

GOVERNANCE OF BRITAIN LOCAL ENGAGEMENT EVENT

LONDON

TUESDAY 22 JULY 2008

The Statement of Values

The overarching message from the discussion was that the idea of a Statement of Values was a good one as citizens' are able to identify with it. However the real challenge will be motivating a discussion in the absence of a historical driver, for example revolution or war – as had been the case in the USA and France.

The main points made by participants were:

- A debate about values would be useful even if it did not result in a written Statement.
- How do we define what are specifically British values? Different generations have different notions of what is British. These values evolve and may also change with the changing face of the populace, which raises the issue of how we reach all people in the process.
- The Statement of Values and the process for formulating it must be inclusive. The process of debate should involve young people. This could be achieved by including a discussion of what it means to be British in the citizenship curriculum.
- The Statement of Values must be secular in nature. However, faith communities must play an important role in the debate.
- We need to be careful to ensure that the process is not hijacked by the far right.
- A Statement of Values should recognise the pluralism inherent in British society. A person should be able to identify with the values regardless of background.
- The English language is the glue that binds us together as citizens' and must be central to any Statement of Values. Translation of government documents is appropriate in the short term but is not a long-term solution as it hinders integration. There needed to be more provision of English language classes.

- The Statement of Values should include Equality, Respect and on a lighter note “a stiff upper lip”. The first two however are not exclusively British but universal.

- Participants came up with the following uses for the Statement of Values:
 - To form part of the school curriculum – particularly citizenship classes;
 - As part of the citizenship test for new migrants applying to become citizens;
 - On or inside passports;
 - On display in public places;
 - Key words should be used in major communications and speeches.

Bill of Rights and Responsibilities

The overarching message from the discussion was that, although there was scope for adding new rights beyond those contained in the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights (e.g. environment, children) the case for a Bill of Rights and Responsibilities was not overwhelming. Some of the new areas considered (e.g. healthcare) were best left to Parliamentary legislation. While a BoRR sounded appealing as a touchpoint, there were many difficulties to overcome.

The main points made by participants were:

- Times had changed since the European Convention and civil liberties had increased in certain ways which might deserve recognition in any new BoRR - for example, the right to marry now included civil partnerships.
- Although the welfare state was important to UK identity, aspects of it e.g. healthcare, should not necessarily be framed as 'rights'. Areas like health and housing were best left as matters of policy, which governments were entitled to change their minds about and re-legislate on. Moreover, there was a danger of vague provisions in a constitutional document being left open to interpretation by successive governments.
- It seemed feasible to include new areas as 'principles' rather than hard edged 'rights', but much would depend on the detail of the provisions. Rights or principles associated with an implied economic well being might be difficult to enforce. However, provisions could be framed as 'responsibilities' on Government itself.
- There was a worry about how far this document would go – for example, would it address controversial areas such as the right to life eg. in the context of abortion – would this impact back on the NHS?
- There were foreseeable problems with the scope of application of a BoRR – who would be entitled under or bound by its provisions? Immigrants, asylum seekers, citizens, residents, everyone in the UK? Some areas such as housing depended on citizenship or residency.
- It seemed a good idea to include responsibilities in the debate. However, it would be important that rights were in no way dependent on fulfilment of responsibilities.
- If certain areas of the welfare state were included, e.g. healthcare, then why not others, such as housing? However, there would obviously be complexities to overcome - for example, if one had a right to a decent standard of living / access to accommodation and put a housing appeal forward, would one have to start processes in central rather than local government? Or would local government responsibility be returned to central government?

- The consensus was that the UK did not need a Bill of Rights and Responsibilities. While an appealing idea in some ways, it felt like regression and seemed anachronistic in a sense. In a globalised society, we should focus more on the international angle. While Europe was coming together as an entity, we would be departing from this, creating a 'British' document, when we could build on the HRA 1998 – i.e. the ECHR contained in it. Bolting further legislation onto existing legislation could be confusing. Participants thought that in the future a review period could be built into the ECHR (or a revised HRA 1998) and publicised.

Community Engagement

The overarching message from the discussion was that engagement has to be meaningful and worthwhile to the participants involved and that their contribution is going to be taken into account as part of the decision-making process.

The main points made by participants were:

- Government consultations should not be tick box exercises. Organisers need to provide real clarity on the outcomes and purpose of events. Are these going to be purely market research events or are they going to give people real influence? People are engaged but often feel that Ministers are not listening.
- We need to ensure that summits and juries are inclusive and broadly representative. The method by which participants are selected will be important.
- Reimbursing participants for their time might encourage people to take part in summits or juries. At the very least participation should be cost neutral.
- Feedback needs to be thorough and timely and participants should have a clear understanding of how their views will be used.
- Whilst new methods of engagement are welcome, the Government also needs to address why people are reluctant to take part in the political process more generally.
- We should use existing networks and forums, for example PTA's and Youth groups, to learn how they engage others.

Election Day

The overarching message from the discussion was that the prime motivating factors that affect participation are if the issues at stake are of interest to people and the extent to which people feel their participation will make a difference. While the voting system plays a part in this, there are clearly issues with the ways in which people access their vote that need to be addressed to remove barriers to participation for those who are motivated to take part.

- There needs to be a better and more responsive voter registration system, particularly for students
- You should be able to register and vote online.
- People work long hours and commuting adds to this. Participants welcomed the idea of weekend voting and advanced voting as ways of making it easier for people to vote.
- There was strong support for online voting because it can be accessed from anywhere and does not rely on people having to be in a particular place to vote.
- Participants thought that the more options available on ways to vote, the better. It is important that the voter has a choice.
- The current system of voting does not seem to fit the 21st century. We are required to vote in a particular way at one polling station and this does not take account of the realities of modern life.
- Voting security is important. Participants appreciated the importance of balancing access to voting against ensuring a secure system.
- There was some concern over how representative a Citizens' Summit would be - but on the whole the summit approach is strongly supported.