



HANSARD
SOCIETY

HeadsUp Launch Forum

www.headsup.org.uk

"MPs- Are they in or out of touch?" (June 2nd - 30th 2003)

A debate exploring the role of the MP and young people's perceptions of politicians

Key Findings...

The HeadsUp website was launched in June 2003 with a forum exploring the role of the MP and young people's perceptions of politicians.

The forums are actively moderated by members of The Hansard Society's Citizenship Education Programme. Facts and figures relating to the role of the MP were also provided on the website- participants were encouraged to familiarise themselves with these before entering the forum, and to make use of them throughout the discussion. HeadsUp forums are held over a period of two weeks; the launch forum, however, was opened for an additional week due to popular demand. By the close of the forum, the HeadsUp website had received over 7000 'hits'.

Most of the young people who got involved in the forum were introduced through their school- in all, 15 schools took part. They were joined by other participants who got involved as individuals. The young people who contributed to the forum represented a range of backgrounds and ages (between 12 - 18). In total, nearly 250 pages of posts were made in the forum. These exhibited a variety of capabilities, levels of confidence and prior knowledge.

Upon their first venture into the forum, it was apparent that many young people had limited knowledge of politics and their perceptions of MPs were negative. At the close of the forum, most students showed definite improvement and in some cases perceptions had been demonstrably countered.

Below is a summary report of the key findings and recommendations made in the forum...

On the way MPs dress...

The way MPs present themselves to young people has been studied from many angles. One common focus that the students were keen to 'put to rest' was the question over whether young people were being alienated by the way that MPs dress.

Ultimately, it was agreed that engaging young people in the political process was dependent on much more weighty factors than the cosmetic appearance of MPs. As far as many of the young people were concerned, issues about dress would only constitute a barrier where MPs were reticent to converse with young people because of what *they* were wearing.

The general consensus was that the formal attire of MPs was not something that should change- "a suit is just an mp's uniform". Dressing in the latest casual/youth fashions, it was agreed, would not work well on MPs. Either they would get it wrong and suffer at the hands of the press, or they would get it 'right' and look out of place amongst their peers. Either way, the MPs would lose respect rather than gain it.

On the way MPs consult with young people...

When asked to rate the ways in which young people were consulted by MPs, the usual blanket statements were posted- "i dont think mp's ask the opinion of young people enough and when we give our opinion they dont always take us seriously". Those who felt that young people weren't being consulted enough, were consequently resentful when MPs talked *about* young people. Formal steps have been- and are being- taken to improve upon consultation with young people. However, that some young people still have these perceptions suggests there is good reason to sustain efforts.

There was some scepticism voiced over MPs' commitment to drawing young people's contributions into their work. Some of the posts expressed a need for visible efforts to be made by MPs to come out to the young people- in schools and youth groups- and talk on a regular and relaxed basis. Other posts approved of this idea but believed that MPs were too distracted by 'mud-slinging' and self-aggrandisement to make time for young people and their input.

The forum recognised that on some matters, the ideas and experiences of young people might be less relevant than on others. Where young people could offer valuable input, the need for guidance was identified, in order to contribute effectively. On a similar note, there was some support for one user who suggested- "Young people have to take the initiative to get their views heard".

On meeting directly with an MP...

When asked to share experiences of having met directly with MPs, many voiced disappointment at never having had the opportunity. Those young people who had were a lot more positive about the role of the MP, and MPs as individuals. This demonstrates that whether meeting with MPs online, in schools or at Parliament, there was much to be gained by both parties in terms of respect and understanding of one another.

Toward the end of the forum, the students had become more appreciative of the effort that goes into being an MP- "they've been trained and sometimes the mps might just know best!" They also recognised that there were many demands made of an MP's time. Still, it was agreed that when a young person contacted an MP their input should be treated with the same weight as that of an adult constituent and that some acknowledgement was expected- "i know they are busy but if i found out they didn't even look at my opinions then i would be annoyed".

On MPs' relationship with the media...

The media (local and national broadcast and press) was identified as a prominent source of information about politics. It was acknowledged that the media can have a major influence on what young people know about politics and politicians, and that this 'influence' has the capacity to be either positive or negative. As a result, a number of young people voiced their reluctance to pay any heed to the media's political coverage because they perceived the relevance and credibility as dubious.

TV was regarded as the preferred medium for exploring politics and interacting with politicians. There was widespread support for politics shows aimed at under-18s where issues could be broken-down in an objective way and politicians could enter into debate with young people in an informal and open manner. There was enthusiasm for an idea about being able to feed text messages or emails into the show (as is done on Big Brother's Little Brother and Question Time).

When the discussion got round to the MPs in the media, the overall picture was one of negativity. Presentation of politics, and in particular Parliament, was described as 'boring'. The key directive to MPs was to look more enthusiastic on-the-job and this will radiate to the young people watching.

MPs were described as being distant, complicated figures. There was a desire to know more about the MP as an individual- their character and qualities- perhaps in a similar way to celebrities. But this was tempered with a warning that MPs suffered from having a 'manufactured' image.

On other political issues...

When the launch forum was held (at the beginning of June 2003) issues concerning the conflict in Iraq were in the ascendancy. There was some

concern that discussion of these issues would clog the forum. However, these concerns proved unfounded, and although Iraq was discussed, the students were very good at tying their comments and questions into the overall focus on the role of the MP.

Other issues that were raised and discussed by the students included education, the EU, globalisation, asylum seekers, crime and lowering the voting age. In the HeadsUp forum they demonstrated a willingness to contribute ideas and opinions, and ask questions. This provides more evidence to debunk the cliché of that young people are apathetic about politics.

The issues that the young people voiced an interest in will now constitute the focus of the next 6 forums being held on HeadsUp over the coming academic year (2003-2004).

Ross Ferguson (HeadsUp Web Coordinator)