

Re: JSCEM Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education

Dear Sir/Madam,

I welcome the Committee's term of reference that, in considering the adequacy of electoral education, it will take into account "approaches used internationally and, in particular, in the UK".

Since I live in the UK, where voting is not compulsory and where concern has been expressed at the low turnout of those eligible to vote, especially among the 18- to 24-year-olds, I wish to comment, **within the terms of reference of this inquiry**, on these matters from a British perspective. I will also describe how the need to include knowledge of the electoral system and the importance of voting has been recognised and forms part of the Citizenship component within the National (Education) Curriculum of England for pupils aged 5-16. Finally, I will refer to efforts to engage British citizens living in the UK and abroad in the electoral process by offering alternative means of casting one's vote in order to increase voter turnout.

I would recommend two titles from the UK's Electoral Commission as sources of evidence for my submission:

- 1 Voter Engagement and Young People. October 2002. (VEAYP)
- 2 Absent Voting in Great Britain. March 2003. (AVIGB)

These titles can be accessed and downloaded from the following website:

<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk> or

<http://www.sosig.ac.uk/roads/subject-listing/World-cat/ukelect.html>

The National Curriculum for England can be accessed from the following website:

http://www.nc.uk.net/nc_resources/html/about_NC.shtml

The user should access Citizenship from the drop-down menu on the toolbar.

(N.B.: Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have their own National Curriculums.)

Low turnout of 18-24 year olds in UK elections

In "Voter Engagement and Young People" (VEAYP), the stark comment is made that "the 2001 general election saw voter turnout drop to its lowest level since the advent of universal adult suffrage, with just 59.4% of eligible voters choosing to exercise that right." The findings of research by the MORI Social Research Institute "suggested that low turnout was particularly pronounced among young people, with an estimated 39% of 18-24 year olds casting a vote." One explanation given was "a decline in civic duty (caused by increasing atomisation of British society)." This led to the conclusion that: "... the central worry for those concerned with the state of democracy in Britain

is that young voters are indifferent to and ignorant of politics, and this is causing an erosion of the concepts of citizenship and participation.”

The study reveals that “the problem of falling turnout is not exclusively British. Turnout seems to be falling in most established democracies across all orders of election.” It hints at possible ways of redressing this state of affairs, including lowering the voting age. Their conclusion ties in with JSCEM’s awareness of the role of civics education. “The political ramifications of lowering the voting age are uncertain, but any move would have to be accompanied by a serious educative process (probably through the Citizenship initiative in Key Stages 3 and 4 in schools). Any such process ought to centre on the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship in modern-day Britain.”

Citizenship in the National Curriculum

Citizenship is introduced into the National Curriculum for England at Key Stage 1 and continued through KS 2, KS3 and KS4. School Year 11 (age 16) marks the end of compulsory schooling in all territories of the United Kingdom.

KS1 = pupils aged 5-8; School years: 1-3.; KS2 = pupils aged 9-11; School years: 4-6;
KS3 = pupils aged 12-14; School years: 7-9; KS4 = pupils aged 15-16; School years: 10-11.

Here are some of the key contents of Citizenship from KS2 to KS4. They have a direct bearing on raising awareness of democracy and civic rights, duties and responsibilities:

Knowledge, skills and understanding Key Stage 2

1) Pupils should be taught:

Citizenship education

Preparing to play an active role as citizens

2) Pupils should be taught:

- a. what democracy is, and about the basic institutions that support it locally and nationally
- b. that there are different kinds of responsibilities, rights and duties at home, at school and in the community, and that these can sometimes conflict with each other

Knowledge, skills and understanding Key Stage 3

Teaching should ensure that 'knowledge and understanding about becoming informed citizens' are acquired and applied when 'developing skills of enquiry and communication', and 'participation and responsible action'.

Knowledge and understanding about becoming informed citizens

1) Pupils should be taught about:

- a. the legal and human rights and responsibilities underpinning society, basic aspects of the criminal justice system, and how both relate to young people
- b. the diversity of national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom and the need for mutual respect and understanding
- c. central and local government, the public services they offer and how they are financed, and the opportunities to contribute
- d. the key characteristics of parliamentary and other forms of government
- e. the electoral system and the importance of voting

Knowledge, skills and understanding Key Stage 4

Teaching should ensure that 'knowledge and understanding about becoming informed citizens' are acquired and applied when 'developing skills of enquiry and communication', and 'participation and responsible action'.

Knowledge and understanding about becoming informed citizens

1) Students should be taught about:

- a. the legal and human rights and responsibilities underpinning society and how they relate to citizens, including the role and operation of the criminal and civil justice systems
- b. the origins and implications of the diverse national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom and the need for mutual respect and understanding
- c. the work of parliament, the government and the courts in making and shaping the law
- d. the importance of playing an active part in democratic and electoral processes

Young people's changing perception of the importance of voting

YEAYP was especially concerned that "... young people were much more likely than the public as a whole to deny the importance of voting – a central tenet of civic duty." This process had happened relatively quickly: "The reviewed literature seems to suggest that young people in contemporary Britain are less engaged with the democratic process than young people were a generation ago."

When asked to suggest ways on increasing turnout, "young people were relatively unenthusiastic about the prospects of better rates of public participation after the introduction of compulsory voting or proportional representation." However, the author comments wryly: "It is hard to see how the introduction of compulsory voting could fail to increase turnout, if nothing else." In a recent article in the Sunday Times (21 May 2006) entitled "Making a model British citizen", the writer argued thus in its favour: "Why not make voting compulsory to underline that citizenship entails a minimum duty of political participation?"

YEAYP's authors are not totally convinced about the value of compulsory voting. They accept that it would undeniably increase turnout, yet "at worse, compulsory voting runs the risk of treating the wrong problem – turnout rather than ineffective democracy."

However, to strike a more positive note, VEAYP continues: "...young people were keener on other proposed changes to the fabric of voting procedures in Britain. In particular, (they) were more likely to favour new mechanical arrangements in the voting process (internet voting, telephone voting and weekend polling)." (This conclusion was, however, disputed in another more localised study of young people's attitudes.)

One solution may be through pre-adult socialisation. "It is clear that much work needs to be done before a better form of linkage between the youngest sections of the electorate and the establishment can be forged. ... If the youngest generations are not participating in politics because they lack sufficient social capital, education ought to be a necessary precondition for reinvigorating democracy. **We would argue, however, that active citizenship comprises more than simply voting at elections; the whole range of participatory democracy needs to be covered by any citizenship programme.**"

Methods of voting in the UK

To facilitate voting, the British Government permits voters to do so in person at the polling station, or by postal vote, or by proxy. Originally, the postal category applied to people who would be out of the country or physically not able to get to a polling station, while disabled or absent people may also nominate someone to vote by proxy on their behalf at the polling station. However, postal voting is now seen as an alternative means of voting. In "Absent Voting in Great Britain" (AVIGB), the report notes how postal voting has increased turnout. "There has been a significant increase in the uptake of postal voting since February 2001. In the local elections of 2002 some 7.7% of the electorate cast their votes by post."

The authors of "AVIGB" point out: "The concept of absent voting has been part of the British election tradition since 1918. But the introduction of postal voting on demand in the Representation of the People Act 2000 marked a significant shift. For the first time, voting away from a polling station was a choice open to any elector without giving a reason."

One significant conclusion in the AVIGB report on postal voting, with particular relevance both to 18-24s and to black and ethnic minority communities, was the following: "... MORI found 51% of non-voters saying that voting by post would have made them more likely to vote at the general election." The accompanying table on "Awareness of postal voting" indicates that 70% of 18-24s and 63% of black and ethnic minority communities were not aware, even though the postal-voting option was available. An awareness-raising exercise targeting these groups is important.

According to the provisions of Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 (Act No.27 of 1918 as amended), postal voting is allowed in special circumstances in Australia but no provision is made for proxy voting.

With regard to proxy voting, the AVIGB conclusion is that “the Commission considers that there continues to be a need for proxy voting in the short term despite the introduction of postal voting on demand. However, the principle of proxy voting should be reviewed again by 2008, taking account of developments in voting procedures in the intervening period.”

Voting rights of British citizens abroad

Britons resident overseas may vote for up to 15 years after moving abroad. They may vote in general elections and European elections, but not in local elections or in elections to the Scottish Parliament or Welsh or Northern Ireland Assemblies or in the London Mayoral election.

To qualify to vote, the British overseas voter must first have registered at the local electoral registration office where they were last registered to vote. The voter can either register before going abroad or from overseas. They can download a registration form, which must be returned by post to their last local electoral registration office. The would-be overseas voter must have their details verified by another British citizen, and both must sign the registration form and give the number and place of issue of their British passports.

A registration form can be downloaded from the Electoral Commission’s website at: <http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk/>

Once registered, the overseas British voter will be sent an annual reminder to renew their wish to vote. If they do not respond, their name will be taken off the register. However, if they believe that the renewal form has been lost in the post, they can contact the electoral office and ask for another form.

As a voter, they can apply to vote by post for a particular election, for a set period of time or for all future elections, and the voting forms will be sent to them. However, as these postal voting forms are sent out just a week before an election, the overseas British voter who believes that it will be difficult to receive and return such a form in time may nominate someone else to vote on their behalf by arranging for a proxy vote. (The proxy must be a British, Irish or Commonwealth citizen.)

British overseas voters cannot vote at a local embassy or consulate. However, the Electoral Commission recommends in AVIGB that “the Foreign and Commonwealth Office should develop and issue guidelines to its posts abroad regarding the promotion of registration and voting to ensure that good practice is disseminated and concerns about ‘political’ activity are addressed.” Whether this recommendation has been put into practice has not been clarified.

Recommendations

Unlike the UK, where voting is voluntary, Australia requires this minimum duty of political participation from its residents, so it would be logical to encourage its overseas-based citizens to exercise their right to vote when they are overseas, even though when they are overseas it is not compulsory for them to do so. This could be

by extending the period that they are entitled to vote for from six years to a significantly longer period, by informing them of the need to register before going abroad, by abolishing the three-year limit for registering as an eligible overseas elector (EOE) or re-enrolling as an EOE from abroad, and possibly by introducing proxy voting should they live in remote regions of the world where it is difficult to get to a local consulate or embassy.

My wife, who is a former Australian citizen (she lost her Australian citizenship on becoming a naturalised Briton under the now repealed Section 17 of the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948*), and I maintain a strong continuing interest in Australian affairs through regular visits to Australia and via information from the Southern Cross Group. Since 1990, she has been five times to Australia, where she has seven cousins in Perth and Sydney, as well as friends in Perth and Melbourne. Her ties to Australia are therefore very concrete ones.

When citizenship reforms presently before Parliament in Canberra become law and enter into force, my wife and her son will be applying to resume their Australian citizenship. On becoming Australian citizens again, however, the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* as it presently stands will prevent them from enrolling to vote as expatriate Australians resident in the United Kingdom. They will only become entitled to enrol to vote again if they spend a long enough period in Australia for them to be resident at an address in Australia for at least a month.

However clichéd the old song line “And I still call Australia home” may be, it does express the feeling that however scattered the Australia diaspora may be and however settled in other countries where their contribution is recognised and valued, they still acknowledge their homeland, to which they bring credit. Voting is a significant way of maintaining that link especially as the overseas voter, unlike the Australian resident, does so voluntarily and may have to travel to the nearest consulate, embassy or High Commission to do so. It is therefore essential that those Recommendations of the Senate Expatriates Inquiry of March 2005 that facilitate the registration and enrolment renewal process be heeded and as many as possible of Australia’s huge diaspora remain enfranchised.

Yours faithfully,

Eric Brown