



HeadsUp Forum

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## **‘Britain uncovered... Do we need a constitution?’**

**(November 20<sup>th</sup> – December 8<sup>th</sup> 2006)**

**An online platform providing young people with a secure and structured space to discuss their perspectives on the constitution**

**All organisations need rules to function properly** and a country is no different as it needs rules of government, more commonly known as a constitution. Some rules concern procedure e.g. how a law is made or how often elections are held. Others concern the amount of power held by government. This provides a crucial safety net around our freedoms and rights.

**The UK is one of a small number of countries** which does not have a written constitution but we wanted to get to the bottom of what young people thought about this and whether it adversely affects us.

**The Constitution debate was hotly-anticipated** by young people across the country, plus teachers and parliamentarians because it covers such big and topical questions in the constitution field.

**Students in the Constitution debate** explained their own opinions and tried to see all sides of the argument. They demonstrated a collective knowledge of a wide range of sometimes complicated constitution-related issues. The debate gained parliamentary expertise from an excellent range of well qualified parliamentarians, taking part online – these included:

- **Bridget Prentice MP\*** – Parliamentary Under Secretary of State.
- **Jane Davidson AM** – Labour (Pontypridd) and Minister for Education, Life-Long Learning and Skills.
- **Henry Bellingham MP** – Shadow Minister for Constitutional Affairs.
- **Chris Ballance MSP\*** – Member for South of Scotland – Scottish Green Party.
- **Lord Tyler** – Liberal Democrat Peer with an interest in Constitutional Affairs.
- **Peter Black AM** – Liberal Democrat (South Wales West) and Chair of Education and Lifelong Learning Committee.
- **Oliver Heald MP\*** - Shadow Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs
- **Keith Vaz MP\*** – Member of the Constitutional Affairs Select Committee.
- **Lord Kingsland\*** – Opposition Spokesperson for Constitutional Affairs.

\* These decision-makers provided a statement of support before the debate began and will be asked to respond to this report.

**The welcome involvement of Peter Black, Jane Davidson and Chris Ballance** in this debate is the first time that AMs and MSPs have taken part in HeadsUp, but we will ensure that it is not

the last time that members of devolved institutions hear what young people have to say on HeadsUp.

**Senior Ministers and MPs from all political parties** continue to see HeadsUp as a must.

**For over a year** the HeadsUp team have offered short, one-to-one online training sessions to all participating decision-makers. This training has paid dividends as all HeadsUp participants are reaping the benefits of the continued involvement of expert decision-makers in all our Forums. These sessions help familiarise them with the key features of HeadsUp.org.uk and encourage their participation in the debates once they can see for themselves how simple and straightforward the website is to use.

**Before the start of the debate**, the HeadsUp team decided that due to the large number of possible areas for discussion under the broad constitutional umbrella, it would benefit from being divided into four more manageable sections; should we have a written constitution, should the Lords should be fully elected, does the Queen have a role to play in politics and if devolution had gone far enough.

**Comments were posted in the Forum both in and out of school hours.** This is a particularly welcome development as it underlines how keen young people are to use this resource, so much so that they will give up some of their spare time to keep on top of the debate as it develops. Students could visit the Forum as often as they liked during the three weeks that the Constitution Debate ran. Young people were given the opportunity to find out more about the issues but also to discuss their constitutional opinions and respond to the thoughts from their peers.

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**The main HeadsUp objective** is not only to enable peer-to-peer deliberation on hot political issues, policies or events but also to provide students with a means of informing themselves about the topic. In keeping with the youth participation agenda, a summary report outlining key findings and quotes is disseminated to interested parties, particularly parliamentarians and government, enabling young people's voices to be heard by key decision-makers.

**This Constitution Forum**, like all previous HeadsUp debates, was supported by structured, student-centred background notes that included an explanation of the key areas surrounding the current constitutional legalisation, an overview of the key issues being debated, a comprehensive glossary and summaries of arguments for and against specific constitutional issues, such as the composition of the House of Lords. These and other relevant facts and figures were presented in a student-centred tone, with a deliberate effort to keep jargon to a minimum.

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**Students aged between 11 and 17 from secondary schools right across the UK** took part in this constitution debate. Recent HeadsUp debates on gritty issues have led to a core group of students participating regularly in the Forums. Even more impressive is that HeadsUp still manages to attract new schools, teachers, and young people to register to take part in the debates. The participants made multiple visits over the three-week duration of the debate and there were **335 posts in total**.

**This summary report gives an account of the debate** that took place and includes key posts from students. Conclusions from the debate are to be found at the end of the report. Special care has been taken to ensure that the report is non-partisan and representative of the views expressed by the participants.

**Summarising every HeadsUp debate** is a particularly tricky, yet fascinating, process. In particular, the difficult task of accurately capturing the deliberations without taking participants' opinions out of context. We address this issue to some extent by attaching all the transcripts from the debate at the end of the longer version of the summary report, so those interested readers can follow the debate as it actually unfolded.

**We would all like to convey our thanks and appreciation to the parliamentarians who gave up their time to participate in this debate.** We would also like to extend an invitation to interested parties, particularly parliamentarians and government, and interested NGOs, academics and journalists to respond to the findings.

**Responses and requests** for further information should be directed to:

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**'Britain uncovered :: Do we need a constitution?'**

*Forum Summary*

## **Do you think that Britain needs a single document to spell out your rights?**

Moderators asked participants whether they liked the idea of having our rights written down somewhere and therefore not open for interpretation, like the USA does.

Peter Black, an Assembly Member and Chair of the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee, hopped onto the Forum early and posted his sceptical thoughts on a written constitution for all the students taking part to respond to:

*A written constitution takes the role of interpretation from the Government and gives it to the courts. As in America disputes on meaning and rights will be resolved by judges. Is this a desirable way forward?*

After considering the pros and cons of a written constitution, several participants stated that they were similarly dubious about the concept, and were especially cautious about following in America's footsteps:

*(We) emulate the USA way too much...the Special Relationship is very clearly one sided and I think we need to start thinking on our own feet*

*I don't think we need a bill of rights, we follow America in almost everything we do. We should start to think for ourselves. If we have survived this long (with a much lower average crime rate than the US) then why change now?*

HeadsUp participants identified the specific right to bear arms as a major problem with the US constitution and the fear that such a right might be replicated in the UK were a written constitution to be enacted:

*Also the American Consitution states that everyone has the right to carry arms, but America has the highest mortality from people shot than anyother country. No other country says that everyone has the right to bear arms.*

*Do we really want our mortality rates by murder to go up to such drastically high numbers as in America?!?!*

Continuing on the issue of the written constitution, a large group of participants voiced their concern at the idea of such a rigid document capturing our rights. The buzz word which kept reoccurring was the inflexibility of a written constitution and the need for our system to remain uncodified, so laws could be adapted to changing situations:

*We need to be able to adapt to new laws and if we have a single writen document that can be changed what is the point in having it in the first place?*

*I believe that we shouldn't have a consitution, as Levitica said before, it needs to be flexible to changes over time.*

*Having a codified constitution is not a good idea. The flexibility of our current system has many more benefits than it does drawbacks. It is able to adjust to current cultures and social opinions, whereas a fully codified constitution such as America is very much concrete. It is very difficult to edit the American Constitution and is very "old-fashioned", in that it was created for its current time period, hundreds of years ago.*

*After the Dunblane shootings here our government were able to bring in gun control legislation quite easily [compared to the US]..*

*A flexible constitution is a very good idea so we can keep up to date and change the laws as society moves ahead. Unlike the US constitution there stuck with it and it cannot progress through the changes that America will go through.*

*I do believe we could just work a lot more effectively with what we have already got, without writing up a document that many would just ignore, as they do the unwritten rules. In this respect I worry that many would assume writing a constitution solves many issues, like respect, so we risk papering over them as if they are no longer a problem when at best it would just be a first step in the right direction*

However, another school of thought existed in this discussion thread who believed that our current unwritten constitution was not working and needed addressing. Chris Ballance MSP (the first Member of the Scottish Parliament to take part in HeadsUp) led calls for a written constitution as he firmly believed that our current system was ineffective, meaning that Parliament is not being checked under this system, leading to an 'elective dictatorship':

*Parliament, at present, is unrestrained. It can make or unmake any law. An executive backed by a parliamentary majority poses the risk of establishing an 'elective dictatorship'. If for no other reason than creating a framework within which Parliament and government must operate we should have a written constitution.*

*But at the heart of the argument for a written constitution is the desirability of identifying and guaranteeing individual human rights. Once enshrined as part of a written constitution such rights could not easily be arbitrarily voted away by Parliament, as they can be at present.*

*Finally, we can say that a written constitution would also resolve the perpetual wrangling over whether an action or proposed action was constitutional or not, as happens at present under our so called 'unwritten constitution.*

Deliberations moved on, and students raised fears about how the constitution would be composed and decided. According to one young person, a compelling reason for keeping the constitution situation as it is currently was the well-used 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' argument:

*I don't think we need a constitution, it what keeps Britain different from other countries. We have done fine without one why do we need it now? We have rights as it is why write them down if we already have it?*

Interestingly as the forum developed, an increasing number of participants voiced their support for a written constitution and a Bill of Rights for a varying number of reasons, primarily making it easier for people to understand their rights:

*right down the laws it would be so much easier! it would take so much less time to sort things out but i do think that we should stop copying america so much because its really sad!*

*Of Course if we had a written constitution this would protect the people from any corrupt government in power who want to radically change the constitution not in aid of the people.*

*The good things about constitution being written down is that we can make sure we are being treated fairly and within the law .*

*Because if the the rights are dotted all over the place its hard to decide whats what and if all the rights are being covered*

*Britain, with its organic constitution has been evolved for hundreds of years to suit Britain. Conventions contain our history and tradition. Therefore, is it wise to pause the progression of our evolvement by writing all our rules and conventions in a written constitution now, and leave future generations to interpret what we have said to suit their societies 200 years on.*

Finally in this rights discussion thread, one young person offered their thoughts on the Bill of Rights. They stated their belief that Britain does not need a Bill of Rights as they argue that we already have one:

*The Human Rights 1998 Act which incorporates the European Convention of Human Rights is the British Bill of Rights. Because EU laws overrides UK laws, any British violation of the HR Act would be repealed at a European level...I believe that we can trust the government to guard our rights. In terms of writing a new Bill of Rights-we already have one.*

Oliver Heald MP backed up this participant's point of view, by claiming that we already have a constitution written down and enshrined in Acts of Parliament, dating back hundreds of years:

*The United Kingdom already has a constitution which is written down in Acts of Parliament and is also in rules that Parliament has made over many hundreds of years. Some people think that all of the most important rules should be put into one single document and then make it difficult for this to be changed.*

*I believe that our current flexible constitution is far more suitable for a fast changing modern society. It means rules can be altered when needed and we live by modern rules rather than ones made for the generations that came before us. For example the right to carry guns in America is still a right today even though it was from a time when people needed guns as frontiersmen to hunt food and protect themselves. The rules still exist even though they don't work in a modern society because it is so difficult to change the written US constitution.*



**'Britain uncovered :: Do we need a constitution?'**

*Forum Summary*

## **Should the House of Lords be fully elected?**

In this discussion space, we wanted to ask young people for their thoughts on a particularly topical constitutional issue, namely whether the second chamber should be fully elected. Furthermore, we asked participants if, like the House of Commons, members of the House of Lords should be elected by the public or should the system stay as it is working at the moment.

Henry Bellingham MP offered his initial thoughts in this particular Lords debate by venturing that 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it':

*The current system in the House of Lords is working well. Never before has the Lords been so proactive and assertive in challenging the House of Commons. Furthermore, one of the benefits of the current composition of the Lords is that no one party has a built in majority.*

*However, the Government has asked for a debate on the way forward. It is my party's view that if reforms are going to be brought forward, then the option of relying on the Prime Minister to appoint yet more life peers is simply not sustainable. This is why, quite understandably, David Cameron is pressing for a predominantly elected second chamber.*

A handful of supporters approved of this standpoint, voicing their fears that the introduction of election's would mean Lords would be more concerned by their electoral fortunes than acting in the interests of the country:

*I think that if the house of lords were to be elected then they would try harder to keep the public happy. this would mean that they lose their element of neutrality.*

*I think that the system we have at the moment is working perfectly well for what it is supposed to do.*

However, the majority of participants were in favour of elections for the second chamber. Both Peter Black AM, and Lord Tyler supported the idea of electing the Lords but perhaps for slightly different reasons:

*Expertise can be built up by elected Lords over a period of time and through the use of advisors. The argument that we will lose expert advice if we have a fully elected second chamber is specious. A properly proportional system of election will assist experts in their field and independents to be elected to it. If the second chamber is going to be an effective reviewing body then it needs electoral legitimacy. Peter Black AM*

*The job of Parliament - both Houses - is to hold the Government to account. For me, that means that the reformed Lords (Senators?) must be partners of the Commons, not rivals. And they need to be quite distinct from MPs, more independent and less at the mercy of Party Whips and constituency pressures. So they must be elected in batches every four years or so, for longer but fixed terms, by a fairer voting system, to give them that independence. Lord Tyler*

Picking up directly on these comments from parliamentarians, a wide range of young people formed a broad consensus in favour of electing the Lords, mainly for reasons of representation and upholding the principles of democracy:

*i think that if we have a vote on who should be in the house of lords then we can have a better representation of our views*

*It would be better if we could vote people into the house of lords because then people could not complain that there is a useless government when they chose it.*

*But also, I think the best chance the house of lords has of surviving in the future is to switch to format similar to the one suggested in the Wakeham proposal. A hybrid containing elected officials, more appointed ones, and more than one faith represented would be the best way forward in my opinion.*

*If Britain wants to be a democracy. Isn't it common sense to have two houses elected on decisions which can change how the country is run?*

*I think the house of lords should be fully elected so everyone gets to choose who is in the house. Also if someone down the line from one of the people in the house of Lords is not very good, we will be able to not elect them.*

One participant considered the issues and boldly decided that the upper chamber should be decided by 'random selection':

*The fact that the lords are all people who have been recognised for some kind of success means that they are truly not representative of public opinion. I think some randomly chosen people could perhaps sit in the lords, maybe only for a little bit like jury service, to protect the interests of the general public.*

Several astute participants offered solutions to the current House of Lords situation, for all the other young people to respond to. One recommended that there should be a referendum on an elected Upper House, whilst another felt that there should be a test before entry:

*I propose that whatever party is in power next should have a referendum on an elected house of lords, only then will Britain have a fully working democracy.*

*I think Lords should have a test to see if they are good enough for the House of Lords.*

Near the end of the debate, Lord Tyler, used his knowledge of the Lords to highlight for participants that not all Lords are completely independent. He underlined that 'Turkeys won't vote for Christmas', stressing that some Lords will protect their own positions at all costs:

*Comments so far suggest that the Lords are all totally independent. I wish they were. However, most Peers are supporters of one or other of the Political Parties. The only reason the Lords are less partisan than the Commons is that the Government has no majority, and has to persuade members of other parties, rather than simply whip its MPs into line, as in the Commons.*

*The danger now is that reform will be sabotaged by Peers dragging out the discussions on the proposed introduction of elected members to save their own positions.*

*Do you think that they should have the last word? I suggested yesterday (in the Lords) that "Turkeys should not be allowed a veto against Christmas". Do you agree?*

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*Forum Summary*

## **Should the monarchy have any role in the UK political system or should Britain be a republic?**

Controversial though this question was, we wanted to get to the bottom of this long-debated issue, by asking the young people themselves whether the monarchy had any role to play in modern society. Moderators also asked participants whether the monarchy intervenes in politics too much or not enough.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this particular discussion space proved to be the most popular in the entire Forum.

The vast majority of the participants were in favour of keeping the monarchy for a huge array of reasons, ranging from the tradition associated with the monarchy, its uniqueness from other countries, the prestige and the fact that it is a huge tourist attraction:

*The Queen plays many vital roles in our country! She justifies many of Englands traditional values and ways, and she brings us business! The tourist industry is one of the biggest contributors to Englands economy, and one of the main things that England as to offer is the Monarchy, Buckingham Palace, The Royal Guards! We have all this because of the monarchy*

*It is one of the things that keeps the British different to the American*

*I believe that we do need a monarchy and that as a country it is part of our identity. I have seen that many people who agree on very little politically will stand or listen to the national anthem, or defend the monarchs in a debate about how useful they are. I also agree with Mr Bellingham; there are many benifits of having a neutral source of advice for the Prime Minister. Why get rid of something that is part of our identities and that helps our political leaders*

*Not only this its a tourist attraction which effects our economy bringing money to the country, its a profitable attraction even with them spending tax payers money it benefits the country overall.*

Participants went further and analysed the cost per head of maintaining the royal family, which someone reported to be £1 per person and clearly thought this was good value for money:

*Firstly, I think we should thank and commend the participating parliamentarians for their commitment to this forum as well as the HeadsUP team at the Hansard Society for their work on this. One point I would stress on this topic, is that the monarchy has a very strong and proud tradition in our countries history and indeed the benefits and privileges we are now able to enjoy in our country. A survey carried out a few months ago, revealed that the royal family costs around £1 per person in the UK and I would suggest that for the tourism, profile and contribution that they make , this is good value.*

*There are 60 million people in the UK, I am sure we can all afford to pay an extra one pound annually!*

Backing up these opinions was Henry Bellingham MP who outlined the advantages of a monarchy as he saw it. He highlighted the independence of the institution, the important advice

offered to Prime Ministers by the monarch and the close association of the monarchy to British culture:

*The huge advantage of having a constitutional Monarch as Head of State is that he or she is totally independent of party politics. They can therefore offer behind the scenes advice to the Prime Minister of the day. Furthermore, the Monarch is always there to protect the public from any Government which becomes totally arrogant and out of touch.*

*When coupled with the fact that much of Britain's unique history, culture and tradition is encapsulated in this national figure head, the argument for retaining the Monarchy becomes even more resolute.*

One participant took exception to the use of the word unique. They substantiated their thinking by applying a couple of interesting analogies and finished by saying that unique was not necessarily a positive outcome:

*why should you be proud simply because you're the only one (or only country) to do something? If we were the only country to execute people for knitting, is that to be proud of? If we're the only country ruled by a man with long hair and a green beard? Just because it's "unique" doesn't make it good.*

In slight contrast to Henry Bellingham's views, Peter Black AM called for a coherent modernisation strategy for the Head of State, similar to that proposed for the second chamber:

*If we are doing away with the hereditary principle in the House of Lords, then how can it be justified for the head of state?*

After analysing all the options, a group of unhappy young people decided that lack of a monarch would be too great a constitutional shift - changing customs, especially the national anthem, which they held in high regard:

*the queen doesn't actually do much but i don't think we should just have a president because the queen kind of represents Britain and who would want to sing 'God save the president'.*

*i agree i would never sing god save the president it would be stupid if i was told to i would pretend*

Following on from these comments, one staunch supporter of the monarchy provided a series of detailed and well-argued reasons for retaining the institution:

*The Queen has given over 50 years of continuous service to this nation and the Commonwealth, never shirking her responsibilities or complaining. She has worked tirelessly representing our interests abroad, and carries huge diplomatic weight. Her successors will be expected to do the same.*

*Economic arguments simply do not add up. £37 million is a small price to pay for the huge benefits the Monarchy brings, and is insignificant in comparison to the billions spent each year by the Treasury.*

*The Queen is above politics, giving her a unique role and integrity. The Monarch helps keep our system stable - surely part of the reason why Britain (unlike so many of our European neighbours) didn't fall into the trap of Communism or Facism in the 20th century.*

*An elected president would be far more expensive than the current system (election campaign etc), and infuse our head of state with the temptations and short-comings of leading an active*

political life. They would also have to concentrate on re-election campaigns, rather than simply continuing in their role.

Still in support of the monarchy through their teacher, one class detailed their collective opinions and understanding regarding the monarchy for everyone else in the Forum to read:

*We are 10M from Gumley House School, we have had a debate on this topic in our PSHE & C lesson. We have summarised our comments below:*

*-The Queen brings money into the country through tourism, lots of people come to see Buckingham Palace and events such as, Royal marriages, funerals and the changing of the guards.*

*-The Queen is Head of State and the Church of England.*

*-The Queen and the monarchy are part of British History and play a part in promoting British Culture.*

*-The Queen does a lot of charity work.*

*-The Queen is also known for giving advice to important people such as the Prime Minister, Tony Blair.*

*Therefore we think that Britain should keep its monarchy.*

Responding to these arguments, one student tried to remind participants of the bigger picture and stressed that there were many features other than the monarchy that made Britain unique:

*A lot of people have said we should have a monarchy to be individual. Firstly, many other countries have a monarchy. Also, England has many other things that make it unique. Should we also try to change other things about how the country is run to be unique? should we get rid of democracy and do something more unique?*

A batch of conscientious participants played out the scenario in their mind of a Queen-less Britain. After much consideration, they voiced a collective concern about the potential power vacuum and the constitutional problems that might be created were Britain to become a republic:

*trying to get rid of the queen would cause massive uprising, as implimenting a new figure would be extrememly difficult and it is something the majority of the public wouldnt want. we like the queen and implimenting any other ruler or politician to take charge would just cause anarchy.*

*Firstly, trying to implement a new figurehead would result in unessacary carnage, as many, like I, would not want a new, politicly charged leader.*

There was a broad consensus amongst young people that the Queen played an increasingly important role in modern British society, some believed the justification for her role was misplaced:

*But the point is that we "chose" those politicians to make decisions for us, whereas the queen was not chosen, and so she has no right to make decisions for us.*

Interestingly, a number of participants supported Peter Black's call to modernise the Head of State, as many young modernisers posted arguments in favour of a republic. Some underlined that the Queen has little influence over politics, whilst others paid tribute to her charity work but also questioned whether she should have her face on British coins – perhaps she should earn this right:

*I think we should become a republic because the monarchy does nothing for this country apart from the odd speech every now and again. She does nothing politically so why should we have a monarchy???*

*taxpayers are paying for the monarchy's lifestyle and i don't think this is fair because what do they give us in return? nothing. Why should we pay for them to go on holiday and give the odd speech when there are so many citizens who work hard for a living?*

*The Monarchy is so over rated. It does make us different from a lot of other countries, but is this good or a bad thing?? It seems unfair to me that the \*Royal Family\* are to be bowed down to. They are born into their roles; they don't have to earn it. People who are as influential as the monarchy should have to earn the respect of the population. Yes the queen does do a lot for charity, so does Bob Geldof but he doesn't have a gold carriage and his face on every 50p.*

*Yes, the queen may be a symbol of our country and our heritage, but with the little power it has is it really 'needed'. The queen has just become a degraded tourist attraction. They are born into a family and may have little or no knowledge of politics; we cannot risk them destroying our great parliament. The monarchy doesn't even play much of a role in our government. So I say abolish the monarchy, or take there power away.*

The monarchy has too much power according to some students, who elaborated further detailing the ways in which the Queen wielded influence. Finally one participant called for an elected president to replace the Queen:

*I think Britain needs to become a republic, because the queen has too much power. The queen can dissolve parliament and she can also stop a prime minister who has won the elections form parliament, this takes the power away from the electorate and if a party has the policy, abolish the monarchy in their manifesto and they win. The Queen has way too much power and an elected president should take the monarch's place.*

However, one young person was quick to stress that the powers acknowledged by many as being at the Queen's fingertips were never likely to be used:

*The Queen might have these powers you mention but she would never dream of using them! They are in place simply as rules that have existed for hundreds of years and will never be implemented.*

Interestingly, several participants believed that the monarchy does not have enough power and should have a bigger role in political matters, clearly feeling that the Queen has a lot to offer society in general:

*I think that personally the queen should have more of a say in society, and b able to make descions about what actions the country takes, for example going to war. I think that this was stupid as it destroyed so much in society. If the queen had had a say, i reckon people would have seen sense.*

*i think that Britain has started to loose respect for its Monarchy beacuse they are seen as figure heads in my opinion i believe they should play a bigger role in the running of our country*

*I think that the queen should have more power than she does at the present because monarchy is a long running tradition and should be treated with more respect.*

One innovative HeadsUp youngster suggested that the possibility of having a younger monarch should be investigated to ensure the institution was not out-of-touch:

*Perhaps a younger monarch would be a more popular choice to a younger generation.*



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## **Should Wales and Scotland be independent of the UK? Has devolution gone far enough?**

In this discussion space, devolution was the subject of everyone's attention. HeadsUp moderators asked participants if devolution has made a difference and asked for young people from Scotland and Wales to offer their post-devolution thoughts.

Peter Black AM offered his first-hand thoughts on devolution and even went as far as calling for devolved government in England as well as Scotland and Wales:

*At present Wales does not have anything like the same powers as Scotland so it is erroneous to lump Welsh MPs in with the Scots in terms of their responsibilities. A sensible settlement would see devolved government in England as well so as to ensure that everybody benefitted from devolution and all MPs are working together on a level playing field.*

One participant used the Forum to agree with the thrust of Peter Black's message that devolution has led to different areas being treated differently. However, they disagreed with the notion of devolution in England and noted that they lived in the North and would have voted against such a proposal:

*I don't want to see any further devolution, I think it will just lead to different areas being treated differently, and so unfairly. I live in the north, and we had a referendum to see if we wanted our own assembly. Most people voted no, and I would have agreed. I don't want to be devolved. I think people around here feel unconnected from the South enough, it was just like they wanted to get rid of us.*

A federation was suggested as a possible alternative, after many young people disagreed with the notion of independence for Scotland and Wales:

*I see no reason in not allowing the Scots and the Welsh their own governments, since colonies such as Australia have their own governments. However I also think, that as they are part of Great Britain as a whole, there should be a government with some influence over them. Maybe one idea would be to have Three smaller governments, and then one larger government to bring everything together*

*Its not just the size of the country that concerns me but that i would hate to use my passport to cross the bridge to wales it would be mad*

*I would not like to see Scotland separated from the UK however I do think Scotland should have their own government..if you can do that without splitting from the UK. I've heard people talking about England when they really mean the UK.... I hope this message goes along with the subject*

Focus in the discussion switched as some participants were even apprehensive about giving Scotland and Wales its own government and more powers since it could lead to independence:

*i dont think they should get any more powers because if you give them a little they will keep on getting more gradually untill they are there own country*

*letting them have there own gervernment is mad even though you say keep them in great britain they will eventually get it changed so there completely independant country*

In contrast some HeadsUp users were in favour of giving Wales and Scotland their independence. A major reason for this amongst participants was that Wales and Scotland need England more than England needs them and that they are a drain on English resources:

*i think wales and scotland have depended on us for too long, now they need to support themselves!!!*

*To be frank, I would be glad to give Scotland and Wales their independence. The MPs from these countries (particularly the SNP) are constantly whining about this, and the fact they resent England and are ungrateful towards us adds insult to injury. England would save over £20 billion just by cutting off Scotland alone. To be perfectly honest, I am sick of paying for an ungrateful country which has served as more of a burden than a helpful neighbour.*

*I think Wales and Scotland deserve to rule themselves as much as we do. Just because they are joined to us, this does not give us the right to make rules for them. Germany doesn't rule France! Wasn't William Wallace fighting for Scotlands inderpendence hundreds of years ago? Don't you think that they deserve it by now?*

*Ultimately it should be up to the Scots whether or not they feel they should be part of Britain. I think that when the Scottish National party comes to poewer in Scotland, then the Scots should become their own country. The whole notion of Scottish MPs having more power than English seems to me to be fundamentally flawed.*

For another young person, they were clear in their own mind that all the countries rely on one another and make Britain stronger:

*I think that Wales and Scotland should be part of the UK as we help each other when we are in crises*

One of the most topical reoccurring constitutional questions concerned the West Lothian question - allowing Scottish MPs to decide on issues which concern England. Many participants were not afraid to tackle this complex and long-debated issue head on:

*I think that wales and Scotland should remain a part of Britain and i also feel that devolution has gone too far because Welsh and Scottish MPs have a say in how England is run but we don't have a say in how their countries are run. I do not feel this fair! We should have a say in how their countries are run!!!!*

*So we currently have a situation where Scottish MP's can vote on laws affecting only English people, with Blair often relying on his northern friends to force through legislation. This situation is hugely unfair and is building up unacceptable resentment in English voters.*

*I'm in favour of devolution; it provides a more personal approach to politics at a local level. Having said this, the so called "West Lothian Problem" needs to be solved. We cannot have Scots MPs deciding on issues which involve England.*

One young person went further still, using the Forum to voice their concerns to their peers and parliamentarians that devolution was in actual fact undermining the United Kingdom:

*I think that the devolution is breaking apart the UNITED KINGDOM. We have already gave a lot of our power to Europe and we are doing the same in this country. Decisions on how the country is run should be distributed from westminister and nowhere else.*

Jane Davidson AM, Minister for Education, Life-Long Learning and Skills, offered her support for the young people taking part in this constitution debate. The Minister gave a ringing endorsement of devolution in Wales and supported devolution more widely in the final week of the debate:

*I think devolution has been good news for Wales and the UK. We had the first Children's Commissioner in Wales, we strongly support the Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly in relation to young people's participation and we have now legislated to ensure young people have the opportunity to participate in school through statutory schools councils including representation of senior pupils on governing bodies. We can now all look across the four countries of the UK and assess the effect of different policies and whether they might be right for us.*

Finally, after reading the Minister's comments a participant was clearly sold on the concept of devolution and captured the reasons behind their thinking for others to deliberate:

*I think that Devolution is definately a move in the right direction. Smaller government is more personal.*



**'Britain uncovered :: Do we need a constitution?'**

## **Conclusions**

- \* Written constitution unnecessary**
- \* Widespread support for election of the Lords**
- \* Long live the Queen**
- \* Mixed reaction to devolution**

**This Forum took a few days to get up to top gear**, but it turned out to be one of the most popular debates ever run. The calibre of deliberations between all HeadsUp participants was impressive. Given the Forum's timing, this outcome was particularly pleasing, as it fell near to the Christmas holiday. Participants ranged from 11-18 year olds to a range of relevant decision-makers in the UK Parliament.

**Participants made four key conclusions in the Constitution Debate...**

**Students were asked whether Britain should have a written constitution** but decided that this was unnecessary. Participants were all very much aware of the benefits of having a single place where our rights are written down but the majority were concerned about the inflexibility of codifying our constitution. Peter Black AM concurred with this scepticism and highlighted that 'a written constitution takes the role of interpretation from the Government and gives it to the courts'.

**When analysing whether the House of Lords should be fully elected**, young people agreed that the second chamber should be elected. Participants substantiated these claims by underlining the need for the Lords to be representative whilst also upholding the principles of democracy. Lord Tyler informed participants of his take on reform of the second chamber and specifically how often Lords elections should be held: 'they must be elected in batches every four years or so, for longer but fixed terms, by a fairer voting system, to give them that independence.'

**In answer to the controversial question asking whether the monarchy should play a role in British politics**, the majority believed that the positives outweighed the negatives when it came to the Queen. Astute participants raised the £1 cost per head of the royal family as good value for taxpayers across the country. However like the Lords, some called for the monarchy to receive a much-needed makeover – perhaps even exploring the idea of installing a younger monarch to keep ahead of developments or alternatively an elected president.

**Responding to the question asking whether devolution has gone far enough**, participants were split on whether devolution was a good thing. After much consultation amongst themselves, some strongly believed that we should give Wales and Scotland their independence, whilst others felt that devolution had gone far enough and particularly opposed devolving parts of England such as the North. From first hand experience both Jane Davidson and Peter Black believed that devolution was a positive step and stated that the Welsh Assembly should have the same powers as the Scottish Parliament.

**The range of enthusiastic and relevant parliamentarians** taking part online during all three weeks, gave the debate added momentum and a stamp of parliamentary approval from the young people's collective viewpoint. The interaction between young people and decision-makers from all parties (in particular Ministers) was a significant moment as it was more than

likely one of their first ever interactions with a parliamentarian. It is also a significant step for HeadsUp, that so many relevant parliamentarians were active in the Constitution Debate Forum space. We are extremely grateful to all the decision-makers who dedicated their time to respond to young people's opinions in this Constitution Debate.

**'Britain uncovered :: Do we need a constitution?'**, was another highly topical issue for a HeadsUp Forum and therefore one that was welcomed by young people who participated, other NGOs and MPs from across the political spectrum. It provided a secure, structured but non-sanitised platform for young people to voice their perspectives on the Constitution Debate.

**HeadsUp tackles complex political problems** but is not designed to make set recommendations. Like adults, young people have a range of perspectives on political events, issues and policies, and often favour different solutions. This resource was established not to give the 'definitive line'; rather it is about providing a space for people to share their views, challenge those of others and, in turn, be challenged.

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