

Start the debate: global learning and the 2015 General Election

Introduction

At first glance, teachers may consider the General Election as a non-important issue for pupils. Will pupils really be interested in it? Are there ways that we can engage them by showing how aspects of it relate to global matters? It may well appear that the political parties pay scant attention to global learning themes, as they concentrate on domestic matters. But perhaps it's worth considering how those domestic matters are actually tied up with global matters as well. It's not just a General Election being fought in the UK – there are some local elections and broader issues here as well. This aide memoire points out some of the issues that you, as global educators, can draw on in this election season, with both a national and local political focus.

What are the issues?

The biggest issues that could form the basis of exploration with pupils are taken from the key aspects of the GLP: those concerned with social justice, poverty and sustainability, conflict resolution and environmental change. These words are not necessarily visible in the election materials, but the issues are. For example, when looking at foreign policy, it is legitimate to try to understand what the political parties' ambitions are in relation to regional conflicts or environmental damage and degradation. How do these themes play out in our own communities in relation to aspects of cohesive communities, migration and sustainable food production? Of course not all politicians will make the connections – or perhaps even want to make them. However, pupils can investigate these issues and research them to understand what their democratic representatives stand for and talk about in relation to such matters, they should try to raise them with any representatives they meet with and include them in school-based debates, mock-elections or campaigning. This does not make the whole topic one just for citizenship teachers. In all subjects there is authentic learning to be had by pupils exploring the issues in a way that will help them make more coherent sense of our democratic system of governance, how it affects them and how they can affect it.

What are parties saying?

Currently the political parties are not saying much about their policies, with some not even publishing their manifestos until almost the last moment. However, some of the bigger issues will still come to the fore, and one or two are there for all to see (there is more on this below). It is important to understand that what parties say they will do and what they actually can commit to may be very different. Given the changing nature of the government – coalition perhaps rather than one outright winner – there will be compromises to be made by those who take power, and there will be budget and policy restrictions as well. However, regardless of the solidity of the policy and what may or may not happen in practice, the key thing – and

also the most interesting – is debating the main issues that link these elections to global learning.

What do NGOs want to hear from the parties?

Most NGOs that are concerned with global matters will want big commitments on issues such as poverty, overseas spending and aid, conflict resolution, world health, food and water programmes, and deeper commitments to environmental change. Some, like the [UNA](#)¹ have a charter for change in place already that they want the UK government to sign up to. Others will be issuing their own manifesto – look out for memos or briefings. These may be of use to you when researching, but need to be treated with care and balanced with the views of others. You could search for these online and encourage pupils to evaluate them for their breadth and depth as well as single-issue focus.

Use the big questions below to start the debate on global matters:

The questions below could form starting points for you to use with pupils. They are not all easy to unlock or find within party manifestos, and you may need to approach or write to candidates in order to understand their position better. However, these questions are good starting points for a whole range of global matters during this election time.

- Which parties are committed to a 0.7% of GDP to development overseas? This commitment was recently enacted in a new law. Did your previous MP support or oppose this [commitment](#)²?
- Is a commitment to a 0.7% of GDP to development overseas truly sustainable for a new government given our economic circumstances?
- What are the parties' views on development assistance?
- What are the parties' views on continuing with support for all existing human rights legislation? (Including that in the UK and Europe.)
- What are the parties' views on promoting social justice in the context of development assistance?
- What are the parties' views on the coming European Year of Development and the new sustainable development goals (SDGs)?
- What are the parties' views on current conflicts and investment in rebuilding after warfare?

¹ UNA (2014) *A global force for good*. Online: www.una.org.uk/sites/default/files/UNA-UK%202014%20Manifesto%20-%20for%20print.pdf

² The Guardian (2015) *UK passes bill to honour pledge of 0.7% foreign aid target*. Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/mar/09/uk-passes-bill-law-aid-target-percentage-income>

- What do the parties say about water and food security, and countering environmental and climate damage?
- What do the parties say about how they see the connections between building more cohesive and just communities overseas with those at home?
- What do the parties say about linking global matters, such as radicalisation, to local and regional matters?
- What do the parties say about human rights matters such as FGM, rape in war, women's education and child soldiers?
- What are the parties' views on whether, or in what ways, Britain might become involved in a number of international conflicts?
- What are the parties' attitudes to nuclear weapons and proliferation and the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), to international security and boundary respect?

What have the parties said already?

[The party manifestos have now been released](#), but below are some indications in their pronouncements on foreign and external affairs matters:

Conservatives: hold a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU by 2017, after negotiating the return of some powers from Brussels. Protect foreign-aid budget of 0.7% GDP. Replace Trident.

Labour: committed to 0.7% GDP on foreign aid. Push for reform of European Union and prevent Britain from 'sleepwalking' towards exit. Commit in law to holding a Strategic Defence and Security Review every five years.

Liberal Democrats: committed to 0.7% GDP on foreign aid. Campaign to reduce the number of Trident nuclear submarines. Push for greater European Union efficiency.

SNP: oppose nuclear weapons and push for removal of Trident submarines from Scotland. In 2010, a Scottish Centre for Reconciliation and Conflict Resolution was proposed to promote peaceful alternatives to armed conflict. Maintain 0.7% commitment to foreign aid. Enhanced role for Scotland within the UK in Europe, particularly in fisheries policy.

Plaid Cymru: honour commitment of 0.7% of budget used for foreign aid. Campaign for cancellation of developing countries' debts. Support the Fair Trade movement. Support the 'Tobin' or 'Robin hood' tax as a means of encouraging more responsibility and stability in the global markets. Reform the IMF and World Bank in order to improve regulation and accountability. Continue membership of the EU, but campaign for democratic reform. Support minority nations and minority language speakers around the world.

UKIP: leave the European Union. Remove the passports of any person who has gone to fight for a terrorist organisation and deport anyone who has committed a terrorist act. Cut foreign aid budget by £9 billion.

Greens: referendum on Britain's EU membership. Reform EU to hand powers back to local communities. Boost overseas aid to 1% of GDP within ten years. Scrap Britain's nuclear weapons. Take the UK out of NATO unilaterally. End the so-called 'special relationship' between the UK and the US. Stop EU-US free trade deal TTIP³.

Teaching strategies

This General Election should spark a good deal of interest among young people on the back of a year of interesting politics: the European Elections in May 2014 that saw UKIP and other right of centre parties across Europe gain more influence, then the independence campaign and referendum in Scotland in September 2014 that gave young people aged 16 and above a say in national politics for the first time in the UK. Of course many young people may also be disinterested in the elections and the campaigning, which will seem to go on for ever. The time is right therefore to fire the imagination of pupils about the election matters from a specific angle – that of global learning. In doing so, you should be aware of the challenges and risks of teaching controversial, topical and sensitive issues, which many of these matters will be in our schools and communities. Key considerations should be to:

- be mindful that these are controversial and topical aspects of learning
- use appropriate teaching approaches and management strategies
- promote respectful debate, discussion, listening and reflection
- ensure balance and avoid partisanship at all times.⁴

You should consider using approaches that rely on critical thinking skills, community of enquiry approaches, P4C and the OSDE methodology. More advice and guidance on this can be found at: www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/lib_res_pdf/0118.pdf



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In association with the Association for Citizenship Teaching

³ Courtesy of BB Manifesto Watch: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-29642613>

⁴ 1996 Education Act 'Political indoctrination (1) the local education authority, governing body and head teacher shall forbid (a) the pursuit of partisan political activities by any of those registered pupils at a maintained school who are junior pupils, and (b) the promotion of partisan political views in the teaching of any subject in the school.'