This talk was given to the London School of Economics by Citizenship Foundation Chairman Michael Maclay, 22 October 2007.

European Citizenship: practical vision or empty vessel?

European citizenship was first proclaimed in the Maastricht Treaty but little of substance has followed. How far will Europeans ever think of their continent as a shared public space?

Some of you might be familiar with the story of Ronald Reagan, at the height of his supply-side revolution in the US, asking about a welfare proposal submitted to his cabinet. "OK, so it works in practice", he said, "but will it work in theory?"

We British for our part are usually better at practice than at theory, which affects our approach to both of today's subjects: Europe and its institutions, and also our rather impressive, developing concept of citizenship.

So please think of this talk as very much about practice rather than theory. This is partly because practice is what the Citizenship Foundation that I chair is known for. More to the point for this lecture, it's also the context in which I would suggest that European citizenship is most interesting today. I won't go quite as far as Goethe when he puts into the mouth of Mephistopheles the line, 'Grau mein Freund ist alle Theorie, und gruen des Lebens goldner Baum.' 'Grey, my friend, is all theory, and green the golden tree of life". That wouldn't do at LSE. But do bear it in mind.

And I don't mean to be making a nationalistic sort of argument along the lines that 'British pragmatism is best'. There is a heritage of European thinking about citizenship in which we should take pride, distinguishing Britain and Europe from the world's other great cultures. From Aristotle through Seneca and Cicero, then the medieval church, the Glorious Revolution in England, and the Scottish and French Enlightenments, there are rich veins of continuity and contradiction that have created our modern relationship of citizen and state. For now, I shall simply say that citizenship is about individuals, conscious of their rights and liberties, and aware of their responsibilities, engaging in public debate and civic activity to help to shape the laws and policies of the state, whether at local or national level. There are specifically French doctrines of citoyenneté, and German concepts of citizens' rights, just as there are variations around Europe on the role of governments and parliaments, Kings and Presidents, Constitutions and Laws. I hope you would not expect me to choose between these competing versions of citizenship, or to construct my own theory of the values on which European citizenship could or should be based. But I shall focus on how our thinking about citizenship has been affected in recent years by the institutional development of Europe. And implicitly, if the answer is 'not too much', what use there might still be in the concept of European citizenship.

This ought to be a pretty good subject to discuss just after agreement in Lisbon last week on the EU Reform Treaty, the latest attempt to re-launch the Europe of Maastricht, Nice and Amsterdam. The text to emerge from the mangling process since the first draft of the so-called European Constitution is however pretty light on citizenship as such. There are a few new sentences since the Maastricht Treaty, drafted some 15 years ago, but they are rather thin gruel in face of the supposed appetite in Brussels for a European super-state. If Giscard d'Estaing's noble attempt to conjure up the spirit of 1770s Pennsylvania in 21st century Brussels had been more successful, we might just have seen the EU going in a different direction from the intergovernmental path on which it was already embarked. Personally, I doubt it, even if the attempt to provide broader popular legitimacy for what was being attempted, with direct involvement of parliamentarians and representatives of civil society, was thoroughly admirable.

But what we must say now, with some certainty, is that the rejection of that text by voters in France and Holland meant that whatever followed was not going to cut across the direct relationship between European nation states and their national citizens.

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When we at the Citizenship Foundation produced a booklet called Maastricht Made Simple all those years ago, the most we could offer as tangible and distinctive evidence of European citizenship was consular protection of EU nationals in third countries, the right to vote in local and European Parliamentary elections in other member states than one's own, and the right of access to the European Parliament and the European ombudsman. The reality today, on paper at least, is little different.

So the strand of thinking represented by, say, the famous Karl Lamers paper for the German CDU in the mid-90s, suggesting a future Europe where the Commission was the government, the European Parliament the legislature, and the European Court of Justice the legal arm, is dead. Nation states are not going to melt away any time soon. More to the point, national debates about Europe continue to be framed in national terms. Newspaper and television coverage of summits stresses national preoccupations and agendas, from British red lines, to French 'humanising' of cold Anglo-Saxon economics, to Polish redressing of past grievances. Whether you describe this as a failure of information or of imagination, on the part of Europe's political and media classes, the European dimension remains secondary. As Michael Mertes, Chancellor Kohl's speech-writer, observed some years ago, it is difficult to have European democracy without a European demos.

This does not mean that the EU has nothing to offer in the field of citizenship. Commission Vice-President Margot Wallstrom has led a programme known as Plan D – Dialogue, Debate and Democracy – aiming to place citizens at the heart of the project. The Lisbon Strategy, with its aspiration to advance the EU as a competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy, aims to promote education, inclusion and social cohesion in ways that deserve the mantle of furthering citizenship, and with time they will have their effect.

But my first proposition is that, the European citizen's primary relationship is rightly or wrongly with his or her national government. Whether we look at voting patterns, survey research, the development of modern media, or the way political parties present themselves, there is no reason to think that over the next generation, citizens will see the focus of their loyalty or representation being in Brussels.

This is not to deny that the sovereignty of the member states, as traditionally understood, is being reduced year by year, and European society will reflect that. We accept limitations on our freedom of action through single-market legislation, and through international regulation such as WTO or Kyoto. There are residual limitations on our sovereignty in the field of defence through NATO. All of these things by our own choice. The borders in our minds and even our hearts become more porous. Similarly, there are legal constraints that we willingly accept, notably arising from the European Convention on Human Rights, which we think bring us benefits as well as giving rise to legitimate debate. The Convention in many ways provides a locus classicus of the European citizenship acquis, but precisely because it is embodied in national legislation in member states, it is not in my view worth depicting as an alien sort of legitimacy – whatever the Daily Mail says.

The Council of Europe for its part has been the keeper over the years of many of the key concepts of European Citizenship. But the very clear inter-governmental tradition there means it is less controversial than the EU. This very inter-governmentalism can be a limitation on its effectiveness. Members who appear from time to time to act contrary to the norms it embodies have little difficulty in facing down criticism. The Council of Europe certainly does not embody an aggressive European citizenship by the back-door, whatever the concerns that Lisbon's Charter of Rights might have that function for the EU.

So to repeat this underlying point, developments in Europe have not generated a serious alternative source of legitimacy, authority or good practice to the member states' traditions of citizenship. The process of achieving membership, both of the Council of Europe and the EU, has certainly encouraged or even forced new member states to do a number of things that brought them into the mainstream of European tradition, often helping them to overcome the legacy of their communist past. But once established as member states, it is the governments rather than the European institutions which present themselves most effectively as the natural channel for the political, civil and civic activity of their citizens.

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And it is in that context that I raise the somewhat surprising resurgence of thinking about citizenship in Britain in the 1990s. As we all know, Britain's constitutional experience is one of subjects not citizens, with the monarchy and subsequently the executive being constrained in the subtle historic interplay of common law, parliamentarianism and a vibrant Third Estate. Without a written constitution, we have lacked the republican rhetoric and practice in which democratic thinking is couched in traditions as different as those of France, the US, and to some extent the Scandinavian countries. So it might seem a bit unlikely that the strands of thinking in the language of citizenship came together here as they did. I am giving a personal view here, but it seems to me that the main factors were the following:

- The fall of the Berlin Wall, with the emergence of civil society in central Europe, and attempts to re-formulate what a post-communist Europe might really be about
- The speedier than expected development of the Brussels institutions, which took many people in Britain by surprise
- New thinking on the Left, notably by think-tanks like Demos, about how democratic participation could be re-thought in face of the populist success of Mrs Thatcher and the Tories
- A wider concern about the breakdown of social cohesion in Britain, involving growing alienation of young people and a more general disaffection with politics.

It was in the latter context that Andrew Phillips and his colleagues who set up the Citizenship Foundation, lobbied to include in statutory form ways of educating and informing citizens – what they called citizenship education – in the then rather novel national curriculum.

It's likely that these concerns about citizenship would have remained a specialist concern, for academics, educationalists and a few politicians, because as a subject, citizenship did not have a huge resonance in media terms. The Foundation was able to make some progress in developing a new pedagogic approach to the old civics agenda, giving young people more awareness of how politics affected them and how they themselves could make a difference. Developing Youth Parliaments, mock trials, and a wider approach to political and social participation were all fine as far as they went. There was no-one else who put quite the resources that the Foundation did, for instance, into explaining the Maastricht Treaty, putting the pros and the cons, in what was not just a booklet, but also a 30-minute film and a set of teachers' notes, distributed to every school in the country.

But what took citizenship beyond a minority sport to the mainstream was the arrival of a New Labour Government with key figures committed to taking a fresh look. It was David Blunkett, as Education Secretary, who asked his old tutor, Bernard Crick, to convene a group to explore certain questions such as democratic participation, the rights and responsibilities of individuals as citizens, and the value to individuals and society of community activity. This was specifically with reference to whether such things could be taught in schools so that young people grew up with an idea of what practical citizenship meant.

It was not entirely a New Labour project. There were opponents of the idea of citizenship education in the group of educationalists around Tony Blair, never mind in the wider educational profession. And it was a factor in the Group's success that the former Tory Education Secretary who had introduced the National Curriculum, Ken Baker, played an active and positive role. It was crucial there was no minority report.

But the driving force of the project, morally and intellectually, was Bernard Crick himself. Crick's classic 'In Defence of Politics' of 1962 remains a key political science text to this day, probably known to many of you here. But alongside the enormous academic authority he brought to the enterprise, Crick showed an ability to choreograph and orchestrate ideas, and make them saleable to Ministers, that combined the best of high and low politics.

It was the sort of initiative that would have been unthinkable in Brussels. He created the proverbial big tent, but involved a cunning mix of carefully-chosen, can-do players, drawing on the good and the great, the political and the media-savvy, the churches, the educationalists, and the NGOs. A huge spread of evidence was taken, extensive consultations carried out, and I owe to the professional officer of the Committee, David Kerr, the intelligence that even the British Anarchists Association sent Bernard a typewritten note saying that they too hoped they might have a role to play.

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I tell this terribly British story because what emerged was a remarkably radical, robust view of citizenship. I quote directly from the report as it appeared within less than a year of being commissioned:

- “We aim at no less than a change in the political culture of this country both
- nationally and locally: for people to think of themselves as active citizens,
- willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life, and with the
- critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting; to build on
- and to extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of
- community involvement and public service, and to make them individually
- confident in finding new forms of involvement and action among themselves.

Quoting the Lord Chancellor, he concluded: “Unless we become a nation of engaged citizens, our democracy is not secure”.

I recite this at length partly because it was remarkable language for such a report, and partly because it portrayed so well the ideal of citizenship it wanted to encourage. It would be difficult for such thinking to emerge other than at national level. If such a prospectus had emerged as an EU proposal, it would have been strangled at birth. Yet precisely this passage has achieved a serious resonance around continental Europe, indeed it was quoted back to me at a symposium in Berlin only last month.

What came out of Crick? The first new compulsory subject in English secondary schools in a generation or so, citizenship education, with three clear strands drawing directly on the analysis in his report. These were:

Political literacy, aiming to bring politics alive in ways that young people could understand and on which they might act.

Community involvement, which might take the form of voluntary service in existing projects, or give students the chance to develop their own ideas on improving their local community.

And social and moral responsibility, encouraging young people to engage with the dilemmas that face all of us as decision-makers, as voters, as workers or consumers, and as members of society.

The underlying logic in the Crick report was that this was citizenship as process, not as ‘status’. It had no counterpart elsewhere on the continent. There certainly were aspects of the study and practice of citizenship, especially in continental Europe, which were more about who belongs and who does not, who to exclude rather than who to include, what entitles individuals and groups to be treated as citizens. But what was important here was the concentration on giving people, whatever their background, the knowledge and the skills to be effective citizens in their public space, local and national, European and international.

A further distinction worth noting is that “active citizenship”, a more familiar concept which you heard in the quote from the Crick Report, was nevertheless not as central as “effective citizenship”. You and I, Chairman, both worked for a Conservative politician, Douglas Hurd, who represented and advocated better than anyone Burke’s tradition of the ‘little platoons’, and the voluntary aspect of playing as full a part in society as possible.

Without playing down the role of the community leaders, the selfless activists and the philanthropists, Crick’s purpose was to stress the way in which every individual, however modest, must be equipped to play his or her part as a citizen. To make a slightly mischievous digression, I would recall a wonderful column by the journalist Neal Ascherson containing the clever sentence that the Gulag received many of its inmates thanks to information provided by ‘active citizens’. I suspect quite a few Stasi informers fell into the same category. It was in this context that Crick subsequently developed the further, imaginative concept of the ‘wary citizen’. But my serious point is that the concept of the

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universal citizen, the everyman-type discovering his or her potential to play a full part in society, was put centre-stage, in a novel and inspiring way.

Then a fresh irony: just as citizenship was entrenching itself in terms of process rather than status, the question of citizenship status became one of the hottest topics on the political agenda, again with implications for the way we think about European citizenship. The surge of new arrivals to Britain of people with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, from the late 1990s on, raised precisely those questions of belonging, exclusion and eligibility for citizenship that the Crick Report had not been about. The same questions had caused havoc in German and French politics. Yet in the British context, some of the tools designed to equip people to understand their own society better – the tools of process rather than status – would clearly have relevance for people who came to Britain, with its EU borders and the right to free movement within the EU, as legitimate immigrants and asylum-seekers. Bernard Crick had a role to play here too – but that is another story.

And how did Europe and the EU institutions figure in Citizenship Education's approved programmes of study? Quite seriously – in theory. At Key stage 4, for instance, for 14-16 year-olds, there is mention of the UK's relations with Europe including the EU, and reference to the opportunities to bring about social change locally, nationally, in Europe and internationally. The survey research so far shows teachers less confident about this subject in the programmes of study than almost all of the other subjects. This might say more about our media debate than about the educational challenge. But it should prevent our feeling in any way complacent, and the programmes of study are now being developed, we hope with resources to help.

An even more challenging dimension last year, opened up by Sir Keith Ajegbo's report for the Education Department on Identity and Diversity, was the suggestion that questions with respect to identity should be formulated within a new, fourth strand of the citizenship curriculum. The group's remit was limited, to review the teaching of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity.

But the quality of the report, and its fascinating observation that white working class boys often made up the most de-motivated and confused group in culturally mixed state schools, led to a very rich debate on how the citizenship curriculum must be further strengthened and enhanced. One element of this, the debate about what 'Britishness' means, has certainly come to be a dominant theme of political discussion. Ajegbo highlighted Britain's relationship with Europe as a key element in this. And in the classroom, the broader question of how diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, and multiple levels of identity including regional, European and international identity fit in, are actually turning out to be popular. These are the great questions of our time. And not just in Britain.

When the Citizenship Foundation received the Carl-Bertelsmann Prize in Germany last September for our work, we did a quick scan of the stories on the BBC website to illustrate the importance on Britain of stories relating to citizenship – every one of which would in the event have been ripe for a citizenship lesson or project. On that day in September, the stories were

- gun-crime, led by the funeral that day of an eleven-year-old
- knife-crime, following the rash of incidents through the summer
- low educational achievement and government proposals to remedy it
- disillusion with politics on the part of young people
- an initiative for Islamic schools to address what are British norms and values
- and Tory calls for a referendum about the European constitutional treaty.

Were these eccentrically British subjects ? Of course not. You might say that we have been dealing with some problems that have not developed to quite the same extent in happier countries, and that our curious British difficulty with European identity is not more widely shared. But our German hosts saw things differently. They spoke of their own urgent need to promote awareness in the public space of what citizenship implies, and to encourage social engagement in just the same way that had motivated Crick and his colleagues ten years before.

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And what all the academic literature suggests is that this partly British, partly English approach to citizenship and citizenship education is up to now more comprehensive and more developed than thinking about citizenship, national or European, in any of the other member states.

Does this mean we should simply encourage peer-pressure between a range of competing visions of citizenship, let a hundred flowers bloom, and accept that the European public space remains limited to expert conferences and intergovernmental exchanges?

Not for a moment, in my view. There is a happy congruence between the way that the European Commission, the Council of Europe, and professional bodies across Europe see these questions. A good deal of original thinking, energy and organisation is going into programmes like the Council of Europe's Education for Democratic Citizenship project, and the European Commission's Europe for Citizens Programme, deriving from the initiatives I mentioned at the outset. It seems to me that these bodies have been quite deft in handling the uncertainties about Europe's broader political mission by focusing on how national approaches could be combined and developed.

They have also been alive to the fact that it is not just among young people that enthusiasm for party politics has waned, while belief in the effectiveness of single-issue movements and NGOs has grown. It is part of a mature view of citizenship to realise that democracy is precisely about putting in context the competing claims of different groups. But it is often through the single issue, or through the emotional response to an international outrage whether a natural or political disaster, or through an act of charitable giving, that people discover their own urge to be socially and politically active. At the same time, it is only too easy for professionals and officials to focus on "active" as distinct from "effective" citizenship, and this is an area where there might be scope for new thinking at European level.

A British approach to European citizenship might build on the Crick approach and develop what the academic Bryony Hoskins has described as civic competence.

Of course national governments are jealous of their own educational criteria and curricula, but there has not so far been a serious attempt to create common educational resources for thinking about European citizenship. This was partly because of the danger that it would be seen as propaganda. But there are practical questions of survival in our democratic, mixed economy societies which are not just for schools. These range from the need for asylum seekers to know about their rights and responsibilities, to the opportunities which exist in being part of the largest single market in the world, to the need to encourage a critical view of the European institutions that have been built up in the name of Europe's citizens over the past generation or so. There are pedagogic and practical ways of doing these things, using hard copy and electronic routes. Ted Huddleston, who is here this evening, is one of the pioneers in this area. We can return to this area in questions if it seems of interest.

Even more ambitiously, there is significant experience in this country of learning and experiencing citizenship through activity, developing skills of advocacy, communication and negotiation. And in this context I have a modest European citizenship proposal.

We might take as a model the Erasmus programme, which many of you here will know. Erasmus has enabled one and a half million EU students to study in other European member states over the past twenty years, and gives young people at a crucial stage in life direct knowledge and experience of the Europe of which they are part. This audience, with its rich international heritage, knows better than any what is to be gained in confronting the challenges of everyday life in another European environment: how students discover what makes you different, what you have in common, what you can learn from each other.

I would like to see a European citizenship programme that involved, with a similar sense of purpose and consistency, some of the people at the sharp end of Europe's problems of social dislocation, uncertain identity and fragmented citizenship. What, for instance, are the shared challenges posed by growing up in an Asian community in a declining British textile town, compared with those of North African youth in the Paris or Marseilles suburbs, or for ethnic Turks growing up in Berlin. These examples are plucked from the air and entirely illustrative, but the range of social, religious, and ethnic questions arising from our European mix of economic success and social dislocation deserves a

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synoptic approach, for which citizenship provides the best possible framework. It does need theory, and most of all it needs practice. Doing citizenship, as well as thinking about it.

The Ajegbo strand of our citizenship curriculum provides an original approach to Identity and Diversity, that is already being picked up as potentially interesting on the continent. And there are citizenship and participation projects in this country that target the toughest estates and social groups – with considerable success, when the focus is there. Of course it is more difficult to target the bottom 25% than the top 25%, and problems of language and logistics would make such work more difficult than the sort of projects we are running all the time in this country. But there are good projects in Brussels, such as the Youth in Action programme, which could provide a basis for scaling up in this way.

For political reasons, it has not been easy to discuss questions of citizenship too extensively in recent years, given the uncertainty about Europe's constitutional future. It will probably remain difficult in this country for the next few months. But if the Lisbon Treaty is ratified, whatever the route, and the institutional debate can be settled for the time being, it might yet be possible to see European citizenship in terms of idealism and opportunity, rather than platitude, abstraction or constitutional menace. There is a distinctive contribution that recent British developments can offer, and it is not out of line either with academic thinking on the continent, for instance in the writings of Jurgen Habermas and his constitutional patriotism, or with the approach of officials in Brussels and Strasbourg.

Whether this will happen on anything other than a minor scale is another question. It would in my view be a pity if it remained, at European level, a minority sport. Without daring to say that Europe is our destiny, we British should at least be able to assert that it is our context, it is a vital part of our public space, and we surely have much to learn through European citizenship, as well as a few things to teach.

Michael Maclay, 22 October 2007

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