

Henry Tam's blog as Director of Forum for Youth Participation and Democracy from July 2011 to December 2014

(not all links live at time of creation Jan 2015)

The Challenges for Democracy & Participation

[Dr. Henry Tam](#), gives his views on the latest development (you can also follow [HenryBTam on Twitter](#)),:

December 2014/January 2015

The Forum for Youth Participation & Democracy (FYPD), a 4-year project established by Cambridge University in 2011 to explore the problem of youth exclusion in decision-making, is now drawing to a close. In 2015, the work on civic engagement, consensus building, and peace education will be taken forward through a new research programme.

The materials developed by FYPD will be archived and information on how to access them will be made available once the reconfiguration of the relevant webpages has been completed. The Forum's Director, Dr. Henry Tam, is continuing to lead the ['Question the Powerful' political education project](#), and you can contact him via email (htam.global@talk21.com) or visit his blog, ['Question the Powerful'](#).

We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has supported or contributed to our work, and we look forward to working with you again in the future.

November 2014

Research has long established that young people are not so much apathetic as switched off by the political options that appear to give them no real influence at all. Why go through the motion of joining a political party or casting a vote when one cannot see how that would change anything that matters? When someone comes along and says that with the wave of a revolutionary wand, everything can be transformed, it is not surprising that some may find that an inviting proposition. But the key question is what kind of revolution is being offered. Revolutions can be a catalyst for positive change, and they can also bring their own abuse and injustice. Anyone tempted to join in any revolutionary movement should learn to unpack the box of promises and discover what is truly in store for them. Not all revolutions are equal, and some are decidedly less equal than others (For more, see ['Revolution for Beginners'](#).)

October 2014

If we find out that someone routinely takes money from our bank account, and instead of receiving any adequate explanation, all we get is a blunt message that the money has been put to good use, we would certainly want to stop it. But what if the money is actually spent on protecting us from a wide range of threats that we, acting individually, cannot deal with. Without the services funded by that money, collected from us and everyone else, we would suffer both directly from the harm inflicted on us and indirectly from having to live in a fragmented and dysfunctional society. Yet unless the people, who are using the money taken from us to organise these services to enhance our safety and wellbeing, act transparently and effectively, and can be held accountable by us, we would still be unsure if this arrangement is one we should accept.

This, in a nutshell, is the problem of resourcing government. And while many politicians are saying we should give up on securing enough resources to tackle the problems that pose a threat to us, the only viable way forward is to develop a genuinely collaborative, easy-to-understand, and appealing system for raising public funds to deal with our shared challenges. For an example of how this approach can be carried out, see ['The National Safety Fund explained'](#)).

September 2014

Ignorance is bliss for those who seek to keep others deceived. So long as the vast majority have no idea what they should do, the manipulative few can con their way to making ever more gains at the expense of everyone else's deepening pains. Democracy was meant to give all citizens an equal say in deciding what should be done for the good of all, but it doesn't work when political ignorance is endemic. Whatever protest and online petition young people give their support to, their declining readiness to vote in elections means that they have less influence on who will run their local council, their national government, and their European Parliament, when these are the institutions that will have the greatest impact on their lives. The antidote to this problem is not some mantra about the civic duty of voting, but political education that will really open young people's eyes to why iniquitous power distribution is so damaging for them; what alternatives would most likely deliver more desirable outcomes; and how they need to organise to help bring about those changes.

If you would like to be part of the ['Question the Powerful' political education project](#), and play a role in raising understanding of what democratic politics should and can achieve, email the Forum's Director, Dr. Henry Tam (hbt21@cam.ac.uk).

August 2014

Many people have talked about the value of participation, especially in the context of getting young people to engage in activities that help to shape and promote the public good. But in practice, participation can lead to a greater sense of futility when nothing is actually changed, or a few take over the process and the rest become alienated. What is needed to boost youth and community engagement is an approach that is at once practically accessible and captivating in the difference it can make to one's school and locality. 'Incredible Edible Todmorden' is just such an initiative. In essence, it invites and facilitates the people of Todmorden to join in and help with growing edible plants in public spaces, and explore how the increased supply of fresh produce can be made available to meet the needs of the town. Growing, cooking and sharing food together always bring people together positively, and what the incredible activists of Todmorden have done is to use that spirit of public cooperation in enhancing the quality of life across their town in countless ways, that others can adapt and adopt for their own towns and cities. (For more about 'Incredible Edible Todmorden', read ['We Are What We Eat'](#))

July 2014

Problem-solving through people cooperating with one another on equal terms has been found consistently to achieve better and more sustainable outcomes than leaving answers to an unquestionable authority to impose, or leaving it to individuals to cope without any collaborative framework. Yet the problem of 'Cooperation Denial' persists. This is due largely to the presence of systemic ignorance, selective indifference, and structural imbalance of power – combining to make it feasible for a powerful elite to dictate terms to others without having to give any due consideration to how their behaviour affects everyone else. Democracy can only function if cooperation deniers are deprived of their props. In other words, if education teaches why and how cooperative problem-solving is preferable, public institutions are strengthened rather than dismantled in providing a common infrastructure for mutual protection, and power is redistributed from those with too much to those with too little, then citizens in all spheres of life will be able to cooperate as equals.

(For more, see: ['Cooperation Denial'](#) and ['The Radical Communitarian Synthesis'](#))

June 2014

25 years ago university students gathered in Tiananmen Square to protest against the lack of democratic reforms in China. On the 4th June 1989, the government sent in troops to clear the square of protestors. Many young students lost their lives. The calls for democratisation were silenced. Could the protestors have done anything differently? There were two lessons that might be relevant for democratic activists in China or anywhere else in the world for that matter. First, isolated protests without wider support from the public rarely manage to secure significant concessions. The Solidarity movement in Poland built a mass resistance movement that the authoritarian state could not brush aside, and multi-party elections were held on that fateful day of 4th June

1989 when Solidarity candidates scored the best results. Secondly, having multi-party elections is a necessary but not sufficient condition for ensuring political power is shared out amongst citizens equally. Many democratic activists in Eastern Europe have belatedly learnt that unless the corporate elite were effectively regulated and held to account, plutocracy would become the de facto rule. For democratic reforms to deliver a truly fairer distribution of power in society, corporations must cease to dictate terms to everyone else.

(See: [‘In Solidarity or In Solitary’](#))

May 2014

In the UK, amongst people aged 65 or over, 17% of them have not registered to vote. For 19-24 year olds, 44% have not registered to vote. Some commentators think that because many young people are ready to join in street protest, online petition, or store boycott, they are simply using different channels to engage politically. But the ultimate power to do good or evil in any country rests with the sovereign state. And if young people surrender their vote, politicians who prefer to look after their plutocratic allies will not hesitate to treat them with even greater contempt. The costs of going to university will keep sky-rocketing, support for housing will vanish, poorly paid jobs will be served up as work opportunities, and ill-health and old age will be problems increasingly left to individuals to cope with. Young and old citizens alike must take their vote seriously, and learn to use it to secure better public policies, not least to get rid of politicians who cannot be trusted with power.

For the three main reasons why people are disinclined to vote and what can be done, see [‘All Quiet on the Voting Front?’](#)

April 2014

To understand where we are politically, we are often told to look back to how we got to the present position, and imagine where we might end up if things continue as they are. The problem is the terrain of the past is immense, and there are so many ways to conceive how the future may turn out. As a starting point, perhaps we can take a very brief look at the essential historical development that has taken us to our current predicament – with [‘A History of the World in 500 words’](#), you will be able to reflect on the rights and wrongs of past power distribution. And if the manipulation were allowed to continue, then the future would not be far from this dystopian mirror on what’s awaiting us all – [‘Whitehall through the Looking Glass’](#). Think back, think ahead, just don’t think things will get better without political action.

March 2014

The Forum of Youth Participation & Democracy has engaged with leading community and cooperative organisations to establish a shared understanding of what constitutes [‘cooperative problem-solving’](#). The more young people learn about this approach, and the more opportunities social and economic organisations have to put this approach into practice, the more likely it is that the shortage of adequately paid work can be remedied by cooperative enterprises recruiting more extensively to expand their activities. A key determining factor will be whether the UK has a cooperative minded government that will give real support to the development of cooperative working. In the coming months, politicians who sing the praise of the cooperative sector should be invited to confirm if they will, given the opportunity in government, do any of the four things that are crucial to establish their cooperative credentials (for the four commitments that ought to be made, see [‘Time for a Cooperative Government’](#).)

February 2014

There should be a course called ‘Politics for Outsiders’ for everyone who is not aware of how public policies are shaped by the lobbying of a wealthy minority, how propaganda is deployed to divert frustration and anger at vulnerable scapegoats, and why the disinterest of many citizens in politics only serves to bolster plutocratic rule. With so many people wrongly assuming that all politicians are “the same”, having little understanding of policy options, and thinking that there is no point in engaging with political action, the outsiders now constitute a vast majority governed by a minority who have very different interests of their own to protect. Teaching about

government institutions and electoral processes is no substitute for critical explanations of how power actually works in society, and why inclusive political actions are the only way to reclaim collective decision making for the people. (For more on this, see [‘Politics for Outsiders: an educational mission’](#).)

January 2014

Educators are told that young people must be taught important historical dates. As this is the quincentenary of the 1514 watershed year that heralded the progressive tradition, I would encourage all teachers and young people to commemorate the year in which Erasmus wrote ‘Julius Excluded from Heaven’ to mock papal hypocrisy; Copernicus wrote the ‘Little Commentary’ to set out his heliocentric alternative to the then orthodox theory of the sun going round the earth; Thomas More began writing ‘The History of Richard III’ to attack monarchical tyranny; Machiavelli completed ‘The Prince’ to explain how difficult but necessary it is to secure power to help bring about a free republic; and Philip von Hohenheim embarked on his medical career and soon after changed his name to Paracelsus to signal that medical studies must go beyond ancient authors like Celsus and embrace practical experimentation.

To resist attempts to inculcate docility in pupils and revive the teaching of dogmas in schools (from creationism to climate-change denial), let us celebrate the 500th anniversary of a year when the thoughtful were wise and bold in questioning the powerful (see: [‘Question the Powerful: quincentenary of the 1514 watershed’](#))

December 2013

We hear of community-based projects to engage young people in finding solutions to the problems they face. But how successful are such projects? To answer this question, we need a shared understanding of what success is supposed to be, and how it is to be measured. Many projects and their evaluation suffer from the twin blow of having an unsatisfactory preconception of ‘success’ expected from them, and having to respond to a mechanical process designed to measure impact in accordance with this preconception. If ‘success’ is defined in terms that are only of interest to external funders, or left too vague, project evaluation would inevitably become a demotivating exercise, with the people who are supposed to be helped left thinking their concerns do not really matter after all. What is needed instead is an inclusive approach whereby funders, community action groups and members of communities themselves engage in cooperative problem-solving and establish a common set of priorities at the outset of the project. Only then can evaluation measures the success communities actually care about. (See:  [‘Cooperative Problem-Solving: what it means in theory and practice’](#); and [‘The Art of Nurturing Communities’](#))

November 2013

One of the oldest debates in philosophy and education concerns which collection of doctrines should be taught to help people cope with, and hopefully thrive on, life’s experiences. Contests between rival scientific, cultural, religious, political, and economic ideas have raged through the centuries. Inevitably it raises the question of how one is to choose between these doctrines without reference to another set of doctrines. One is then left with the seeming paradox that one must either arbitrarily pick one set rather than another, or embark on an infinite regress of looking for further doctrines to justify any doctrine one is inclined to accept.

The only coherent way out is to shift from static authority-based teaching to progressive lifelong learning, which enables us to think and interact with one another in a continuously open, critical and democratic way, so that together we can understand what we believe in the light of the available evidence. It is time to revisit why the cooperative gestalt engendered by progressive lifelong learning needs to be more systematically promoted (see [‘The Cooperative Gestalt’](#)).

October 2013

For Aristotle, politics was the most important study because it brought together the learning of all other disciplines to inform our understanding of how society should be organised and what action should be taken for

the common good. In a democratic society, this enriched understanding is not the privileged possession of an unaccountable elite, but provides the very basis for citizens to judge what policies and politicians should get their backing. But how effective are we in cultivating this vital understanding with successive generations? Political education, far from being the most important part of what is taught in schools, universities or adult learning, is often left on the margins. Hampered by the lack of a common framework and the constant threat of being accused of showing 'political' bias, political education has a long way to go to be established as key to the development of citizens. If we are to have a functioning democracy, this must change, and change fast. (For more, read ['Who's Afraid of Political Education?'](#)).

September 2013

How people want to see youngsters develop in their formative years determines what they want education to achieve. For those who want to see young people grow into thoughtful individuals who can play their part in society as responsible citizens and realise their own potential in living a meaningful life, education is about nurturing students so that they are ready to learn continuously in future years to improve themselves under changing circumstances. For others, young people should simply and exclusively be sorted by their abilities to pass short-term exams so as to be assigned their station in life, and accordingly education is about subjecting students to a narrow range of tests and putting a permanent marker on them as 'good', 'average', or 'poor' for the rest of their lives. The challenge for educators is that even if they favour the former outlook, the prevailing plutocratic power structure in society demands an unequivocal adoption of the latter approach. There is no easy way to go against the current of institutionalised expectations, but the struggle will not go away. If you believe that education should prepare students for lifelong moral and intellectual growth, you are not alone. (See ['The Loneliness of the Long Distance Teacher'](#), and share your comments.)

July-August 2013

Stendhal famously captured the life options for aspiring young people in the 19th century with the title of his majestic novel, 'The Red & the Black' – the red uniform for those who want to obtain glory in the army, or the black cassock for those who seek to attain status in the church. Today it would have to be renamed 'The Suit'. For while any colour will do, the only recognised success must now come via a suited career in the business world. Successive governments want to focus the role of education on producing cohorts who will dutifully serve or imperiously run enterprises, on which everything else in society allegedly depends.

But enterprise is only as good as the impact it makes, and some we know can seriously damage our health. To appreciate the value of business organisations, we need to distinguish between those which make preponderantly positive contributions and those which are indisputably harmful to society overall. We should promote awareness and interest in socially responsible, cooperatively run companies. And we should certainly put a critical spotlight on what ought to be more generally known as anti-social enterprise.

[Read more on ['Anti-Social Enterprise'](#); you can also find out more about socially responsible forms of enterprise from ['Young Co-operatives'](#) and ['Young People Social Enterprise Network'](#)]

June 2013

What would happen if politicians, instead of taking charge of the country for five years so long as they can get enough support from MPs to form a government after a general election, have to go back to the electorate on an annual basis for the mandate to rule? Many pioneers for democratic reforms have long advocated annual elections as a tool to strengthen government's accountability to the public. Back in the 1640s, the Levellers put it forward as part of the settlement to move beyond undemocratic rule (be it by a monarch like Charles I or a Parliamentarian like Cromwell). In 1838, the Chartists included it as one of their six demands for Parliamentary reform – it remains to this day the only Chartist demand to be completely sidelined. But annual elections would give people a real incentive to engage in political deliberations as they can translate their assessment of rival party options into a decision on who should govern. At present, those in government can ignore all criticisms and dissatisfaction for a better part of four years and then pour money into a single campaign when, with the

disillusioned not voting and the distracted not remembering previous transgression, they might just win power to rule for another five years. Whatever the merits are of compulsory voting, or lowering the voting age, a shift to annual elections may yet give the greatest boost to electoral participation [See [‘Chartist No.6: the call for annual elections’](#)]

May 2013

There is a perennial debate about whether the education provided to young people will enable them to fulfil a productive role in the economy. What we hear much less of is whether the education system will help them function in a democracy. Given that one of the main reasons why the current economy is structured to suit the interests of the corporate sector at the expense of millions of people who either have jobs which pay less than a living wage or no job at all, it is essential we question how ready will the next generation be to realise the potential of democratic life. Do they get to learn, we ought to ask, how the vast majority might be better off if they back the redistribution of power from those with too much to everyone else in society. The riposte is that political ideas are highly contested and should not be transmitted through schools. But then the economic ideas which purport to define what counts as a productive role or what constitutes legitimate market conditions are also highly contested; and they permeate current education policies and practices. If the economy is going to be truly steered to meet the needs of society as articulated by democratic deliberations, then education for democracy should be strengthened, not least with a greater understanding of how plutocracy is becoming a new form of tyrannical rule.

[Find out more on [‘The Greed Tyranny’](#), and two public talks on [‘The Problem with Plutocracy’](#) to be given in Cambridge this May]

April 2013

We often hear that although young people are less engaged in electoral politics, they are active in single issue campaigns and protest activities. The latter, however, are not a substitute for the former. To lose interest in how government power should be directed towards serving our common wellbeing is to risk that power being captured by those who are only really concerned with serving the wealthy elite. According to a recent analysis of the British Social Attitudes Survey (from 1983-2010), today's young people are “less supportive of the NHS than their parents were; are less likely to favour higher benefits (though they are far more likely than their elders to be unemployed); and feel less connection to society at large than previous generations.” (‘Generation self: what do young people really care about?’, Guardian 11 March 2013). [To find out how young people voted in the recent ‘No, Minister’ poll compared with others, take a look at [‘Don’t Know Much About Politics?’](#)]

March 2013

Few would dispute that schools should teach their pupils how to act in a considerate manner towards each other. But how many young people get to learn about the conditions which are necessary for responsible behaviour? What is seldom, if ever, taught is that the tendency to engage in mutually supportive interactions is inversely proportional to the inequality of power distribution.

In essence, the Power Hypothesis states that in any social context (e.g., a school, a firm, a country), the more power is concentrated in a few at the expense of others, the less likely will the people concerned act reciprocally. Exploitation will most probably be the norm, with disdain and resentment polarising those affected. It ought to be a prime lesson of political education to explain the importance of curbing power inequalities (Read more in [‘The Power Hypothesis’](#))

February 2013

We are pleased to announce the opening of the 2013 ‘No, Minister’ Poll – an exercise in democratic reflection. We hear often enough from the great and the good urging young people to vote. But they all seem somewhat reluctant to talk about the difference the vote would actually make. Do they not have an opinion when people use their political offices to do vastly different things? For decades, the outdated ‘Yes, Minister’ caricature

sustained a false image of well-meaning politicians hemmed in by cunning civil servants. In reality, Ministers are rarely shy in pushing through their political agendas. Instead of going along with the illusion that they are all the same, we should promote a public discourse that critically distinguishes between them. Let's get people to think about the current crop of Cabinet Ministers.

Vote for up to three Ministers who deserve to stay in their post, and up to three who ought to be ejected. Send your vote in (with a short reason) either by tweeting to @HenryBTam (#NoMinister) or emailing to hbt21@cam.ac.uk (Subject: No Minister). Poll closes at 23:00 on Friday, 15 March 2013. Encourage others to cast their vote too. For more details, see ['No, Minister'](#)

January 2013

What is education in democracy? Teaching young people about Parliamentary institutions, with a bit of history of how universal suffrage was eventually obtained? It would seem that educators are often not sure how much they can say in raising students' understanding of conflicting political claims, or helping them differentiate between misleading assertions and proposals that would actually help people in need. But they have a vital role to play in helping young people learn about political disputes and how to use their vote to advance not just their own interests but society's common wellbeing. Doctors cannot pretend that all medication pushed by pharmaceutical companies are as good/bad as each other. Engineers cannot ignore the fact that the claims of some construction firms are less reliable than others. Similarly, teachers cannot stand back and just watch their students make no distinction between what rival politicians put before them. If despite their grounds being highly contested, religious faiths can be taught in schools, there can be no excuse for not teaching the use of democratic reasons. [See ['Like to Teach the World to Vote'](#)]

December 2012

What would Aristotle make of it? Politics, the subject through which citizens come to understand the relationships and priorities of all other issues, is for that philosopher the key to ordering society. Yet the contemporary world has thrown the concept of organising for the common good onto the scrapheap. Even politicians join in trashing the notion. Have we not heard them muttering apologetically phrases like: "this crisis is very serious, we must leave politics out of it"; "we have to find a solution together, it's no time for politics"; "we must do what is right, and forget about political correctness". No wonder politics is perceived to be an unsavoury game. The problem is that politics' own practitioners have been distracted by the media focus on image and posturing that too many of them have forgotten that politics is ultimately about brigading individuals so that their sum is greater than their parts. It is about knowing when to pool resources, how to build consensus, and why attacks on the vulnerable have to be repelled precisely because it is politically the correct thing to do. Politics is the noble art of cultivating the cooperation of equal citizens in furthering their wellbeing. One of its finest achievements is the development of the democratic state – our biggest cooperative institution. And all political activists should join forces in preventing it from further dismemberment by privateers, who just want to see real politics ousted by plutocratic manipulation. [See ['The Biggest Coop of All'](#)]

November 2012

When politicians say they want to see more youth participation, are they really concerned with young people being able to exert their influence over the decisions made by leaders in the public or private sector? Or are they just wishing to see more youngsters offering their service for free to charities or employers preferring not to pay their workers? 'Cooperative problem-solving' is what holds the key to true democratic participation. To help shape how we in the Forum for Youth Participation & Democracy can promote it more widely, come along to our next meeting at 4.30pm, 15 November (Donald McIntyre Building, off Hills Road, Cambridge). Cooperative problem-solving requires an equitable distribution of power and responsibility. And any call for a fairer redistribution of power will meet with the fiercest resistance, especially from those who see any attempt to move towards more equal cooperative relations as a direct threat against the retention of their power advantages. 76 years ago, a President who tried to secure a second term to continue his work in repairing the

damages caused by an excessively powerful, and correspondingly irresponsible, financial sector told the American people that he was well aware that Wall Street and its plutocratic allies were united in their hatred of him. Inspiringly, his response was "I welcome their hatred". [Read FDR's '[Message for America](#)']

October 2012

Cooperative Problem-Solving:

Announcement: following the 'Education for Democracy' Summit event last month, a position statement expressing the shared views of the participating individuals and organisations has now been published. If you would like to find out more about 'Cooperative Problem-Solving: the key to a reciprocal society', click on [CoopPS](#).

Democracy and Party Politics:

Politicians want young people to take democracy seriously but get terribly upset if there is any hint of 'party politics' involved. Perhaps they have forgotten that our democratic political system is propelled by party politics. From the strategic formulation of election manifestos to the infantile barracking in the House of Commons, one cannot engage with democracy without knowing party politics. And since the Tories are the senior partner of the current government, it is always useful to know what's on their mind. In the last few weeks we have learnt that a [Tory MP](#) thought that young people should go busking if they haven't got enough money to travel to job interviews; a [Tory donor](#) (and the Party's Treasurer) thought that far from closing the loopholes of offshore tax havens, the UK should become more of a tax haven for the superrich; and (according to a police report) a Tory Minister warned "plebs" that they "don't run the [expletive deleted] government." What else do these powerful people think? And how might it affect us? If you know something you would like to share with your fellow citizens, consider sharing it through '[Question the Powerful](#)'.

September 2012

What's wrong with the way political power is exercised these days? When schools performed better with their exam results – which is all politicians seem to care about in terms of education now, the response was to criticise examiners for giving too high grades. So without any discussion, lower grades were given regardless of the arbitrary changes harming those affected. When the London Metropolitan University was deemed to have failed to use their power to validate visas for overseas students properly, that power was pulled away immediately and totally with no thought for the impact on the many genuine students who could be deported before their studies were completed through no fault of their own. This kind of callous exercise of political power happens because those with the authority to take such actions believe no one would hold them to account. Indeed across the board, we have seen excessive cuts directed at the most vulnerable groups in society – the poor, the disabled, the marginalised. Citizens must organise, not just to protest, but to make use of their democratic power to unseat those who would otherwise go on obsessively cutting down the life chances of others.

[See also: '[Political OCD: is there a cure?](#)']

August 2012

With investment in the economy radically cut, employment opportunities are reduced for those trying to find the first step on the work ladder. Without a job, where the current generation of young people live and what they have to live on become more critical every day. The Government's response has been to consider further cuts to young people's eligibility for public support with housing, council tax, and other benefits. At the same time the Government is pressing ahead with changes to the electoral registration system which would make it easier for young people to drop off the radar. Deeply disillusioned with false promises and relentless cuts, young people may lose all faith in electoral politics and surrender their right to vote. But there is an alternative. They could exercise their democratic power – not simply by casting a vote which may or may not make any difference by itself, but by spreading information about the damages inflicted on their life chances by harmful policies, and the policy alternatives which could be brought in. Through ensuring that others know about the contrasting options and acting collectively to back the better choice, they can help secure a government that would respond to their

needs, and avoid any further deterioration to their condition.

(For more on why you should get involved, see [‘Your Power, Your Government’](#))

July 2012

Politicians talk about the importance of engaging young people in ‘social action’, and about empowering them to make a difference. But when the rich won’t pay their taxes, the Government’s response is a plan to scrap housing benefits for the young. In fact, while Ministers are very keen to see more young people volunteer and become ‘work ready’ for paid employment, they rarely give any support to the vital democratic elements of engaging and empowering young people in collective decision-making. For them, young people should learn to do the bidding of others who will make all the key decisions for them – at school, at work, in society at large. Yet the biggest debt society owes young people is the fulfilment of the democratic promise that they will have a real say as equal citizens in what decisions are taken that will affect them and their communities. Given that the wealthy corporate elite have seized greater control over most important decisions, it is essential young people learn how to challenge for and secure their democratic share of power in society. This will be a key theme in ‘Education for Democracy: cooperative problem-solving in school and society’, a two-day event hosted by the Forum for Youth Participation & Democracy in 12-13 September 2012. For more details see the News and Events section.

(See also [‘Democracy’s Debt to Young People’](#))

June 2012

Many people, young and old, are put off politics because they see it as a stale contest between parties with nothing significantly helpful or different to offer. While this overlooks what some politicians nobly try to achieve, it is a reflection of the limited impact of our democratic culture in engaging citizens to back vital collective actions. Facts and figures pumped out in news reports and policy pamphlets can leave many cold. The use of literature and story-telling to evoke a deeper response to political issues has more often been discussed than applied. Let us know if you have ideas on how popular fiction can be used more to promote democratic engagement. For example, a new novel, ‘Kuan’s Wonderland’, has just been published with the aim of rousing interest in the fight against injustice and oppression whatever their outward disguise may be. Using the fantasy genre, it exposes a series of iniquities in contemporary society. (Find out more about [this political fable](#))

May 2012

If society is not to be divided between those so powerful they can trample over others’ wellbeing and those unable to defend their own interests, then true democracy must prevail. We would need more than an electoral system dominated by the influence of the wealthy. What is required is a socio-political structure that enables all citizens to engage in cooperative problem-solving at their workplace, in their local communities, and through their national government. In partnership with others who share our concern in improving understanding of how democratic decision-making can function without plutocratic distortions, the Forum will be focusing on research that specifically supports the expansion of cooperative problem-solving in different spheres of life. Democracy can only be sustained if citizens continuously learn to come together for the sake of their common good. Should they forget those lessons, they would inevitably fall prey to oppression (see [‘The Case for Cooperative Problem-Solving’](#)).

April 2012

Does the freedom of a politician to present his party’s disingenuous policies trump the freedom of a concerned citizen to express his objection, in prose or otherwise? Such issues are about contested claims regarding harm being done, and they can only be settled with reference to how the evidence in any given case stacks up in the judgement of our peers. Imagine a politician had spoken to a university audience about the way Jews had according to him exaggerated the “minor inconvenience” they experienced in the 1930s and 1940s. Would we not wish for someone to interrupt him, robustly? Or conversely, if a minister’s presentation on climate change is interrupted by a student repeatedly claiming that climate change is solely down to God punishing gay people, would we not want to see a swift end to that interruption? In short, whether anyone’s speech should flow freely

without interruption cannot be judged in isolation from the reasonableness of the claims and counter-claims involved. To slap a stringent punishment against an interruption irrespective of the context bears a hint of irrationality at best, and authoritarian excess at worst. (see [The Free Speech Conundrum](#))

March 2012

Should democratic cooperation be taught to everyone? Should all citizens at school, in their community, at the workplace, and in the public domain, learn how to resolve their differences and collaborate on the basis that everyone has an equal say in the decisions that affect them? While some of us may wonder how the inculcation of such a reasonable outlook could be met with anything other than a warm welcome, the reality is that some powerful voices are against the very notion that people should help each other formulate and pursue common goals on equal terms. On the one hand, authoritarians of different hues demand to see their preferred faith, doctrine, or elite agenda command the obedience of all regardless of individual objections. On the other hand, relativist intellectuals proclaim with absolute certainty that there is no such thing as objective truth that can be invoked to resolve conflicting views. But unless we promote better learning of the techniques and benefits of democratic cooperation, and keep at bay both the authoritarians and the relativists, we would end up being mired in irreconcilable disputes and social fragmentation. (See [Much Ado About Cooperating](#)).

February 2012

Imagine a political leader who has ordered firewood to be scattered across the city, publicly defended the right of arsonists to be paid bonuses for their hard work, froze the pay of firefighters, and cut funding for fire engines. When fire breaks out across the city, he blames the firefighters for coasting along and not doing enough. Well, having scattered the firewood of widening inequalities everywhere, our Cabinet of Millionaires have decided that every time there is a report on disadvantaged children doing less well in school examinations, they will pile the blame on teachers and heads of schools. They have ushered in the age of Premier League Education, where concentrated wealth is celebrated for buying success in winning A* trophies and much besides. For schools in poor areas, they just have to keep living under the threat of relegation to a lower status which brings stigmatisation and even more funding cuts. Of course there are teachers and heads who need to improve, but not half as much as political leaders who think the slope of a plutocratic pyramid will do as a level playing field (see [Welcome to the Premier League of Education](#)).

January 2012

Many people, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, are concerned that memories of the summer riots, especially TV footage of "young people out of control in the streets, walking off with looted property from shops, noisily confronting police and so on," would lead to the public demonising young people. In fact, in the ICM poll carried out on behalf of Barnado's in November 2011, 44% of respondents believed young people were becoming feral in their behaviour. Presumably these people also believe that all adults were becoming utterly selfish and irresponsible because a small minority of adults (in the finance sector) behaved abominably in recent years, completely out of control in the board room, walking off with other people's money, nosily demanding public funds to line their own pocket. Unfortunately, some politicians will exploit such misconception and call for even more fodder education, or schooling that will 'domesticate' young minds into docile workers to serve plutocratic masters. But what we really need is not mindless fodder, but thoughtful citizens (see [Educating Fodder](#))

December 2011

From the activists of Cambridge Defend Education to workers who're losing out on pay and pension, from families being pushed into poverty to small businesses squeezed by excessive cuts, citizens are confronted by a system which, despite its formal democratic structure, appears to marginalise the majority in favour of the wealthy minority. The latest measures by the UK Government bring in more cuts that hit the poorest over 5 times as hard they do the richest (Resolution Foundation). The rich continue to receive huge subsidies for land they own, while the number of affordable homes built for the less well-off has been cut from 12,482 (April-Sept 2010)

to just 454 (April-Sept 2011). The Government's response to the nearly £100 billion of tax evaded/avoided is to cut 12,000 more tax collectors. So is democracy ineffectual? Is society fated to serve the interests of the corporate elite? Ultimately it depends on how we make our democratic voices count. The Forum will be focusing in 2012 on what form of participation can best bring about a more inclusive society. (See '[Can Democracy Be Saved?](#)')

November 2011

For centuries the primitive outlook of leaving young people (except for those born into a very wealthy family) to fend for themselves held sway. Little education, no protection for working in treacherous conditions, and no safety net if they ever became too ill, too old or just too out of luck to get any paid work. The 20th century was supposed to have changed all that. But the old callousness is making a rapid return under the guise of a most dubious economic doctrine. Instead of pooling resources, nationally and globally, to enable young people to have a sustainable future, the new priorities are to cut support for the young in every sphere of life and hand the savings to the financiers so they can keep growing richer. We would like to see researchers speak up and challenge the worldwide policies which are stripping the next generation of all hope of attaining a better quality of life. If you are playing an active part already, let us know about your work.

October 2011

If there is one thing young people should know about politics, it is that there are those who want to cultivate total cynicism amongst them so they would stay away from electoral politics. The ploy is simple enough: dismantle public services so they appear as inadequate, jettison pledges so politicians who appear to care end up looking utterly untrustworthy, and put the blame on scapegoats so people overlook the unfair policies which help those with the most at the expense of those with the least. If you don't rally behind political action, those who count on your apathy win. Young people must make sure their peers are not deflected from electoral politics. Protests, marches, sit-ins etc can only take you so far. There are policies which are fairer, stand up to vested corporate interests, responsive to people's needs irrespective of the size of their bank account, and deliver improvements for all and not just for the few. Work with those who have these as part of their political platform and win the necessary elections. 'Nothing will change for the better' can be the most destructive self-fulfilling prophecy.

September 2011

Where is the youth impact assessment on government policies? Under the catch-all banner of deficit reduction, the government has cut out numerous forms of support for young people, burden them with increased costs to enter higher education, and remove investment in the public sector which undermines the employment prospect of school leavers and graduates. The costs to the affected young people and the wider society are likely to be far higher than the short term savings. Moreover, whatever the political reason for requiring young people with the smallest share of the nation's wealth to contribute disproportionately to dealing with the fallout of the irresponsible behaviour of the banking sector, it is alarming that there is no sign of any concern with developing a proper public investment plan for future generations. If politicians want young people to be engaged in public policy debates, they should start addressing what they are prepared to do for those growing up with the gravest uncertainties since the 1940s.

August 2011

Sadly the urgency for critical understanding of youth policies has escalated with the riots across England this summer. As usual, knee-jerk reaction from some commentators and politicians has shown how ill-thought responses could exacerbate rather than repair the damages to society. There are at least three sets of issues which demand informed consideration. First, what should be done about that tiny but highly problematic minority of young people who have no respect for the wellbeing of their neighbours or the wider community? Secondly, what policy changes should be brought in to avert the social and economic marginalisation of vast numbers of young people? Just because they remain law-abiding, it does not mean the government should

ignore the pressing need to remove the many demoralising barriers now placed before young people in getting a university education, a job, a place to live, and a chance to escape dire economic insecurity. Finally, what socio-economic reforms must be introduced to end the hypocrisy of encouraging the rich and powerful to do as they please while condemning the young and dispossessed who follow their example? Why should the poor be evicted if they cannot stop the criminal behaviour of their child, but the rich should be able to not pay their taxes and be rewarded by being told that those taxes would be scrapped?

July 2011

The UN General Assembly is to hold a high-level meeting with theme of 'Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding' on 25 and 26 July 2011, as part of its [International Year of Youth](#). It will be examining how to strengthen "international cooperation regarding youth and enhancing dialogue, mutual understanding and active youth participation as indispensable elements towards achieving social integration, full employment and the eradication of poverty"; and how to tackle the "challenges to youth development and opportunities for poverty eradication, employment and sustainable development." 25 years on from the first International Year of Youth back in 1985, the need for effective policies to give young people a real say in dealing with the global changes that impact on them is greater than ever. The University of Cambridge has agreed to set up the [Forum for Youth Participation and Democracy](#) to promote the exchange of ideas to help meet this need. We look forward to working with colleagues across the world to contribute to the development of better thinking for the future.