

Review: *CONCEPT Seminar, Political Education in Scotland: Looking Back, Looking Forward*

13th November, 2015, Edinburgh.

The Referendum on Scottish independence left an important legacy, in that it generated an interest in politics across a diverse range of social groups, as well as enfranchising 16 and 17 year olds. The UK General Election in May 2015 also witnessed a remarkable change in political fortunes for the Labour Party in Scotland and the Scottish Liberal Democrats, with an overwhelming victory for the SNP. This changing national context appears to reflect a greater interest in politics in communities which, in turn, should stimulate motivation to engage in political education.

This half-day seminar was organised by *Concept* to reflect on what has gone before and anticipate the opportunities presented by other forthcoming political events. Consequently, it was felt that the time was ripe for some reflection on how community educators engaged in political education during the Scottish Referendum and what issues, concerns and opportunities it created. It was also an opportunity to look forward to how the past can help educators develop political education in communities in the future. In short, educators may ask whether this is an opportune time to reclaim the democratic purpose of community education.

Vicky Petrie, Community Learning and Development (CLD) Practitioner, City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) and member of the Editorial Board, chaired the seminar and encouraged participants to reflect on recent political education work and discuss what happened and what happens next.

Constitutional change and adult learning during the Scottish Referendum

Jim Crowther, University of Edinburgh, began by reminding the audience that 2015 was the 40th anniversary of the Alexander Report and commenting that this could

have been highlighted more over the year and used as a means to re-engage workers with political education. In his presentation, Jim aimed to discuss what is meant by political education, what provision is available and what the dilemmas are for workers. Although the Referendum has passed, there are a number of elections over the next few years, which could provide opportunities to engage learners with politics, such the Scottish Parliament elections (2016), Scottish Council elections (2017), European Referendum (2018), European parliament elections (2019) and the next general election in 2020.

Politics is about how we manage and articulate disagreements, what type of a good society we want and how we encourage common interests when we live in neo-liberal times which are constantly fragmenting and individualising them. As community educators, we need to define our own political education and distinguish it from political socialisation (civics education), missionary activity (converting rather than helping people to make up their own minds) and propaganda (e.g. fixed positions which are not open-ended).

Jim presented a typology of provision available in the run up to the Referendum. He highlighted the fact that although at Scottish Government level, Education Scotland was keen on political discussion, the subsequent provision throughout the country was variable. The Workers Education Association (WEA), in conjunction with a range of staff, organised TALK Scotland which collated excellent online resources, as did the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Constitutional Change (CCC). The University also made a Mass Open Online Course (MOOC) during the final month of the Referendum. Whilst it claimed to have over 10,000 participants, and was an excellent resource, the opportunity for using it with communities was largely neglected. Workers may have had concerns about discussing the Referendum in groups because they had not yet formed their own opinion. However, uncertainty is part of the educational process and workers should have had the confidence to share these dilemmas with learners. Often, the depth of the political discussion was framed around the issues of the 'Yes' and 'No' Thanks campaigns rather than developing a broader or deeper curriculum and, it would seem, some workers were 'warned off' by

their own managers or local politicians. Many young people participated in informal activity through social media. There was some excellent work in schools, which teachers tied in with the Curriculum for Excellence or developed outside the formal curriculum (e.g. debating groups). Unfortunately, the pre-election guidance from government to civil servants was interpreted differently by each local authority, such that although some schools felt able to engage in open debate, some did not. For example, to fulfil the demand for balance, many in-school debate and activities had to be cancelled because staff were unable to find 'Better Together' campaigners able/willing to attend.

Neil Saddington, Development Worker, ALN & ESOL Service, Midlothian Council.

Whilst a literacy practitioner at CEC and in the run up to the Referendum, Neil Saddington delivered lessons in politics and decision making with various groups, including young people and adults with learning disabilities. He found that this process opened up new and different spaces in which to debate politics. Whereas much of adult learning is currently focussed on employability, where individuals are seen primarily as a commodity it seems the Referendum debate connected personal issues to public structures, which allowed literacy learners to get to grips with their own political issues.

At the same time, the CEC were implementing benefit changes which allowed recipients to decide how to spend and save their own money. This change raised issues relevant to the debate. In addition, some development organisations looked at the council's online budgeting tool and used this to prompt discussions on spending. Neil witnessed a change in attitudes, with people becoming more involved with active citizenship. Post-Referendum, Neil ran a 6 week taster course in Politics and Democracy, which although not so well attended, gave participants the opportunity to learn about the Scottish Parliament, meet MSPs and connect their private troubles to public concerns. So, what works? Neil suggests that a lack of time can hinder work. Tasks have to be broken down and top down language deconstructed to make it much

more accessible to learners. Finally, it is essential to make connections with workers in other organisations, who might just have the resources/ knowledge that you need.

Will Golding, Adult Education Worker & Youth Worker in Edinburgh for Outlook/ Crisis

Will Golding works in political literacies for CEC, Outlook (mental health) and Crisis (homelessness). Taking a Freirean approach, he works with generative themes, where people began to see their lives in terms of global forces. This approach enabled learners to develop hope and practical strategies for addressing specific issues. Will discussed the importance of how CLD is recognised and legitimised and asked whether communities are really being trusted to support a whole range of views, the way that the Alexander Report intended.

At the Outlook Project, learners looked at what adult education meant to them and constructed their own manifesto for MSPs. They also put an exhibition together for the Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival (SMHAFF) and won the Adult Learners Award for participation. Will is now working on a new project entitled Rebels with a Cause. In this, learners develop a series of stories identifying their own cause and how to communicate it effectively. At Crisis, Will delivered a programme entitled Movers and Shakers – Making Politics Work, in which homeless people had the opportunity to look at issues pertinent to them and participate in a debate with MSPs.

How do we take these ideas forward? At the Adult Learning Project (ALP) they look at the micro-politics of what is happening in their own local area and then find practical strategies to facilitate change. Will encouraged workers to feed back into the CLD action plan, to legitimise the scope and impact of political education.

Hayley Cole, Youth Engagement Officer, The Scottish Parliament.

Hayley Cole works in the Scotland Parliamentary Outreach Services, which aim to educate schools, colleges, communities about the Parliament. In the run up to the Referendum, there was more demand from informal voluntary groups to visit the

Parliament. Outreach Services ran summer sessions to engage with young people who would not normally engage. Although the group has to remain neutral, they could educate on the current situation in terms of current powers and transfer of powers. On the 23rd Sept 2014, the Presiding Officer stated that engagement must continue and increase. Since then, the Outreach team has targeted schools that they had not managed to before. In 2015, they held an Inspiring Young Women conference, aimed at encouraging young women to develop confidence and leadership skills. They also hold regular Urban Parliament Days, where they take services (including the Presiding Officer and MSPs) out to the community, for an information and Q&A session.

Discussion

Vicky Petrie (CEC) chaired a discussion and a selection of responses from participants are as follows:

- A socially just future depends on people's critical thinking skills and creativity. Rather than the value being placed on work, it should be linked to issues around social justice.
- There are reasons for optimism, in particular, the involvement of young people, which we need to build on.
- During a forum focus group with those who had been on opposite sides during the debate, people were asked whether they were now more likely to get involved in their community. In general, it was 'yes' voters who said yes. How then do we provide the resources for these opportunities?
- There were examples of 'bottom-up enthusiasm' where people were able to make the link between helping out in their community and a movement for change.
- Where have all the recently politically engaged voters gone? They have gone to the political parties. What the political parties lack is imagination – what do they do with people who have demands? In some countries, state funds are available for political parties to try to engage people. This is an area that community educators should be working in.

- Do we have a responsibility as educators to go out to communities and ask them how they would deal with particular issues? CLD workers need to know what's going on in their own area and link it to the bigger picture.
- CLD workers need to be knowledgeable in economics as much of the political debate centres on that.
- Should CLD workers be politically active or not? It's not enough to simply raise awareness, they must help people to join up their thinking.
- Start giving young people the skills of critical thinking to enable them to become both responsible and critical citizens.
- The new Community Empowerment Act opens up a process of consultation and legitimisation harking back to the Alexander Report, CLD workers should be involved in debates surround the Act.
- There is a push from government on participatory budgeting, which is another opportunity for CLD involvement and education.
- Political education can be developed within the constraints of government policy, education for employability and SQA assessments. CLD workers often limit themselves and yet we can do things differently and use a critical literacies approach to lobby for a different future.

Carolyn McKerracher, Sessional Teaching Fellow, Moray House, Edinburgh.