



HeadsUp Forum # 28

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

## Youth Citizenship Commission :: Are young people allergic to politics?

(17 November – 5 December 2008)

The Youth Citizenship Commission was set up to look at ways of developing young people's understanding of citizenship and increasing their participation in politics. The Commissioners were tasked with finding out what citizenship means to young people, whether they think they should be able to vote at 16 and how our political system can best listen and respond to their concerns. They used the HeadsUp forum to find out what young people up and down the country think about these issues. The Commission will report back to the Prime Minister in late spring 2009 and the opinions of HeadsUp users will be included in their findings. There will be an opportunity for HeadsUp users to find out more in a debate (15 June – 3 July 2009) that will discuss the findings once the final report has been written.

The Commissioners had the opportunity to debate exclusively with young people about the issues they were investigating for their report. Commissioners contributing to the debate included:

- **Professor Jonathan Tonge** – Chair, Youth Citizenship Commission
- **Dame Tanni Grey-Thompson** – Paralympic Gold Medallist
- **Hazel Rees** – Newly Qualified Teacher
- **Wes Streeting** – National President, National Union of Students
- **Dr Andrew Mycock** – Senior Politics Lecturer
- **Richard Demby** – Citizenship Teacher
- **Robyn Keeble** – Member, Barking and Dagenham Youth Panel
- **Victoria Collin** – Member, Claim Your Voice Youth Advisory Group

[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.

# Youth Citizenship Commission :: Are young people allergic to politics?

## Forum Summary

The debate was split into three different forum threads addressing the significant issues in the wider debate about citizenship and youth political engagement. These were:

- Citizenship and you...what does being a citizen mean in 21st century Britain?
- The p word...are young people allergic to politics?
- Young people and the community...what do you do?

There were 394 posts made in the forum from 171 HeadsUp users<sup>∞</sup>. This forum was the most popular yet in terms of the number of contributions it received. The discussions on the forum were broad but the general themes and directions of the debate are highlighted below along with all the practical suggestions given by forum users.

During the forum, the Commissioners responded to the issues that the young people raised, and asked further questions to inform their report. They also provided statements before the debate explaining their reasons for being involved in the Youth Citizenship Commission as well as their support for the HeadsUp project as a whole.

### Politics

HeadsUp users overwhelming said that they found politics boring and too complicated. The use of technical terms and long words account for much of this negative feeling.

*there are a lot of words used in politics that makes no sense to us watsoever, they need to get of their high horse and come down to the level that we can understand.*

*i think the bit about using difficult language is true its one of politicians' weapons of keeping the public out of their business.*

The image of Parliament as portrayed in the media emphasised how young people felt politics wasn't for them (see section below on the media).

There were many comments that emphasised the connection between politics being relevant (or irrelevant) to young people and their subsequent interest in politics. There was a lot of disagreement about the extent to which politics affects young people, how far up young people's issues are on the political agenda, and

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<sup>∞</sup> Includes: young people, moderators, teachers and commissioners.

therefore whether there was any point being interested or involved. Most of the comments below show a resemblance with the opinions of the electorate at large - young people made it clear that they wouldn't get involved if the issues didn't affect them or they didn't think they had a chance of influencing the outcome.

*laws do involve us young people. for example the 10p tax on basic essentials. My favourite chocolate "chomp" was 10p years ago however...it is annoying that there has been a rise of 5p , just like Haribos have been increased to 15p. This is due to Alistair Darling who did not seem to think about young people when making the law.*

*It's not that we're not interested it just doesn't directly affect us. A rise in tax, yes we know that sounds bad and yes we know our parents etc. are going to moan about it but unless you actually pay taxes then you sort of just accept it.*

*we think that it only affect adults. the thing is that young people find politics boring and not interesting enough, we do not see anything significant enough about the laws of today..because it doesnt feel like it is working.*

As is mentioned above, a major part of being interested in politics was connected to the ability of young people to effect change or for their ideas to have an outcome. Changing the voting age to 16 was supported by a majority of 3:1 in the forum. Most young people felt that politics might be worthwhile getting involved in and might affect them more if they could vote.

*I think the main reason that us teenagers dont really like politics is because of the voting age. when you cant vote you felt left ... it really should be reduced to 16.*

*The language they use makes it boring. I think they dont aim it at us because we can't vote so to them our opinion doesn't matter. It doesn't effect them if we don't want them to run our country, as long as they have the older generation on their side they will still get votes. They should let us vote at a younger age, if we got to vote at the age of 16 would have our say. At the moment our views don't really count.*

*i just think that we are a bit frustrated because we don't get a say in what our country is like. If young people had a chance to have their say then maybe they would start to like politics a bit more.*

Those that were against votes at 16 thought that either 16 year olds would not have made up their minds sufficiently about politics or were not well-informed enough to be trusted with a vote.

*I know that if I carry on as ignorant as I am about politics on both a local and national level then when I turn 18 I won't have a clue who to vote for. I don't think that lowering the voting age will be successful because 16 year olds are still trying to work out what they believe.*

Politics in general suffered from an image problem and a misunderstanding of what it involves. The main thing associated with the word politics was old men in suits shouting at each other in Parliament. Issues that were important to young people were not seen as being 'political'.

*When I think of politics, I see a group of men debating about one thing or another, and after hours of endless droning, nothing is solved. However, I am sensible enough to recognise that it is more than that, but what exactly?...I am keen on debating and campaigning, and finding ways to help combat issues in today's rickety world, but how is the question, as well as the fact that, what is it to do with politics?*

Young people's mayors were also discussed as a way young people can already get involved in decisions and voting in their local areas. They were seen positively but some were dubious as to how many voted in these elections and how widely publicised they were.

*you say that a young mayor is in every borough..but how many of us young people actually know about this ...if you say so can you give me the statistics of how many people voted.*

A lack of knowledge about how to get involved in projects and initiatives that currently exist was a consistent theme of the forum.

## **Politicians**

Politicians drew many criticisms from young people for being out of touch, not listening, not speaking simply enough, setting a bad example, not visiting young people and blaming them for all society's ills!

*it is believed politicians do not pay attention to us young people. They look down on us and point the finger at us whenever something is going wrong in the community. Politicians should walk with us and involve us somehow*

*after watching one session of PMQs a couple of weeks ago I actually felt quite embarrassed at the way Cameron and Brown had descended into scoring "points" of each other rather than focusing on the real issues...Politicians should be setting an example to young people, not trading personal insults while avoiding actually answering questions.*

*maybe politicians should get around more - like doing extra sports like imagine Gordon brown doin the marathon*

Young people felt that politicians also needed to be more representative of the population as a whole in order to appeal to voters and young people.

*I think that politicians give away a negative image towards children because they are usually old and crusty. Maybe if a young, interesting, fun politician was to come by then it would appeal to kids.*

*i believe young people are rather fed up with the politics surrounding them than a lack of interest because recently we saw a vast number of young people involved in the US presidential election. So i think we need a change in our male dominated and institutionally racist Britain.*

In terms of how they would like to be contacted by politicians, young people overall were keen on their MPs being on MySpace or Bebo. A majority of 2:1 said they thought it was a good idea. They felt that this would give them a better

understanding of what their politicians were like and would allow them to stay in contact more effectively.

*i do think that our MP should be on Myspace because, many young people use it and if an MP does, it would show that he is with the trends and is able to communicate with young people in a way that they would actually listen...children may also start to think differently about MPs' and politics, they may start to think that they are not all boring people who do not understand kids and start thinking that they can be child friendly. Children respect and listen to them more.*

*I think that MP's and politicians don't take the time to talk to young people. They ask for the opinions of adults and don't really take into consideration what we want. I think if MP's and politicians were on Facebook or Myspace then they would be able to hear what the youth want and would be able to communicate with them in a better way.*

However there were also those that felt MPs on social networking sites could be a little embarrassing or might be invading young people's space (although usually social networking sites do require consent from users before any contact is made).

*I don't think that MP's on MySpace etc will work at all, politicians seem so desperate to be 'down with the kids' and thought of as 'cool' and representative of today's youth rather than concerned with the actual issues that affect them. I would rather vote for someone who will fight for our rights and support our issues rather than someone who can speak in slang and write in text type on Facebook.*

There was also support for politicians leaving Westminster and coming to where young people are to explain how politics works or to update them with what they are currently doing to improve the local area.

*children are put off by politics because all you ever see on the news is old people talking in the House of Lords or The House of Commons. Politicians should go into school or youth centres and talk about what they want in their local area. They should make it less formal and talk about that matters which affect everyday children.*

## **Media and Information**

The media was widely blamed by young people for making Parliament and politics seem much more complicated than it needed to be. It was also criticised for its negative portrayal of young people and politicians.

*I think there should be more press on the good things government do because if the mistakes or bad remarks are high-lighted in our local papers and our favourite television channels.*

*Most teenagers only know about politicians mentioned in the news and media and not about everyone else that is involved in making decisions. It's not all about one single politician*

*when it comes to young people they don't understand the current world's circumstances they just think it's the lack of role models but think about it who is our role model it's the **government!!** and we all know that because we hear*

*about it more in the current news than anywhere else and if we keep on hearing criticism we will think they are not doing anything about the crisis in the world eg. the bombings in india. or the credit crunch.*

They almost universally complained about the lack of clear, simple information available for young people and this exacerbated the idea that politics wasn't for them or that adults were purposefully excluding them from politics. HeadsUp users had plenty of ideas about how they would like to be more informed or learn about politics. TV seemed to be the most favoured medium and many were keen on seeing more political debates on TV that involved politicians and celebrities.

*i think that the politics is useful and if we had a children's politician group programme that celebrities hosted then more children will be interested in the subject*

Advertising politics to young people and how important it is was also highlighted by many of users in the forum.

*To get teenagers more interested in politics I think it should be advertised like everything else. Bring it to everyone's attention how important politics is and how it affects EVERYONE, so we all might as well have our say. There should be more sites like this [HeadsUp], TV shows too.*

### **Citizenship Lessons**

There appeared to be little awareness that citizenship was compulsory in secondary schools or that it was linked to politics, as more political education was one of the solutions regularly suggested by young people to combat apathy or ignorance.

*If there were lessons in Citizenship based specifically on politics, it would increase our understanding of it.*

*citizenship is a GCSE option in which children can learn more about politics, however, this is optional and I don't think that enough is being done to teach people about it from a younger age than a GCSE level...This option is just encouraging people who already are interested in politics, not educating the people who are naive about it.*

More in-depth citizenship lessons that were explicitly related to politics were suggested to increase young people's knowledge.

### **Defining Citizenship**

HeadsUp users were less likely to see citizenship as something given to everyone as a right and more in terms of the duties citizenship entails to wider society. This was evident in their definitions of being a good citizen as not breaking the law, being environmentally friendly and helping others wherever possible. The feeling of community, attachment to their local area and all citizens being linked through citizenship was particularly strong.

*A citizen means that you are united with everyone else in your neighbourhood and you be friendly with each other it also means to abide by the laws that the*

*government passes and that you should not be a criminal as this breaks down communities*

*A good citizen is someone who does things like: recycle, not litter, helps the community etc.... I think a bad citizen is someone who does the complete opposite. Also i feel that being a citizen means that you are leagally here and a part of your country or city.*

Equality, respect and a multi-cultural society without discrimination were also seen as synonymous with British citizenship.

*Citizenship in Britain has changed over the years as more and more people have moved here. I think it means that no matter what your race, beliefs or culture is you are still a part of the country and no one should tell you otherwise because of your differences.*

*to me a citizen is someone who do doesnt descriminate others and can live together in harmony*

## **Volunteering**

Volunteering was almost universally seen as a good thing by HeadsUp users but there seemed to be little knowledge of the diversity of volunteering opportunities. Most users seemed to think the only options for them would be working in a charity shop or picking up litter.

*The only holdback is that the kind of volenteer work around, isn't really interesting to most people. They think that working in shops and picking up litter is boring. In a way I have to agree with them; that there aren't that many choices to pick from.*

Better advertising for projects was highlighted as a good way to encourage more young people to volunteer.

*There are not many advertisements that aim there charity work at the youth. I believe that if there was more out there for us then we'd be more likely to get involved.*

Volunteering projects in schools, perhaps coordinated by the local council, were suggested as a way of giving pupils a place to find volunteer projects.

*I can do volunteer work through school and I think most of the students do get involved. But this is becasue there is a teacher who makes the initial link for us and the school/care home/charity. perhaps if there were youth volunteering groups put in place in schools either by the local councils or by a teacher then students would feel as though they could get involved.*

Many also wanted to volunteer in their local area and help with specific problems they had noticed in their community but again were unsure about how to go about this.

*I did some work for a charity last week and found it much more rewarding because I had noticed that they needed help myself and done something about it.*

*I would like to see young people being able to volunteer in nursing homes as I have a Nan in one, and I would like to help everyone that is there not just her. I would also quite like to be able to do so with friends, it would be quite nice bonding and we'd also be helping our community. I also think it's sad that some people that stay in nursing homes don't get many visitors.*

Those that did volunteer said they gained useful skills and did not like young people being stereotyped as lazy because it's not true of all teenagers.

*i think that young people are totally under rated. for example i am part of a guide group and we do loads like fund raising for the indian children and also we sing at christmas for the elderly at a hotel.*

*Volunteering gives you lots of experience and helps you work well with other people. It is a good life skill to have.*

### **Practical Ideas for Action**

Below are the practical ideas suggested by HeadsUp users in the forum that address some of the issues they identified as putting them off politics, stopping them becoming more informed or being more active in their communities. Some of their suggestions may already exist as projects but they were obviously not aware that these opportunities were available to them. These suggestions were often put forward by more than one user.

#### **Politics**

- MPs using social networking sites
- Politicians should get out of Westminster more e.g. Gordon Brown doing the marathon
- A student government made up of young people
- Greater use of petitions
- More visits made by politicians to young people in schools and youth clubs to talk about the local area in a less formal way
- Politicians should set a better example in debates and stop scoring points off each other
- There should be a young people's party or young people's wings of parties
- More young, lively MPs - Parliament should be more representative of the country as a whole

#### **Information**

- Using simpler language when talking about politics and Parliament
- Adverts on TV highlighting the importance of politics (similar to the anti-smoking adverts)
- More websites like HeadsUp
- More positive media stories about politics
- Fun website or news programme giving brief, less in-depth information about politics

- Programme called 'Pimp My Politics' (name taken from 'Pimp my Ride' on MTV – a programme that takes old, unattractive cars and 'pimps' them up with customised parts making them more flashy and better looking) to overhaul politics' image
- More TV programmes for young people on specific politics issues e.g. the credit crunch
- Wider use of YouTube
- More TV debates involving young people, politicians and celebrities
- Young people can be reached through:
  - ❖ TV
  - ❖ Social networking sites e.g. MySpace, Facebook
  - ❖ Text messages
  - ❖ Email
  - ❖ Billboards
  - ❖ Bus stops
  - ❖ Cereal packets

### **Education**

- More in-depth Citizenship lessons
- Citizenship lessons should be more kinaesthetic
- More political information at school
- Citizenship GCSE should be compulsory

### **Community**

- More multi-cultural police force and better relations with young people
- More youth activities e.g. sports, music, art, drama etc.
- Young people should be surveyed more to find out their thoughts
- Young Mayors are a good idea but should be publicised more
- Opportunities for volunteer work should be more widely advertised
- Youth volunteering groups created by schools or councils would help

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### **Political Context**

Many of Gordon Brown's priorities as Prime Minister have been based on creating a more unified Britain following events such as the London bombings in 2005. He has called for renewed debate on our understanding of British values, citizenship and community.

The *Governance of Britain* Green Paper, published in July 2007, attempted to recast the relationship between citizens and Government, building on the constitutional changes that have happened since 1997. The *Governance of Britain* aimed to spark debate about how citizens can better hold those in power accountable, reinvigorate their rights and responsibilities and involve them more in the decisions that affect their lives.

The creation of a Youth Citizenship Commission was recommended to also engage young people with these themes. It was anticipated that the Commission would look at citizenship education, as well as discussing the possibility of reducing the voting age to 16. Since its creation the Youth Citizenship Commission's remit has

expanded to also look at young people's participation in their community, in volunteering projects and their political involvement. It will report its findings in late spring 2009.

In September 2007 (implementation September 2008) changes to the Citizenship curriculum were made which reflect the Government's interest in promoting community cohesion and a discussion of citizenship amongst young people. The changes follow on from the curriculum review carried out by Sir Keith Ajegbo looking into promoting diversity in schools. The curriculum will now include a new element entitled 'Identity and Diversity: Living Together in the UK' meaning that all secondary school pupils will be taught about shared values and life in the UK.

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**The HeadsUp team would like to convey our thanks** and appreciation to the Commissioners, 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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