



HeadsUp Forum # 42

www.HeadsUp.org.uk

How equal is Britain?

(26 September – 14 October 2011)

Issues of equality had been highlighted in the months before the beginning of the forum, with the causes of English riots and the different impacts of public sector cuts on women and other groups in society debated in the media. Forum participants were keen to share their views on a range of topics related to gender, race and age equality.

Nine decision-makers took part in the forum from a variety of backgrounds. The decision-makers supporting the forum were:

- **Angela Burns AM** – Conservative Shadow Minister for Education;
- **Christine Chapman AM** – Member, Children and Young People Committee;
- **Caroline Lucas MP** – Leader of the Green Party;
- **Siobhan McMahon MSP** – Member, Equal Opportunities Committee;
- **Ian Mearns MP** – Member, Education Committee;
- **Baroness Estelle Morris** – former Minister for Education;
- **Meg Munn MP** – Vice-Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women and Enterprise;
- **Jenny Rathbone AM** – Member, Children and Young People Committee;
- **Tim Woodhouse** – Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation.

www.headsup.org.uk is a safe, online space for under 18s to debate the political issues important to them. **Young people** share viewpoints with their peers and **decision-makers** up and down the country. Through the forums, HeadsUp develops **young people's** political awareness and promotes active citizenship so they can play an effective part in the democratic processes that affect them.

HeadsUp enables **politicians** to consult with **young people**, to find out their ideas, experiences and opinions. There is ample background information to prepare **young people** for the debates, as well as **teachers'** notes and activities.

How equal is Britain?

Forum Summary

There were 4,254 visits to the website throughout the course of the forum, with 1,169 posts.[∞] This represents the highest number of comments posted for any HeadsUp forum since the site's creation in 2003.

The forum was split into sub-topics, each with a broad heading covering an issue related to equality. These subjects were selected both for their timeliness, and also to prompt discussion in areas that young people might hold a particular interest. The four threads were:

- **How fair is Britain?** – Is Britain divided? Were the riots in London, Birmingham and Manchester a reaction to inequality in our society? How can we make sure that Parliament is more representative of British society?
- **Young People and Equality** – Have you ever experienced age discrimination? Should there be a younger voting age? Are young people more affected by government cuts than other groups in society?
- **Education and Equality** – Does everyone have an equal chance in our education system? Do schools do enough to include students with special education needs and disabilities?
- **Sport and Equality** – Are sports sexist? Can women's sports ever reach the same status as men's? Do you think mixed sports teams at schools are a good idea?

The general themes and directions of the debate are highlighted in the following pages, along with specific ideas given by forum users.¹

Riots in England

Although the riots in London, Birmingham and elsewhere had been quelled over a month before the forum began, participants were still keen to discuss the causes. Opinion was divided on the reasons for the disorder: some posters believed that the government's failure to address problems in society had put the rioters in a desperate situation. Others thought that most of the justifications given were excuses for criminal behaviour.

I believe that the people who got involved in the riots had a reason. Maybe it was because the government were not really taking care of them. They have got nothing left, so they have got nothing to lose. So, I think, that's what started the riots. They

[∞] Includes: young people, moderators, teachers and decision-makers.

¹ All quotes are direct and unamended.

were getting angry, they had nothing to lose, and that combination was just so unfortunate.

I don't think there was a message behind the riots because it could have started for a reason but most people that were involved with it were doing it for the excitement and money that looting provides.

I think that inequality was partly to blame for the riots but 2 wrongs don't make a right and surely they wouldn't want to get into trouble?

One poster argued that if the rioters had grievances they could have expressed themselves through non-violent protest.

In situations where people feel they are being treated unfairly, they might do a peaceful protest, write letters or create petitions i.e. something that makes them show they deserve to be treated fairly (if they are currently not)

Among posters who condemned the rioters, there was agreement that harsher discipline was necessary, both from parents and police.

Britain should not start worrying about how fair their being .they should worry about being sterner! =(

If anything, the riots exposed why we need tougher criminal punishments and a stricter, more efficient police force - not helping these people at all in the long run.

Was inequality to blame for the recent riots in London and other British cities?



During the forum the students were asked whether they thought inequality was to blame for the riots in the summer of 2011.

The majority felt that inequality played at least some role in the riots, although the comments on the forum suggest that the young people did not see this as an excuse for criminal behaviour.

Freedom of expression and the French niqab ban

One of the issues highlighted to students that sparked much debate was the French government's decision to ban Muslim women from wearing face coverings in public places. The majority of posters disagreed strongly with the French government's decision, contending that Muslim women had the right to dress as they wished. Others pointed out that the measure prevented women from practising their faith, and felt that this discriminated against Muslims.

It's wrong to tell people how to dress, this country should be run on the basis of equality, so if you're muslim, christian or any other religion you should be allowed to wear what you want.

Yes, I think everyone should be able to wear what they want. We live in a country now, where there is a strict separation between the church of england, the queen and government and although in convention, the 3 were closely tied, I think it is invalid to say England is a predominantly protestant country. In such instances, people should be able to express their religious views by wearing headscarfs etc.

Some posters, although broadly supportive of women's right to wear the niqab, did feel there might be exceptional circumstances (e.g. security) when that right could be curtailed.

Although when trying to get into another country, if asked to show thier faces even though they might think it is against their religion, they should do as told, for the safety of others.

I don't think it is fair to ban head scarves however I think that sometimes some minorities, such as criminals, wear veils to avoid being caught, which is probably why some might argue that veils should be banned.

Equal representation in Parliament

Most posters agreed that they would like to see more minorities in Parliament, but there was no consensus on quota policies, with some arguing that they prevented the best person being selected for the job. Some contributors acknowledged that men had an advantage over women because of the public perception of politics as a 'male' sphere.

Although I think that it is unfair that there are so few women, people from ethnic minorities and people who are gay/lesbian who are MPs, I'm not sure about having a quota. Everbody should have an equal chance to become an MP. If having a quota is their solution to it, then this is fine, but will these MPs be the best people for the job?

I strongly believe that men dominate such things such as the government.

I think that more women should be in the parliment because then decisions would be made from both a female and male point of view. The only thing that might put women of is that Politics is generally dubbed as being to do with men.

Voting age

There was a lengthy discussion on the voting age, with a range of proposals discussed. Some felt that children took on more responsibility at secondary school and that this was a good age to start voting, while others voiced concerns about the maturity and political knowledge of younger children.

Some proposed a 'maturity test' that young people could pass to gain the vote. Others suggested parents should decide when their child is ready.

I think that children should be allowed a vote when you start secondary school as this is the age we earn more responsibility and should have a say in who will be making the decisions for our country.

I think that 18 is a good age to be able to vote as most younger people probably wouldn't understand how most of it works.

This test should be available from the age of 12 and when ever you feel ready you can take a free exam to see if you are mature enough to vote.

Let the parents decide. if they think thier child is ready to take a leap in growing up. we should have the permission to vote

Some posters thought that giving young people the vote would force politicians to take their concerns into consideration.

I think You should be allowed to vote at the age of 12. This means that the person who gets elected will be best for youngert and older people.

For some participants, full suffrage was a step too far, but they felt there was room for compromise, giving young people limited voting rights.

Maybe learning about it in Citizenship as a topic once a year when you are in years 7, 8 and 9, and then be able to have a kind of "joint vote" as a school when you are in years 10 and 11.

I think that we are too young to vote for major, country elections, or someone who is very special, but I think that younger people should be allowed to vote in smaller, minor elections such as choosing a new mayor in a town

University fees

The majority of students felt that the recent tuition fees rise had made access to university less equal, and excluded some people entirely, with a negative impact on the skills of the next generation as a consequence. One poster suggested that a graduate tax would be a fairer arrangement. Others reasoned that the fees rise was necessary if universities were to be properly paid for.

Many students cannot go to university, even if they are very clever, because of the increased fees. I strongly believe this is wrong because the people who would like to go to uni will be the leaders for Britain's future

If people want to study why should they have to pay? It's not right! There should be at least one thing free in this world and that should be education.

I think that in the case of uni fees, they should not have tuition fees, maybe have a graduation fee.

If you can't afford the uni fees then don't go to uni. They need that much money to pay the staff.

Single-sex schools and the 'Gender Gap'

There was a general agreement that boys were less inclined to work hard than girls, in part because of social pressure and partly because they find it harder to concentrate. One or two students also felt that a lack of male teachers might have an effect.

The main reason that girls scored higher, in my opinion, is: There are more female teachers than males in most schools.

Some boys can be bothered but often it is the girls that do the best. Maybe this is because boys are easily distracted.

Single-sex schools were agreed to benefit girls academically as it was felt classes were disrupted less often. It was also argued that both sexes learned differently and benefited from being taught in a specialised way. Some posters recognised potential difficulties with regards to socialising, but believed these could be overcome by twinning schools or organising joint social functions.

I go to an all girls school and think it is easier to learn with out boys interrupting as they so often do!

Boys and girls do learn differently because boys are into different things to girls. If you gave boys a maths lesson, incorporating action, they would take to it far better than if they were in a classroom. Whereas, girls tend to prefer quieter, more relaxing activities and this is the environment that they learn best in.

A part of life is being able to learn with the other sex and some people don't get that

Private, Grammar and Comprehensive schools

Most pupils seemed to think that grammar schools helped brighter pupils achieve their potential due to the benefits of being around like-minded students. Some posters said they felt ability was a better way of segregating students than income, as is the case in private schools. However, others pointed out that access to grammar schools is not equal because of elements such as tutoring or travel costs.

even though the 11+ is free you can't stick a verbal reasoning paper in front of a person who is potentially very smart, they need tutoring, which costs money so in some ways the 11+ isn't fair

It is unfair that if you have less money you have fewer opportunities and less chance of getting a good job in later life. However, I do think that grammar schools are good. I myself attend a girls' grammar and I think that they are good because the criteria for getting in is based on ability rather than money.

School Uniform

School uniform was an extensively debated topic. Many students felt that uniforms were unappealing and uncomfortable to wear, and stopped students from expressing themselves.

Others countered that uniforms made pupils equal and prevented bullying and competitiveness over fashion. Many pupils also noted the value of uniforms in making students part of a community, although a few did voice their irritation that teachers were not subject to uniform rules while pupils were, and said this made them feel unequal.

I think school uniform is an important part of school. It shows that you belong to the school of the uniform. I myself would rather not wear school uniform but it is certainly a key part of school.

Everyone tells us to be ourselves - how can we when we are all stuck in the same clothes?

School dress codes are fair as they show equality. If everyone wears the same clothes they can not be taunted because of their style.

Women's Sport

There was almost unanimous agreement that the world of sports favours men over women. Posters felt that men's sports got more attention, were broadcast more often, and that sportsmen were higher paid than sportswomen.

In tennis women only get to play 3 games and men get 5! That is just saying that men think that women are weaker! Also, in football women get way less popularity and money than men, which isn't fair. There are loads of sports that women are good at but that doesn't get televised.

Sport isn't entirely sexist, but it is on the telly! You never see women playing sport on tv and men are payed a lot more.

Stereotypes about gender were agreed to play a role in discrimination. Many posters identified "boys" and "girls" sports, and some girls spoke of personal experience of being excluded from football because of their gender. One poster thought that parents' expectations of their children might condition them to enjoy particular sports. A number of posters said they found these stereotypes frustrating, and said that people should be able to play any sport regardless of sex.

Sports are sexist because there seem to be 'boys sports' and 'girls sports' for example: football is associated with boys, and netball with girls. At some schools the

boys aren't allowed to play rounders and the girls aren't allowed to play cricket. I don't think this is fair at all because some girls do like cricket and some boys do like rounders even though people don't think they will.

It is usually a man's instinct to choose football rather than Ballet, but is that because they really like football or were they brought up to enjoy football, or don't they like the way Ballerinas dress? It is the same with women, do they like Ballet, do they like looking elegant, or were they just brought up that way?

Opportunities and attitudes towards sport were agreed to be determined at a young age. Girls reported being put off by P.E. lessons, which tended in their experience to favour boys. Some also reported that their schools were uninterested in girls' sport and provided fewer facilities. There were also agreed to be fewer female role models in sport.

At my old school we had a girls football team and a boys football team. The school paid for the boys football kits but would not pay for the girls.

I think what stops women getting involved is confidence, men are always said to be best. As a girl I think that men should step back and let women have a chance.

When I was younger I was put off sport, because I never saw female players, which made me think that women weren't allowed to participate. It totally put me off sport and I never tried because I didn't think it would be a job possibility.

There was disagreement over whether mixed sports were desirable. Some posters conceded that physical differences gave men an advantage, but others pointed out that this was not applicable in all sports, and that women had skills that could complement those of male athletes in team games. Others maintained that separate sports gave women more opportunities for success.

I think that men and women should be able to compete together, but I also think that they should be able to compete with their own gender too.

My personal views on this subject are men and women should not play sports together because men are naturally (in most cases) marginally better than girls in this area of the curriculum. It gives women the chance to shine as well as men and they have an equal chance of medal winning.

I think that there should be mixed sports teams because women and men both are equal. Women have a different way of doing things, and so do men. If they mix this together, the team could be really good.

Dale Farm

Posters were divided over what to make of the situation at Dale Farm. Many maintained that the traveller community should seek permission before building, but also felt that travellers suffered discrimination, and that the council's action was too drastic.

It is unfair moving them as they will have nowhere to go. But they are not paying to stay there. So if they paid them it might be alright but at the moment it is unfair on the people that pay mortgages.

I believe travellers are have a right to put their caravans somewhere like a field otherwise they wont have a place to live.

i agree now that as long as they have permission it is there right. that is thier way of life dude.

I think people being on illegal sites is wrong because the first half of dale farm is allowed because they did it properly but the second half should not be there.

Political Context

The period surrounding the forum was particularly fruitful for stories about equality, with unemployment and increasing income disparity making the headlines, particularly in the wake of the riots and the Government's programme of public sector cuts. Questions of cultural discrimination were also raised by the Dale Farm controversy and women in France facing fines for covering their faces in public. Students were also very aware of issues surrounding equality that had emerged in the last year or so, with the university tuition fees rises being a popular topic of discussion.

The HeadsUp team would like to convey our thanks and appreciation to the decision-makers, young people and teachers who got involved in this debate. We would also like to extend an invitation to interested parties, particularly legislators and government, interested NGOs, academics and journalists to respond to the findings. Responses and requests for further information should be directed to:

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