CITIZENSHIP: THE UK EXPERIENCE

ABSTRACT

Acquisition of citizenship is a contentious area of policy reform driven by broader agendas on migration, cohesion and security. Current proposals for "earned" and "probationary" citizenship have an exclusionary tone, would erect barriers to integration, and reflect concern to assure the public that new citizens will identify with and contribute to Britain rather than evidence that, under current arrangements, they do not.

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Citizenship is a contentious, fast changing and contradictory area of policy development in the UK. Immigration, devolution, Britain's place in the European Union and security concerns post 9/11 have convinced the government of the need to build a stronger sense of British identity and belonging at both the national and the local levels. Reform of the country's relatively liberal, laid-back policy on access to citizenship status has thus, in recent years, become interwoven with broader moves to strengthen social cohesion, civic engagement and migration management, culminating in proposals for further reform of citizenship law in the current parliamentary session. While the primary objective of earlier reforms (2002) was to use acquisition of citizenship as a means of promoting social integration, current proposals for "earned citizenship" have an exclusionary undertone, would reassert a clear disparity in the rights enjoyed by citizens and non citizens, and arguably run counter to the inclusive concept of local belonging increasingly being promoted by municipalities: a concept that, in the words of a key proponent, "focuses on where you are, not where you come from."[1]

Historically, Britain neither encouraged long-term residents to become citizens nor put significant barriers in their path. Those who had resided in the UK for five years could apply to become citizens, language requirements were modest and dual citizenship allowed because:

> we recognize that in the modern world, as well as owing an allegiance to the country in which they live, people also retain an affinity to the country of their roots. It is therefore possible to be a citizen of two countries and a good citizen of both. (Home Office 1999)

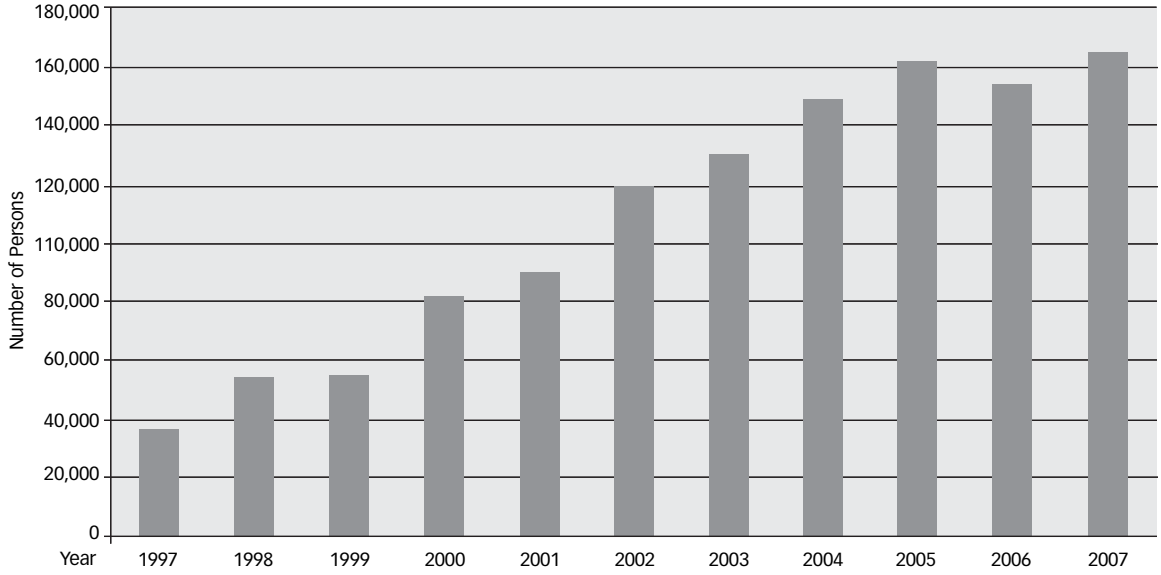
Reflecting Britain's colonial history, citizens of Commonwealth countries have since 1948 been allowed to vote in general and local elections, while EU citizens are, as in other EU states, allowed to vote in local and European elections. Rights of access to employment and benefits have effectively been tied to immigration and residence status, not citizenship.

Citizenship tests and ceremonies

In 2001, however, a series of events placed acquisition of citizenship onto the political agenda. Labour was re-elected to a second term and a Minister with a strong interest in communities and civic engagement, David Blunkett, was appointed Home Secretary. Blunkett had come from the education and employment ministry where he had introduced compulsory citizenship education in secondary schools and, coincidentally, overseen the expansion of labour migration in response to skill and labour shortages. With that experience he came into the Home Office determined to join up, for the first time, the country's immigration, asylum and citizenship agendas. Disturbances in northern towns in the summer of 2001, and the implications for Britain of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, served to reinforce his conviction that action was also needed at the local level to promote cohesion. A strategy emerged in which cohesive communities were defined as having a common vision and sense of belonging, where the diversity of people's backgrounds is positively valued, where those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities, and where strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds at work, in schools and within neighbourhoods.

Blunkett saw cohesive communities as a prerequisite of success in the integration of migrants, arguing that "to enable integration to take place, and to value the diversity it brings, we need to be secure within our sense of belonging and identity and therefore to be able to reach out and embrace those who come to the UK." At the same time, Britain needed to do more to prepare people for citizenship, to enhance its significance, celebrate its acquisition and "develop a sense of civil identity and shared values." In contrast to what he called the "low key and bureaucratic approach" that the UK had, in the past, adopted to acquisition of citizenship, it should be seen as a clear act of commitment to Britain and as

Figure 1
Grants of British Citizenship in the United Kingdom: 1997 to 2007



Source: Home Office (2008: 11).

a step in the process of achieving integration (Home Office 2002).

As a result, legislation in 2002 made provision to require those seeking citizenship to have "sufficient knowledge about life in the UK" and, in addition to swearing the existing oath of allegiance to the monarch, to pledging the following: "I will give my loyalty to the UK and respect its rights and freedoms. I will uphold its democratic values. I will observe its laws faithfully and fulfil my duties and obligations as a British citizen."

Local citizenship ceremonies were introduced in 2004 and by November 2005 tests had been devised on knowledge of life in the UK under the guidance of an Advisory Board on Naturalization and Integration (ABNI). In July 2007, ABNI reported that since November 2005, approximately 368,000 people had taken the test; of these, 69% had passed. Of these individuals, it is of note that many of those were of nationalities that scored below the 50% mark, including those from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Turkey (ABNI 2007). Thus, while the intention in 2002 was that the language and knowledge requirements should be slight, designed to encourage new citizens to identify with the UK and to affirm their inclusion, a significant number of those seeking citizenship are finding the test to be a barrier to that aspiration.

The latest statistics show that citizenship applications rose by 8% in 2007 and the number granted by 7% (to 164,635), a dramatic rise in ten years from the 40,000 granted in 1997. Fifty-three percent were granted citizenship on the basis of residence, 18% on marriage and 25% as minor children. Forty-four percent were citizens of Asian countries and 31% originated from Africa, with Indians, Filipinos, Afghans, South Africans and Pakistanis at the top of the list. As well, 14,725 applicants were refused – 9% of all decisions – of which 16% (2,365) was due to the applicant's insufficient knowledge of English or of life in the UK and 11% (1,695) because the applicants were considered to be "not of good character" (Home Office 2008). While the government is encouraging applications for citizenship, the record number of grants was seen by its critics as not being an indicator of integration but of immigration. "The public will be alarmed," the Opposition spokesman said, "that passports are being handed out at such a rate."[2]

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New proposals

The broader impact of the change in policy on citizenship acquisition has not yet been evaluated. Nevertheless, the government proposes further reforms, following a pamphlet published in 2007 by the Immigration Minister and then Communities and Local Government Minister, which argued that the "quiet citizenship revolution" of recent years had now stalled (Kelly and Byrne 2007). In an increasingly diverse society, including changes in patterns of work, family life, technology and means of communication, shared experiences are being replaced by a "myriad of smaller subcultures," while communities face a

threat from Islamist extremists and from the far right. The answer, they argued, is to develop a more inclusive sense of citizenship, for which they proposed a new national day "celebrating what is best about Britain," a renaissance of civic governance and identity in cities, towns and villages, support for Muslim communities in defining a "modern sense of British Islam" emphasizing loyalty to Britain as well as to faith, and good neighbour contracts for newcomers. Henceforth, applicants for citizenship would have to demonstrate that they had *earned* that privilege, a concept now central to the government's proposals, *A Path to Citizenship*, to be taken forward in an overhaul of immigration and citizenship legislation later this year (Home Office BIA 2008).

In contrast to the generally inclusive tone of earlier reforms, *Path to Citizenship* emphasizes "the expectation that all who live here should learn our language, play by the rules, obey the law and contribute to the community." Citizenship is a deal and the unmistakeable message is that those who want the benefits of citizenship need to be reminded of their responsibilities. Driven by the Home Office and not by the department dealing with cohesion, these proposals are firmly set within the government's migration reform program and reflect its preoccupations: ensuring that migrants make a positive economic contribution and pose no threat to security and, of no lesser importance, that the public be assured that this is the case. With these objectives in mind, it is proposed that applicants should be obliged to undergo an additional "probationary citizenship" phase during which they would have no access to benefits and would have to demonstrate that they are making an active contribution to society (through volunteering, raising money for charity or running a local sports team, for instance), while paying taxes and staying on the right side of the law.

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While the *Path to Citizenship* proposals were under consideration, former Attorney General Lord Goldsmith was asked to undertake a separate review of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship for the Ministry of Justice. Recommending in *Citizenship, Our Common Bond* (Goldsmith 2008) that those with vestigial categories of citizenship such as British Overseas Territories Citizenship should be given full citizenship (and hence rights of entry), the main thrust of his argument is that there should be a clear distinction between the rights and responsibilities of those with citizenship and those without. His recommendations include the adoption of a statement of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, incentives for those eligible for citizenship, and a provision that Commonwealth citizens who are not British citizens should lose their right to vote (on which the government has yet to respond).

Problem or perception?

These current proposals clearly address a perception that foreign-born residents need to be encouraged to identify with and contribute to British society, raising two questions: whether that perception is supported by the evidence, and whether the measures proposed would promote those outcomes.

It is worth noting that of the two key drivers of the government's cohesion agenda – the disturbances in northern towns in 2001 and the security threat from terrorism – neither focused primarily on migrants or on those who had newly acquired British citizenship. The disturbances involved second generation Asian youth, and the terrorist incidents involved those who were British-born as well as those born abroad. The cohesion agenda developed after the disturbances focused on building bridges between established communities perceived to be leading "parallel lives," while the security strategy seeks to prevent the radicalization of Muslim youth growing up in the UK. Only with the arrival of significant numbers of East Europeans from an enlarged European Union (post-May 2004) did the impact of migration at the local level (pressure on local services and minor tensions with neighbours) become part of the cohesion agenda.

Moreover, an independent inquiry on cohesion reporting to government in 2007 was at pains to emphasize the overwhelming evidence of positive cohesion outcomes across Britain, citing its own findings and data from the official Citizenship Survey (Commission on Integration and Cohesion 2007). The most recent data shows, for instance, that 82% of the public agree that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together (with no difference in findings for ethnic minorities). Eighty-four percent feel they belong strongly to Britain (88% of Asians) and, while the proportion of some ethnic minority communities who volunteer in the community is not as high as those of White people, they are *more* likely to feel that they can influence decisions taken at the national and at the local level. Eighty percent of people mix socially with people from different ethnic and religious groups at least once a month (Communities and Local Government 2007).

An analysis of data from a range of polls in 2006 on Muslims' sense of belonging in the UK demonstrates that,

when asked whether they consider themselves Muslim *or* British first, the vast majority (81%) said Muslim; but when not required to choose, almost half (46%) said British first, 12% Muslim, and 42% that they did not differentiate (Blick et al. 2006). A recent study of migrants that asked which aspects of life in Britain they most valued found the highest attachment to be to democracy, fairness, justice and security (followed by opportunities for education, a good standard of living and access to services), and that migrants shared the same concerns as their neighbours: crime, drug use and pollution (Jayaweera and Choudhury 2008).

The government's own research shows that migrants make a positive economic contribution in the UK, often undertaking jobs with unattractive working conditions and anti-social working hours that other residents are unwilling to do. Many are ineligible for welfare benefits or recourse in other respects to public funds, with refugees being a notable and accepted exception. Coupled with the survey evidence demonstrating positive cohesion outcomes, high rates of belonging and common values suggest that the *Path to Citizenship* proposals say more about government's concern to assure the public that new citizens will make a valid contribution to, and identify with, Britain than any significant evidence that they might not under current arrangements. The danger must be that raising the bar to make it more difficult for long-term residents to obtain citizenship, rather than strengthening belonging and participation, will widen the gap between citizen haves and have-nots, imposing unnecessary barriers to the integration and community cohesion which the government itself says it wants to achieve.

More than 1,600 people arrive in the UK each day planning to stay for a least a year. Some will remain in the long term; many will move on or return to their country of origin, perhaps returning to the UK at a later date. The evidence shows that, even among EU citizens with a right to remain, intentions on length of stay and whether to settle shift over time (Spencer et al. 2007). Rather than creating a new divide between citizens and non citizens, the government would do well to focus on this significant, ever changing, group of new residents, facilitating their full economic, social and civic participation throughout the time they are living in the UK, however temporary or permanent that might be.

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Notes

[1] Professor Ted Cantle, Citizenship in the Community conference, organized by the Advisory Board on Naturalization and Integration, May 21, 2008. See the Institute of Community Cohesion's Website for examples of initiatives by towns and cities, at <www.coventry.ac.uk/researchnet/d/339>.

[2] BBC News, May, 20, 2008. Retrieved at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7410046.stm>.