

31 August 2021

An open letter to Members of the Scottish Parliament:

We believe that responsible debate is at the heart of good decision making. And that by talking more about how we can debate responsibly we will be able to improve both the quality of debate and the decisions we make.

So, we are asking you to support our Charter for Responsible Debate today. The charter is one product of a project we have been leading for the RSE Young Academy of Scotland on responsible debate.

As you may know, the [Young Academy of Scotland](#) brings together 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 policymakers build a future that is equal, sustainable, healthy, and enterprising.

With Parliament returning from recess, we are sure you will agree that the quality of our public debate is essential to the functioning of Scotland's democracy. This is why we have been working over the past two years to create a 'Charter for Responsible Debate'. As early and mid-career academics and professionals we want to foster a better quality of public debate with a culture to go with it, both online and in person.

We recently launched the Charter (below) and have also published [a full report](#) (pdf link) of this project, which includes reflective essays on the principles of public debate and a set of "boardroom, classroom and living room" exercises to help people try out the charter. We worked with a wide range of civil society partners to develop this charter, and from these discussions, identified three themes: debate should be **informed**, **respectful** and **inclusive**. We are now asking all Members of Scottish Parliament to sign up to the principles of the charter and to commit publicly to debating responsibly. Will you join us by signing [our charter pledge here](#)?

We hope our Charter will have a positive impact on how public debate is conducted in Scotland and beyond. Your signing up to this Charter could help catalyse long-lasting change for the better, so we hope very much that you will join us in promoting these important principles for Responsible Debate.

Yours aye,

Prof Matthew Chrisman, Dr Alice König, Very Rev Dr John O'Connor, Peter McColl
YAS Responsible Debate Project Leads

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 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.

Inclusive

- 6 Show appreciation for good points made by others, acknowledging when they change your mind.
- 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 with 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 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 Millennialifest 2019, Wigtown Book Festival, and Learning for Sustainability Scotland; and we have taken public feedback via a questionnaire on our website.