

Passive v Active citizenship: A theoretical approach

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In ancient Greece citizenship was a commodity that only the privileged few could attain. In order to attain it one had to be free and the ability to be free was based on affordability since not everyone could acquire the financial resources to acquire their freedom the distinction between citizens and non-citizens was an arbitrary one based exclusively on economics. During this period there was a clear distinction between citizenship which was participatory and passive citizenship which was a status as in Greece. The tangible distinction between these two forms of citizenry was the difference in levels of participation and expectation between citizenship of the small homogeneous Greek *polis* and the large heterogeneous Roman Empire. The Greek ideal of citizenship was more aligned with the moral, cultural and the personal good of each citizen, citizenship under the Roman Empire on the other hand was based around a notion of law making and administration (Low: 2000).

Active citizenship is cradled in a participatory approach and works on the supposition that there is a consensus of values and an agreed concept of an objective common good. From 1997 the Labour government and to a lesser extent the previous conservative government attempted to bring the citizen closer to the decision making processes through increasing the opportunities for participation. There was a plethora of new institutions which sprang up to facilitate this such as the devolved authorities, the increased consultative and regulatory role of police authorities, the creation of the Metropolitan Police Authority, the development of Local Strategic Partnerships, Regional Development Agencies, Government Offices, the new Learning and Skills Councils, Connexions Service, Primary Care Trusts, the 'big Conversation, the introduction of street wardens or community police officers. Although not exclusively these initiatives precipitated the significant growth over the last 15 years of voluntary and community organisations and other pressure groups, the creation within the Home Office of the Active Community Unit (ACU), the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU), the proliferation of initiatives such as the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), , European Social Funds (ESF), New Deal for Communities, Ethnic Minority Outreach programme(EMO), and all the regeneration monies being spent has had a huge impact on peoples lives and have provided opportunities for increased consultation and involvement – whether these initiatives have led to real measurable and evidenced change does however warrant detailed study at another time and place.

Passive citizenry however is premised on the idea of a separation and distinction between the public and private spheres. The individual is able to pursue their own goals and interests because the protection of property and liberty are the responsibility of the state. Passive citizenry is arguably individualistic and competitive in outlook. Civic solidarity and a sense of community could only be built on the presumption that the more a citizen received from the state the easier it was for him/her to equate and link private interests to that of the public hence the welfare state was a critical institution in that realisation. Ignatieff (1995: 66-7) argued that the creation of the welfare state was an attempt to make citizenship a real experience.

In modern day Britain one can see examples of citizenship as being both passive and active. Passive because there is a bestowing of status, rights and responsibilities on the public irrespective of the degree to which it is beneficial or

desirable given the unequal access to resources and influence afforded to each citizen on account of their ability to accumulate wealth/resources (Marshall; 1963). These rights and responsibilities include the responsibility not to cause offence, the right to be free from violence and the prevention of damage to others or the property of others. To be a citizen of Rome carried legal rights and proffered protection and allowed one to travel and trade unhindered. Citizenship at this time did not include within it a responsibility to participate in the political life; the same is true in Britain today. As there is not an overt obligation to actively participate in political life there is an expectation that within the structures of local, regional and national government that in an environment of increased political awareness and activism over issues of war, environment, schools, education, health, the burgeoning of interest groups, opinion polling, the rising cost of administering our lives through taxes ranging from vehicle registrations, income related taxes, penalty fees, congestion charging, the encroachment of all things political into our living rooms that the citizen will be lured into active engagement and participation. On another level the encroachment of things political into our lives provides an implicit legitimisation of the political establishment: by thrusting information upon the citizen he/she can consciously or subconsciously choose whether or not to be actively engaged even at the most basic levels. It is worth noting that non participation can be seen as a legitimate act of participation; for example according to (Healy et al. 2005) majority rule only works if one is also mindful of each individuals rights; for example you cannot have five wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for supper.

Discussions around the ever changing subject of citizenship tend to accept that above all there is indeed a need to re-establish' a sense of common values, shared civic identity in order to reunite the citizen and its relationship with the state. The Parekh report (2000) identified the need for an increased 'sense of belonging' to help rebuild the social fabric of our communities and rebuild a sense of common citizenship that embraced Britain's diverse experience. The report highlighted the importance of the government being clear about what it was/is trying to achieve when it spoke about citizenship and for increased clarity on the role both the state and the citizen ought to play.

The erosion of trust

In order for our institutions to remain effective and legitimate the citizen needs to trust and give consent to the systems and procedures our institutions engaged (Blunkett 2002). The erosion of trust in one institution can lead to an erosion of trust in others and a questioning of legitimacy. Trust is however in my opinion an illusory concept as one can never be too sure of motive. Machiavelli in '*The Prince*' 1513 questions whether it is better to be loved than to be feared and whilst one would like to be both it is difficult to combine them therefore it is better to be feared. In recent year's public trust and confidence in our public services has diminished significantly not because of the stark realisations of the state's intentions as expressed by Machiavelli but due to high profile scandals which have caused alarm and resulted in calls for greater accountability in the delivery and administration of those services. Incidents ranging from the Hatfield crash, the death of Victoria Climbié and the resulting inquiry which identified significant failings in social services and resulted in the creation of Children's trusts and a Minister for Children; incidents at the Alder Hey hospital, the BSE crisis, the murders by the GP Harold Shipman, the killing of Zahid Mubarak in his prison cell, the high numbers of deaths of people in police custody, Westminster Council and the role played by Dame Shirley Porter in the votes for homes scandal have all become synonymous with public policy failures and has eroded the trust of the citizen.

On 28th November 2003 the government launched the biggest consultation exercise the country had ever known it was called 'The Big Conversation'. The 'Big Conversation' was an attempt by the government to reengage a disaffected, unattached and apathetic public with politics. What the 'big conversation' did succeed in doing was to join the throng further elevating the importance of citizenship and the rights of the citizen to be informed and engaged. The then Home Secretary David Blunkett (2001: 140) wrote that there was a gap that needed to be bridged between the aspirations of citizens and the ability of the government to act on them. What the 'Big Conversation' did was to further underscore the responsibility that government has towards the citizen firstly, in terms of disseminating information and secondly, in relation to the citizens right to be consulted. One of the architects of the 'Big Question' Mathew Taylor – now working as an advisor at 10 Downing street- explained that the real challenge of the big question was how to scale up a qualitative engagement with a small number of people, into a legitimate contribution to national policy-making (Coleman: 2005).

When consultation is undertaken it is of paramount importance that sufficient information is available to enable the citizen to understand the process, aims and objectives. Every attempt ought to be made to ensure that the consultation involves a wide breadth of participants from the diverse strata of the society. Whether at a local, regional or national level many well intentioned decisions are made yet they turn out to be ill thought because the unintentional consequences may be severe and therefore offer only short-term solutions to very complex issues. Whilst there is no guarantee that well thought out and planned policies which are subject to the rigorous scrutiny of the legislature could not still be subject to the ills describe above if all citizens have the opportunity of being actively involved then the risks and rewards of decisions making can be said to have been mutually arrived at and agreed.

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