re-writing the compact between people and politicians, citizen and state, and feeds into the objectives around the Constitutional Reform Bill and a British Bill of Rights and Duties.

# Engaging local communities and incentivising citizenship

There is already a growing acceptance across Government and across the political spectrum that local communities must be meaningfully engaged when it comes to spending public money. Apart from anything else, if they're not, these public funds are linked to policy failure. We can't afford not to promote active citizenship. Local Strategic Partnerships, New Deal for Communities programmes, Sure Start, and Safer Neighbourhood structures have community engagement and participation as a vital component. More and more children and young people are now routinely consulted as part of these programmes with a plethora of new interventions designed to increase representation and relevance for young people – from the recently launched Young People's Fund, school councils, and growing number of Youth Parliaments, to the involvement of young people in high profile interview processes at some of the highest levels of Government

But while these interventions are to be warmly welcomed and encouraged, they still remain the exception – and they are limited, running the risk that only the 'usual suspects' get involved. Given the

rising tide of political disengagement, we urgently need a quantum leap in the democratisation of governance that goes far beyond these programmes, reaching people of all ages, and in particular young people. The recent Government call for 'renewed representative democracy' offers an opportunity to engage. The challenge for decision-makers is to re-imagine political processes to appeal more to voters, especially through the use of emerging technology.

Citizenship education in schools has the potential to be an ever more important element. But young people would understand and contribute much more if they were genuinely part of the decision-making process that affects their lives. They would experience the responsibility, frustration and success that comes with representing others.

Citizens should be incentivised to be active – this means making participation not just more appealing, but also easier, and rewarding. Although there has been much debate on compulsory voting, there has been less attention paid to encouraging voting in positive ways – through for example a Citizens Tax Credit to reward those who do vote, or participate in structured policy consultations, by offering a discount on council tax or income tax. The Citizens Tax Credit could be extended to other areas of engagement, for example working with local voluntary sector organisations, or donating to timebanks.

# Inspiring the next generation

Despite many good intentions, it is widely accepted that involvement in decision-making has not yet filtered into the reality of young people's lives. The next generation care about a range of local, national and international issues but do not necessarily connect their 'politics' with the ballot box. Signing online petitions, supporting a campaign, joining single-issue interest groups, or buying tickets for a cause, are some ways young people expressing active citizenship.

During the Make Space Youth Review, Young People and Citizenship emerged as a key theme, along with the urgent need to give teenagers a voice. Consistent complaints surfaced from young people that they were never consulted, with many describing the world around them as having been moulded by out-of-touch adults. They do not perceive their community to be 'theirs', with statistics showing dangerous rises in the feeling of alienation and apathy towards what goes on in the

community. Yet these young people also had many ideas about how to turn this around.

Enthusiasm amongst young people to get involved in community decision-making is high but it is tempered by a perception that the proliferation of consultations thrown at them are simply 'going through the motions'. Young people's voices must be built into planning processes in a meaningful way. The result will be services that are more in touch with teenagers, that better engage young people's needs and ambitions. The Youth Review found that young people do not necessarily expect the final say on public decisions but they do want to 'have some say'. Removing the feeling of tokenism around involvement of this kind is the only way to avoid cynicism and foster engagement.

# A manifesto for youth

Eighty six per cent of young people favoured specific 'Youth Manifestos' in constituencies. Finding ways for politicians to communicate with young people is not that difficult. Young people say they rate politicians who visit schools and youth groups. Taking an interest and campaigning on issues which are important to them, as well as speaking the 'language' of young people are also seen as positives. This is not rocket science, but it requires time and effort. But if we really want to make a difference we must extend and enshrine young people's involvement in a more bold and dramatic way.

First, lower the voting age. At the age of 16 a young person can choose to finish education, leave home, join the armed forces, have sex, and start a family. If a young person earns enough they even pay tax – and yet they can't vote. If we are to be serious about raising levels of participation of young people in the formal democratic process, teenagers have to be given the right to vote from their 16th birthday. Candidates for political office should also be encouraged to produce Youth Manifestos to distribute in schools and local youth groups.

Youth Mayors, Parliaments, school councils and local youth funds are some of the ways that young people can experience voting and decision-making. There is the potential for every area to have a Youth Mayor, backed up by an elected Youth Parliament with budget-spending powers working with and consulting schools and youth

groups. Youth Funds are already proving popular but need to be extended with additional promotion and support to ensure that the most disadvantaged young people gain the opportunity to shape and influence contributions to the communities around them.

And being serious about young people's involvement and the impact of services on them may mean that we enshrine consultation in law. From national legislation to local implementation – a requirement to undertake and publicise a Young People Impact Assessment on key public policy decision-making would make the importance of young people's engagement clear and ensure that it was followed through.

## Conclusion

It's time to re-write the compact between people and politicians, citizen and state. This means genuinely embedding democracy in our current governance structures, and inventing new ones that give more power to the people, and in particular young people. By redistributing influence we tackle entrenched inequality, and help build stronger communities. Our task is complicated by a globalised world, with a churning population, that makes it harder to build cohesive communities – and easier to stir up hate.

Managing diversity and building social cohesion are key challenges of our time. As people feel greater insecurity, witness widespread change, and feel less control over their lives, they become either despairing or angry, and withdraw from the democratic process. These days, democracy-rage drives people insane: the rage against those in charge, the inability to pin them against the wall, and the conviction that politicians just don't care.

Both politicians and people must change. Modern democracy was founded on the principle of 'no taxation without representation'. But in the 21st century, representation isn't enough – and it certainly won't coax people into voting. Even if it did, voting alone won't breathe life into our democracy. The lesson we are learning is that there can be no real democracy without effective engagement. And there will be no future for democracy if we don't persuade young people to engage. It's not about magic wands and quick fixes – only a genuinely participative democracy will do.

# Setting sights high for young people

4Children has pioneered an innovative model of provision of activities and support for young people, supported by evidence from the Institute of Education and informative in respect of the Government's own vision for youth services contained within the *Aiming High for Young People* ten year strategy. The Make Space model designs dynamic integrated centres and hubs for young people.

Make Space is a £3 million national programme, supported by Nestlé in partnership with 4Children, working to ensure a positive future for teenagers through the creation of 1,200 new-style youth clubs based on this model. The campaign aims to create a network of 3,000 clubs by 2010 for young people aged 11-19. Make Space clubs are designed by young people for young people – providing a place to go, things to do and opening doors to new opportunities.

Oona King co-Chaired the Make Space Youth Review, an independent, one year body established to consider the lives of young people in the UK today and the support we offer them as a society. The full report and summary of findings and recommendations are available to download from www.makespace.org.uk or call 4Children on 020 7512 2100.