Commissioned Research Article

Title: A Conservative case for CE

Author: James Shoesmith
A Conservative Case for Citizenship Education

Abstract.

This article will begin by examining and dismissing the disparaging remarks made about Citizenship by some prominent Conservatives. It will acknowledge the descriptive accuracy of these comments with regard to bad Citizenship practice. The article will go on to outline what constitutes a consensual and normatively desirable definition of Citizenship education. It will assert that good Citizenship practice is both consistent with and indeed the embodiment of three predominant strands of current Conservative ideology: Libertarianism, Civic Conservatism and New Localism. It will conclude that it is intellectually consistent and politically desirable for a Conservative Party dominated by these strands of thought to embrace Citizenship education.

The author.

James Shoesmith completed a PGCE in Citizenship at St. Martin's College in June 2006. He began his first teaching post at Haslingden High School in September 2006, where he teaches History and Law and contributes to Citizenship provision within the school. He does not fit the stereotype of a Citizenship teacher; namely progressive, politically correct and left-wing. Indeed, his background is quite atypical. He is a member of the Conservative Party who graduated in Law from Oxford University (The Queen's College) in 2005. He might be described as a ‘Cameroon’: socially liberal but economically right-wing. Nevertheless, he is a true blue: in favour of selection by ability and grammar schools; concerned by the extent of the Welfare State and sceptical of Britain’s membership of the European Union. Yet, he is an unashamed advocate for rigorous, discrete Citizenship education.

Conservative criticism.

Mumbo jumbo¹; psychobabble²; an invitation to misbehave³. These are all descriptions of Citizenship by prominent Conservatives. One might assume the various sources are ardent Thatcherites or traditional Conservatives. However, the author of the first attack is the progressive, One Nation Conservative MP, Damian Green, the former Shadow Secretary of State for Education under Iain Duncan-Smith. As a member of the Tory Reform Group, Mr. Green subscribes to internationalism, market solutions to social problems, social justice and a positive approach to Europe⁴. Yet he describes Citizenship classes as “irrelevant at best, harmful at worst”.

There are two apparent stimuli for Green’s criticism. First, visits to schools where Citizenship was taught badly. Second, discussions with teachers of other compulsory subjects who either had to teach Citizenship through their subject or were forced to see their subject accommodate Citizenship as a discrete subject within the timetable.

---

² Chris Woodhead, former OFSTED Chief Inspector of Schools.
⁴ See Aims and Values section of Tory Reform Group website: www.trg.org.uk.
The latter limb of his criticism will be examined first. Citizenship’s tentacles need not strangulate other subjects where it is to be taught through those other subjects. All that is required, is for those subjects sometimes to make use of existing opportunities within their current schemes of work to explore concepts related to Citizenship (such as democracy) in an active way. Take the example of genetics in the Biology syllabus. A debate about genetic engineering could be held where pupils represented different interest and pressure groups. Here they would be able to apply their scientific knowledge (Biology) to create reasoned arguments (Biology and Citizenship) expressed in the structured forum of a debate (Citizenship). Pupils may go on to examine briefly how interest groups try to gain and exploit influence in the political process. This is hardly an arduous expectation of a Biology department. Moreover, it would undoubtedly cement the necessary scientific knowledge and understanding in pupils’ minds.

Teachers of ‘traditional’ subjects may be concerned about Citizenship squeezing their place on the timetable. This is no bad thing. We spend years filling our pupils’ heads with information most of them will never need. Yet they will leave school without a clue about nearly all of the things that will matter in their lives: how to participate intelligently in a democracy; how the legal system operates; how to manage personal finance; how the economy functions.

Critical conservative educationalists.

Some conservative educationalists have denied the very principle of a compulsory entitlement to a form of Citizenship education. Many of their criticisms are motivated by a more fundamental opposition to any State involvement in education, especially “any attempt to bring higher order values into the curriculum”5. James Tooley argues that Citizenship education is superfluous, since there are sufficient resources outside the classroom for pupils to access. However, this perspective is somewhat blinkered. A role for the school in the process of education for democracy is unavoidable given the deficiencies of the market in providing access to these materials. Moreover, as Terrence McLaughlin observes, schools are the “most promising contexts in which all children and young people are likely to engage to an adequate extent and in an adequate way with resources relevant to the achievement of citizenship”6. For, some pupils, schooling is the only way that young people can acquire the conditions required for citizenship. As Bernard Crick wryly observes, “one can take a horse to water and it may not drink. But unless water is provided it cannot drink at all. The civic drink must be a universal entitlement, clearly there for all”7. What should the flavour and texture of that drink be?

An agreed rationale for and definition of Citizenship education.

The dissemination of useless information in certain subjects is less damaging than Citizenship taught badly. In order to identify that which constitutes bad Citizenship practice, one must explain what the proper nature of Citizenship should be.

Until the Crick Report (hereinafter ‘the Report’),

11 Turnout in British elections at all levels of Government averages 40%. Public trust of politicians and the political processes of elections and government is at a very low ebb. According to a MORI poll in 2004, only 22% of voters generally trust politicians to tell the truth. A MORI poll in 2003 showed that 50% are not interested in politics.

several mutually exclusive perspectives were proposed which proffered to define the proper nature of Citizenship. Pearce and Hallgarten assert that “the process by which governments, schools and individuals define citizenship is unlikely always to be consensual”9. However, this is a somewhat defeatist attitude. Moreover, McLaughlin’s continuum of conceptions muddies the waters unnecessarily by examining citizenship as a political concept, rather than Citizenship education. He focuses on normative conceptions of ‘liberal’, ‘active’ and ‘consumer’ and the prescriptions of different levels of participation these conceptions require.

The level of contestability in a definition of Citizenship could have been avoided by building on three points of consensus, which can be accepted by all mainstream politicians, from Traditional Conservatives to socialists.

First, a shared normative commitment to the basic precepts of a western, liberal, plural democracy, i.e. the procedural values referred to above.

Second, a shared analytical observation that there is a growing “democratic deficit”10 in Britain, whereby both the youth and adults have become disinclined towards the electoral, let alone the civic, participation necessary for the effective functioning of a democracy. The apparent increase in anti-social behaviour, the growing underclass and levels of indiscipline in schools are of concern. But they are not the catalyst for Citizenship education in Britain, nor should they be. Instead, the Report rightly has a particular concern with civic deficit in terms of inadequate levels of political understanding and involvement11.

Third, apart from several conservative educationalists, there is a shared acknowledgement that education can play a role in reinvigorating interest in the democratic process.

To these three cornerstones, can be added a fourth, namely that there should be a determination to avoid heavily normative content in a definition of Citizenship.

Together, these consensual areas can form the basis of a workable definition of Citizenship education, which makes explicit its rationale. The descriptive observation accentuates the need to engage interest and motivate participation. Irrespective of the concerns of a faltering democracy, there is also a powerful argument that it ill becomes a democracy not to prepare its youth to be active in public life. The normative commitment does not prescribe any form of participation in the school or community, only that political action is democratic in nature. This is consistent with an active or passive view of citizenship. It avoids McLaughlin’s pre-
occupation with a prescribed conception of Citizenship along a continuum of conceptions. It encourages neither conformity nor subversion. In not being prescriptive as to the nature, content or purpose of action, it leaves open to the pupil the course of action. The only caveat is that any action taken is consonant with the shared, democratic precepts, or what Bernard Crick terms “procedural values” or “presuppositions”\(^{12}\); namely freedom, toleration, fairness, respect for truth and respect for reasoning. It is doubtful whether most Conservatives would object to such values.

Citizenship education is therefore ‘education and training for political action’.

This perspective takes its inspiration from Joseph Raz’s theory of State action premised upon the autonomy principle\(^{13}\). Raz argues that the principle of autonomy should provide the basis of all legislation, including that pertaining to education. It is the special character of autonomy that one cannot make another person autonomous. All the State should do is develop each person’s inner capacities for the conduct of an autonomous life in a democracy and create the conditions for an adequate range of options from which he may choose. Forms of participation are not prescribed; participation itself is not demanded and contestable moral values are not preached. Instead, capacities for participation are developed in a morally neutral manner. The fact that a democracy is by its very nature a societal creature\(^{14}\) demands that autonomous choices are taken which respect the autonomy of others within the democracy.

It is not for Citizenship teachers to be morally prescriptive. They must be detached and ruthlessly analytical. Pupils must be left to make their own and question each other’s moral or value judgements. The teacher should be a neutral arbiter; a mere facilitator of democratic thought, debate and action. His perspectives, beliefs, instincts and morals should be irrelevant. Many such teachers exist, of whom the author is one.

No room for values and dispositions.

The Report lays down the “values and dispositions”\(^{15}\) its authors believe are one of the “four essential elements” which underpin Citizenship education. Many of these are uncontroversial and of minimal subjectivity. All democrats accept that “rights and responsibilities” and the “rule of law and justice” are functional requirements of any democracy. However, of particular concern is the inclusion of “the common good”\(^{16}\). This initially reared its head in ‘Excellence in Education’\(^{17}\). The common good is an extremely ambiguous concept, open to numerous interpretations and definitions. It is not an inherently left-wing, communitarian notion as the authors of the Report might hope or Conservative critics might assume. It can easily be used to mask a conservative political or moral agenda, as legal philosophers such as John Finnis have unwittingly demonstrated\(^{18}\). Its own terms, ‘common’ and ‘good’, couch the

---


\(^{15}\) Ibid., p.43.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., p.43.


\(^{18}\) See the work of John M. Finnis: Natural Law and Natural Rights. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980. Finnis lays down seven supposedly pre-moral, self-evident common goods which should guide the actions of the State and
concept in a positive light, yet its substantive content could be anything but universally accepted or ‘good’. Conservative values and morals are no more worthy than their socialist counterparts of being presented in the classroom as universal truths or unquestionably correct. Such morally contestable or nebulous notions should be avoided.

The Citizenship Order19 (hereinafter ‘the Order’), is therefore welcome in that it rightly makes no reference to the acquisition of values and dispositions. However, there is evidence of bias by omission. For example, the Order makes no direct mention of racism. Yet Crick has emphasised the importance of an indirect approach to racism20. Moreover, he has stated that “What is not ruled in is not ruled out.”21. Crick asserts that the Order should be read alongside his Report. Hence ‘values and dispositions’ are still in his eyes an implicit element of Citizenship education. The National Curriculum Programme of Study for Citizenship (as compared with the Crick Report) is ‘value-light’, so reduces the likelihood of contestability and accusations of indoctrination. Many activities in Citizenship lessons will involve pupils grappling with contestable issues or concepts. This should not, however, weaken the consensual definition of Citizenship suggested earlier: ‘education and training for political action’. Indeed, it strengthens Citizenship’s status as a rigorous subject if complex and contestable notions are discussed, challenged and debated. Concerns can, however, arise in their presentation.

Citizenship taught improperly and the danger of indoctrination.

Citizenship is a subject fraught with danger. The value-light Order could easily be manipulated or ignored by well-intentioned Citizenship teachers of the Left or Right if they allow themselves to present morally contentious notions, concepts, organisations or norms of behaviour as ‘good’. In such circumstances, Citizenship would become a pseudonym for political indoctrination rather than education. Citizenship teachers must be aware of and evade this danger.

The subject becomes indefensible where its teachers lazily present highly contestable concepts, organisations, norms, values or morals as universally valid, correct, desirable, absolute or unquestionable. This practice is evident in some classrooms and implicit in several textbooks and in resources provided by NGOs. It legitimately leaves Citizenship open to accusations of political indoctrination.

For example, Citizenship taught improperly would promote the entire concept of ‘human rights’ in all its guises as undoubtedly ‘good’. To state that human rights are unquestionably good is misleading, inaccurate and no more coherent than ‘psychobabble’. Certain rights under the umbrella of human rights are contestable. For example, capitalists would not

all its citizens. They are: play, knowledge, aesthetic experience, religion, life, practical reasoning and friendship. These appear low on subjective content. Nevertheless, they are simply ‘ought’ statements couched in ‘is’ terms. Their potential to be part of a conservative, religious agenda is revealed in Finnis’ work published in the United States. A good illustration is ‘Law, Morality and Sexual Orientation’, Notre-Dame Law Review 69 (1994) pp.1049-1076. Here, Finnis adds marriage to the list of his common goods, declaring any sexual activity outside marriage as against the common good.

21 Ibid p.118.
Research Article – a Conservative case for CE

acknowledge a moral case for the human right to work or to a job\textsuperscript{22}. Left-leaning Citizenship teachers who present the right to a job as inalienable ignore the fact that the majority of Labour Party MPs, let alone the population, are capitalist! Moreover, such a glib generalisation ignores the distinction between absolute and qualified rights and bypasses the debate about how qualified rights might be weighed against competing interests.

Similarly inadequate Citizenship teachers would present the concept of inequality as ‘bad’, as perhaps would David Cameron. Yet this ignores the democratically legitimate view that inequalities create incentives and are inevitable in a meritocracy. Poor Citizenship teachers would present Amnesty International as ‘good’ and the British National Party as ‘bad’ or vice versa. The former organisation is hardly an impartial body; whilst the latter, despite some of its repugnant policies and thuggish tendencies amongst its membership, appears for the moment to be democratic. Teachers who present such organisations as entirely ‘bad’ or ‘good’ display not only a worrying level of academic weakness, but also a subconscious or even overt readiness to indoctrinate pupils into woolly ways of thinking or, worse still, a certain credo.

Such predispositions are present in teachers of all subjects. Yet it behoves Citizenship teachers to be vigilant and avoid presenting that which is morally contestable in a definite manner. PGCE providers must play a role in ensuring this message is transmitted and assimilated by their trainees. But the existence of some bad Citizenship teaching does not mean that Citizenship as a subject is therefore undesirable. Moreover, Damian Green’s observation of a handful of unsatisfactory Citizenship lessons cannot form the basis for an assertion that all Citizenship teaching is poor. Bad Mathematics teachers do not lead to questioning of the place of Mathematics in the curriculum. The same should be true of Citizenship, albeit that a skewed perspective on politics is more dangerous than a misunderstanding of Calculus. Citizenship is, in many respects, a high stakes subject. But it is one for which many Conservatives should be enthusiastic.

Effective, non-partisan Citizenship teaching.

The teaching of the subject can be both effective and non-partisan. For example, I created a scheme of work on ‘Our democracy’ for Year 7 pupils at my second PGCE placement school, Edge End High School in Nelson, East Lancashire.

Pupils were given a great deal of ownership over the work they created. The emphasis was very much on pupils developing their own political perspectives, ideas and arguments. Therefore, pupils were able to: create manifestos for their own political parties; play the role of councillors in a decision-making/crisis management exercise and synthesise their own ideas as to how we might re-integrate the politically apathetic into our democracy.

Political bias from the teacher could easily have percolated the local councillor exercise. Pupils had to examine a scenario such as “You have spent your entire budget. The firemen are demanding an increase in their wages of £20 per week otherwise they will go on strike”. Pupils were then issued with several options with which to respond to the scenario. Pupils had to discuss, decide upon and justify their preferred option. The range of options provided were

\textsuperscript{22} Italian Constitution, article 4(1): “the right of all citizens to work”.
carefully crafted to ensure that each option reflected a particular political philosophy and had implications for any future electoral success of a local councillor.

Pupils were neither cajoled into nor penalised for choosing particular options. Instead, they were rewarded for opinions justified by reasons and awareness of the political and electoral consequences of their decisions.

The exercise was both academically rigorous and highly challenging for Year 7 pupils, yet a good example education and training for political participation.

Conservatism and Citizenship: not mutually exclusive.

Conservatism is a hard political doctrine to define. It barely merits the description, ‘ideology’. To put it “in a bottle with a label is like trying to liquefy the atmosphere”\textsuperscript{23}. Indeed, one can wear the label of a liberal, libertarian, authoritarian, patriot, nationalist, internationalist, pro-European, anti-European, monarchist or republican and still be a member of the Conservative Party. I have friends within the Party for whom these terms would be accurate shorthand for their beliefs. It is clear that Conservatives can no longer simply be labelled ‘wet’ or ‘dry’, One Nation or Thatcherite. Greater nuance is required. An instructive categorisation of current Conservative ideologies is outlined by a most unlikely source: Andrew Gamble of the Fabian Society\textsuperscript{24}. He identifies four distinct strands of twenty-first century Conservative thought: Traditionalist, Libertarian, New Localist and Civic. All but the first strand should embrace Citizenship education.

The Traditionalist position is articulated by Thatcherites such as Norman Tebbit aided by members of the Cornerstone Group of MPs. They assert that the Conservatives should build their appeal around faith, flag and family, with commitments to decrease taxation and engage in a radical overhaul of the provision of health and education. Instinctively, such Conservatives demand (with some credence) a return to traditional education and a movement away from progressive practice. Citizenship in its current form would presumably be jettisoned along with PSHE. However, Traditionalist Conservatives place a much stronger emphasis on British national identity, a complete rejection of multiculturalism, and the revival of a culture of decency and respect. With the exception of the absolute rejection of multiculturalism, these elements may find their way into Citizenship lessons, even those with an apparent left-wing bias. Whilst the teaching of such notions run counter to the proper nature of Citizenship articulated earlier, they do illustrate the possibility of harmony between a strand of Conservatism and a form of Citizenship education.

Both New Localists and Libertarians are strongly anti-centralist. They represent an emerging consensus in the Conservative Party to make a radical shift towards decentralising public services. The Libertarians go further than the New Localists, however, in challenging the social authoritarianism of traditional Conservatism, arguing that “for the party to revive it must shed its authoritarian image and renew its libertarian tradition, embracing the pluralism of life-styles and different cultures which have come to define many parts of urban

Britain” (italics added). Indeed, the Libertarian position contends that the Conservatives should actively acknowledge religious, racial, ethnic and sexual plurality and refrain from making value judgements on the worth or desirability of any particular elements within our diverse society. Libertarians may personally disapprove of particular lifestyles but they assert that the State is not a legitimate vehicle through which their personal morality may be imposed. This is consistent with the Joseph Raz’s view of the legitimacy of State action articulated earlier.

On a theoretical level, Libertarians should at least be equivocal about the form of Citizenship education espoused by this article. As democrats, they ought to share concern about political apathy and reduced public participation. Equally, they should welcome the value-neutral nature of Citizenship education proposed. Indeed, their perspective on religious, racial, ethnic and sexual plurality is entirely consonant with KSU 1b of the Order.

New Localists embrace radical policies to decentralise public service provision. The State would continue to fund these services on a universal basis, but there would be no distinction between public and private providers. Most services would become private or voluntary. The cornerstones of their philosophy are the community and the individuals they contain. Individual and collective action within communities is at the heart of Citizenship education. If one adopts the definition suggested in this article - education and training for political action - Citizenship education can be an instrumental tool for New Localists in empowering young people within communities to make decisions about the shape of their communities and the provision of public services within them. If, under New Localists, public life is to be community-centred, some form of education and training is required for the appreciation of and informed participation within those communities. Citizenship is the natural source of that education. Indeed, it already requires young people to “negotiate, decide and take part responsibly in both school and community-based activities”.

These activities could be typically Conservative causes such as defence of the countryside; a reinvigoration of neighbourhood watch schemes; or campaigning to prevent the construction of a new superstore.

The Civic Conservative position is perhaps the greatest natural ally of Citizenship education. Its most well-known proponent is David Willetts who is, intriguingly, the Shadow Secretary of State for Education. Civic Conservatives argue for the need to combine a ‘good society’ with a flexible economy, and to recover the reputation of the Conservatives as a party of the State which can protect the welfare of all citizens, not just the well-off. More importantly for the interests of Citizenship education, it seeks to “reinvigorate British civil society and the public realm, and is happy to embrace the cause of active government”. On this basis, Civic Conservatives cannot deny the value of Citizenship education. If one accepts education and training for political action as the mission statement of Citizenship education, it appears to fulfil an instrumental role in implementing Civic Conservative philosophy. The reinvigoration of civil society and public life is only possible through the participation and action of individuals acting alone or in concert which itself is only plausible if young people are sufficiently informed about, skilled in and inculcated into participation.

Conservatism and Citizenship: a partnership ‘built to last’?

25 Ibid.
26 National Curriculum in Citizenship, KSU 3b.
The Conservative Party under David Cameron has (in my view rightly) been reluctant to make firm and detailed policy commitments so far in advance of a General Election. Education comes under the umbrella of the Public Services Task Force established by Cameron. The BBC reports that this task force will hold seminars on the teaching of Mathematics, Science, English, Citizenship and Languages later this year. The presence of Citizenship alongside such prestigious and traditional subjects is promising. It suggests that David Cameron may see considerably more value in the subject than some of his predecessors.

Elements of the New Localist, Libertarian and Civic Conservative strands of thought are evident in David Cameron’s forays into policy so far. He has championed ‘social entrepreneurs’ who work at a local level. He has been keen to mould the Conservatives into a party which reflects the plurality of modern Britain. He has spoken of his desire for a national school leavers’ programme aimed at restoring a sense of national and civic unity. These messages chime with all three strands of Citizenship education.

In his recent speech to the Power Inquiry Conference, Cameron forcefully observed that “public faith in our political institutions is draining away and being replaced by a progressive and debilitating alienation.” Like many grandees of the Citizenship world, he acknowledged that lack of political participation is different from apathy, citing the many civic activities engaged in by Britons, from wearing ribbons for breast cancer, to marching in favour of the countryside or against the Iraq War. This is consistent with the analytical observation, or second point of consensus outlined earlier.

Cameron also identified two components which need addressing: the institutional (such as the reform of select and standing committees and a largely elected House of Lords) and what he terms the “behavioural” by which he presumably means people’s attitudes and dispositions towards politicians, politics and participation in public life. He has committed the Conservative Party to addressing these areas by establishing a Democracy Task Force headed by one of the few politicians to whom the public warm, Kenneth Clarke. Moreover, he asserted in his speech that he is, “determined to reclaim the proud tradition within the Conservative Party of local rule and civic pride that stretches back to Chamberlain”.

In the Conservative Party’s current statement of aims and values, *Built to Last*, David Cameron calls for a “revolution in civic responsibility – giving our neighbourhoods and communities the power to shape their destinies, fight crime and improve the quality of life.” Only through Citizenship education will future generations ensure this revolution is sustained.

If David Cameron and the Conservative Party embody those strands of thought, it is only consistent to embrace Citizenship education. Taught rigorously and objectively, Citizenship education is ‘built to last’. It is hoped that the Conservative Party will prove sufficiently well reconstructed to ensure that remains the case.

---

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 *Built to Last*, The Conservative Party 2006, p.3.