

DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

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A "Politics based on partnership" is the declared ambition of the Prime Minister (Faithworks Lecture, 22 March 2005). In his lecture, Tony Blair was clear that in modernising the 1945 settlement, he wanted the citizen to be at the heart of each service. "The Government can't raise your family ... get you a job ... police your community. But the state can help or hinder. Mutual respect is needed to found a society. A selfish society is a contradiction in terms."

In this opening article Duncan Forrester takes up this theme by exploring the basic building blocks of a democratic society, namely, democratic citizens. "Citizens ... belong to a community of people bound together by links of accountability and responsibility for and to one another." He argues that a decent and just society has to have an active, participatory citizenry and that this is the best antidote to paternalism in politics. Forrester reminds us that to St Paul citizenship was a special honour and privilege and that just as the Church should be a model of "the good things God has in store for humankind" so "a just, democratic society, a just nation, a just globe should display something eucharistic, something lovely and healing in the common life of its citizens, and in its structures and processes".

When we speak about citizens we are affirming (contra Margaret Thatcher) that society exists, and that it is not simply a group of independent individuals accidentally side by side, or a collection of people locked together in controversy and conflict, without shared interests or ties of altruism. John Paul II puts it thus: "If the promotion of the self is understood in terms of absolute autonomy, people inevitably reach the point of rejecting one another. Everyone else is considered an enemy from whom one has to defend oneself. Thus society becomes a mass of individuals placed side by side, but without any mutual bonds. Each one wishes to assert himself independently of the other and in fact intends to make his own interests prevail."¹

Citizens, on the other hand, belong to a community of people, bound together by links of accountability and responsibility for and to one another. They have claims on and rights and duties to one another. The way these links are organised and expressed determines whether a society is just or unjust. Citizenship is a way of speaking about solidarity. Citizens are responsible for the kind of community in which they live.

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

When we speak about *citizens* rather than *subjects* we are implying that citizens do not simply receive and obey

orders from above. They participate in the life of the community; they co-operate with others; they share in decision making; they contribute to the life of the community. Aristotle spoke of human beings as political animals by nature, i.e. the proper life for human beings was one in which they shared freely in decision making and in responsibility for one another. Less than that was not a fully human way of living. A decent and just society has an active, participatory citizenry who fulfil their duties just as much as they claim their rights.

A democratic society in which people participate in decision making and attend to the needs of the other is not easy to achieve. Even in democracies there is often, for various reasons, a low level of participation. There is a lot of paternalism in politics. Parties and ideologies of the left and the right often suggest that a small group of intellectuals or politicians is more capable of taking decisions about what is good and just for others without consulting them. But only the wearer of the shoe knows where it really pinches. The Roman Catholic principle of "subsidiarity" suggests that decisions and decision making should take place as close to the grass roots as possible. From a different angle, Liberation Theology urges that we need to learn from the poor and from the Bible what justice means; we cannot decide in advance what justice is for a particular community in a specific situation, and then implement it. Citizens are entitled to have a say about decisions that affect them.

DEPENDENCY²

Citizens are often assumed to be independent people. Dependency is said to be an inferior way of life to that of the active citizen. But dependency, of course, is a natural part of the lifecycle, and some people for a variety of reasons, good and bad, are dependent throughout their lives. All of us are dependent on others for countless things that make life possible and pleasant, and we all need to learn how to be dependent, and how to deal with people who are dependent on us. A healthy society is one in which there is much interdependence, a rich, vibrant pattern of dependency and support where the worth of each citizen is affirmed. The British welfare system as established in the 1940s has been accused, from the left and the right, of encouraging a passive attitude towards welfare provision, launching multitudes of people into a harmful and degrading dependency, and locking people into a poverty trap. Welfare is not simply a passive entitlement of citizenship, but citizens have an active duty to seek the

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welfare of the whole community, and to take as much responsibility as possible for their own welfare and that of their families. But in a just society it is also necessary that state and voluntary agencies should provide welfare that does not demean or demoralise, but affirms the value of each citizen. Attitudes that degrade, exclude and marginalise dependent people make it hard for them to return to a fuller involvement in the life of the community.

Older welfare systems, with their specious distinction between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor and their readiness to blame the poor and the weak for their condition, systematically degraded and humiliated the poor in workhouses and other forms of “relief”. Without going back to that, we must seek a welfare system that encourages the active participation of citizens at every point, and discourages harmful forms of dependency.

EXCLUSION

Who are citizens? It is well known that in the cities of the ancient world and in the Roman Empire a small minority of males were the citizens. Citizenship was a special honour and privilege, as Paul the Apostle recognised when he claimed the exemptions and the privileged treatment to which a Roman citizen was entitled. In the Greek city states, women, slaves and aliens were all excluded from citizenship. Their role was to provide the small minority of male citizens with the leisure and comfort required for the exercise of their duties as citizens! None of the ancient societies were democratic and participative in the modern sense of these terms.

Democratic participation is still an issue in many countries, including Britain. Women, ethnic minorities and the poor are far from having the same access to power or control over their destiny as the more prosperous white sectors of society. Nor do such groups find it easy to contribute to the flourishing of society. Minority groups need to be given a voice. A major concern today is the low level of involvement in the electoral process on the part of young people. They just do not see the point of voting, and regard the political system as being remote from their concerns and unwilling to take their opinions into account.

Then there are the groups who are technically citizens, but are unable for one reason or another to play an active citizen’s role in society. One thinks, for example, of children, of the confused elderly, of people with severe learning difficulties, . It is important that such people are accorded the dignity of citizens and are

encouraged to play as active a role in the community as possible. Help with problems of mobility and access for people with physical difficulties is a matter of justice rather than pity or charity. Such people bring special gifts to the flourishing of a just community.

Then there are people whose citizenship is elsewhere; although they live in the country they do not possess citizenship in the technical sense. There are, for example, refugees, seeking asylum from persecution, torture or hardship elsewhere. Such non-citizens may not be given the vote or incorporated within the political system, but it is important that they are treated with dignity and respect. A society is unjust if it demeans and humiliates such people, however well it treats its own citizens. The treatment of refugees and asylum seekers in Britain today is one of the great issues of social justice that we face and we shall be judged on its proper resolution.

The same issues of justice arise in relation to ethnic minorities. Although they have the vote and formal civil rights, they are often marginalised and do not always enjoy the equal protection of the law, or equal access to power and influence. Recent cases of violence against Blacks raise very serious questions of justice: how just is a Britain in which such things happen, and in which so many Black Britons walk in fear?

A central problem with citizenship today is that nations as communities of citizens, even democratic nations, may be and act as little more than expressions of collective selfishness. Prosperous nations are seldom generous in helping the citizens of other, poorer nations in any significant and sacrificial way. The extreme disparities of power and wealth between nations are an offence to any kind of justice. There is much here that Christians should be deeply concerned about.

Globalization raises major issues in relation to democratic citizenship. International economic and political structures and the major multinational companies are not answerable to any body of citizens. Even national governments find it impossible to make these systems and structures accountable. It is easy to talk about citizens of the world, but the reality is that individuals and whole nations have precious little influence over what global institutions do, and do not do.

CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

Christians might wish to suggest that we already have some experience of global citizenship, for our true

NOTES

1. Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* 20.
2. On this see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (London: Duckworth, 1999).
3. John Donne, “Devotions XVII”, in *Complete Poems and Selected Prose* (London, 1945).

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► citizenship is of heaven; and this is a way of expanding our whole understanding and practice of citizenship. We can broaden the understanding of citizenship somewhat by referring to examples from the Bible.

We read in the New Testament that we are citizens of heaven (Phil. 3.20), and this makes us fellow-citizens with the saints of every clime, age and nation. This great fact relativises our earthly citizenship, and makes us linked in the Church by ties of accountability and responsibility to people of many lands and cultures as well as to our own fellow citizens. The poet John Donne put it thus: "The Church is Catholike, universal, so are all her Actions; all that she does, belongs to *all*, when she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that Head which is my Head too, and engrafted into that *body*, whereof I am a *member*. And when she buries a [Hu]man, that action concerns me; all [hu]mankind is of one *Author*, and is one *volume*."³

Thus in the earthly city Christians are "resident aliens" who have a larger citizenship in the city of God. This does not at all mean that Christians are not concerned for the justice of the earthly city. We do not find justice for ourselves in a ghetto, accepting no responsibility for the wider world. We learn through our citizenship of the City of God something of what God's justice is, the justice we are to seek first if all things are to be given to us. We measure the justice of the earthly city against the justice of the City of God. We learn to be accountable to our "fellow citizens" around the world.

The City of God in which we are all citizens is in principle a universal society in which all limited associations of state, class, or race are overcome. Augustine emphasises the importance of justice. Without it, he claims, a state becomes demonic; and the justice of nations must be measured against the divine justice, the justice of the reign of God. Remember that in Matthew 25.32 it is *the nations (ta ethne)* that are called to judgement for how they have treated the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the naked, the prisoners and the strangers. Their behaviour and their policies are measured against the loving justice of the reign of God.

Our experience as citizens of heaven, citizens of the City of God should give us clues as to how to behave in modern globalized society. We are responsible for one another, accountable to one another. The needy stranger at the other side of the world has a claim upon us. Christians should be at the forefront of movements

seeking economic and political justice in a world with such extreme inequalities of wealth and power. We love our fellow-citizens of the globe by contributing generously to development and relief agencies, and by supporting campaigns such as Jubilee 2000, which highlighted so effectively the scandal of debt issues facing developing countries.

THE CHURCH

The Church, meaning both the world Church, the united and lively Church that is striving to be born, and the Church as the congregation of God's people who gather for worship and serve as disciples in the world, includes in its membership many of the poorest and weakest people in the world, and many of the most rich and powerful. Within the Church they should be able to challenge and attend to one another, to disturb and challenge one another. This Church should not only speak of God's justice and purposes of good, but manifest and demonstrate in its own life something of the life of the City of God, a kind of appetiser for the good things God has in store for humankind.

Christians, as citizens of heaven and resident aliens, should be able to point to the Church as a kind of working model of the City of God and its justice and love. Christians should behave as responsible citizens of that city and of the earthly city, taking the lead in caring for one another, and being answerable to one another, and to the needy, unknown stranger who is also a citizen of the City of God.

Perhaps we can also point to exemplifications of justice in democratic communities. In L'Arche communities, for example, people with severe difficulties live together with others in such a way that the distinction of carer and cared for almost disappears because of the assumption that everyone has something to contribute to the welfare of the community, and the worth and value of each is to be affirmed. Or perhaps when the Church gathers to celebrate communion we show just a little of what it is to be the City of God, and the pattern of life that is appropriate for its citizens, and the resources that are available to them in their relationships, responsibilities and failures. A just, democratic society, a just nation, a just globe should display something eucharistic, something lovely and healing in the common life of its citizens, and in its structures and processes. ■