



HeadsUp Forum # 36

[www.HeadsUp.org.uk](http://www.HeadsUp.org.uk)

## Politics and Politicians...what needs to change?

(21 June – 9 July 2010)

This forum was designed to follow on from the previous forum; 'The General Election... who would get your vote?'. Having debated, digested and discussed the parties vying to reach number 10 in the last forum – this forum asked what the priorities of the new Parliament should be. Some very informed comments were posted by users, suggesting ideas for constitutional reform and providing a critique of the priorities that they feel MPs have often displayed. MPs joined in the dialogue, helping to inform young people on some tricky issues and to give credit to ideas suggested.

The forum received an unprecedented 20 statements of support from MPs. Five of these statements came from new MPs; the General Election and the appointment of a new government seemed to harness the engagement and support of decision-makers on a scale not seen before. As always, the visible support from MPs and their involvement in the discussions played a vital role in motivating young people to post their thoughts.

The decision-makers supporting the forum were:

- **Lord Adebawale** – Crossbench Peer
- **Lord Alton of Liverpool** – Crossbench Peer
- **Ed Balls MP** – MP for Morley and Outwood, Shadow Secretary of State for Education
- **Anne Begg MP** – MP for Aberdeen South
- **Luciana Berger MP** – MP for Liverpool Wavertree
- **Philip Davies MP** – MP for Shipley
- **Lord Faulkner of Worcester** – Labour Peer, Deputy Speaker House of Lords
- **Sheila Gilmore MP** – MP for Edinburgh East
- **Lord Goodhart** – Liberal Democrat Peer
- **Andy Hamflett** – Chief Executive, UK Youth Parliament
- **Baroness Hamwee** – Liberal Democrat Peer, Spokesperson for the Home Office

- **Charles Hendry MP** – MP for Wealdon, Minister of State, Department for Energy and Climate Change
- **Julie Hilling MP** – MP for Bolton West
- **Margaret Hodge MP** - MP for Barking, Shadow Minister for Culture, Media and Sport
- **John Howell MP** – MP for Henley
- **Julian Huppert MP** – MP for Cambridge
- **David Mowatt MP** – MP for Warrington South
- **Anas Sawar MP** – MP for Glasgow Central
- **Jo Swinson MP** - MP for East Dunbartonshire
- **Karl Turner MP** – MP for Hull East

[www.headsup.org.uk](http://www.headsup.org.uk) is a safe, online space for under 18s to debate the political issues important to them. **Young people** share viewpoints with their peers and **decision-makers** up and down the country. Through the forums, HeadsUp develops **young people's** political awareness and promotes active citizenship so they can play an effective part in the democratic processes that affect them.

HeadsUp enables **politicians** to consult with **young people**, to find out their ideas, experiences and opinions. There is ample background information to prepare **young people** for the debates, as well as **teachers'** notes and activities.

# Politics and Politicians... what needs to change?

## Forum Summary

There were 80 comments posted<sup>∞</sup> from 15 student HeadsUp users - with 2,549 unique visits to the site over the course of the forum.

The debate was split into four forum threads that focused on significant issues for young people around the future of politics post-election, and what they want to see from politicians. These were:

- **New MPs** – what should their priorities be?
- **Do you feel represented?** – what qualities are most important in an MP?
- **All change** - what do you think of the new Government's reforms?
- **Could you be an MP?** – what qualities do you think you need?

The general themes and directions of the debate are highlighted in the following pages, along with specific ideas given by forum users.<sup>1</sup>

## What makes a good MP?

Across the discussion threads, students saw the need for MPs to engage with people in their communities as something of high priority.

*... I also believe that the best MP's are the ones who work in the community and with the people there, and who aren't necessarily the best speaker or the most intelligent, who just want to make a difference.*

*...its understandable that you want MP's to represent their constituents but its important for MP's to find a healthy balance of their career and their constituents. But I do believe that its important for MP's to do some help locally in their areas.*

*The problem with the previous MPS was that they had very little face to face contact with their constituents. The previous MP for the area I live in I only met once, and that was in a trip to parliament. They need to focus on talking to the average person in real face to face...*

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<sup>∞</sup> Includes: young people, moderators, teachers and decision-makers.

<sup>1</sup> All quotes are direct and unamended.

Despite Twitter and new media, playing a part in the campaign, face-to-face contact was seen as crucial for effective engagement.

*I think that MP's need to get more involved with their constituencies like getting to know some of the people in their constituency. They need to show that they have an interest in the area and what is best for the people and not just what parliament decides is best for them all. The electorate choose MP's for the constituency not for government we want to see change locally, if every MP did this for their constituency their wouldn't be as many local problems as all areas would be looked after.*

*MP's should be out and about talking to people. It would make me feel as though the MP's are actually listening to what we have to say and means that their answers are more genuine, instead of being carefully thought out and re-read as they would be in a letter or blog post.*

*It's no replacement for actually getting out and about and talking face to face, but it's a good start and will at least offer another way of communicating, if used properly.*

Young people felt strongly that MPs have not been honest enough in the past – and that that this was a substantial area for improvement.

*I am extremely interested in becoming a MP in the futur. I think the main qualities nedded are to be able to debate, not being shy to speak in public, standing up for one's vieus and being honest. Unfortuanly quite a few MPs forget my last point...*

*I agree that honesty is often forgotten. MP's seem to spend a lot of their time making empty promises during the general election and not acting on them fully once they are in power.*

*The thing that puts me off politics is the lack of honesty in the profession. A flurry of sex scandals, rent boys, and bird houses - make the occupation slightly too shifty*

Linked to honesty, is the feeling from young people that MPs make promises during the campaign period which they do not intend to keep.

*The Political Parties need to deliver on their promises made during the election campaigns in order to win the trust of the people. The last government promised a referendum on the EU constitution (lisbon treaty) which was not delivered.*

*I believe that the last government didn't fulfil it's promises. However, I have hopes that the new coalition government will fulfil tehir promises. It does take time and that may have been the problem of the last government, because they didn't seem to act quickly enough.*

## The Big Issues

Young people discussed the issues they felt that MPs should tackle as a matter of priority and that were particularly important to them.

### The Economy

Whilst discussing political issues, many students stopped to reflect on the money available for government projects.

*Personally at this current time we will need to make cuts to reduce the giant deficit. But these cuts have to be well thought out.*

*Why not tax the richest of the rich more? Even if we tax them by a few more percent, they will still be the richest in the country and make so much more money than the average citizen of the UK. This tax increase would not make any difference to them at all; it's barely skimming the surface, in fact. The deficit would be decreased incredibly quickly if we used this method, and then money could go back into public services again, where money is needed.*

*I disagree that we should keep taxing the rich people in the country even more. They are already being told they will have to pay more tax, but you believe that they should be taxed even more? They have worked hard for their money, so we shouldn't be punishing them by taking more and more of it away from them...*

### Crime and Justice

*The motto for our justice system should be 'prevention, rehabilitation & pay back'...*

*I completely agree with what you wrote about prisons, and that they should provide rehabilitation to stop reoffenders, but i think your motto sounds slightly violent when you write 'payback'. You could consider calling it a constructive input (for example community service).*

### The Environment

Whilst young people realised the importance of looking after the planet, they were keenly aware of the economic problems of the UK and the constraints upon spending.

*I think another main focus should be the conversion to greener energy, but this seems to be pushed to the side by many politicians, who see it as a silly idea proposed by pressure groups.*

*issues like carbon emissions are too heavily pushed. Of course it is better to have less pollution and less waste, but there are people who are struggling to feed themselves in this country whilst the government spends millions on decreasing carbon emissions.*

## Education

As was seen in the General Election forum, and quite understandably, educational reform was a subject that students were both passionate about and knowledgeable on.

*I'm very sceptical on Michael Gove as the Schools Minister; the 'free schools' idea has so many flaws. We need regulation in schools; 'free schools' will only lead to more and more religious and segregated schools, and we don't need more division in society! Teachers may be unqualified and unfit for the job, as they are in a number of private schools; and these 'free schools' will suck money out of the budgets of existing schools. We need improvement in schools, not new ones.*

*It is good that teachers have been given more freedom because this will of course help students to learn in the ways that they need to, but there still needs to be guidelines to follow. Is it really possible for people to set up their own school in a community? Would this not lead to a poorer quality of teaching?*

*Education is important, and we should be ensuring that we have the best people teaching with the best resources. But this idea of starting up a new school is a silly one, and will take money away from schools where money is already needed.*

The issue was also discussed in the wider context of the economic deficit.

*We have no money in the economy and yes there are a lot of schools which need improvements, but the country has other priorities at the moment, such as getting out of the recession and saving peoples jobs and livelihoods.*

*To the points about schools not being built after they were promised, even if this is very regrettable we have to remember that the government is broke! One of our top priorities is reducing the deficit, not building new schools that in most cases are capable of lasting a little while longer.*

Although certain issues like education were of particular importance to young people, it was felt that in these difficult economic times a lot of problems did not depend on age and were of interest to the majority of the population.

*...there are some issues which have an impact on everyone. Issues like Immigration and the EU are very important, and it doesn't help that the government has not listened to the people on these issues.*

*of course certain issues are different for certain age groups, but essentially they are the same, in the end where ever you are 15, 20, 39, 67 or 104, we all want enough money to get by, to have a government who is doing a good job, action on climate change and for Great Britain to remain a proud,*

noble and powerful nation. Certain things change but most of these differences are because of ideology not age.

Ideology changes with age, we know this and is shown in voting patterns of over 65's. Even so, the basic needs of people are the same and I would argue that lifestyle is what influences ideology. With this in mind, MP's need to appeal to a broad base, this is what Blair realised and was very successful

## Voting

In the General Election forum, arguments for and against changing the voting age were popular forum posts. For obvious reasons, this subject retained its popularity here.

*I don't think the voting age should be changed. Not many 16 year olds have been affected enough by the world of politics to understand how their vote will affect other people, even young people who are actively interested in politics.*

*Passing it down to 16 could be a good idea for those who are politically active, etc and these are mainly the kids who talk about this and support it. But the kids who don't care (most of them I believe) it would be a bit risky either them not turning up or voting randomly (the risk of getting extremist MPs like in the 2002 french GE where a far right party leader got in the the 2nd presidential round.)*

The coalition Government suggested a number of constitutional changes, one was to hold a referendum on changing the electoral system. There was not much appetite for changing the electoral system as students didn't think it would have much of a positive effect on the current problems with politics.

*Most of the time they are too focused on sticking to the party line, and not stepping over it if the majority of their constituents want them to. there are 2 simple ways to get out of this: 1- MPs get themselves some back bone and stand up for their constituents. 2- We get rid of parties completely, and replace it with a system of fully independant MP, and where the whole country votes in one of them as PM, chancelor, etc.*

*Of course, we want the House of Commons to be more representative, but we also want to keep the constituency link. If we were to abolish parties altogether then people would be forced to actually vote for what they believe i, but it would also mean that prospective MP's would have to fund their own campaign, meaning less interaction with the voters. We need to close the gap between politicians and people, not widen it.*

*To the point about having a 'ranking system' for election, I think the idea is a pretty good one, but I can't see much use for it unless there is a tie between candidates, witch would happen. But the idea does have potencial.*

## Women in Parliament

Gender was the issue almost exclusively debated when talking about representation, and forum users overwhelmingly felt that any kind of system to increase the number female politicians was unfair. Most students did not feel that the lack of women in Parliament was a problem and positive discrimination was something that Parliament should not be pursuing.

*Discrimination is discrimination, whether it is done in the name of diversity or not. Nobody should be turned down from a job based on their gender, race or sexual orientation. Nobody should be given more priority than anyone else.*

*Politics and a persons position in parliament used ot be based on meritocracy. Somewhere down the line it seems that people have seen this as wrong.*

*I personally feel that there are a lot of women in parliament. Even though they may not hold the top jobs and there are more men overall, any woman willing to become an MP has the opportunity to do so.*

*Even if sexism is still a problem in society, it is just stupid to say there has to be at least x many women elected or y many on ther cabinet. This is also sexism (so called 'positive discrimination') towards men... i don't care if the gouverment is made up of only a load of disable black women or is made of a mixed bag of people as long as they do a good job and do the country proud!*

Only one forum user saw the lack of gender balance as a real problem.

*how is a upper class, eton educated, middle class white man (the typical MP) ment to represent the working class single mums of this country who dont have a qualification or any life prospects to their name*

There were some interesting viewpoints on the reasons that may be behind any 'discrimination'.

*Yes there are less women in parliament but this is probably only because less women want to go into that profession. The same argument could be made with any other occupation.*

*I think too many people feel that nowadays if they don't get a job they can blame it on discrimination. In todays financial situation where there are fewer jobs available jobs are of course going to go to the most able candidates so it may seem that there is more discrimination about today. The business*

*people and employees may choose against employing someone who is disabled because they don't have the money and funding to do so. It does seem unfair but is it not important to keep businesses running?*

## The future of political engagement

Many people in the debate felt that more needed to be done to engage young people in politics in school.

*... I believe that it would be worthwhile MP's going into schools and colleges and speaking to the students who are not yet eligible to vote as they may have the best points because as we are told "we are the future" and we should know what we want for our future.*

*I believe that in order to encourage younger people to vote, politics needs to be made more friendly... Politics needs to be taught more in school and made to seem interesting and personal to people, in order to get their attention.*

Whilst debating the value of new media in politics, most students saw two sides to the argument on campaigning online.

*I think it is a good idea for MP's to have facebook and twitter accounts because it will make their ideas easier to follow and will allow more contact between the public and the MP themselves, which can only be a good thing. However, I don't believe that using the internet would make more people interested in politics. It may have a small effect, but anyone who is interested in what our MP's have to say already listens and reads about it in the news. Also, using more modern technology may cut off older audiences.*

*As much as I think it would be useful for politicians and MPs to have Facebook and Twitter as something to complement their contact with the public and young people in general, I also think it should be just that - a way to back up and support usual communication.*

*I think it's good for MPs to have these accounts as a means of younger people getting into contact with them. However, if they don't make an effort to take into account what people say to them or listen to any suggestions made then it isn't really worth it- it shouldn't just be about who has the most followers on Twitter.*

*I agree with what John Howell MP is saying about twitter not allowing any in depth discussion. If an MP did post something personal on twitter it would be pounced upon by the media and probably twisted or used to make parliament and the government sound bad.*

Although young people use social networking widely for personal communication, this forum suggests the communication itself is more important than the method.

## Political Context

The forum took place the month after the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government came into power in the UK. It was a good opportunity to find out what young people made of the outcome. After a very closely fought election they felt that politicians should aim to engage with them more; through education and face-to-face contact in the first instance. The forum happened at a time when the UK was in a period of economy difficulty – and students have accounted for this in their discussions about what Government priorities should be. The forum was an opportunity for students to take part in wider debates being held about the future of UK politics, such as the number of women MPs and a change to the electoral system.

HeadsUp makes sure that young people's views on the election are sent to the appropriate policy-makers, journalists and politicians so they can take into account young people's views on the issues.

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The HeadsUp team would like to convey our thanks and appreciation to the decision-makers, young people and teachers who got involved in this important debate. We would also like to extend an invitation to interested parties, particularly legislators and government, interested NGOs, academics and journalists to respond to the findings. Responses and requests for further information should be directed to:

Beccy Allen, HeadsUp Manager  
Hansard Society  
40 - 43 Chancery Lane  
London  
WC2A 1JA  
020 7438 1214  
[r.allen@hansard.lse.ac.uk](mailto:r.allen@hansard.lse.ac.uk)

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