The background features several overlapping speech bubbles with various patterns: orange with concentric circles, blue with horizontal stripes, yellow with a geometric maze, yellow with green zigzags, blue with white wavy lines, pink with light blue zigzags, pink with blue diagonal stripes, and yellow with blue polka dots. The RSE Young Academy of Scotland logo is in the top right.

RSE **YOUNG  
ACADEMY**  
OF SCOTLAND

# Charter for Responsible Debate

Discussing **contentious** issues  
with common purpose

July 2021



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# Introduction

The central question has been whether there are better ways to discuss deeply contentious issues amongst people who disagree with each other but who are committed to living and working together.

**Democratic politics has always been a place of discussion, disagreement and debate. However, recent politics seems to be increasingly polarised; and channels of information are increasingly siloed. In this context, the Young Academy of Scotland wants to promote ways of discussing controversial topics in a constructive fashion that help us recognise common ground and achieve common cause.**

Because of this, we have engaged in a two-year conversation about responsible debate with diverse groups of people. The central question has been whether there are better ways to discuss deeply contentious issues amongst people who disagree with each other but who are committed to living and working together. Making such debate 'work' often involves rethinking what it means to be 'right' or 'wrong,' in order to open up more space for understanding and collaboration.<sup>1</sup> We think the need for this arises in public settings such as parliaments and media, but also in ordinary discussions amongst family members, in schools, at workplaces, as part of community organisations, and online.

In our discussions, we have found that one common conception of debate is of two opposing sides seeking to win over each other's minds, or at least to convince some third party. This stems from a rich

history of competitive debating traditions (going right back to the ancient world) and it picks up on the etymological roots of 'debate' in ideas of combat. However, as our discussions of responsible debate continued, it became clear that under the label 'debate' we wanted to think about a broader kind of interaction. We wanted to reflect on multi-faceted discussions amongst people with diverse opinions about some topic of common concern.

All too often, such discussions are framed as 'pro versus con' debates, which can make it tempting to ensure 'adequate representation of both sides.' Such set-ups can entrench 'opposing' viewpoints, with changes of position sometimes decried as a 'u-turn' rather than welcomed as reasoned progress. Such debates do sometimes result in compromises being found between competing positions.

<sup>1</sup> Kal Turnbull helpfully framed the issue this way for us. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-48579597>

## Consideration of different ways of disagreeing, with an aim of highlighting good practice, can exemplify and prefigure responsible debate

However, the binary, oppositional framing often distorts discussions, with attention focused on potential points of agreement rather than on the issues at large. There is clearly a place for seeking compromise in collective deliberation, but in the best cases, people who disagree but want to work together on some issue will debate the issue in ways that promote mutual understanding of many perspectives and emphasise common purpose, even in the face of intractable disagreement. For most contentious issues, this makes it advantageous to hear from diverse points of view, and not just on one proposition (for or against) but on various complexly interrelated questions. Our principal question is what can make such debates work well?

We have found that writing this report has generated controversy within our own organisation, and we have used this opportunity to think more about what ideal debate within a group of people looks like. We are aware of many shortcomings and limitations in our own efforts, but we have found it productive to look for common purpose amongst disagreement. By framing our project not as a negotiation between individual stakeholders but as a challenge to collective action within a group of people who have shared aspirations, we have sought to prototype the kinds of debate we are simultaneously trying to better understand.<sup>2</sup> This has in turn helped many of us to consider more fully the common perspective.

As much as anything, we have found that adding conversation about the very question of what responsible debate is, alongside first-order debate about points of disagreement, tends to promote better discussions of controversial issues. So, our primary goal in publishing this document is to promote further public conversation, in a variety of contexts, about what constitutes responsible debate,

which we hope will lead to further conscious reflection amongst participants in debates about how they engage. Consideration of different ways of disagreeing, with an aim of highlighting good practice, can exemplify and prefigure responsible debate. Wherever there are people who disagree but who need to work together, we think it will be useful to discuss principles for responsible debate.

In support of such conversations, this document contains several resources.

- Our 'Charter for Responsible Debate.' This includes a list of nine general principles that emerged as part of internal and external conversations that YAS has facilitated about responsible debate over the past two years. We view these principles as a starting point for conversations about what responsible debate means in various more specific contexts.
- A series of personal reflections from YAS members about responsible debate in their areas of expertise and interest: why they think responsible debate is important, and where they already see the relevance of particular principles from the Charter.
- An exercise pack for classrooms, boardrooms and living rooms. This is a set of small group tasks designed to facilitate conversations about what responsible debate means within schools, universities, businesses and families.
- A brief list of future steps and calls to action.
- A list of frequently asked questions and some initial responses.

**Matthew Chrisman, Alice König, Peter McColl and John O'Connor**

June 2021

<sup>2</sup> For more on this conception of responsible debate as a solution to a collective action problem which can be usefully turned upon itself in searching for principles for responsible debate, see Matthew Chrisman *Discursive Integrity and Responsible Debate*, forthcoming in the *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*.

# YAS Charter for Responsible Debate

The Young Academy of Scotland proposes nine general principles for responsible public debate. These are grounded in an ideal of informed, respectful and inclusive collective decision-making. This is designed as a starting point to support discussion amongst those who initially disagree, but who listen well to each other in pursuit of common ground and common cause. We encourage people to adapt and refine the principles for more specific contexts.

## Informed

- 1** Aim for accuracy, and base your contributions on evidence and experience.
- 2** Talk to people with different beliefs, experiences, perspectives and backgrounds.
- 3** Be honest in how you communicate, and speak with conviction for what you believe.

## Respectful

- 4** Listen carefully, open-mindedly, and with empathy.
- 5** Use emotional language judiciously, avoiding disrespectful or inflammatory language.
- 6** Show appreciation for good points made by others, acknowledging when they change your mind.

## Inclusive

- 7** Communicate in ways that unite rather than divide.
- 8** Try to address imbalances in power, knowledge and accessibility.
- 9** Seek to identify common ground and shared purpose.

This list of principles originated at a one-day event in May 2019 which brought together politicians, media personalities, campaigners, activists and academics, to share experience and propose possible principles.

YAS hosted an RSE *Curious* event at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 2019, where members of the public were invited to contribute to the ongoing development of our 'Charter for Responsible Public Debate' by commenting on the principles proposed at the previous event in May and proposing their own principles.

We ran an event at the Scottish Parliament's Festival of Politics in October 2019 to further refine the principles and discuss the process of improving the quality of political debate in Scotland.

The general membership of the Young Academy of Scotland has given us invaluable feedback and assistance, especially at a critical feedback session at the December 2019 plenary meeting.

We have also led discussions of the project at Millennifest 2019, the Wigtown Book Festival and Learning for Sustainability Scotland; and we have taken public feedback via a questionnaire on our website.

The following people have provided direct input to the principles: Matthew Chrisman, Alice König, Peter McColl, John O'Connor, Harriet Harris, Ken Macintosh, Stephen Reicher, Kathleen Stock, Kal Turnbull, Jim Wallace, Kirsty Wark, Maria Azeredo de Dornelas, James Blake, Stephen O'Rourke, Nasar Meer, Emma Boffey and Nikki Moran.



# Reflections on Responsible Debate

Collectively, these reflections provide a rich sample of our membership's ideas about responsible debate.

As a civic organisation related to the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the Young Academy of Scotland brings together mid-career entrepreneurs, academics, business leaders, teachers and other professionals to work collaboratively for the benefit of society. Our mission is to help Scotland's people and policy makers build a future that is equal, enterprising, sustainable, healthier, smarter and international.

See [www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/our-work/](http://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/our-work/)

Our greatest strength is the diversity of our membership: ranging in age from mid-twenties to early-forties, we come from a wide range of backgrounds and represent communities from all over Scotland. With access to resources and expertise in many different sectors, from animation to brain surgery, we are uniquely positioned to research and tackle complex problems, both short- and long-term.

We had valuable input from this diverse membership in the course of developing the Charter. So, when it came to writing this report, we put out a call to the YAS membership for short pieces reflecting on how the principles of responsible debate are relevant or reflected in their areas of expertise and interest. What follows are the responses we got to this call.

These are personal reflections of the respective authors and do not represent the views of the whole organisation. In addition to living in different places in Scotland and working in many different areas, our

membership naturally embodies a diverse set of religious faiths, political beliefs and conceptual frameworks for understanding the world. Accordingly, what follows is presented in the spirit of a 'community of ideas', not always in harmony but stemming from a shared purpose in thinking through responsible debate together.

Some of these pieces are more scholarly and others are more opinion-based. The target audience is wide, including regular citizens, people working in education, media organisations and public officials. Our only requirement was that each piece prompt some reflection on at least one of the principles of the Charter. The purpose of including them in this report is to give concrete examples of how principles of the Charter can be engaged with and mobilised to think about what makes public debate go better or worse in a variety of areas of our lives. Collectively, these reflections provide a rich sample of our membership's ideas about responsible debate.



# **The Discussions**

**Peter McColl**  
Futures + Policy

# Recognising Concessions in Responsible Debate

from "The Second Coming"

**Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,**

**The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.**

W.B. Yeats, 1920

This piece relates primarily to Responsible Debate Principle 9: **'Seek to identify common ground with shared purpose'**

Yeats' famous words are now over a century old: **"The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity"**

They have haunted me for some time.

My interest in responsible debate is driven by a conviction that we need to be able to agree more as a society, and that must be underpinned by good practice in debate. And the problem of the best lacking all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity is one of the fundamental issues I am seeking to address. I am writing this not because I have found the answer, but because I want to explore one of the reasons why I think Yeats' observation is still so true today. I use the peace process in Northern Ireland, or the North of Ireland, as a worked example below.

There are lots of reasons, but I'm interested in one in particular. And it's this: the tendency to misunderstand a concession in debate. What I mean by this is the circumstance where one party seeks a compromise by offering to concede a point. Where this is recognised, the favour can be returned, or the nature of that concession discussed. But too often, as I describe below in the context of the Northern Irish peace process, it is ignored. Or even worse, taken as a sign that the party to whom the concession is made was right all along. Because if your opponent is conceding to you, it must be because you're right... One of the inspirations for the Responsible Debate project is [Kal Turnbull](https://www.wired.com/story/change-my-view-gets-its-own-website/)<sup>1</sup>, whose [Change My View](https://www.reddit.com/r/changemyview/)<sup>2</sup> subreddit seeks ways for people to have reasoned debate about contentious subjects on the internet. It would substantially increase the quality of the public sphere if it were seen as a strength to change your mind.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wired.com/story/change-my-view-gets-its-own-website/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reddit.com/r/changemyview/>

The result is that the perceived winners are those who avoid conceding ground. And once people work that out, it creates a log jam. I first observed it in the Northern Ireland peace process. For nationalists, the partition of Ireland in 1921 was totally artificial, and it appeared natural that decisions about Ireland should be taken on an all-Ireland basis, not based on what they would describe as a 'statelet' in the north. For unionists, conceiving of Northern Ireland as a separate political entity was a way to preserve their British identity and have its legitimacy endowed by the British State.

The armed conflict which ensued emerged from nationalists' belief that they had been excluded from housing, jobs and equal access to political representation. It drew to a close in a politically negotiated process in the early 1990s.

To achieve peace, both sides made concessions. Unionists conceded the principle of consent – that Northern Ireland might not always be part of the United Kingdom – and that if a majority wanted to re-join the rest of Ireland they had the right to do so. Nationalists conceded that until a majority wanted to re-join Eire, Northern Ireland would continue to be part of the United Kingdom. Yet this exacerbated a situation in which what John Barry calls "ungenerous majorities" were dominant.<sup>3</sup>

The parties that negotiated these concessions – an agreement that ended three decades of political violence – were crushed by the electorate. The Ulster Unionists are a shadow of the party they once were, with no representation in the Westminster Parliament; the SDLP have performed poorly. They have been replaced by parties more extreme in their views. And this has not helped to cement any gains in the peace process. In fact incidents such as the [flag protests](#) <sup>4</sup> have made the situation worse.

**The outcome of any process where concessions are not properly recognised or valued is that the centre cannot hold**

The outcome of any process where concessions are not properly recognised or valued is that the centre cannot hold. You create a situation where the focus is on grievance, rather than on recognition of the shared concessions and common ground and a desire to strengthen that relationship.

The situation is exacerbated by a secondary behaviour where concessions are seen as indications that the party conceding was wrong all along. Some Unionists bemoaned that after 30 years of political violence, nationalists had finally accepted the existence of Northern Ireland. "All that killing – for what?"

This simultaneously ignores the concessions made by their own side, and minimises those made by the other side as pointless. This toxic combination increased grievance and set the path from the troubles towards a cold war rather than a peace.

It may be emotionally gratifying, but it creates the context for more conflict. It also reduces the possibility of further concessions in the name of peace building. The path towards 'zero sum' interactions, in which one party must win and the other must lose, creates deep polarisation, very often unnecessarily.

<sup>3</sup> Barry, J. 2019. Class, political economy and loyalist political disaffection: agonistic politics and the flag protests. In *Global Discourse: An interdisciplinary journal of current affairs* 9 (3), 457-77.

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belfast\\_City\\_Hall\\_flag\\_protests](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belfast_City_Hall_flag_protests)

One problem with this approach is that it is difficult to identify when a concession has been made. It might be useful to employ external observers, or to seek advice on where concessions have been made. Failing to do this makes the process susceptible to bad actors, who can easily articulate the sort of views that minimise the significance of concessions. In the Northern Ireland peace process this role was played enthusiastically by Ian Paisley.<sup>5</sup>

We can ask that you think carefully about what concessions have been made to us in debate, discussion and negotiation, and I think we should. We should point it out where others fail to see it. And we should try to understand how we can better signal when we make such a concession.

This is something I am exploring, and I would really welcome your reflections and observations on how we can embed this sort of understanding. At a time when polarisation risks poisoning our public sphere, it is even more significant that we recognise concessions as a way of building a shared future.

## Recommendations

- 1 We may wish to think about responsible debate as a way to positively transform the public sphere, rather than one in which sectional interests are pursued, and consider treating actors who pursue sectional interests accordingly.
- 2 When engaging in debate, one way to be responsible is to look actively for concessions by interlocutors and recognise them.
- 3 Using independent observers to help understand what concessions have been made may help interlocutors identify and recognise concessions.

<sup>5</sup> <http://bright-green.org/2010/03/30/paisle/>

**John O'Connor**  
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## Conviction and Humility in Responsible Debate

Philosophical and theological debate rarely hits the newspapers. But it did in 1987, when *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* ran stories on an academic dispute between Michael Dummett, Wykeham Professor of Logic at the University of Oxford, and Nicholas Lash, Norris–Hulse Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge.<sup>1</sup>

It started with an article by Dummett in which he criticised what he considered to be the decline in doctrinal orthodoxy among theologians and in seminary teaching.<sup>2</sup> A brief quotation from Lash's first response to Dummett gives an indication of the tone that would characterise much of the debate: "As a theologian I look to the philosopher to educate me in the art of moving properly from 'if' to 'then'... his [Dummett's] article presents us with a catalogue of inferences so leaky as to constitute a kind of theological colander." Lash then proceeded to list a sequence of what he took to be *non-sequiturs* committed by the distinguished Professor of Logic.<sup>3</sup>

After numerous similarly fractious articles, the Editor declared the debate closed. This was marked by a short article by Timothy Radcliffe designed to make peace. Radcliffe summarised the final state of play thus: "Michael Dummett is rightly indignant of any betrayal of the truths so secured [by the Church]. But Nicholas Lash is also surely right to insist that making sense of these truths... is a painful and tentative business."<sup>4</sup>

That Radcliffe could express the main concerns of both principal protagonists so briefly and in a way highly suggestive of possible common ground (since the concerns of Dummett and Lash as stated need not be incompatible), indicates that something went badly wrong with the debate.

The topic of 'epistemic humility' often comes up when debates go wrong. Epistemic humility is a kind of intellectual humility and can be understood as an active appreciation of our limited ability to know things. What lessons relevant to epistemic humility can we glean from reflection on the Dummett–Lash debate?

I suggest four:

First, epistemic humility is regularly presented as a virtue. This is significant because virtues are often understood as involving our affective side: not just the head but also the heart, as it were. Both Dummett and Lash were exceptionally qualified to grasp intellectually the principles of epistemic humility: Dummett wrote celebrated articles on the surprising complexities of claiming that something is true and Lash's writings emphasised the radical inadequacy of human understanding regarding the divine. Yet, their intellectual grasp of epistemic humility was insufficient to temper the tone of this particular debate.

- 1 Longley, Clifford. 1987. A Question of Theological Discipline. *The Times*, 21 December 1987; Oulton, Charles. 1987. Dons sets [sic] for clash over role of Jesus. *The Sunday Times*, 27 December 1987. Both retrieved 28 December 2020.
- 2 Dummett, Michael. 1987. A Remarkable Consensus. *New Blackfriars* 68 (809), 424–31.
- 3 Lash, Nicholas. 1987. A Leaky Sort of Thing? The divisiveness of Michael Dummett. *New Blackfriars* 68 (811), 555–56.
- 4 Radcliffe, Timothy. 1989. The Dummett–Lash Debate: positively the last appearance. *New Blackfriars* 70 (826), 200–01.

## ...we can all learn from mistakes, whether our own or those of others

Second, it is possible for someone to possess the virtue of epistemic humility and yet, perhaps due to triggers and the heat of debate, fail to manifest it in a particular circumstance. It would, I think, be unfair to jump to conclusions about Dummett and Lash themselves on the basis of one episode – epistemic humility should also be exercised in our judgements of people: the complexities of persons and circumstances should not be overlooked. In any case, there is much evidence that Dummett and Lash were both highly impressive and virtuous people. Dummett was, for example, knighted not only for services to philosophy but also for his work for racial justice; and Lash was known as an exceptionally supportive academic colleague.<sup>5</sup>

Third, epistemic humility creates a space for empathetic imagination, due to the way it gets us to reflect on the sources of our deepest commitments. So much of what we are passionate about derives not only from the issues themselves, but also from our subjective perspectives and personal histories.<sup>6</sup> Notice that in his summing up, quoted above, Radcliffe expressed matters not in terms of disputed points, but in terms of the concerns of Dummett and Lash that reflected their different personal perspectives. An attitude of empathy with another's perspective fosters charitable readings of opposing views because the concerns underlying them are considered; and whilst protagonists in debate might differ in conclusions reached, they might turn out to share similar concerns.

Fourth, a mediator can play a positive role, even when the main protagonists remain at loggerheads. Indeed, Radcliffe opened his summing up thus: "Professor Michael Dummett and Professor Nicholas Lash are both still very angry with each other."<sup>7</sup> Yet Radcliffe's conciliation nevertheless gave them an extra opportunity to move beyond differences. Even if they did not avail of this themselves, it might still have given readers who were confused, or who had taken sides, a further opportunity to reflect on common concerns, engage empathetic imagination, and even arrive at some degree of personal resolution.

Epistemic humility is highly relevant to all of the principles in the Charter for Responsible Debate. Principle Four, for example, states that we should listen carefully, open-mindedly and with empathy, which I have discussed in this article.

The fact that two people, both expert in reading texts and in clear analytical academic writing, claimed that they were frequently misunderstood by the other, suggests that the sort of empathetic stance that can be a fruit of epistemic humility was not present in this particular case.<sup>8</sup> But treating epistemic humility as a virtue also reminds us of lessons that apply to all the virtues: growth in the virtues can take time and practice, and we can all learn from mistakes, whether our own or those of others.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Moore, A. W. 2011. Sir Michael Dummett obituary. *The Guardian*, first published 28 December 2011; Williams, Rowan. 2020. Nicholas was a joy to know. *The Tablet*, published 15 July 2020. Both retrieved 29 December 2020.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Teti, Stowe Locke. 2018. Epistemic humility and empathetic imagination. *Narrative Inquiry in Bioethics* 8 (3), 213–16.

<sup>7</sup> Radcliffe 1989 *ibid*, 200.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Dummett, Michael. 1987. Unsafe Premises: a reply to Nicholas Lash. *New Blackfriars* 68 (811), 558; Lash, Nicholas. 1989. The Difficulty of Making Sense. *New Blackfriars* 70 (824), 82.

**Alice König**

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# Responsible Debate and Quiet Campaigning

“At one time I thought campaigning was about speaking with a loud voice, asserting your point and getting people to hear you. But actually, it’s the value of people caring and being kind and just reaching out and connecting and sharing... A lot of campaigning can feel like it’s a megaphone... but being part of a community is probably more important long term.”<sup>1</sup>

Richard Ratcliffe has learnt a lot about campaigning in the last five years. In March 2016, his wife, Nazanin Zaghari Ratcliffe, was arrested while taking their baby daughter to visit relatives in Iran. She was later convicted of “plotting to overthrow the Iranian government” – a charge which she and her family have always strenuously denied. Representatives of the United Nations, the European Parliament and other international bodies have [spoken out](#);<sup>2</sup> millions of supporters around the world have signed a [petition calling for her release](#);<sup>3</sup> and Richard Ratcliffe has spent years lobbying both the British and Iranian governments to raise her case and try to bring her – [and their young daughter](#)<sup>4</sup> – home.

The assumption that campaigning is a noisy, assertive business is widespread. The term itself has military connotations and implies a strenuous, oppositional approach, with one side or viewpoint seeking to overcome another. The environmental protest movement [Extinction Rebellion](#)<sup>5</sup> is a recent

**‘megaphone campaigning’  
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responsible debate**

example: fed up with inertia in the face of the [climate emergency](#),<sup>6</sup> they have called on supporters to ‘rebel’,<sup>7</sup> ‘join the fight’ and engage in acts of (non-violent) civil disobedience in order to communicate their ‘demands’<sup>8</sup> to governments. Conspicuous, confrontational campaigning can raise the profile of a cause, win new supporters, shake ‘the opposition’, and sometimes even succeed in effecting change. However, ‘megaphone campaigning’ can also result in more entrenched positions and it does not always facilitate respectful or responsible debate – which is crucial if differences are to be resolved and long-term solutions found. Passion drives change faster than apathy; but passion can also narrow perspectives and blind us to other people’s viewpoints.

1 <https://eachother.org.uk/richard-ratcliffe-what-fighting-for-nazanins-freedom-has-taught-me/>

2 <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22267&LangID=E>

3 <https://www.change.org/p/free-nazanin-ratcliffe>

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/jan/12/richard-ratcliffe-i-want-boris-johnson-to-protect-nazanin-and-bring-her-back-iran>

5 <https://rebellion.global/about-us/>

6 <https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/climate-change/facts-about-climate-emergency>

7 <https://rebellion.global/why-rebel/>

8 <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/the-truth/demands/>

## Ratcliffe speaks with conviction, but he moderates his passion even when calling attention to the serious injustices which he and his family are enduring.

Richard Ratcliffe has been fighting for what he holds most dear: his wife, his child and their life together. He could be forgiven for shouting and screaming, for passion, anger and condemnation; but he has found a [different route](#).<sup>9</sup> Even when careless words by Boris Johnson caused a new court case to be brought against his wife in 2017, Ratcliffe allowed himself 'no space for rage'.<sup>10</sup> That is not to say that he has kept his head down; on the contrary, he has worked tirelessly to keep his wife's plight in the public eye and to get politicians to feel the urgency of her situation, even joining her on [hunger strike outside the Iranian embassy](#)<sup>11</sup> for two weeks in 2019. At all times, however, his campaigning has been characterised by qualities which the YAS Charter for Responsible Debate promotes.

Ratcliffe speaks with conviction, but he moderates his passion even when calling attention to the serious injustices which he and his family are enduring. His [petition updates](#)<sup>12</sup> leave many readers in tears, but not because he uses emotive or inflammatory language; he tends to understate not overstate, letting events speak for themselves. In interviews and press conferences he speaks with nuance, even when criticising those who have

mistreated his wife, Nazanin; he acknowledges different viewpoints, the different pressures that politicians face, and the complexity of Britain's relations with Iran.<sup>13</sup> He also practises and communicates empathy: "We have got a lot further by remembering that even the [Iranian] Revolutionary Guard are people." As he puts it, "Where people are honest and empathetic with others' perspectives, you can always find a way through. Where people are busy triggering each other and try to provoke each other, you are much less likely to find that."<sup>14</sup> Ratcliffe's campaigning does not raise people's hackles; rather, it creates a non-confrontational, reflective environment in which people on all sides have the space to think, to see each other from different perspectives, and sometimes even to find common ground.

Where has this got him? Speaking out has been a leap of faith, involving risk as well as responsibility; both [British and Iranian authorities warned Ratcliffe against campaigning](#).<sup>15</sup> At the point of writing, he has not yet secured his wife's release. Ultimately, this is something that only the British and Iranian governments can bring about. He has achieved other things, however.

<sup>9</sup> <https://eachother.org.uk/richard-ratcliffe-what-fighting-for-nazanins-freedom-has-taught-me/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/nov/18/richard-ratcliffe-i-have-no-space-for-rage-but-our-government-has-not-been-entirely-honest>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48810394>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/free-nazanin-ratcliffe/u/28246148>

<sup>13</sup> Oliver Burkeman explores the importance of nuance here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000qlsj>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://eachother.org.uk/richard-ratcliffe-what-fighting-for-nazanins-freedom-has-taught-me/>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/jan/31/foreign-office-tells-richard-ratcliffe-to-keep-quiet-as-wifes-release-date-nears>

At times, and with the power of Twitter behind him, Ratcliffe's campaign has helped to improve the conditions in which his wife was being held or [persuaded diplomats to intervene](#)<sup>16</sup> when new court proceedings were initiated. Just as importantly, it has introduced thousands, if not millions, of people around the world to a whole range of miscarriages of justice, bringing campaigners together to champion the causes of many other 'political prisoners'. Collectively, that campaigning community has challenged the very term 'political prisoner'; slowly, politely, but with perseverance and conviction, Ratcliffe and others have insisted that their loved ones be described as 'hostages'<sup>17</sup> not 'prisoners'. In changing the terms of reference, they have changed the nature of the debate in political circles, international relations and the [media](#).<sup>18</sup> Though Jake Sullivan, National Security Advisor to President Biden, did not publicly use the word 'hostage' himself, [he responded to its growing use in media coverage](#)<sup>19</sup> when he insisted that the release of Americans unjustly held in Iran was central to the next phase of nuclear talks.

Campaigning is not exactly the same as debating; and often it has little in common with *responsible* debate. In campaigning, the two 'sides' are rarely engaged in any meaningful dialogue, frequently talking past each other from distant positions rather than listening carefully and seeking to understand the other's perspective. Campaigning can lack nuance, tending towards black and white; it can be prone to exaggeration, even sacrificing accuracy at times for rhetorical effect. Emotional, divisive language is common, and the identification of common ground or shared purpose can be hampered when a campaign is set up as a zero-sum

game. This is not true of all campaigning, however; and there are many lessons to be learned about both campaigning and responsible debate from Ratcliffe's approach. The wheels are grinding painfully slowly, but his judicious use of language, quiet conviction, acknowledgement of complexity and inclusiveness have steadily forged community, built momentum and helped the wider world see Iran's regular imprisonment of foreign or dual nationals for what it is: state hostage taking. Not all campaigning needs to be done with a megaphone; a great deal can be achieved by adopting the principles of 'responsible debate.'



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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-54138055>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/dec/20/nazanin-zaghari-ratcliffe-is-a-hostage-the-government-needs-to-call-her-that>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000h3h2/panorama-hostage-in-iran>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jake-sullivan-biden-iran-talks-solarwinds-hack-face-the-nation/>

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# Participatory Democracy and Responsible Debate

Democracies are commonly said to be more responsive to the needs of their citizens than any other political arrangement. The idea is that majority elections function (perhaps imperfectly) to aggregate citizens' diverse private preferences and, because of this, democracies have a unique mechanism for responding to local knowledge of what's needed by particular communities and what is important to particular groups of people.<sup>1</sup> This way of governing is also commonly said to be good for facilitating non-violent resolutions of competing interests.<sup>2</sup> The idea is that political power in functioning democracies is always temporary, and this means that political leaders usually have incentives to negotiate conflicts in ways that maintain peace and the rule of law within their jurisdictions; and those who are dissatisfied have the prospect of swaying majority opinion in the future. So, it's natural to think that, with democracy, we are on our way to a government that makes public policy in reaction to the popular will.

These are certainly reasons to favour democracy over various forms of autocracy, free market logic or anarchy. However, I think this common understanding of what democracy is and why it is valuable is inadequate. It tends to assume, even if only implicitly, that people's desires and preferences are formed privately, and solely for personal reasons; and it construes democratic decision-making as something between a popularity contest and a contract negotiation.

For a long time, however, majority opinion in many democracies was supportive of slavery; and the tax code in many contemporary democracies has facilitated increasingly extreme inequalities in wealth and stagnating wages amongst the working class. So, the fact that the majority want some law enacted clearly doesn't make that law just, and the fact that some policy is the best each side could hope to get out of a negotiated struggle over competing interests clearly doesn't make that policy adequately responsive to local need.<sup>3</sup>

So instead of thinking of public policy making as seeking whatever happens to be most popular, or as negotiating solutions between competing factions, we need ways of fostering people thinking *together in public* about the challenges faced collectively. To achieve this, I think we need more and better forums for people to exchange and explain their reasons for this or that public policy, and better practices and behaviours with which to do that. Instead of grounding political legitimacy in the process of voting for representatives who represent their constituents' private preferences in the give-and-take of politics, we should ground political legitimacy in ways that citizens inform and form each other's preferences together, in light of reasons for and against various options. And to achieve this, I believe we will need more and better public reflection on the purpose of public political debate.

<sup>1</sup> John Stuart Mill makes this point in: Mill, J. S. 1861/1991. *Considerations on Representative Government*, Chapter 3. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Amartya Sen argues that "no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press." See Sen, Amartya. 1999. *Development as Freedom*, 152. New York: Knopf.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau makes this point in: Rousseau, J.-J. 1762/1988. *On the Social Contract II*, 4. Indianapolis: Hackett, A lengthy and powerful case for this is made by John Rawls in: Rawls, J. 1993. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

There are various small steps in this direction visible in citizens assemblies,<sup>4</sup> participatory governmental budgeting,<sup>5</sup> public consultation<sup>6</sup> and review processes,<sup>7</sup> and open dialogue through a public and free press. Nevertheless, so much real-world politics seems mired in popularity contests and factional negotiations: from the Brexit debate to the election of a new US President, from monetary policy in the EU to global action on climate change, the way public policy decisions are made often seems to have a lot to do with what is temporarily most popular or easiest to negotiate, rather than with reasons we share with each other in collective deliberation.<sup>8</sup>

The YAS Charter for Responsible Debate was conceived (and debated!) with the distinction between mere aggregation of preferences and genuine collective reasoning in mind. It is broad enough to cover non-political contexts of collective reasoning, but many of the principles are inspired by the question “what makes public discussion of controversial topics go better or worse for the purpose of reaching good collective decisions?” It is clear that violations of particular principles in public political debate tend to undermine the “collective” quality of whatever reasoning is driving public policy.

Consider, for example, principles 5 (emotional language) and 7 (unity vs. division). Politicians know all too well how emotional language can intensify some people’s preferences for a cause. When such language is used injudiciously, however, especially when it is used to convey disrespect and to inflame hatred, it divides people rather than unites them. This can make good strategic sense if one’s goal is to be just popular enough to win a first-past-the-post election. But if democratic politics is instead about collective reasoning, we need to find better ways to communicate about our reasons.



**...we need more reflection on how to implement and design citizens’ assemblies so that their richly informed recommendations will be acted on by governments**

Putting these ideas into operation is not straightforward, and my main recommendation in this piece is not for any particular form of democratic reform, but rather for more reflection on how we can collectively strive to meet our fellow citizens as people and talk to them about the reasons they think what they think, and explain the reasons we think what we think. In my view, this won’t be achieved by improving talking-head politics programmes or changing algorithms for social media. Rather, we need more reflection on how to implement and design citizens’ assemblies so that their richly informed recommendations will be acted on by governments. We need to identify places where we galvanise genuine dialogue within communities that empowers them not just to reach collective decisions but to foster and preserve mutual understanding. And we need to think more about structures for multi-layered collective reasoning that harnesses diverse understanding of issues of common concern, whilst at the same time encouraging reasoning framed more by the common good than by individual preferences.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.citizensassembly.scot/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://pbscotland.scot/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://consultationhub.edinburgh.gov.uk/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://yourviews.parliament.scot/>. For helpful discussion, see: Chambers, Simone. 2009. Rhetoric and the Public Sphere: Has Deliberative Democracy Abandoned Mass Democracy? *Political Theory* 37 (3), 323–50.

<sup>8</sup> Joshua Cohen characterises the basic contours of democratic legitimacy through collective deliberation in: Cohen, Joshua 1989. *Deliberative Democracy and Democratic Legitimacy*. In Hamlin & Pettit (eds) *The Good Polity*, 17–34. Oxford: Blackwell. James Fishkin has designed various ways of implementing this in practice; for discussion, see: Fishkin, James. 2009. *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Futures + Policy

# Social Media and Responsible Debate

The development of social media in the early 2000s seemed to promise increased opportunity for genuine and constructive political debate. In addition to a place to post pictures of our cats and children, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter gave us the opportunity to articulate and refine reasons for and against various public policies and to quickly share our ideas with a large number of people.

Optimistically, one might have hoped this would generate space for a new kind of public deliberation much richer and more widespread than occasional trips to the ballot box. However, we now know that these platforms often create [echo chambers](#),<sup>1</sup> [stoke political polarisation](#),<sup>2</sup> [exacerbate natural tendencies towards confirmation bias](#)<sup>3</sup> and provide a [forum for antisocial behaviour](#),<sup>4</sup> rather than facilitate meaningful public debate.

Moreover, social media seems not only to have failed in its political promise but also to have taken much in-person political debate down with it. Shifts in public discussion associated with the rise of social media are, we think, a significant reason the YAS project to create a Charter for Responsible Debate has gained so much attention. It is time to use the Charter to reflect on how the political promise of online debate might be revived.

This is particularly important in an era in which the rapid advance of new technologies makes collective debate even more important for communal decision-making. The roll-out of new digital technologies and data-led approaches for all aspects of our lives, and the shift to a society much

**Moreover, social media seems not only to have failed in its political promise but also to have taken much in-person political debate down with it**

more connected online, requires sophisticated decision-making about individual and collective approaches to technology. For instance, driverless transport is technologically possible at present, but the question of what extent of public space should be given over to these vehicles is a social question, not a technological one. Similarly, it is technologically possible to use personal data to analyse rapidly the spread of infectious diseases; but determining how to do so requires the balancing of personal and collective rights.

This depends on creating a public sphere, which German philosopher Jürgen Habermas describes as “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state.”<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, however, large parts of the existing conception of how the public sphere should function is based on cultural understandings that do not easily translate to the internet. Social media platforms significantly lower the cost of access to the eyes and ears of large swathes of the public, which has a democratising effect; however, they reward engagement with others that is short-lived, emotive and unreflective.

<sup>1</sup> <https://aeon.co/essays/why-its-as-hard-to-escape-an-echo-chamber-as-it-is-to-flee-a-cult>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pnas.org/content/115/37/9216>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/biases-make-people-vulnerable-to-misinformation-spread-by-social-media/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/03/29/the-future-of-free-speech-trolls-anonymity-and-fake-news-online/>

<sup>5</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. 1962 (transl. 1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*, 162. Cambridge: Polity.

Whilst countries such as Scotland and Ireland have begun to successfully adopt participatory methodologies such as [Citizens' Assemblies](#),<sup>6</sup> to be successful this needs to incorporate online approaches. The proliferation of the kinds of bad behaviour that makes online debate toxic is often not carried over from real life: trolling, doxing and death threats are very unusual during an in-person debate, for instance. How can we shift from in-person to online whilst preserving and improving the cultural understanding of how the public sphere should function? In this piece, we seek to make and motivate some recommendations.

### **Structural:**

The structure of social media is based on attracting people to spend increasing time on their apps – what is called the 'attention economy.' This means that it tends to promote voices that generate strong reactions – and although this has always been the case in politics, it is particularly significant in social media. As a result, one of the easiest ways to get attention is to express yourself very stridently, which is more likely to be rewarded with the 'like,' 'comment' and 'share' responses that promote a post. Although this generates lots of engagement, it also creates reward pathways, which can make people behave in irresponsible ways, such as making intentionally inflammatory comments or promulgating unchecked conspiracy theories. This tension suggests it needs a response. However, it is not clear what the best response should be.

## Recommendation 1

Social science research funders should encourage public policy think tanks and academics working in media studies, psychology, sociology and political theory to collaborate on user-based research into how to protect responsible debate online, whilst maintaining engagement, particularly around issues of public significance.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.citizensassembly.scot/>

### Behavioural:

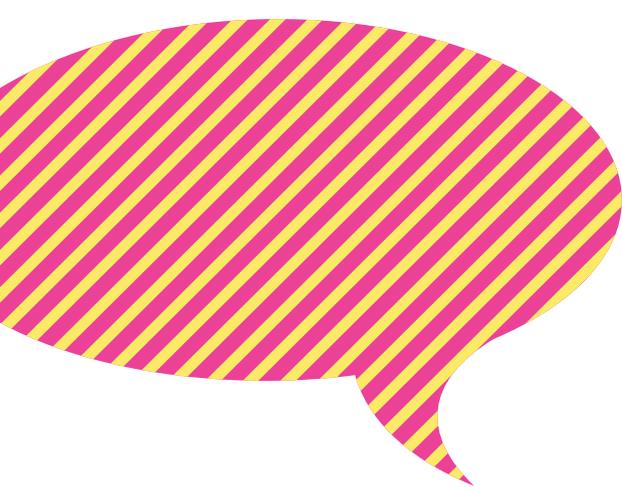
Discussions of problematic interactions on social media often focus on the poor behaviour of particular people. Beyond tackling specific transgressions, however, we should also confront the broader challenge of promoting individual and collective behaviours that encourage online debate to exemplify more of the principles in our Charter.

YAS's work on the Charter for Responsible Debate has been particularly indebted to Kal Turnbull, whose online discussion board [Change My View](https://www.reddit.com/r/changemyview/)<sup>7</sup>

on the platform Reddit gave us insight into the ways that online discussion could be designed to promote thoughtful engagement between those who disagree. As Kal put it, we need ways to reframe how we think about being 'right' or 'wrong' when discussing topics about which people deeply disagree. Rather than seeing online debate as beating back an opponent or seeking to convince the unconverted, we need ways to encourage people who disagree about particular topics to collaboratively seek truth and mutual understanding.

## Recommendation 2

Social media companies, schools, universities and governments should collaborate to create and disseminate behavioural norms around online behaviour that promote good behaviour and create sanctions for poor behaviour, in order to replicate the norms of debate in the analogue world.



The YAS Charter for Responsible Debate aims to do this in a more general sense. We recommend this be used by platforms hosting debates to co-create with users an application designed for their online space and develop collective approaches to rewarding responsible debate and deprecating irresponsible actions.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.reddit.com/r/changemyview/>

### Regulatory:

Much recent political debate about social media focuses on regulation. We think regulation should seek to fill the gaps left by structural and behavioural approaches, by seeking to identify the ways in which rules and laws can be used to promote responsible debate. This must include a careful analysis of the benefits of free speech, the need for political expression, the openness of social networks to scrutiny and the competing demands of creating profitable companies and having a functioning public sphere.

The spread of conspiracy theories and fake news is facilitated greatly by the shift to closed communication tools such as WhatsApp, which has end-to-end encryption that allows for

the dissemination of untruths that cannot either be analysed or countered. Whereas on Twitter or Facebook information can be challenged, on closed apps such as WhatsApp misinformation – most recently about vaccines – can spread without contestation. The speed and detail with which this information can circulate could cause even greater damage. This stems from a failure of other, open networks and suggests there needs to be a way to more effectively authenticate information, so that closed networks are of less significance. Where possible, fact checking and suppression of identifiably false information should be considered.

## Recommendation 3

There should be communal efforts to create not-for-profit public sphere-focused social media, bringing together public bodies, institutions and new forms of governance to protect the public sphere. Where private companies are used to disseminate important information, open information systems should be privileged over closed systems, and those companies should allow freedom of political expression where it avoids hate speech and the spread of demonstrably false information.

Social media can serve other purposes than public debate, and we are not calling for State takeover of companies hosting various platforms. However, we do want to highlight the negative side-effects the status quo is having on public discussion of contentious issues. These platforms have the potential to facilitate constructive exchanges of conflicting points of view. And it is this sort of exchange that is crucial for genuine collective reasoning amongst people who often disagree but who are still committed to living together. This is why we'd like to see attempts to re-engineer social media so that it harnesses its potential to facilitate the sort of collective reasoning that would improve our democratic governance.

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# Children's Voices

## What can be learned through constructive communication?

For many families in the Global North, the 2020s have marked a radical shift in interactions within the household, with an enhanced focus on children's wellbeing and an unprecedented involvement in their education.<sup>1</sup> With the necessary homeschooling, interactions within families and between families and formal institutions of education are being quickly re-negotiated, with potentially long-lasting effects. In the short term, schools are having considerably less input into children's lives and must now negotiate new ways to involve parents and carers in the learning processes, preparing the adults of tomorrow. A trustful and inclusive approach to the curriculum encourages all adults with caring responsibilities to support a pedagogical mission that was formerly the remit of State institutions. It will be an unexpected benefit if this revolution can contribute to a more inclusive approach to education and act as a catalyst to better incorporate children's voices into public debate.

To acknowledge the 30th anniversary of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#),<sup>2</sup> the Scottish Government has recently embedded the Convention into domestic law and, thereby, instituted a new legal approach towards listening to children's voices. As per Article 12, children have the right to have "their views on self-regarding matters taken seriously and weighted according to the child's maturity".<sup>3</sup> Children have, therefore, the right to be heard. Ruth Lister and Nicola Berkley echo this statement and extend their reflection to the role

of adults in actively listening to children: "Listening with respect to children's views could be seen as a responsibility of adults' citizenship".<sup>4</sup> It could also be seen as the key driver of children becoming responsible and respectful adults.

However, we still need to identify the methodology that will allow children's voices to be heard and taken into consideration. Legally considered as vulnerable individuals, children have to be approached with care and caution. There are also limitations of their physiological ability to express and communicate their views and aspirations. This is probably why, as mentioned by Einarsdottir (2014), the research *on* children has taken the lead over doing more research *with* children.<sup>5</sup> Yet the question remains: how can we really listen to children? How can their voices be truly heard? Focusing on children requires different ways to record children's approaches to their environment, society and the world. Reflecting on these paradigms and embracing the challenge to undertake a more inclusive approach, YAS has been looking at ways to involve children in the design of the future.

The YAS community has designed a series of projects through which children's views have been sought and recorded in different ways. At the intersection of projects on sustainable education and the Charter for Responsible Debate, we have created a toolkit aimed at growing a more responsible, respectful and inclusive society – from children up to adults.

- 1 Le Guennec, A. 2020. Children, school and dress code: towards post-pandemic reflexions on children's clothing behaviour. <https://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/blog/children-school-and-dress-code-towards-post-pandemic-reflections-on-childrens-clothing-behaviour/> posted in October 2020.
- 2 <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>
- 3 Archard, D. 2020. Hearing the child's voice: a philosophical account. *Journal of the British Academy* 8 (suppl issue 4), 7-15. Posted 28 September 2020.
- 4 Berkley, N. & Lister, R. 2020. Multidisciplinary perspectives on the child's voice in public policy: an introduction. *Journal of the British Academy* 8 (suppl issue 4), 7-15. Posted 28 September 2020.
- 5 Einarsdottir, Johanna. 2014. Children Perspectives on Play. In Brooker, L. et al. (eds) *Play and learning in early childhood*, 319-30. London: SAGE.

## Not only should we listen more to children's voices, but we should involve them in public debate

### Listening to children's voices:

The YAS Charter for Responsible Debate can be used in homes and schools as a medium to facilitate respectful and fruitful discussions between children and adults. Its emphasis on attentive and open-minded listening can be taken as a prompt for adults to take more actively younger generations' points. Its principles also offer a framework that can promote and strengthen effective communication amongst children. As a tool that children, teachers, parents, researchers and policy makers can experiment with, the Charter invites us all to re-imagine debate with and amongst children and to communicate with them more inclusively. From this initial project, others have emerged, enhancing different aspects of the Charter and inviting further experimentation.

### Fostering children's voices:

Developing awareness of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child amongst school children is the aim of one of YAS's recent activities around children's voices. Not only do children have the right to be heard, but they should also know how society can support them in the design of a future of hope and opportunity. Capturing children's voices can be challenging, however. Therefore, involving creative practitioners, such as story tellers, in the development of tools aimed at facilitating child-centred communication has been a major focus of our work. Telling stories, projecting themselves into a world where they have to experience the otherness to express their individuality, has been the key in the creation of experimental workshops where children aged 9–10 are asked to identify an object, a place, a situation particularly representative of their freedom, of their rights, of their role and interaction with the society.

We think this is a good way to introduce children to the inclusive and informed criteria of responsible

debate. This is reflected in Principle 2 of the Charter, which enjoins people to talk to individuals with different beliefs, experiences, perspectives and background. In the context of children, upholding this principle encourages children to better understand their peers, and it provides a way for them to begin to mould their identity, as citizens and as responsible beings.

### Collecting children's voices:

Following this approach, as a wider-scale response to this *in-situ* experiment, the competition [Tomorrow... Reimagine our world](#)<sup>6</sup> demonstrated an alternative way to amplify children's voices. Invited to identify the Grand Challenges that Scottish society must tackle in the immediate future, children aged 8–14 were asked to communicate their views creatively. Designing a poster, an animation clip, a collage, they were given the chance to participate in a creative way that appealed to them, while reflecting on the effectiveness of different visual methods of communication in an increasingly digital world. The discussions held at home around the design of these creative contributions helped them explore another aspect of the responsible debate: collaboration and listening to other people's ideas.

Echoing the work of our Scottish policy and governmental partners working on childhood and with children, YAS believes it is important to design, test and evaluate the tools children have to create a sustainable and inclusive future. Not only should we listen more to children's voices, but we should involve them in public debate. But to do that, we need everyone – both adults and children – to debate responsibly. By linking the classroom with family-based conversations, YAS's Charter for Responsible Debate, alongside the portfolio of experiments we have developed around children's voices, can be seen as providing a template for beginning to shape positive behaviours in that direction.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/our-work/childrens-voice-gallery/>

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# Responsible Debate on Society's Response to Climate Change

## Why we need judicious use of the scientific evidence

This post takes climate change as a point of departure to reflect on responsible engagement with the idea of scientific consensus in public debate. Until recently, the drive for responsible debate around climate change has largely concerned itself with countering the viewpoints and tactics of climate change deniers. Such deniers have typically homed in on uncertainties, and challenged the assertion that scientists 'agree' climate change is happening by arguing that science doesn't function on the basis of consensus.<sup>1</sup> Now, though, the contours of the debate are changing in a way that requires us to think in more nuanced terms about what scientific evidence is, and how we use it when we make decisions as a society about how to respond to climate change.

For decades, the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has been a critical driver for national and international policy and legislation on climate change. The job of the IPCC is not to *do* climate change science as such, but rather to get the world's leading climate change researchers to synthesise the state-of-the-art which has already been published in the peer-reviewed science and, through periodical assessment reports, provide policy makers with regular scientific assessments on climate change, its implications and potential future risk. On this basis, the work of the IPCC can be considered a strong example of one of the ways we can create an evidence-informed public sphere.

Nonetheless, an additional challenge we now face to a responsible climate change debate is not only that some people do not believe what the IPCC is saying. It is also that we have voices who believe 'the truth' is much graver than the IPCC – or scientists in general – are willing to concede. The climate change action group Extinction Rebellion has repeatedly called the IPCC reports "conservative".<sup>2</sup> The Deep Adaptation movement – which believes climate change is going to be so catastrophic that societal collapse is inevitable – has likewise been critical of the IPCC's predictions and ways of working.<sup>3</sup> Actions of this nature have led US climatologist Michael Mann to express concern over the impact of climate 'doomerism', bending science to worst-case scenarios and extremes.<sup>4</sup>

**...the contours of the debate are changing in a way that requires us to think in more nuanced terms about what scientific evidence is...**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2019/nov/03/naomi-oreskes-interview-why-trust-science-climate-donald-trump-vaccine>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/12/climate-activists-glue-hands-to-uk-government-building-in-new-protest>  
See also <https://extinctionrebellion.uk>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/faulty-science-doomism-and-flawed-conclusions-deep-adaptation/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://alumni.berkeley.edu/california-magazine/summer-2020/michael-mann-on-climate-denial-and-doom>

## It is also true that climate change is an emotive issue that cannot simply be reduced to scientific and technological language

The effectiveness of discourses of climate denial and/or delay, and the emerging backlash of radical, immediate and direct action against an impending climate catastrophe, raise an important question for responsible debate on climate change. How can we have a reasoned and principled discussion which recognises that the urgency of climate change action isn't always made apparent by the necessarily cautious language of science, yet still respects the fact that the IPCC outputs represent the very best evidence-driven assessments we have of what lies ahead?

In this regard, two principles from the Charter for Responsible Debate may help to steer the discussion. The first is to *aim for accuracy, and base contributions on evidence and experience*. As outlined above, the syntheses and outputs of the IPCC represent a rigorous appraisal of peer-reviewed science, which itself spans multiple disciplines and perspectives. Those synthesising the evidence are themselves experts in their fields and represent diverse experiences and backgrounds. Professor Julia Steinberger, for example, is a lead author of the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report and also a vocal advocate for the need for rapid, radical and far-reaching reform of the economic assumptions underpinning much of our society.<sup>5</sup> The IPCC assessment process is not, in other words, an echo chamber. It is also important to remember that the IPCC is very unequivocal in stating that urgent action on climate change is necessary.<sup>6</sup> Responsible debate on climate change therefore ought to recognise that the best available evidence is clear and strong enough as it is, without the need for further cherry-picking or embellishment.

A second principle that can guide us here is to *seek to identify common ground and shared purpose* – and, indeed, to *use emotional language judiciously*. In my research, I work with people who propose a whole range of climate change countermeasures, from radical reductions in personal emissions to renewable energy, through to speculative approaches to removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. What unites the people behind all these approaches is a deep personal concern for the risks that climate change poses to our society, and a commitment to developing strategies that they feel will reduce the harm we face, or at least soften the blow of the changes we are locked into. Yet, I have seen some of these people branded as shills for the fossil fuel industry, because the technologies they work on are perceived as 'supporting' high-emitting industries; or facing personal attacks for questioning the rationale behind deadlines for meeting emissions targets. It is of course imperative that we question whose interests the technologies and policies we develop to counter climate change will ultimately benefit; and acknowledge that speculative technologies such as carbon dioxide capture and storage can, if not governed judiciously, be appropriated in bad faith to sustain 'business as usual' modes of working. It is also true that climate change is an emotive issue that cannot simply be reduced to scientific and technological language. However, *ad hominem* attacks and divisive 'either-or' schools of thought on how society ought to respond to climate change may serve only to obscure the great deal on which we do agree.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/age-extinction-who-extreme-response-policy-exchange/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

Responsible use of scientific consensus on climate change in public debate does not mean we cannot be critical of organisations such as the IPCC. Indeed, people such as Professor Kevin Anderson<sup>7</sup> continue to do great work to remind us that the IPCC assessments are based on particular assumptions about how the economy works. There is a whole field of academic study – science and technology studies (STS) – dedicated to understanding how science is a social and political process. Yet even key thinkers in STS, for instance Professor Sheila Jasanoff, are clear that acknowledging the social and political nature

of science does not detract from the fact that climate change poses very real and grave danger to humans.<sup>8</sup> Just as responsible debate on climate change requires acknowledgement of the realities of climate change, so too it necessitates responsible interpretation of the available evidence.

On this basis, we can propose the following recommendations for responsible use of scientific evidence in climate change debates and, indeed, other contentious issues such as genetic modification, vaccines and data-driven technologies.

## Recommendations

- 1** create and protect mechanisms, such as the IPCC, which act as a space where scientific enquiry – which includes the social sciences, arts and humanities – can be insulated from name-calling and abuse, and synthesise the best available evidence in order to inform public debate;
- 2** establish clear distinctions between people doing research, and those seeking to participate in and influence social and political debates. In practice, this means policy makers and opinion shapers being given the opportunity to realise that 'the science' is never homogenous and is in itself unlikely to provide clear recommendations on specific courses of action; and researchers having the chance to understand the realities and complexities of how expertise and evidence is used in policy- and decision-making processes;
- 3** acknowledge that emotion does drive our reactions to issues such as climate change, which are grounded in scientific evidence but have the potential to affect our entire way of living and sense of who we are, and work to harness emotions as a force for good. Figures such as Greta Thunberg, Vanessa Nakate and Sir David Attenborough all demonstrate how emotional responses to climate change can be combined with a deep appreciation of the underpinning science as a means of finding common ground and energising action.

<sup>7</sup> <http://blog.policy.manchester.ac.uk/posts/2018/10/response-to-the-ipcc-1-5c-special-report/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://vimeo.com/200735298>

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# How to Talk about Migrations?

## Some insights from the perspective of reporting the coronavirus pandemic

Migration is such a frequent topic of media reporting, political debates and everyday conversations that we no longer pay attention to how this term is used and the meanings it suggests. Scholarship looking at media representations of migration indicates the prevalence of dehumanising<sup>1</sup> and stereotyping connotations, such as 'invasion', 'hordes', and 'swarming', which enforce a binary opposition between 'us' and 'them' (migrants/foreigners).<sup>2</sup> The use of these metaphors matters because the media play a crucial role in the creation of public opinion about this topic. So how do we challenge these perceptions, and where should this change come from? How might the principles of the Charter for Responsible Debate be used in this respect?

Surprisingly, looking at how the pandemic-related international travel restrictions are reported may offer some insights into the opposition of 'us' versus 'them' from the point of view of *who we are* and *how we see ourselves*. In the UK, restrictions imposed on international travel have been one of the most frequently debated

**...we fail to acknowledge that contemporary Britain is a trans-national society, whose members often travel for urgent personal as well as work reasons**

pandemic-related public health measures. Although they have profoundly affected all spheres of human life, including businesses and student mobility, the media have focused largely on leisure travel – if *holidays will be cancelled*<sup>3</sup> or whether *to book a summer holiday or not*<sup>4</sup> – with the term 'holiday' replacing the all-encompassing '(international) travel'. Although the reporting refers to the *legislation*<sup>5</sup> which makes travel abroad for leisure purposes explicitly illegal, the media use of these terms indicates imbalances in power, knowledge and accessibility (**Principle 8**) in reporting.

- 1 Musolff, Andreas. 2015. Dehumanizing metaphors in UK immigrant debates in press and online media. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 3 (1), 41–56. doi: jlac.3.1.02mus
- 2 See, for instance, Arcimaviciene, Liudmila & Baglama, Sercan Hamza. 2018. Migration, Metaphor and Myth in Media Representations: The Ideological Dichotomy of 'Them' and 'Us'. *SAGE Open*. doi:10.1177/2158244018768657.
- 3 Summer holidays cancelled? UK faces big decision on border. *The Guardian*, 23 January 2021. Accessed on 23 January 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/23/summer-holidays-cancelled-uk-faces-big-decision-on-border>
- 4 Grant Shapps: don't book holidays in UK or abroad. *The Times*, 10 February 2021. Accessed on 10 February 2021. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/extend-travel-ban-to-stop-new-coronavirus-strains-arriving-ministers-told-055pkrbvs>
- 5 Travel advice: coronavirus (COVID-19). <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/travel-advice-novel-coronavirus# covid-19-travel> Accessed on 12 February 2021.

The frequent use of the term 'holiday' suggests that British citizens are travelling abroad mainly for leisure, and are otherwise firmly settled in the country, with families and close social circles in Britain. Concurrently, this disregards the fact that many British citizens or non-British nationals living in the UK are either foreign-born or have families abroad. It is estimated that in 2019 there were 9.5 million people living in the UK who were born abroad, which is 14% of the population.<sup>6</sup> Of these, 6.2 million had non-British nationality; and there are approximately 994,000 Britons living in other European countries, excluding Ireland.<sup>7</sup> In other words, when we replace 'international travel' with 'tourism', we fail to acknowledge that contemporary Britain is a trans-national society, whose members often travel for urgent personal as well as work reasons. One such recently reported story was about a 10-year old boy<sup>8</sup> ordered to self-isolate in a hotel after arriving from Finland to Britain to be with his father as per a shared parenting agreement. But how many such stories, especially by those who come to Britain for work, or members of ethnic minorities, go unreported?

This suggests that at least 14% of the population has been excluded from the media consideration of the impact of travel restrictions on the overall population. Trans-national families are a fact of life: "Whether pushed or pulled out of homelands in search of safe asylum, better economic futures or

improved lifestyles, increasing numbers of people are separated from their family by distance and national borders."<sup>9</sup> Media reporting on the impact of international travel restrictions on such families would most certainly contribute to reassessing the understanding of migrations and thus of migrants as well, and in this way offer a more inclusive approach that unites rather than divides (**Principle 7**), and seeks to identify common ground and shared purpose (**Principle 9**).

Conversely, biases in media reporting of tourism should also be recognised. Reports about "crowds" *swarming*<sup>10</sup> to beaches is not just the use of a de-humanising term adopted from migration discourse, but also a stereotypical description of tourists in terms of class differences and wealth, seen "in an overwhelmingly negative light,"<sup>11</sup> as crowds as opposed to privileged travellers, for example, discovering the world off the beaten tracks. Moreover, this is another example of media misrepresentation of *issues of adherence*<sup>12</sup> to Covid-19 regulations that has been discussed by behavioural psychologists. The purpose is to divert attention from failures in the Government public health response to personal responsibility and personal weakness of people breaking the rules. This suggests that emotional language should be used judiciously (**Principle 5**), because in crisis situations, such as the current pandemic, the careful choice of words may prevent a deepening of social divisions.

6 Migrants in the UK: An Overview. *The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford*.

[https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-an-overview/#:~:text=UK%20project%20page.,In%202019%2C%20people%20born%20outside%20the%20UK%20made%20up%20an,in%202019%20\(Figure%20](https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-an-overview/#:~:text=UK%20project%20page.,In%202019%2C%20people%20born%20outside%20the%20UK%20made%20up%20an,in%202019%20(Figure%20)

Accessed on 10 February 2021.

7 Migration Statistics. *House of Commons Library*.

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06077/#:~:text=In%202019%20there%20were%20approximately,live%20in%20the%20capital%20city>

Accessed on 5 February 2021.

8 Father's plea after 10-year-old son told to hotel quarantine. *BBC News*, 4 March 2021. Accessed 9 March 2021.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-56169566>

9 Baldassar, Loretta & Merla, Laura. 2013. *Transnational Families, Migration and the Circulation of Care: Understanding Mobility and Absence in Family Life*, 6. Taylor & Francis Group

10 UK heatwave: Chaos at beaches as Britons swarm coastlines and cause two-mile traffic jams. *The Independent*, 9 August 2020.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/uk-heatwave-beaches-bournemouth-camber-sands-coronavirus-lockdown-a9662001.html>

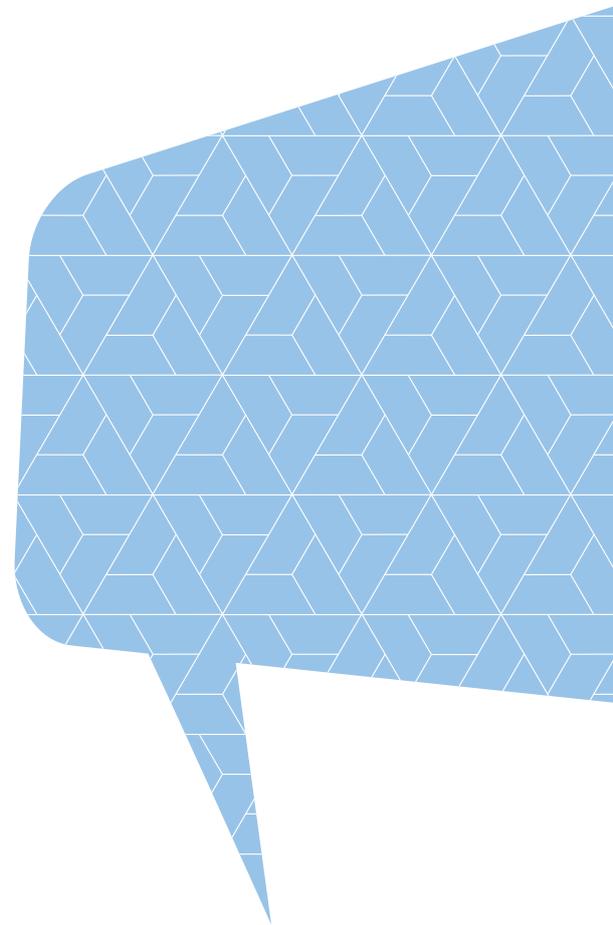
11 McCabe, Scott. 2005. Who Is a Tourist? A Critical Review. *Tourist Studies* 5 (1), 85–106, doi:10.1177/1468797605062716.

12 Reicher, Stephen & Drury, John. 2021. Pandemic Fatigue? How adherence to covid-19 regulations has been misrepresented and why it matters. *The BMJ Opinion*, 7 January 2021. Accessed on 9 March 2021.

<https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/01/07/pandemic-fatigue-how-adherence-to-covid-19-regulations-has-been-misrepresented-and-why-it-matters/>

**...many key workers, who in British national consciousness are seen as heroes in the collective fight against the pandemic, are economic migrants subject to immigration controls**

How does the discussion of these issues affect the way we talk about migration? First, reporting of all three phenomena – tourism, international travel and migration – is often highly biased and judgemental. Secondly, the term ‘tourism’ replaces the more inclusive ‘international travel’. This reflects and creates an identity narrative: it is about who we think we are, and what our societies look like, often at the detriment of people with different needs, and life circumstances. Finally, migration in a narrow sense of the word – economic migration – appears to be a *forgotten story of the pandemic*.<sup>13</sup> But many key workers, who in British *national consciousness*<sup>14</sup> are seen as heroes in the collective fight against the pandemic, are economic migrants *subject to immigration controls*.<sup>15</sup> Replacing ‘international travel’ with ‘tourism’ does not do justice to them and their trans-national families.



<sup>13</sup> Giles, Chris. 2021. Coronavirus sparks exodus of foreign-born people from UK. Financial Times, 14 January 2021. Accessed on 8 February 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/def33cfe-45c7-4323-bd08-d4fc42051f09>.

<sup>14</sup> Covid-19 heroes and NHS key workers dominate Queen's Birthday Honours. ITV News, 10 October 2020. <https://www.itv.com/news/2020-10-09/covid-19-heroes-and-nhs-key-workers-dominate-queens-birthday-honours>

<sup>15</sup> Visa rules forcing migrant NHS workers to leave UK amid Covid second wave. The Guardian, 9 November 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/nov/09/visa-rules-forcing-migrant-nhs-workers-to-leave-uk-amid-covid-second-wave>

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## Religion and Responsible Debate

Religion can stir up controversies, particularly when it colours public debate. Whilst many assume that Europe is secular – that religion has lost its significance, that it has been relegated from the public to the private sphere – pretty much any newspaper you open attests to the opposite. The debate about migration into Europe is a telling and trenchant example. Both religion and assumptions about religion have a significant – sometimes positive but sometimes negative – impact on this debate. Hence, it is crucial to think through the role of religion in responsible debate.

At least since the summer of 2015, when many refugees, mainly from Syria, made it onto European beaches and over European borders, religion has been interpreted and instrumentalised as a marker to distinguish European from non-European identity. Europe has been constructed as ‘Christian’, while non-Europe has been constructed as ‘non-Christian’ – and identified with Islam. When these constructions take hold of the public imagination, Europe becomes a battlefield in a clash of civilisations: Christians against Muslims, Muslims against Christians. Islamophobia, a type of racism that targets Muslimness or perceived Muslimness, is a consequence of this imagined confrontation. Here, an excessive focus on religion can make public debate more polarised. This is nothing new, but in the debate about migration it perhaps plays out with a new fervour.

However, religion is a bit of a misnomer. There is simply no such thing as ‘religion’. There are religions in the plural, different and diverse, with many paths to take within each of them. Talking about people of faith as if there is no plurality among them is dangerous. And yet this is how public debates about religion tend to play out.

Before he became Prime Minister, Boris Johnson compared women wearing the burqa to ‘letter boxes’.<sup>1</sup> When he added that these women also look like ‘bank robbers’,<sup>2</sup> he brought in allusions to Islam as a security threat in the imagined confrontation over Europe. While he may have tried to pass off his comments as jokes, the context and consequences of Islamophobia are serious. After Johnson’s ‘jokes’, [surges in anti-Muslim hate crimes](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/08/05/denmark-has-got-wrong-yes-burka-oppressive-ridiculous-still/)<sup>3</sup> were reported across the UK. People’s clothing or colour of skin were taken as markers of their faith. And people marked as ‘Muslim’ were singled out for attack, regardless of their actual religion. Under such circumstances, responsible debate becomes impossible. It has been stopped and suffocated before it can even begin.

To many people, it might seem dangerous when believers define their identity through their faith, visible in symbols and signs. Violent confrontations about faith symbols in the public sphere can be traced throughout history, from the past to the present. But for many believers, faith is not something that you can get rid of, even if you want to. It is not experienced as a choice, but as being chosen – being chosen by something that is larger than your life, mysterious and marvellous. Many would call this something ‘God’. And this God orients them, their belonging, their believing and their behaving. Whilst such orientations can be tricky for debates that privilege water-tight evidence, they also hold a chance: faith leads you away from yourself, to something outside and other than you. Hence, it can foster and facilitate openness to the other. In a way, all nine principles of the Charter for Responsible Debate call for the cultivation of such openness.

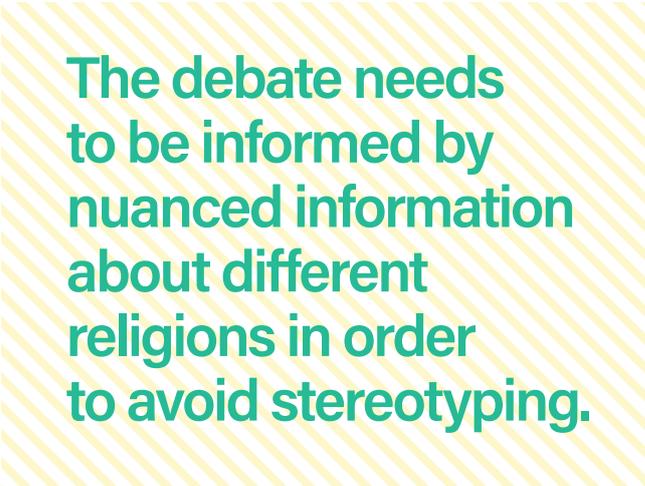
<sup>1</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/08/05/denmark-has-got-wrong-yes-burka-oppressive-ridiculous-still/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/08/05/denmark-has-got-wrong-yes-burka-oppressive-ridiculous-still/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://tellmamauk.org/press-section/page/3/>

Aiming for accuracy, as **Principle 1** asserts, is crucial where religion is concerned. The debate needs to be informed by nuanced information about different religions in order to avoid stereotyping. When people who bring different positions and diverse perspectives to the table are involved in a debate, as **Principle 2** points out, religion can play out its potential for openness. This is not an easy fix, because both prejudices and power imbalances have to be addressed, as **Principle 8** calls for. Sometimes, well-meaning commentaries from one faith – for instance, Christians suggesting that churches have found a way of settling conflicts without violence, so Muslims should follow their example – can unwittingly strengthen stereotypes, implying that a faith community is stuck in the past, militant or misogynist. One recent example of this was Pope Benedict XVI's 'Regensburg Lecture',<sup>4</sup> in which he remarked, by citing a medieval text, that the Prophet Mohammed had commanded his followers to spread the faith by the sword. Although the Pope later *apologised*,<sup>5</sup> many interpreted the remark as an attack on Islam, provoking protests in a number of countries. Muslim leaders issued responses. By contrast, 'A Common Word',<sup>6</sup> an inter-faith initiative started by a statement that Muslim leaders issued one year later, points to the commonalities between both religions, presenting them as a point of departure for mutual learning. This initiative exemplifies how common ground can be identified, as called for by **Principle 9** of the Charter.

Religious refugee relief organisations working across Europe are building on such common ground in practice. In *A World of Neighbours*,<sup>7</sup> an inter-faith network spearheaded by the Archbishop of the Church of Sweden, people from different religious and non-religious backgrounds come together to accompany, assist and accommodate people on the move in Europe. The commitments that drive them –



The debate needs to be informed by nuanced information about different religions in order to avoid stereotyping.

many speak of a common humanity, love for one's neighbours, no matter where they come from – are shared. Of course, differences remain. Different religions have different takes on what humanity means, how to and how not to love one's neighbour. Yet, all of them work with refugees, regardless of their backgrounds. Since the engagement is inter-faith, it can help avoid the reproduction of prejudices and power imbalances. Such work can have a significant impact on public perception and public policy.

Religion in public debate cannot be avoided. While it can lead to more polarised debating, it also has the potential to foster and facilitate openness to the other. Such openness is crucial for taking responsibility for the debates in which we find ourselves. When it is engaged as more than a crude marker of identity, when prejudices and power imbalances are tackled through accurate information that gives voice to diverse perspectives – particularly those from people who are in a minority rather than a majority position – then religion can even become a drive to action, a drive for the common good.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html)

<sup>5</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/5353208.stm>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.acommonword.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aworldofneighbours.com/>

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# Trans Lives in Scotland

## Imbalances of power and the limits of respectful debate

In 2019, the Scottish Government initiated a second consultation about proposed reforms to the [Gender Recognition Act](#)<sup>1</sup> (GRA), aimed at simplifying the process for changing the sex marker on an individual's birth certificate. As Minister [Shirley-Anne Sommerville acknowledged](#)<sup>2</sup> when condemning transphobic responses to the first consultation, debates on trans rights have become more polarised, with trans people facing increased scrutiny and hostility. What she and many others (in politics, the media and academia) have not sufficiently addressed is that debates on trans rights entail an asymmetric distribution of power. Those who oppose the recognition or inclusion of trans people in society are often given as much say as trans people themselves; but trans people are not simply arguing points of principle: they are fighting for survival and the right to an authentic existence.

The idea that debate about the lives and experience of people who constitute minority groups is conducted on a level playing field is a fiction. Feminist scholar [Sara Ahmed has articulated the limitations of such debate](#),<sup>3</sup> stressing that trans-exclusionary and transphobic arguments do not simply articulate an alternative viewpoint, but attempt to 'chip away' at the existence of trans people. She also notes that the format of most debates requires participants to exchange rebuttals, information that contradicts or nullifies evidence presented by your opponent. This is problematic when individuals are asked to provide evidence that demonstrates their right to an authentic life.<sup>4</sup>

The imbalance of power means that one party is expected only to bring evidence based on external observations, whereas the other party is expected to bring both objective evidence *and* evidence based on their lived experience – all whilst debating the validity of that lived experience.

In my view, debate can become irresponsible when it is set up in such a way. When someone believes that everyone's sex is either male or female, confirmed at birth and immutable, the personal testimonies of trans people are unlikely to convince them otherwise. And when the evidence provided fails to satisfy an opponent's demands, the staging of a debate and its illusion of reciprocal dialogue can actually result in entrenched positions. Worse, it can lend authority to what might look like majority viewpoints (through sheer strength of numbers) or even strengthen people's calls for an individual's or a group's erasure. For trans people, in other words, debate can sometimes be a trap. To put it another way, debates that look responsible are not always so. They may be conducted politely, respectfully and with what looks like evidence-based arguments on both sides; but those 'trappings' of responsible debate can mask serious imbalances in power and even be used as a tactic to undermine, marginalise or exclude people.

1 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/7/contents>

2 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/gender-recognition-reform-scotland-bill-consultation-scottish-government/>

3 <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3334151>

4 Ahmed, Sara, 2016. An Affinity of Hammers. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3 (1-2), 22-34. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3334151>

## The idea that debate about the lives and experience of people who constitute minority groups is conducted on a level playing field is a fiction.

Ahmed proposes one solution to this imbalance of power when she declares that “A refusal to have some dialogues and some debates is thus a key tactic for survival.”<sup>5</sup> Several LGBTQ rights groups have adopted this strategy, refusing to put forward representatives to ‘debate’ with trans-exclusionary campaigners. As Ahmed observes, “There cannot be a dialogue when some at the table are in effect (or intent on) arguing for the elimination of others at the table.”<sup>6</sup> The idea that some issues related to people’s lives and experience are beyond debate is not particularly radical. In public forums in Scotland, it is no longer acceptable to ‘debate’ whether Black people are equal to White people, whether there is a role for disabled people in the workforce or whether people who follow a religion should be free to practise their faith. A responsible approach to debate recognises that power is unequally distributed in society and that concepts such as freedom of speech are not universally inclusive. **Principle 8** of the Young Academy of Scotland’s Charter foregrounds the need for those engaged in debate to consider ‘imbalances in power,’ whilst **Principle 1** highlights the need for contributions to consider both evidence and experience. When viewed together, these principles underscore the limits of certain kinds of ‘debate’ and might be cited, when necessary, to justify refusal to participate, as part of a survival strategy for minoritised groups when faced with calls to ‘debate’ their lives and experiences.

It is a privilege to engage in a debate when you have nothing to lose. In thinking more about ‘responsible debate,’ we must address the smokescreen of ‘respectful debate’ and recognise the power imbalances that occur when an individual’s right to an authentic existence is ‘up for debate.’ The practice of debate is not an equalising phenomenon; it can shed light on issues, but also operate as a tactic to exclude individuals from public life. For those who manage forums where debates occur, such as journal editors and convenors of parliamentary committees, there is a need to acknowledge the limitations of respectful debate. This might involve strategies to address power imbalances between majority and minoritised groups, reflexive consideration of when (if ever) you should host debates that only amplify the views of those who bring expertise and not experience of the topic they wish to scrutinise, and recognise that the refusal of an individual or group to engage in ‘debate’ is a valid strategy for survival.

The arguments sketched here demand consideration if we are to move beyond the kinds of imbalanced consultation exercises which both the Scottish and UK governments have recently conducted on the GRA. But they also go well beyond the staging, reform or repudiation of debates on trans rights. It is important that anyone interested in responsible debate scrutinises the ways that traditional set-ups can manufacture a veneer of respectability whilst maintaining power imbalances. We must remain mindful not only of the limitations of responsible debate, but also of the ways in which a semblance of respectability can mask a multitude of problems.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed 2016 *ibid*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed 2016 *ibid*, 31.

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# Responsible Debate in International Affairs

Debate is an integral element of international affairs, given the prevalence of negotiation and the premium placed in this sphere on the peaceful settlement of disputes. In international negotiations, different actors seek to explain their preferences, and to persuade others of the virtues and strengths of one position over another. Credibility is key. Indeed, international law – the ‘gold standard’ of diplomatic outputs – is predicated on the notion that agreements must be kept: *pacta sunt servanda*.

Of course, posturing takes place – both in public and behind closed doors – and powerful states can always pressure weaker states to get their way. States are also famously capable of siloing issues: cooperating in one arena whilst managing tension in others. In iterative, multilateral settings, however, where there is a premium on trust, confidence and parties’ abilities to make credible commitments, brute power is often insufficient to obtain one’s desired outcomes, especially in the longer term. Rather, parties who appear to conduct themselves responsibly, who credibly present reasonable and responsible positions, and – critically – whose word can be relied on, can be more likely to achieve their ends than parties whose words and conduct cannot be taken in good faith.

If this all seems rather abstract, the past several years of Brexit negotiations provide a valuable real-life example of the perils of irresponsible debate. The UK, by the Government’s accounting, has achieved some ‘wins’<sup>1</sup> in the final Brexit settlement. These have come, however, at potentially considerable cost to the UK Economy,<sup>2</sup> as well as to British power<sup>3</sup> and influence<sup>4</sup> internationally.

Arguably, irresponsible debate contributed to bringing this about. Perhaps most obviously, the 2016 campaign for Brexit was characterised by dubious claims,<sup>5</sup> sloganeering<sup>6</sup> and a surfeit of emotional rhetoric,<sup>7</sup> followed by divisive and populist political<sup>8</sup> and Parliamentary manoeuvres.<sup>9</sup>



**Credibility  
is key.**

1 <https://www.thepavloviectoday.com/data/BREXIT-Government-Analysis-of-the-Deal-Document.pdf>

2 <https://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/uktpo/publications/the-cost-of-brexit/>

3 <https://www.ft.com/content/f5cf57f5-0d62-4158-b67b-46b2df5c04bd>

4 <https://theconversation.com/cuts-to-uk-foreign-aid-budget-are-short-sighted-and-could-damage-british-interests-150899>

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/ng-interactive/2018/mar/28/11-brexit-promises-leavers-quietly-dropped>

6 <https://www.ft.com/content/473bd2ae-4ee5-11e9-b401-8d9ef1626294>

7 <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/brexit-and-the-weaponisation-of-metaphor-language-boris-johnson>

8 <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/boris-johnsons-radically-undemocratic-maneuver/596983/>

9 <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Parliament-and-Brexit-report.pdf>

This rhetoric and its fallout – including, latterly, the Johnson Government's threat to “break international law in a very specific and limited way”<sup>10</sup> – may have played well with certain audiences at home. The associated impairments to relationships, credibility and trust with interlocutors in Europe<sup>11</sup> and further afield,<sup>12</sup> however, risk undermining rather than bolstering the UK's international position. Indeed, with mis-steps not the sole preserve of the UK,<sup>13</sup> early post-Brexit skirmishes around Northern Ireland<sup>14</sup> and over vaccines<sup>15</sup> illustrate that the cross-Channel atmosphere remains strained. If not addressed, these tensions may well limit the prospects of future EU–UK initiatives to improve on the 2020 Brexit settlement.

We can never know, of course, what might have been. It is conceivable, however, that had the UK and EU adhered more closely to principles of responsible debate in dealings with one another, the outcome may have looked different. Brexiteers could, for example, have “aimed for accuracy, and based their contributions on evidence and experience” in dealing with the British public as well as with the EU. Had this been the case, the British populace may, in turn, have been better placed to appreciate the likely real-world costs and benefits of different Brexit options, allowing politicians the leeway to strike a more balanced deal. Likewise, quarrelling over issues with arguably little substantively at stake<sup>16</sup> does a disservice to the pursuit of sustainable, constructive relations.

That said, such shifts may equally have proved insufficient. The Brexit campaign and negotiations were also characterised by inflammatory and divisive

discourse – in respect of both the ‘enemy’<sup>17</sup> EU and domestic ‘enemies of the people’<sup>18</sup> – in tension with the YAS Charter's principles of responsible debate: reaching out to those with different beliefs (**Principle 2**); listening with empathy (**Principle 4**); endeavouring to unite rather than divide (**Principle 7**); and seeking to identify common ground and shared purpose (**Principle 9**). Indeed, Guy Verhofstadt<sup>19</sup> remarked of British political rhetoric that: “This is the language of Europe's dark past. It implies Britain's European allies and neighbours are enemies.”

It need not have been this way. Indeed, the origins of the EU provide a particularly apt illustration of what may be achieved when negotiating partners abide more closely by principles of responsible debate. Famously, the 1957 Treaty of Rome was largely made possible by the adoption of a shared pragmatic, judicious and collaborative approach by French and German leaders.<sup>20</sup>

In short, responsible debate and conduct in international affairs holds out the prospect of more effectively promoting national interests – even for powerful states.<sup>21</sup> It does so by setting the scene for sustainable – if not necessarily always harmonious – relations, including collaboration in solving problems, finding compromises and resolving conflicts. Responsible debate in international affairs may not always be consistent with grandiose promises and visions. It does, however, acknowledge differences, tone down divisive rhetoric and enable international actors to identify, promote and achieve realistic outcomes.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-eu-lewis-law-idINKBN25Z1ZS>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-eu-boris-johnson-simon-coveney-b1812323.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/03/13/brexit-has-devastated-britains-international-reputation-respect-its-democracy/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55865539>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/11/irish-pm-asks-eu-uk-dial-down-rhetoric-before-crisis-talks-gove-sefcovic>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-uk-relations-hit-new-low-over-vaccine-ban-comments/a-56821585>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-55742664>

<sup>17</sup> <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2019/04/13/global-britain-scripting-the-eu-as-an-enemy/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/524ae104-b250-11e7-a398-73d59db9e399>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/guy-verhofstadt-boris-johnsons-brexit-rhetoric-is-language-of-europes-dark-past>

<sup>20</sup> See generally: Laurent, Pierre-Henri. 1972. The diplomacy of the Rome Treaty, 1956–57. *Journal of Contemporary History* 7 (3), 209–20.

<sup>21</sup> <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/american-soft-power-will-survive-donald-trump-176013>

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# Responsible Debate and the Criminal Law

Given the importance of the rule of law to a democratic society, those who engage in legal debate should always seek to do so accurately, based upon evidence and experience.<sup>1</sup> In this piece, I will focus upon the criminal law specifically and consider a number of its features, relating to its substance, and the process of its formal enforcement. I will highlight how its punitive character, and its human aspect, necessitate that care is taken by all those who are involved in its formulation, application and discussion. Although I focus upon the criminal law, some of the observations I make here also apply to responsible debate and the law more generally.

I will begin by considering the nature of criminal law, particularly its normative power, and the consequences of its breach. The formal criminalisation of behaviour has powerful consequences. By deeming certain forms of conduct criminal, legislatures and courts send a clear message to the populace about their obligations to their fellow citizens, and to the State.<sup>2</sup> Criminalisation delineates the boundaries of permissible conduct, facilitating peace and

trust between citizens, and is accordingly an important component of effective governance in modern democratic societies.<sup>3</sup> The criminal law obtains much of its normative force through the threat of State sanction. Infringement of the criminal law, if proven, carries with it potentially severe consequences, including imprisonment. It is accordingly a powerful tool of coercion, and its role in society, and the punitive repercussions of its breach, necessitate that certain high standards be met in terms of its creation.<sup>4</sup>

Given these attributes of the criminal law, it is clear that the utmost care must also be taken in political, public and academic discussion of the subject. Misunderstanding, and misrepresentation, can lead to damaging consequences but, regrettably, careless debate of the criminal law is commonplace. This [article](#)<sup>5</sup> for example, absurdly alleged that following the introduction of new Scottish hate crime legislation, people could “face prosecution for shouting incorrect opinions in their living rooms about Nicola Sturgeon”. Such inaccuracy serves to damage public understanding of the law under discussion.

<sup>1</sup> The rule of law equates to the general belief that everyone in a society is subject to law, which is publicly made and fairly applied via independent courts and tribunals. See Bingham, Tom. 2010. *The Rule of Law*. Penguin.

<sup>2</sup> This has been described as the normative, symbolic and functional role of criminal responsibility; see Loughnan, Arlie. 2020. *Self, Others and the State: Relations of Criminal Responsibility*, 47. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup> See Farmer, Lindsay. 2016. *Making the Modern Criminal Law*, 165. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> From both a philosophical and legal perspective see, e.g., the discussion of the principles of criminalisation in Ashworth, Andrew. 2000. *Is the Criminal Law a Lost Cause?* *Law Quarterly Review* 116. And also the requirement that criminal offences are defined in such a way that conforms to the European Convention on Human Rights, which has effect in Scotland.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.spiked-online.com/2020/10/29/sending-the-thought-polis-into-scottish-homes/>

A regrettably common feature during the response to the Covid-19 pandemic has also been the ambiguity that exists relating to whether certain public health measures were backed by criminal sanction, or were merely advisory, and how potential exemptions operate.<sup>6</sup> The YAS Charter for Responsible Debate provides a mechanism via which some of these problems could have been avoided. For example, **Principle 1** of the Charter states that one should “aim for accuracy, and base your contributions on evidence and experience.” By adhering to this principle, politicians and commentators can help the wider populace understand clearly the scope and effect of the criminal measures being implemented. A good example of responsible commentary in this respect can be seen in this accurate [piece](#)<sup>7</sup> on the BBC News website.

The final matter I want to mention concerns what I call the human aspect of the criminal law. At the beginning of each semester, in my first lecture to undergraduate law students, I remind them that the subject matter we will discuss, as expressed in various legal judgments and case reports, pertains to real people. Although the names of those involved (often anonymised) may appear to lawyers as merely words upon the page, these cases involve fellow members of Scottish society. Lawyers require professional detachment, but that doesn't mean they should lose track of the humanity of all those caught up in the criminal law's machinations.

Worryingly, commentators in Scotland often do lose sight of the humanity of those featured in legal cases. A striking example of this relates to the

**Lawyers require professional detachment, but that doesn't mean they should lose track of the humanity of all those caught up in the criminal law's machinations.**

ongoing political wrangling over the fall-out of the former First Minister, Mr Alex Salmond's, acquittal for various sexual offences. Responsible and informed debate surrounding both the trial and related inquiries is to be welcomed, not least given the complexity of the legal issues involved. Frequently though, the desirable standards of accuracy and responsible language have not been reached by those commenting on the matter.<sup>8</sup> In this respect, an egregious example of poor practice can be seen in this [piece](#)<sup>9</sup> which appeared in *The Spectator* magazine,<sup>10</sup> by someone who chose to describe themselves as a “former honorary professor” of law. The article offered a legal analysis of certain statutory provisions relating to criminal disclosure that was entirely erroneous, and was disputed by all those with an understanding of the matters involved.<sup>11</sup> The piece, which was also laden with hyperbolic and reckless language, was shared extensively by various politicians, and is still available online.<sup>12</sup>

All of those caught in the grasp of the criminal law deserve better. It is hoped that the YAS Charter for Responsible Debate will provide a clear framework to enable better legal discussion of such matters in future.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. some of the problems reported on here by Alastair Dalton: Dalton, Alastair. 2020. Scotland Covid Travel Bans a 'Recipe for Confusion'. *The Scotsman* 17 November 2020. <https://www.scotsman.com/news/transport/scotland-covid-travel-bans-recipe-confusion-3038960>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-54691779>

<sup>8</sup> Both of these principles are again articulated explicitly in The Young Academy of Scotland's Charter for Responsible Debate). See Principle 1: 'Aim for accuracy, and base your contributions on evidence and experience' and Principle 5: 'Use emotional language judiciously, avoiding disrespectful or inflammatory language.'

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-salmond-inquiry-is-a-farce>

<sup>10</sup> Bonnington, Alistair. 2021. The Salmond Inquiry is a Farce. *The Spectator* 26 January 2021. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-salmond-inquiry-is-a-farce>.

<sup>11</sup> Which includes, in this instance, myself! See Keane, Eamon. 2021. Clarity on Salmond Inquiry. *Scottish Legal News* 27 January 2021. <https://www.scottishlegal.com/article/eamon-keane-clarity-on-salmond-inquiry>, but also presumably the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, Scotland's national prosecutor whose advice formed part of the discussion.

<sup>12</sup> To date no correction has ever been printed.



**Classroom,  
Boardroom and  
Living Room  
Exercises**

Drafting a **Charter for Responsible Debate**<sup>1</sup> is only one step in a much longer process of effecting culture change. If we want to improve the ways in which we discuss contentious issues of shared concern, we need to start practising what our Charter preaches; or at least we need to find out what difference that might make.

### We need your help in this!

Will you test out our Charter for us? We are looking for individuals and groups to put the Charter to the test by trying to adopt its principles in everyday life.

For example, you could try it out:

- > **at home over the dinner table**
- > **in meetings at work**
- > **in school classrooms or university seminars**
- > **on social media**
- > **at public gatherings**

Start by sharing the Charter with your family/colleagues/classroom/friends. As a group, you could try out our different sections of the Charter ('Informed', 'Respectful', 'Inclusive') in turn; or individuals could pick a particular Principle to adopt for a meeting/class/day and see if they manage to stick to it. Alternatively, you could challenge everyone in your group/family/class to adopt as many of the principles as they can, perhaps with one or two observers noting when participants are doing particularly well or struggling.

When trying the Charter out, the aim is not to 'win' the debate or even to 'succeed' in responsible debate, but to talk with each other about what difference these principles do and don't make, and perhaps what other principles we also need to consider. We would like to know from you if our Charter is fit for purpose: if it makes a positive difference to how people agree or disagree with each other, and if we need to keep refining the principles.

### Will you tell us how you and your fellow 'debaters' got on?

- > **How accessible/understandable are the principles?**
- > **Did you find them difficult or easy to follow? (How? Why?)**
- > **Which principles proved more doable than others?**
- > **Did some make a more positive difference than others? (Which?)**
- > **What aspects of contentious public debate do our principles not help with?**
- > **Do you have any additional principles to suggest?**
- > **In what contexts do you think it would be helpful for people to discuss or acknowledge shared principles of responsible debate before engaging in 'debate'?**

If you test out the Charter in your home or workplace, please let us know how you got on! You can fill in a quick survey on our Responsible Debate webpage: [tinyurl.com/y6c7srnu](https://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/our-work/smarter/sign-the-charter-for-responsible-debate/).

# Thank you for your help!

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/our-work/smarter/sign-the-charter-for-responsible-debate/>

# Sample scenarios to help you test out our Charter in your everyday lives

## 1

**You have a frustrating meeting at work.** You come away from a meeting feeling dissatisfied. Perhaps it was because of what was decided; but it might also be due to how it was decided. Was the meeting a good example of responsible debate? You could try measuring up what happened against the principles in our Charter. You might consider your own contributions first, and then move to the contributions of others.

- > For example, did you listen carefully, open-mindedly and empathetically to what others were saying (**Principle 4**)? If not, what lessons might you take from what happened? And, if you found that others were not listening carefully, open-mindedly and empathetically to you, might there have been some constructive way you could have managed to shift this? Would it have been possible or appropriate to have said something like: "I realise that this is a difficult matter for all of us; we all need to try looking at it from each other's perspectives"? Or "Shall we focus for a minute on where we agree and work from there?" Did you and other participants focus on common ground rather than points of division? If not, what sorts of framing could have led to more focus on working together?
- > When resetting a discussion, it's almost always better to avoid singling out individuals for blame; another good approach is to identify common ground and promote a sense of shared purpose. If you were (perhaps understandably or unjustly) provoked, did you respond in a way that made things better rather than worse? Did you at any point say anything that was divisive or provocative, and thereby contribute to the problem?
- > How inclusive did the discussion feel, and were there things that could have improved that or addressed any power imbalances? Could any decision-making have been delayed, to ensure that discussions were better informed or that more consensus was reached? Were there avenues you could have pursued after the meeting to address problems with the meeting itself?
- > Meetings can have complex dynamics and consciously reflecting on how they go can be a great way to learn how to handle them in ways that help unite rather than divide (**Principle 7**); that address power imbalances (**Principle 8**); and that unite participants around a common purpose (**Principle 9**).

# 2

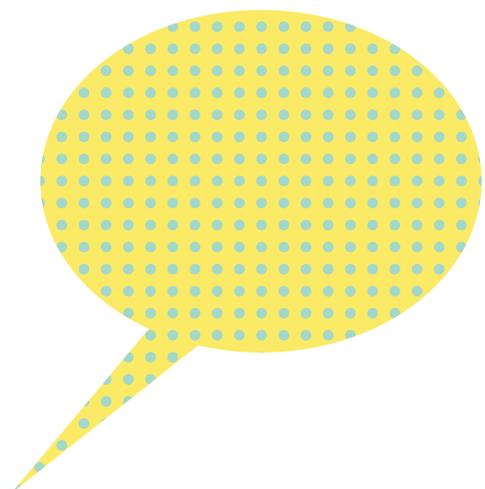
**You have received a provocative or unreasonable email.** The email could be from a family member or work colleague related to an ongoing disagreement between you and the sender of the offending email. Before thinking about how you might respond, have a look at our Charter for Responsible Debate to get some starting points for reflection. Notice too that the email scenario has some important differences from face-to-face verbal disputes.

- > It can be a lot more difficult to control the tone of an email, how it might come across to the person addressed, than with the spoken word. Paying attention to this is to be concerned with communicating honestly and with conviction (**Principle 1**), but also judiciously and with respect (**Principle 5**). Part of this is seeking to avoid miscommunication in what you write and misinterpretation of what you have received. Is it possible that the sender of the email meant something different from the way it came across to you? Even if there is a small chance of this, it should sound a note of caution regarding both what you take from the email and how you might reply. How might this affect what you do?
- > Emails remain in the receiver's inbox and one cannot unwrite what has been written. 'Getting things off your chest' in an email might give short-term relief; but an email lasts a lot longer. We should seek to communicate in ways that unite rather than divide (**Principle 7**). Can you think of instances when you fired off an email when provoked and later regretted it? What in particular did you regret about your reply?
- > Emails can be shown to other people, so one should be careful about sending anything in an email that you would be embarrassed if others were to see it. This can be a very effective check on writing what could otherwise be intemperate emails. This is another aspect of seeking to communicate in ways that unite rather than divide (**Principle 7**). Would this aspect of email communication, that your emails could be shown to others, be a relevant consideration for you? Sometimes picking up the phone can be the best solution: hearing one another's voices can enable people to judge tone better and resolve misunderstandings more cooperatively. The careful use of the human voice can be an excellent way to foster listening that is careful, open-minded and empathetic (**Principle 4**). Can you think of cases in which a phone call might have helped/not helped resolve an email battle?

## 2

- > When treated properly as a form of carefully written communication, emails can allow for a high degree of self-control and intelligence to be exercised. This can shift a dispute in more constructive directions that help locate common ground and shared purpose (**Principle 9**). After all, an email exchange can give the receiver time to cool down and take stock of things. The standard advice is not to respond too quickly to a provocative email, but to allow a more settled and balanced attitude to arrive. This can stop you getting sucked into a cycle of email tit-for-tat. It is also sometimes advisable not to respond to every point made in the provocative email. That said, it is wise not to talk/write past each other, but to signal, when appropriate, that you have taken on board the points the other party is making and that you are willing to think about them (**Principles 6 and 9**). Can you think of situations in your life in which taking on board such considerations might have made a big difference?

Have you ever written a well-thought-out and considered response to a provocative email that made things a lot better because you were able to make use of what emails can offer? Can you put your finger on which bits of an email exchange have made things worse and which have made discussions go better? Email exchanges have advantages and disadvantages, but they can allow you (even if you have no control on what the other person writes) to correspond in ways that help ensure that the exchange is informed, respectful and inclusive – the general aims contained in the three subheadings of our Charter. If you manage to uphold these successfully, you can hopefully feel with some justification that you managed to do your best to uphold responsible debate in a difficult situation.





# 3

**You are part of a family argument.** You might start by stepping back to observe it with the principles of our Charter in mind. We know from our own experiments that this can be difficult to do, but stepping back to observe is very worthwhile. You could consider how open-mindedly people are listening to each other. How emotional or bridge-building is the language they are using? Are the points they are making based on fact, or is inaccuracy or exaggeration creeping in? Are the people involved acknowledging the merits of each other's points? Are they trying to find solutions that account for everyone's perspective, or are they trying to 'win people over' to their starting position? Are there any power imbalances involved? And is the debate really about the matter under discussion, or are there underlying issues of contention bubbling away under the surface? Upon reflection, how well is the discussion going and what could make it go better? You could get involved as a moderator right away; or you could talk through your observations at a later date, perhaps by asking some of the questions listed above. You could highlight just one principle or factor which you think would make a big difference in future family discussions; or you could even set up a challenge or competition based on your observations, which involves family members scoring points or getting to talk first/for longer if they adhere to certain responsible debate principles. The idea is not so much to 'correct' bad practice as to generate conversation amongst family members about habits of debate and what impact they have on the debate itself. We have found from experience that observing other family members in debate has also made us more reflective about our own habits and practices.

# 4

**You are involved in a political debate that starts to get heated.** The debate might be taking place in person (amongst friends or in a public setting) or online on social media. Participants feel passionately about the points they are making, so emotion is running high; the longer the discussion goes on, the more entrenched people become in their own positions and the more divided they seem. What can you do to help take the debate in more constructive directions?

- > If you have the opportunity, you could try to pause the debate briefly – perhaps by summing up the different points that people have made so far, or by asking if you have understood what has been said. Pausing a debate like this can give everyone a breathing space, but it also performs another important function: it helps people take stock and check what they think they have heard or read. When debates get heated, participants sometimes listen or read very selectively, homing in on points they want to take issue with. An intervention which goes over what everyone has said so far can rebalance the discussion, drawing attention to key points rather than diversions, and it can encourage participants to reflect on the direction the discussion is taking.
- > You can model certain principles in your own contributions: for example, empathy (“I can see where you are coming from...”); open-mindedness (“that’s a really interesting point, I want to think about that some more”); accuracy and evidence-based discussion (“the research I have read suggests...”); and inclusiveness (“we haven’t heard from x yet: I wonder what they would say...”).
- > You can try to nudge the debate in directions which encourage consensus building or help identify common ground; e.g., “X and Y, I think you both want the same thing actually, don’t you, you just disagree about how to get there?” If we look far enough forward, we can usually identify goals or outcomes which all participants share, so it can be helpful to underline them and then contextualise points of disagreement as smaller controversies that need to be tackled in pursuit of common goals.
- > You can ask participants to reflect on why they are discussing things with each other; and then ask what they propose as the ‘ground rules’ of the discussion. If they are short of suggestions, try out one of the principles from the Charter.

You do not need to be in a position of authority to make the kinds of interventions suggested above; anyone can ‘press pause,’ model responsible debate and ask unifying questions. They may not always succeed, but the more we try this, the more we will internalise key principles of responsible debate ourselves and generate a ripple effect within our wider circles.

# 5

## **You have been asked to set up a roundtable on a controversial topic.**

Perhaps it is whether pupils should be allowed to have mobile phones in your child's primary school; or whether your company should cut ties with funders who have been making some troubling environmental decisions; or whether alcohol should be declared a Class A drug. How will you ensure that the debate at the roundtable is informed, respectful and inclusive? And how can you ensure that everyone leaves the debate feeling satisfied with the discussion, at least, even if they are not 100% happy with the outcome?

- > You might start by thinking about the final category first: who will be involved, and how you will ensure that you get a good cross-section of the relevant community, including experts and people likely to be impacted by the decision. While it is important to ensure that diverse viewpoints are represented, it is equally important to involve people who do not (yet) have a clearly-expressed viewpoint. As well as considering who to include, you will need to think about how to include everyone involved: not everyone feels comfortable speaking in public, for example, so you might want to make use of anonymous polling tools or chat boxes alongside in-person discussions, to ensure that everyone has a say and certain voices do not dominate. Your roundtable will also need to cater in advance for accessibility issues (e.g., audio captioning/documents in braille/building accessibility/financial or time constraints).
- > Considering who to include, and how to include them, raises structural and procedural questions – and these also have a bearing on how well informed the debate is. Ensuring that a debate is well informed involves much more than inviting a good range of experts to contribute. First, you might consider if you want to provide participants with some information in advance (some statistics/facts and figures; a set of recorded lectures capturing a range of expert views; some reading matter; an outline of precedents from different communities of organisations; etc). Secondly, what kinds of experts will you invite to contribute, whether to the debate itself or by providing advance materials? For instance, if debating mobile phones in schools or alcohol as a drug, you might consider asking people with lived experience (e.g., children who get the bus home every day/people who sell or have been harmed by alcohol) alongside more 'scientific' experts. Finally, how will you ensure that the roundtable gives participants time to process, question and reflect on what they learn? Some debates can be information-heavy but not well informed, with participants rushed to decision-making before they have had time to think about what they have learnt. Making use of break-out rooms for group discussions and exchange of views can avoid this; and the added benefit is that participants will then learn from (and have opportunities to empathise with) each other, as well as hearing from expert witnesses.

# 5

- > Whilst break-out rooms can be run by participants themselves, it is often useful to appoint a facilitator to ensure that all voices are heard and that discussion is respectful. However formal or informal a roundtable is, a good facilitator or moderator or Chair can make a big difference to how well the discussion goes. Who might you ask, and why? And what brief will you give them? It can be tempting to ask someone in a position of authority, but this need not be the default. More important is what kind of role model they will be for participants. A Chair should model open-minded listening as well as respectful speaking; they need to remain neutral, but that need not prevent them from acknowledging when points are well made. They might need to intervene if discussions become heated (modelling temperate language themselves), but they might also play a role in encouraging more reticent/quieter participants to have their say.
- > Chairs can play an important role – along with the structure of the debate – in helping participants to identify where they agree as well as where they disagree. This is important if progress is to be made. How can you set up the roundtable so that all parties feel they have come to an agreement together, rather than one side persuading a majority to vote for their position? It is usually impossible to achieve consensus on all points amongst all participants; but it is a good idea to frame questions so that they encourage consensus building and to create space and time in the debate for participants to identify shared principles and priorities in common. This can ensure that, even when participants do not agree with the final outcome, they have built up a degree of empathy and good faith with their fellow decision-makers, they feel that their perspectives have been heard and (as a result) have trust in the decision-making process (sometimes known as 'loser's consent').

This does not cover everything you need to think about when setting up a roundtable, but we hope that these tips will prompt some useful reflections. You might want to think back over roundtables you have attended in the past, both in person and online. Which went well and which were less successful? Can you explain why? Was it down to the people involved – e.g., who they were, or how they behaved? Was it partly due to set-up and structure? Were participants encouraged to engage with the issues prior to the debate, and did that make any difference? How did people feel at the end of the debate? Did the discussion leave people feeling informed and consulted or frustrated and unheard? Did it succeed in establishing common ground and shared purpose, or did participants end up feeling more divided than united?

# 6

**You belong to a debating society.** It is organised along traditional lines. Participants are divided into teams, one tasked with proposing and the other with opposing a motion. Debates are run as competitions, with individuals and teams seeking to be more persuasive than each other until one side wins. The set-up encourages speakers to communicate with confidence, clarity, accuracy and respect; but emotive rhetoric and memorable soundbites are also winning tactics, and participants become skilled at attack and rebuttals. You might ask yourself whether the debating society's conventions promote genuinely responsible debate. Could you persuade your debating society to try out some other models, or adapt what they do in response to our Charter?

- > **Informed:** You might suggest a review of the reward system, for example, to credit participants for breadth of research; not only for making arguments based on one kind of evidence or one expert opinion, but also for researching multiple angles and referencing a variety of perspectives in their arguments. Acknowledging gaps in data and unknowns should also be viewed as a strength not a weakness, because it paves the way for more inquiry rather than implying that all factors are fully known.
- > **Open-minded:** Perhaps more credit could be given to participants for showing that they have been listening to each other – and listening open-mindedly, not simply with a view to point scoring. Does your debating society reward participants for conceding the merits of an opponent's point of view, for example, or only for overturning their arguments? If we are to make progress in our discussion of contentious issues, rather than simply engaging in a to-and-fro of entrenched positions, it is important to nourish an atmosphere where participants can reflect in the light of new information and even change their minds.
- > **Co-operative:** Are there ways in which your debating society could promote collaboration ahead of competition? Perhaps the structure needs rethinking, so that – instead of pitching arguments against each other in rotation – people on opposing teams cross the floor to work with each other to identify areas of common ground as well as disagreement. Could the 'victory' be communal and based on the degree of consensus building and progress towards common goals, rather than focused on a motion being passed or not? (Here is an interesting example of a set-up which "is designed to reward not the ability to win an argument but rather the ability to thoughtfully advance debates on ethical issues of public concern":  
<https://millcup.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/what-the-cup-is-all-about/>)
- > **Inclusive:** Perhaps your debating society could reflect on how accessible and inclusive it is. How well do people whose first language is not English thrive, for example? Do some of the conventions favour one gender over another? Can people with a variety of backgrounds and characteristics compete on a level playing field? Our society is made up of many different kinds of people and all should have a say on matters that concern us; at present, however, some voices dominate public debates more than others. What can your debating society do to ensure that it empowers everyone with an interest in responsible debate, especially traditionally marginalised groups?



# **Calls to Action**

**This Report represents only the first steps in thinking about how to facilitate more responsible public debate. To give an indication of what we think should be done next, we summarise below some concrete recommendations under the headings 'Informed', 'Respectful', and 'Inclusive.' We would also like to propose some future steps for improved public engagement with responsible debate.**

## Recommendations

### Informed

Universities, governments, media outlets, and non-governmental organisations should create and protect spaces where controversial issues can be pursued and debated without name-calling and abuse, and where participants have time to learn about each other's points of view and personal situations.

Governments and regulatory bodies should privilege open information systems over closed systems for distributing information and hosting debate of public policy; this means favouring platforms that promote public and challengeable statements, rather than peer-to-peer communication networks that are much more likely to spread conspiracy theories.

Governments should ensure to listen to those most affected by the issues being debated; and should do more to listen to the voices of children and young adults in making public policy; the same holds true for other voices often marginalised in public debate.

### Respectful

Participants in public debates should exercise humility, not only about their own views but also those of other people, and should engage in debate with empathy and good faith.

Participants in public debate should recognise that respecting other people is not the same as maintaining neutrality or using only polite language in debate.

Social media companies and governments should work together to create and uphold codes of conduct around behaviour in online forums for public debate.

## Recommendations

### Inclusive

Academics and policy makers should reflect more on the design of democratic participation, so that citizens' main opportunities to contribute to public policy making are not limited to voting.

Governments should improve forums outside the ballot box (e.g., citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting) for people to exchange and explain their reasons for views about public policy.

Those managing and engaging in contentious debates should learn about and deploy strategies to address power imbalances within those debates (which are often subtle and unacknowledged), in order to ensure that debate doesn't amplify and ossify structures of oppression.

### Future Steps

We call on **politicians** to pledge to respect principles of responsible debate in their political campaigning and policy making, and to prioritise methods of debate focused on finding common purpose and working collaboratively to achieve common goals.

We call on **people involved in high profile public debates** to reflect on principles of responsible debate in their discussions of contentious issues with others and to work to reduce power imbalances and increase inclusivity in public debate.

We call on **news outlets** to highlight egregious violations of the principles of responsible debate and discuss ways that they undermine constructive public deliberation. We also call on news outlets to set up debates in ways that promote informed, respectful and inclusive discussions, focused on identifying common purpose.

We call on **social media companies** to develop algorithms that promote informed, reason-based engagement with fellow citizens in online debate, rather than opinion manipulation, point-scoring and echo chambers.

We call on **universities** to lead by example: to foster informed, inclusive and respectful debate, especially when the issues are controversial; and not simply to facilitate responsible debate by others but also to take seriously the responsibility to enter into debate themselves, for example to take and defend public stands on important issues of public policy such as human rights.

We call on **individuals in all walks of life** to experiment with and discuss principles of responsible debate in their daily lives: a culture change in public debate can only be achieved if we all get involved.

**We believe that together we can shift the general culture of debate, and our expectations of public debate, in a more responsible direction.**



# Frequently Asked Questions

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### **Is this Charter just an academic exercise?**

We don't think so. Academic reflections on various aspects and implications of responsible debate provide space for trying to think carefully through various issues, but the principles we have formulated are ones that we think could have consequences on the direction of public discussion of contentious issues, if participants take them to heart. And more importantly, we have already seen how encouraging people to discuss their own visions for responsible debate leads to more responsible discussions of contentious issues amongst people who disagree.

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### **Aren't the principles of the Charter too vague to follow?**

Our proposed principles are meant to be a general-purpose starting point for developing more concrete rules for specific sorts of debates. As such, they need to be somewhat vague, and it won't always be clear what counts as a violation in particular contests. However, we think people can endeavour to follow them, often by seeking to give them more precise content for specific contexts.

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### **If your truth is different from my truth, is there any hope of finding common purpose through debate?**

First, yes. Even when two people see things in fundamentally different ways and there is no hope of agreement, we think responsible debate can help to identify common purpose. That is, through responsible debate we can come to understand what is important to both people and how they might collectively pursue this even while disagreeing about what is true.

Secondly, one of the best ways to understand an issue better is by trying to justify 'your truth' to someone who cares about working with you but who has a starkly different take on your truth. We have found that engaging in this process whilst seeking to follow our principles often leads to a more nuanced understanding of the relevant truths. And even if parties remain deeply divided on important issues, their opinions about these issues become more coherent and better warranted.

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### **Don't structures of debate need to change - this isn't the solution to everything is it?**

Yes, structures need to change. At various levels of debate about public policy, we call for more participatory structures and better responses to power imbalances. However, such changes won't do much to improve the quality of public debate without improved behaviour of people participating in such debate. This is why we believe it is useful to discuss principles for participation alongside thinking about structures of public decision-making.

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### **What can you do when someone won't debate responsibly?**

The mere existence of our Charter won't make people debate responsibly, but we hope that having a concise list of principles to point to will help people identify potentially irresponsible behaviour in themselves and others. This is a first step towards having a conversation not about first-order questions of deep disagreement, but about second-order questions about the point of discussing these issues and how to do this constructively. If you can engage someone in a discussion in the form of "why are we discussing this issue we disagree about, and what should the rules be for this discussion?", there is more hope for engaging responsibly with one another.

### **What good is a Charter when there are so many bad actors in public life?**

It is one thing to know that someone is behaving badly, it's quite another thing to be able to articulate why their behaviour is bad and seek to understand what would remedy it. Our Charter of proposed principles won't prevent people from acting badly when engaged in public debate. But we think it can help everyone to understand what would need to change to make such debate go better.

### **Isn't a Charter like this just preaching to the converted? How will this Charter tackle trolling and the spread of conspiracy theories?**

We recognise that one challenge for responsible debate is the tendency for us to talk mostly to/within our own echo chambers. We also recognise that people who engage in trolling, or who are determined to spread fake news, will not be deterred by a Charter for Responsible Debate. However, we hope that by generating more conversations about what responsible debate involves, our Charter will have a ripple effect. One effect will be to help people spot irresponsible debate in their day-to-day lives; another might be to empower more people to call it out. By talking about our Charter to people you know, you can help us to push out those ripples and expand the conversation. Culture change happens incrementally, not through top-down rules and recommendations but through reflection and practice from the bottom up.

**One effect will be to help people spot irresponsible debate in their day-to-day lives; another might be to empower more people to call it out.**

### **Is this really usable at home or in the classroom or within a workplace? Isn't it just politicians who need to read this?**

Anywhere people disagree about important issues but remain committed to living and working together on shared projects, we think it can be useful to discuss principles for having constructive conversations about topics of disagreement. The political sphere encompasses communities of people who are committed to 'living and working together' in a fairly minimal sense and, as a result, there may be less implicit shared understanding of what works for constructive discussion of disagreement here than in a particular family, classroom, or workplace. But that doesn't mean that it is always clear to everyone in these smaller organisations of people committed to living and working together how best to discuss disagreements. Moreover, we have found that just having the second-order conversation about what responsible interaction over disagreements looks like does work – to get people to see more sides of an issue and to approach disagreement in a more constructive spirit. The more that we practise responsible debate in our daily life, the more we will recognise forms of irresponsible debate elsewhere and feel empowered to tackle them.



# **Acknowledgements and Further Discussion**

This Report has benefitted greatly from participants at our events developing and workshoping the Charter. We'd like to thank those people mentioned in the Charter as contributing possible principles, as well as participants at our events at the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the YAS 2019 Plenary Meeting, the Scottish Parliament's Festival of Politics, the RSE *Curious* series at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Millennifest, the Wigtown Book Festival and Learning for Sustainability Scotland. For guidance and support, we'd also like to thank Marie Montondo, Angie O'Sullivan, Morven Chisholm and the general YAS membership. Matthew Chrisman is grateful to the British Academy for support for work on this Report.

For further discussion of the project, please see:

**Peter McColl's articles in *The Scotsman* about online debate and about YAS grand challenges:**

[www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/peter-mccoll-debate-digital-world-needs-new-rules-1414592](http://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/peter-mccoll-debate-digital-world-needs-new-rules-1414592)

[www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/peter-mccoll-join-our-grand-challenges-help-find-answers-our-future-1395700](http://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/peter-mccoll-join-our-grand-challenges-help-find-answers-our-future-1395700)

**Alice König's YAS Covid blog post about the role of expertise in democracy:**

[www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/news/expertise-versus-democracy-a-false-choice/](http://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/news/expertise-versus-democracy-a-false-choice/)

**Alice König and Matthew Chrisman's Scotsman article about the (false) choice between expertise and the popular will:**

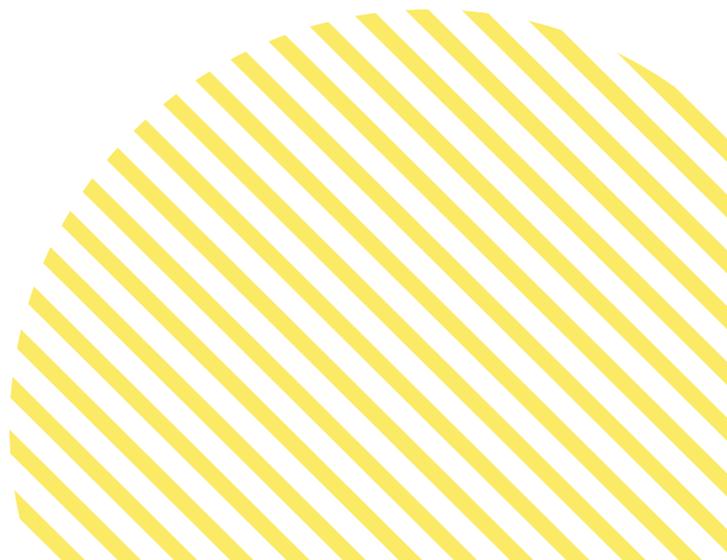
[www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/pitting-experts-against-public-opinion-not-way-forward-professor-matthew-chrisman-dr-alice-konig-2898021](http://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/pitting-experts-against-public-opinion-not-way-forward-professor-matthew-chrisman-dr-alice-konig-2898021)

**Matthew Chrisman's blog post for the RSE Post-Covid-19 Futures Commission:**

[www.rsecommission.org.uk/expertise-and-the-popular-will/](http://www.rsecommission.org.uk/expertise-and-the-popular-will/)

**Please see the YAS project website for future developments:**

<https://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/our-work/smarter/sign-the-charter-for-responsible-debate/>





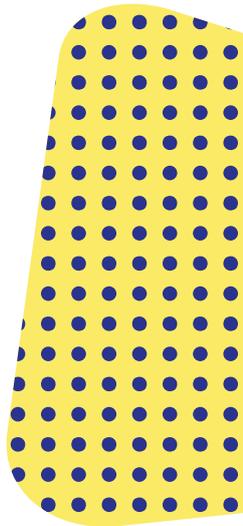




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