

'Assess the extent to which the modern state is based on active citizenship.'

Written by Sam Rourke (October 2009)

Introduction

Currently there is very little active citizenship in the modern state, there is decreasing social responsibility for active citizenship therefore it is not happening. With an active citizen being someone who takes responsibility for something that they are not required to do but do it for the good of society, a selfless good deed.

Community

The idea of active citizenship is expressed through charity events that are set-up and run by the community or helping an elderly person with their shopping. For active citizenship to take place you should have a friendly attitude as to do something for the community you would have to know people in your community and be willing to help them.

In the current climate we live in with the media covering vast amounts of crime across the country and the stereotyping of young people as 'youths' which is now becoming a derogatory term people are finding it harder to trust their community, this can be reflected in activities of young people as shown in a study in young people's social participation, saying

ⁱ"Young people were less likely than older people to participate in acts of charity or citizenship and one in ten had not participated in any."

. Also it is becoming harder to get to know people in your own community. When years ago you would feel safe to go to the shops and leave your house unlocked or leave your child with your neighbour, now this is just not possible with the government implementing new plans for anyone to look after a child to be CRB checked, while this has positive and negative effects it will no doubt discourage people from offering to look after children. Also living in a larger city in the country most people will be working for a large part of the day and then possibly have children to care for so will therefore have very little time left in the day for community activities. The media does not help the idea of a "rising crime wave" as it will cover more criminal activity than citizenship activity, for instance the nation's most popular newspaper 'The Sun' on the 13th October has the headline ⁱⁱ"Mum held over paedo photos" while on the 12th October another popular newspaper "Daily Mail" ran the headline ⁱⁱⁱ"Schoolgirl 'tortured by her father before she was murdered in honour killing." While there are many negative things happening in our societies these are rare occurrences whereas positive community work does not get nearly as much coverage.

This leads me to the conclusion that the country has entered a phase of fearing our neighbours and being unable to trust people in the community. This means people would be less willing to take part in community activities let alone start up community activities. Therefore the idea that the modern state is based on active citizenship would not work as currently people are unwilling to let it happen.

"Active Citizenship" or "Good Citizenship"?

The term “active citizenship” previously described as a “selfless good deed” is different from the idea of a “good citizen” which is some who does the community to work but still wants to get something from the work and is therefore not a selfless deed. For instance it is now a government requirement that all GCSE students take Citizenship, this includes doing a citizenship activity. This can range from running a charity event to helping at an old people’s home. But this therefore means that the people that do this are exhibiting good citizenship and not active citizenship as they are aiming to get a qualification from it at the end of the course and it is a mandatory requirement. The idea of “active citizenship” is that you are doing it in your own time for no benefit to you. While showing good citizenship is not a bad thing and can still be beneficial to the community it does not show support the idea that the modern state is based on active citizenship.

This idea of good citizenship is also seen when people are applying for British Citizenship. Under the new idea migrant will have to take part in “active citizenship” to be granted British Citizenship as shown in this article on the BBC;

^{iv}“Active citizenship is more nebulous. Assessors will be looking for proof that someone is more than just a taxpayer - and the more "active" they are in the local community the quicker their journey to citizenship will become.

Acceptable activities could include voluntary work, involvement in local groups or the school parent-teacher association.

Migrants will need to find referees to vouch for these good deeds.”

The idea that this active citizenship could be completed by including themselves in volunteer work does not fit with the definition of “active citizenship” but with the definition of “good citizenship” as migrants would be doing the activities in order to gain British Citizenship, not for the good of the community. This is therefore misleading to the public who read the article and again is an example of how the media can influence people’s ideas of what is “active citizenship” and what is not.

This therefore shows that there are very few acts of “active citizenship” but various acts of “good citizenship” in today’s society. This may not be a bad thing as when people see others doing good citizenship it may encourage them to take the next step into active citizenship. But currently this shows that the modern state is not based on active citizenship but partly on good citizenship.

Decreasing Social Responsibility

With the ideas above that people are less willing to take part in community activities it is leading to a decrease in a sense of social responsibility. The idea of social responsibility comes from the fact that all people in the UK (British Citizens or not) have certain rights and we are given these rights at no cost, therefore social responsibility is giving something back to the community for the rights we are given. These rights are given to us by law but social responsibility is not as therefore unjust for instance people who do take part in active citizenship or just good citizenship have the same rights as people who break the law and this does not seem fair as one side of people are benefiting the community and have earned their rights whereas others are a costing the community as yet still receive the same benefits.

As people are slowly coming to realise that they do not have to be good citizens to receive the same rights as “bad” citizens they are becoming less likely and less willing to be good citizens but instead not take their social responsibilities but go around daily life with the benefits of the rights we are

given. This means a decreasing attitude to social responsibility so less and less people are taking part, this is not aided by the fact many people are able to claim benefits such as housing benefits, job seekers allowance and education maintenance allowance without accepting their social responsibility.

The idea of social responsibility is strongly linked to active citizenship if not good citizenship. As taking your social responsibilities would be showing active citizenship, therefore if more and more people are taking a negative attitude to their social responsibility then it will decrease the amount of active citizenship, once again showing that the modern state is not based on active citizenship.

What is the modern state based on?

Currently the modern state is suffering from the fear of crime and young people and a lack of social responsibility and citizenship. While these are all negative points there are still plenty of acts of good citizenship through schools and other organisations and also acts of active citizenship. While these acts are rare the modern state must still be working on something else.

The vast majority of people in the UK are in full time employment despite economic troubles in the country. ^vThe level of working age people (16-64 for men/16-59 for women) is at 72.5% as of July 2009. This means that the country is based on hard working citizens who support their own family and the majority can support themselves without state intervention.

Also there are chances throughout the year for people to become socially active, they may not be demonstrating good or active citizens but they are participating in social events in the community, for instance such community events around St George's day and event on bonfire night. This will encourage people to disregard the idea of fearing their community and could then lead to good/active citizenship. So although currently it is not happening there are chances for future active citizenship events to happen.

Conclusion

At the current time the modern state is in no way based on active citizenship as this is rarely happening due to a decrease in social responsibility and an increase in fear due to bad press. There are some good citizenship activities taking place but these have a different merit to active citizenship but are a good place to start. If more people were to be involved in good citizenship and community events it may inspire more people to take their social responsibilities and show active citizenship which would be beneficial for all as it would make our own communities more friendly and improve quality of life. There is a chance for an increased active citizenship but currently it is not happening.

ⁱ National Statistics Online "Young People and Social Capital", 13/10/09 - http://www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/nojournal/Social_capital_young_people.pdf

ⁱⁱ The Sun, 13/10/09 - <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/2679960/Mum-held-over-paedo-photos.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Daily Mail, 12/10/09 - <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1219878/Schoolgirl-tortured-father-murdered-honour-killing.html>

^{iv} BBC, 15/1/09 - http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7254926.stm

Sam Rourke

^v National Statistics Online, 13/10/09 - <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/ci/nugget.asp?ID=12>