

# David Blunkett: Introducing Citizenship education was the easy bit. We need to do more to encourage schools to support youth participation

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The previous Labour government added Citizenship to the National Curriculum in England in 2002. Last week on Democrat Audit David Kerr discussed how its prominence has fallen in more recent and called for more robust monitoring of provision. In this post **David Blunkett MP**, Education Secretary under Labour, discusses the importance of Citizenship and how its teaching can be strengthened. This post is part of our [series on youth participation](#) in politics.*



David Blunkett was Education Secretary in the previous Labour government. Credit: [City College Norwich](#), CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Seventeen years ago I was both shocked and depressed to learn from a study, undertaken by researchers from the University of York, that the British were the least politically literate electorate in any developed democracy.

Recent surveys have regrettably reinforced the view that those societies where the struggle to establish democratic institutions is an historic memory – rather than a current reality – now appear to be the most disengaged.

Yet, on a day-to-day basis, people are demonstrating some desire to be ‘involved’, whether it is tuning in to serious radio programmes or the interchange online. But paradoxically, the more transparent politics becomes, the more the warts are revealed and the more disillusioned people appear to become!

Openness is essential and healthy scepticism is around in spades, but how do we turn this into participation rather than into pessimism?

Given that young people are the least likely to vote, most likely to be affected by austerity and in very large numbers fail to appreciate the connection between the two, it must be right to start with those in school and college.

That is why, after years of campaigning, Citizenship was included in the National Curriculum. As a zealot I was very keen in 1997 to set up a working group under Professor Bernard Crick. But, I had underestimated the forces resisting information reaching those who will be tomorrow's citizens.

Whilst the working group embraced all mainstream political views, it is clear now that key elements in society were not convinced.

Introducing Citizenship education in 2002 now appears to have been the easy bit. Providing £15m to facilitate programmes of study and schemes of work seemed at the time to be a substantial investment. Steps were taken to provide initial teacher training (and continuing professional development) but sadly not enough.

Above all, as the evidence from National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and elsewhere shows, we did not collectively reach head teachers and persuade them that engaging young people in this way improved their wider engagement and yes, their attainment levels in other mainstream subjects.



[Read all posts in our series on youth participation.](#)

Success was never going to be achieved without the enthusiasm and commitment of head teachers. Not least in the fractured and (to use the phrasing of the Chief Inspector of Schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw) 'atomised' landscape in the education field of today. Why, I ask myself, is it so difficult to persuade those leading schools that developing engaged adults committed to maintaining a participative and lively democracy is essential?

Partly of course, people respond to the signals given to them. If a subject does not affect their inspection outcome, their floor targets or the acknowledgement of their success, it is not surprising that it comes some way down the pecking order! After all, schools have never been under more pressure than today.

However, politically engaged, analytical and thoughtful young people understand the importance of education in their future life. They see the relevance of history, of geography and climate change. And why it matters to have the ability to speak and write coherently and have an understanding of maths in the practical and financial ways in their life.

I do understand that politicians, fortunate enough to have a public platform, play a key part in inspiring young and old alike in becoming involved and engaged voters.

In the end, however, one set of people blaming another for the failure to nurture and value our democracy gets us precisely nowhere. In the end (to coin a phrase from the Prime Minister) we really are all in this together!

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**This post is part of a series on youth participation based on the Political Studies Association project, [Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission](#). For further details, please contact [Dr Andy Mycock](#). An electronic copy of the final report can be downloaded [here](#).**

*Note: This post represents the views of the author and does not give the position of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before responding.*

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**David Blunkett** is the Labour Member of Parliament for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough. He was Secretary of State for Education from 1997 to 2001, before becoming Home Secretary.

