Speakers' Corner Trust

Submission to the Speak for Change Inquiry (Oracy APPG) by Speakers' Corner Trust (charity no. 1120913). The Trust exists to promote free expression, open debate and active citizenship as a means of stimulating civil society in the UK and supporting its development in emerging democracies.

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Summary

- Since 2007, SCT has worked to create opportunities for the free, face-to-face exchange of ideas, information and opinions, believing that this is a key to rebuilding trust and participation in our democracy, and to creating a stronger and a happier society.

- The Trust was started by a group who feared for the potential loss of citizens' abilities to engage in open public debate. In creating new opportunities for people to come together to discuss their interests and priorities and by providing new platforms for unmediated expression and engagement, we are tapping into that reservoir of ideas, intelligence and community spirit which make neighbourhoods, cities and societies viable.

- Establishing 15 local Speakers' Corners, publishing online debates and resources, and providing expert commentary in speeches, lectures and the media have underpinned its work. The Trust is currently undergoing a review of how its activities will best meet the needs of society faced with rapid changes in the way we communicate.

- The national website www.speakerscornertrust.org.uk carries 10 years' worth of valuable resources, guidance and information that anyone, including teachers and educators, can draw from.

- The Trust has not specifically focused on work in schools. However, it was a partner in the development of the website *Youth Amplified* with Leeds University. The website was designed to help 11-18 year-olds develop effective speaking and listening skills and confidence in using them. We have recommended a separate submission to the APPG from Stephen Coleman , Professor of Political Communication at Leeds University who led the project.

- SCT also developed, with the Southbank Centre, *Speaking Out*, a fifteen minute film which seeks to provide inspiration and encouragement to people who have opinions and ideas to communicate.

- SCT was also one of a small group of organisations invited to work with the House of Lords and the English Speaking Union to organise a debate on free speech, principally involving young people, which took place in the Chamber in 2016.

- This submission draws from some of the local Corners' experience of working with schools, University students and Youth Parliaments, but focusses principally on the need for school-level education in the appropriate use of the internet for conversations, debates and exploring common ground. This is because in 2017, SCT and the Oxford Internet Institute organised a symposium on 'Developing a Civil Society on the internet' with the funding support of Facebook.

- The symposium brought together leading figures in journalism, political science, moral philosophy, the law, civil society activism, media psychology, government and tech companies. The summary findings and recommendations were published, together with the press release in October 2018. http://www.speakerscornertrust.org/speakers-corner-projects/special-initiatives/developing-a-civil-society-on-the-internet/

- This submission builds on the key finding – that education rather than regulation is key to a more civil internet. But we need to go beyond internet discourse and educate future generations to become thoughtful and respectful participants in face-to-face conversations, discussions, debates and disputes.

- This submission also looks at the link between oracy, critical thinking and active citizenship. It argues for providing a younger generation with the skills to listen, to think and form ideas, to explain those ideas and to learn from listening to others. Ultimately we need to develop future leaders, especially political leaders, if our democracy is to function effectively.

- Speakers' Corner Trust has a vital role to play in both advocating and facilitating local gatherings for the purpose of public discussion and is open to exploring with the APPG how we might become more involved in Oracy education.

- This submission attempts to address the enquiry question *'how can the delivery of effective Oracy education contribute to individual and societal outcomes?'*

1.0 SCT – 10 years advocating the face-to-face exchange of ideas

1.1 Between 2007 and 2014, Speakers' Corner Trust worked with several towns and cities across England (and in Europe, the USA and emerging democracies) to establish local Corners. Plinths, plaques and posters point to the spot these places have designated as spaces for gatherings of all kinds.

1.2 The Trust draws inspiration from Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park (regulated by the Royal Parks Agency), recognised worldwide as the home of free speech. In *Speakers' Corner: Debate, Democracy and Disturbing the Peace,* [1] photographer Philip Wolmuth has captured images and dialogue from over 4 decades of exchanges on Sunday afternoons. He says: (sic) *….'the apparent mayhem can be seen as a remarkable example of self-regulating, anarchic, collective expression. (Those) who congregate there each week are the vibrant heirs of those who fought for, and won, the rights to freedom of expression and assembly. It is a legacy worth cherishing'.*

1.3 Nottingham Speakers' Corner (NSC) in King Street was opened officially by the Rt Hon. Jack Straw in 2009 when Justice Minister and is the first such corner outside London. The street has become synonymous with the right to assemble and hosts a regular stream of individuals, local campaign groups, political hustings and organised debates. Nottingham City Council Events Team helps to regulate the gatherings if they expect to exceed 50 and have provided a power source for amplification.

1.4 The NSC Committee has held training sessions for the City's Youth Parliament which covered planning the speech, delivery practice and dealing with hecklers. The representatives were shown how to use the Corner in a supportive and encouraging way. SCT would like to encourage more local Corners to engage with their Youth Parliaments in this way.

1.5 NSC ran a day-long workshop at a local secondary school (Djanogly City Academy) for 13 – 16-year olds in preparation for a public debate '*Why are young people always seen in a negative light?*' The speakers presented their views to a panel representing local government, the police, and education. The debate was lively and constructive and gave the young speakers greater insight into the subject, and confidence to articulate their feelings. SCT suggests that in-school Oracy training be attached to a real event, such as a public debate on a topic of their choosing.

1.6 Walthamstow Speakers' Corner engaged the local schools in designing, with students of Central St Martins College of Art & Design, series of mosaic speaking platforms in a local park, and the FE Colleges in Croydon and Medway helped shape their local corners. All corners have encouraged students and schools to use the opportunity to run outdoor debates and mock hustings. Indoor debates have been held in association with Speakers' Corner Trust, covering topics such as gun crime and inter-generational differences.

2.0 Online Oracy - educating students towards a more civil use of the internet

2.1 For increasing numbers, the internet has introduced a virtual reality which demands so much less of us than the real world. Increasingly our children, brought up with laptops, mobile phones, computer games and 24-hour multi-channel TV, have come to view and often to negotiate life and relationships through a screen. While it is argued that democracy is well served by the opportunities the internet offers for engagement, the anonymity of online identity means that people can contribute to blogs and forums without ever justifying their opinions to themselves, much less to others, which is why so much online debate is so negative, abusive and destructive. This is not so much engagement as a substitute for it. [2]

2.2 Professor Susan Greenfield goes further in highlighting the need for research into a potential consequence of our new relationship with the internet and social media. In *New Media – Making or Breaking Connections?* an online debate with Professor Stephen Coleman published on Speakers' Corner Trust's website (March 2013), she warns that 'mind change' - the adaptations our brains could be making in the ways in which we encounter, understand and cope with the world around us - could be as much uncharted territory as was climate change 30 years ago and perhaps as important to our futures.[2]

2.3 The SCT / Oxford Internet Institute symposium in 2017 was designed to begin to address the issues highlighted by Professors Greenfield and Coleman. The day-long gathering looked at

● The internet's potential as a forum for the kind of discussion, diversity and consensus building which underpin and enliven the democratic process;

- The factors that inhibit the realisation of that potential;
- What changes in online culture, and perhaps the design of the internet's platforms, might be required to achieve it.

2.4 The summary report is available for APPG evidence

http://www.speakerscornertrust.org/speakers-corner-projects/special-initiatives/developing-a-civil-society-on-the-internet/

Participants expressed a range of views but consensus was reached on one central proposition; that the key to creating a better civic space online lies in education.

2.5 The key recommendations are:

- The school curriculum should be broadened. The young can grow into confident online citizens by being taught how to shape the online space to their own preferences. The quality of online political argument can be raised by a new emphasis on teaching critical thinking, citizenship and individual responsibility.

- Technology has a secondary, but important, role to play. Current and future innovations in tech could nudge internet users to pause for reflection while debating politics online – for instance by detecting hot-headed language, or by delaying posted content.

- Ministers and civil servants should resist legislation which carries too great a danger of harm to internet freedom, and of other unforeseen consequences.

3.0 The link between Oracy, critical thinking and active citizenship

3.1 Over the past 10 years, SCT has provided evidence through papers, articles, speeches and in the media that freedom of expression is emasculated if we don't exercise it. To do so requires not only the skills, but the willingness and the opportunity to do so.

3.2 In his St James' Place lecture in April 2016, former Director Peter Bradley comments: '*rights must not just be learned and appreciated; they must also be expressed: a true state of democracy does not exist simply because the rights of citizens are guaranteed by a constitution or protected by law.*

Rights are like muscles: if they are not exercised, they become weak and ineffectual. Just as the body grows strong and healthy through the regular exercise of its muscles, so the democratic society is strengthened and renewed through the vigorous exercise of its freedoms'.

'Democracies in which citizens do not play their full part – including participation in reasoned debate and decision-making – are vulnerable to opportunists and demagogues and to lapses into unreason and bad faith and, ultimately, bound to fail'.

3.3 In the past we have delegated decision-making to others (be it our MPs, the media, trades unions). There is sufficient evidence, worldwide, that many citizens have now lost faith in these representatives and that this has led to a discontented populace. Discontent and divorce from the centre of decision-making has led to a fractured society and a sense of lost voices (in the UK, Europe and the US).

3.4 Properly taught, oracy education should lead to strong citizenship, including greater engagement in democratic decision-making. It would include helping students to understand the role of Oracy, not just as a career skill, but to help each student to participate in and have a voice in an open and tolerant society.

3.5 Engaging in Oracy education will also allow pupils to develop greater self-awareness, to hone their ideas and opinions, build confidence, and strengthen overall mental well-being. It will also build greater understanding, respect and faith in democracy – the opportunity to resolve conflict by talking matters through and reaching a compromise agreed by both sides.

Ends

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References

[1] Wolmuth, Philip. Speakers' Corner: Debate, Democracy and Disturbing the Peace (2015) The History Press

[2] Bradley, Peter. Founding Director of Speakers' Corner Trust from a lecture based on *Free Speech, Idiocy and the Challenge of Citizenship* given first for Gresham College at the Museum of London on 24 June 2013 and subsequently, in revised form, to the University of Wolverhampton on 5 February 2014.

[3] *New Media – Making or Breaking Connections?* an online debate between Professor Susan Greenfield and Professor Stephen Coleman published on Speakers' Corner Trust's website (March 2013)