

Lord Goldsmith QC

Citizenship Review

# The Future of Citizenship Ceremonies

by Mark Rimmer

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# About the Author

Mark Rimmer, Director of Registration and Nationality, Brent Council

Mark started his career in the public service in 1971 working for the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) in Southport. Following a subsequent seven year stint as one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Registration he ended up in London as the Department's Staff Inspector looking at the efficiency and effectiveness of the department.

Mark left OPCS in 1988 to become Head of the Registration Service in the London Borough of Brent. During the 19 years of his stewardship the office has attained five Government Charter Mark awards for excellence in service delivery and other accolades for customer service. He has been seconded to the Cabinet Office on two occasions to work as a Charter Mark assessor and is currently seconded to the Local Authority Co-Ordinators of Regulatory Services (LACORS) as a professional advisor on the civil registration service. He also chairs the London Group of Registration Managers.

He is the national local government spokesperson on Citizenship and Nationality and sits on the Citizenship Ceremonies Liaison Group which forms the interface between the Home Office and local government. Mark conducted the 1st Citizenship Ceremony in the UK on 26 February 2004 in the presence of the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, and Prince Charles.

Mark instigated the new Nationality Checking Service which enables local authorities to assist citizenship applicants in determining their eligibility for nationality, correctly completing the application documents, copying and certifying travel documents and submitting the application to the Home Office. This partnership arrangement between central and local government has been extremely successful and 75 local authorities are now participating in delivery of this service which is already processing around 50% of all citizenship applications received by the Home Office.

Mark's passionate advocacy of customer service excellence within a public sector environment means he is in great demand to speak at seminars and conferences and he regularly appears on TV as the local government spokesperson on the civil registration service.

# About the Review

The Prime Minister has asked Lord Goldsmith to carry out a review of British citizenship. In particular:

- To clarify the legal rights and responsibilities associated with British citizenship, in addition to those enjoyed under the Human Rights Act, as a basis for defining what it means to be a Citizen in Britain's open democratic society;
- To consider the difference between the different categories of British nationality;
- To examine the relationship between residence, citizenship and British national status and the incentives for long-term residents to become British citizens; and
- To explore the role of citizens and residents in civic society, including voting, jury service and other forms of civic participation.

Over the course of the Review, we will be publishing a series of pamphlets to draw out new ideas and to stimulate discussion.

This is an independent Review and each pamphlet represents the views of the author.

You can find out more about the Review at [www.justice.gov.uk/reviews/citizenship](http://www.justice.gov.uk/reviews/citizenship)

# Introduction

Citizenship ceremonies came into being on 1 January 2004 as a result of provisions contained within the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. The task of delivering these ceremonies was delegated to local authorities and specifically to the Registration Service, who were already responsible for civil marriages. It was thought the celebratory nature of that work would be ideally suited to the concept of citizenship ceremonies.

Prior to the implementation of ceremonies the application process for acquiring citizenship was conducted entirely by post. The aspiring citizen filled out an application and sent it back with supporting documentation. Once a favourable decision was reached a hard copy of the Oath of Allegiance was sent to the applicant with instructions for it to be sworn before a person legally authorised to witness it. After it was returned to the Home Office the nationality certificate was despatched by post – and that was counted as the point at which nationality was conferred.

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The process was purely bureaucratic and impersonal. Becoming a citizen provided an opportunity to mark the occasion and engage the citizen in reflecting on or celebrating his or her new civic identity – but we did nothing to capitalise on this opportunity. This was very typical of the low key approach that the UK has adopted historically towards the whole subject of citizenship.

The idea behind the introduction of ceremonies was that they would give added significance to attaining citizenship and provide an occasion at which the applicant, their family and close friends could celebrate a life defining moment.

It would also provide the local authority with an opportunity to welcome their new citizens into the community and encourage participation in the democratic process.

The only element of ceremony content that was prescribed in the legislation was the making of the Oath of Allegiance to the Sovereign and a new Pledge of Commitment to the United Kingdom. A number of other elements were set out in guidance but the overall feel and content was very much left to the local Council to determine. The guidance covered such elements as location of the ceremony, attendance of dignitaries, refreshments, display of national symbols and the provision of gifts.

The location of ceremonies was expected to be seemly and dignified and should specifically exclude places of religious worship in order not to offend any participants. It was recommended that the Council should provide light refreshments and

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arrange for the attendance of a local dignitary which could be the Mayor, MP, elected member of the authority or any other person the Council deemed appropriate. It was also recommended that there should be a portrait of the Queen and the Union Flag on display and it was proposed that the Council should present a gift to new citizens to add to the celebratory feel of the event.

The huge majority of local Councils have embraced citizenship ceremonies enthusiastically and most are following the guidance issued by the Home Office. Many elected members of local Councils have recognised the importance of engaging with the new citizens within the community and all the feedback received from those going through the ceremonies has been incredibly positive. Ceremonies are invariably happy and often emotional events and it has been extremely heart warming for me, as the person responsible for running these ceremonies in Brent, to discover how much the acquisition of citizenship means to the majority of applicants.

However, it is now three years since the ceremonies were introduced and they have become, for most local Councils, an administrative process, albeit an important and celebratory one. An overwhelming majority of ceremonies are held in civic buildings, either in Council Chambers or in the Ceremonies Suites of the Register Office, and most local Councils have not taken advantage of the freedoms they were given in being able to conduct ceremonies anywhere they deemed to be seemly and dignified.

There is also a perception that there has been a cooling of enthusiasm for ceremonies in central government since the introduction in 2004 and no high-profile politician is seen to be championing the cause and encouraging local Councils to be imaginative and innovative in delivery of ceremonies. LACORS (Local Authority Co-ordinators of Regulatory Services) has been very active in trying to encourage local Councils to be more adventurous in ceremony provision but without high-level support and direction it is easy to understand why most Councils choose to stay in their comfort zone.

I believe it is time to re-energise the citizenship ceremonies programme and make them a peg on which to hang citizenship education and community cohesion initiatives.

# The Vision

My vision for Citizenship Ceremonies is that they should be high profile celebrations that are well known and highly regarded by the new citizens that participate in them, the general public, elected representatives from both local and central government and the media.

The ceremony should include dignitaries from the local community, and the leaders of businesses and institutions that employ large numbers of migrant workers and should be an integral element of the citizenship education curriculum in schools.

Ceremonies should not only be held in civic buildings but also in venues that are considered to be iconic symbols of Britishness and should be conducted in accordance with the national standards agreed between the Home Office and local government. Ceremonies should also be considered as a focal point for community cohesion and citizenship education initiatives. I believe they should form an important element of a national Citizenship Day which should be a celebration of the wider citizenship agenda and showcased by a very high profile ceremony presided over by the Prime Minister.

# The local dimension

The first element in recasting citizenship ceremonies for the future is to begin to engage the community outside the venue in which the ceremony is taking place. The ceremonies can already be a powerful celebration and statement of civic identity for the new citizens; the key is to link the new citizens to the local community and to engage the local community in thinking about citizenship as well.

## Involving schools

A few local authorities have made the effort to involve schools in their ceremonies but this has been infrequent, not structured in any way and completely disconnected from the education curriculum on citizenship. I believe there is a massive opportunity to involve young people in delivery of ceremonies.

In Brent, we pioneered involving local schools in ceremonies and have conducted a couple in the Capital City Academy in Harlesden. The latest one, which was organised to celebrate the 3rd Anniversary of the citizenship ceremonies programme, was attended by the then Minister for Citizenship, Nationality and Immigration, Joan Ryan. The Capital City Academy has a hugely diverse range of pupils and at the first ceremony in the school one of the students, along with his parents, was actually presented with his certificate of naturalisation.

The students provided entertainment in the form of live music whilst new citizens were being welcomed in the Reception Area and also performed some songs as part of the ceremony. The song 'We are the World' seemed particularly appropriate for the occasion. More importantly however, one student delivered his view on being British and what British values meant to him. I think this was incredibly powerful and personal and it seemed far more meaningful than a similar message being delivered by a politician, local or national, or any other figure in authority.

The Principal of the school, Philip O'Hear has been a great supporter of this initiative and summed up how much he values having ceremonies in the school: "Citizenship is a very important part of education and working with an extraordinarily diverse community in our school the challenge of creating a strong and inclusive school community where everyone has rights, responsibilities and access to the same opportunities is really important. It is also important to recognise value and share the cultures that our students bring with them from their families, their countries of origin and from their own traditions and religions. We believe that it is possible to both value diversity and still create a strong sense of belonging, citizenship and community and that is what Citizenship Ceremonies are all about".

East Riding Registration and Celebratory Services (ERRCS) has been carrying out Citizenship Ceremonies for nearly two years, and has involved local dignitaries and school pupils at ceremonies at Registration Offices in the East Riding. Citizenship is a key part of the school curriculum and East Riding saw the benefit of linking with schools in the work that they undertake. It was also felt that important issues relating to equality and diversity could be incorporated into the presentations. ERRCS staff perform a mock citizenship ceremony involving year 5 or 6 pupils (9 -11 year olds).

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The aim of the presentation is to educate pupils on the meaning of citizenship, the importance of being a good citizen, respecting cultural diversity and how new citizens are welcomed into the East Riding community. ERRCS staff members devised a presentation incorporating a ceremony script and prepared props and costumes. So far two mock ceremonies have been performed and evaluation sessions held with the teaching staff following the ceremonies agreed that they had been extremely beneficial, educational and fun for the pupils. 25 other primary schools have expressed an interest and ERRCS are looking into the possibility of incorporating other community issues within these ceremonies such as local policing issues and crime prevention.

Oxfordshire County Council has also started to invite local schools to ceremonies and conducted a ceremony at Wallingford School in April 2007. The Council received some written feedback from a number of the citizens and they all commented on how welcome they were made to feel and how good the music and atmosphere was. A number of the students that witnessed the ceremony were taking Citizenship at GCSE and their teacher reported that of the

13 students five attained a B grade, five attained an A and three an A\*. The examiner was apparently very impressed with their course work and the teacher was convinced that taking part in the ceremony had helped their work.

I believe these initiatives are far too important to be left to a small number of innovative and imaginative local authorities and schools and should be made an integral and necessary element of the citizenship curriculum in schools. Students would benefit greatly from talking to new citizens and hearing the reasons why they have chosen to embrace the United Kingdom as their home. It is often a humbling experience to listen to people's stories about fleeing persecution or how they were unable to exercise their right of free speech, practice their own religion or participate in the democratic process and how proud they are to be attaining British nationality.

People born and raised in this country are often far too cynical about being British and it seems to be a national pastime to put down British institutions and our way of life. It is far too naive to believe that initiatives like this will change attitudes but it might at least make some of our young people stop to think about how lucky we all are to be living in a tolerant and free society.

## Involving businesses

It is important that business should play a part in welcoming new citizens to their community. New citizens are active within every area of our economy and are vital to the continuing success of business in this country. Business leaders have an important role to play in raising awareness of the contribution made by those who choose to come here and work, and who choose to become British citizens. It is a decision that employers should celebrate, in the same way that they celebrate other important milestones in their employees' lives.

The Employability Forum has been active in trying to encourage business leaders to attend ceremonies in the capacity of dignitaries but have had limited success to date. They are lacking the resources to properly co-ordinate this initiative and a very small investment could result in the significant involvement of employers in ceremonies.

## Involving local politicians

Although many local politicians have recognised the significance of attendance at Citizenship Ceremonies we still encounter some indifference from a significant proportion of elected members. In my co-ordination role with LACORS I hear the same stories of indifference from many local authorities and I think it is important to raise the profile and significance of ceremonies if we are to make them an essential element of an elected member's duties.

I believe there are already good reasons for local elected representatives to attend in the capacity of dignitaries. In Brent's case we conduct three ceremonies per week with an average of 25 new citizens at each ceremony. In many cases they bring family and friends and most ceremonies have around 70 people in attendance. This means that an elected representative could meet in excess of 200 residents of the Borough each week without leaving the Town Hall. I consider this to be incentive enough to be involved but it obviously needs more. I think the proposals for making ceremonies an integral element of citizenship education and giving them a higher public profile may well be sufficient to encourage a greater ownership by local politicians of all parties.

# The symbolic dimension

There is no doubt that we have rich symbolic imagery in the UK. We can do more to use this symbolic dimension in citizenship ceremonies.

I believe one way of raising the profile of citizenship ceremonies and making the whole experience more exciting and memorable for the participants would be to hold ceremonies in venues that are iconic symbols of Britishness.

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Many of our Civic Centres are important and historic buildings. But holding a ceremony in the National Gallery, Tate Britain, Edinburgh Castle, Wembley Stadium or even the House of Commons would be so much more meaningful than a ceremony in an anonymous room within the Council Offices, where so many ceremonies tend to end up at the moment, and would be likely to generate local and even national interest.

One of the problems for local authorities, in conducting such ceremonies on a regular basis would be additional costs of venue hire. But there may be scope to work on this. If local and national iconic buildings are to be part of defining our future sense of Britishness, then they may be willing, with positive encouragement and support, to provide accommodation for citizenship ceremonies at reduced cost.

A better idea perhaps, at least in the short term, is to begin this process of adding a greater symbolic dimension to ceremonies and to significantly raise the profile of citizenship ceremonies with the public by holding special ceremonies in iconic buildings with a

high profile public dignitary in attendance.

The idea would be to hold one or two ceremonies a year of this much-higher profile in different regions of the United Kingdom. These special ceremonies should be perceived as a reward for citizenship applicants that have been identified as having made a contribution to the community in which they have chosen to live. In this way, we would be giving greater symbolic significance not only to citizenship, but to active, engaged citizenship. These ceremonies will serve as a recognition of those who are committed to their new civic identity and as an incentive to others.

A procedure would need to be established to enable regions to nominate citizenship applicants for such ceremonies based upon specific criteria. The acceptance of a nomination would only be possible after a decision had been made on the citizenship application by the Home Office but there would be no reason why potential citizens could not be nominated whilst the application was being processed.

The Home Office would need to be advised of successful nominations, as the certificate of naturalization would need to be sent to the local authority area in which the ceremony was being held or, alternatively, if the certificate had already been dispatched to the local authority of the usual residence of the applicant, the certificate would be transferred to the relevant authority.

If such ceremonies were introduced there would be a very small loss of revenue to the local authority transferring the certificates and the citizen would not be welcomed, as is the norm, in the local authority in which they had chosen to live. However, I'm sure that new citizens would be extremely proud to travel to a regional ceremony which would welcome them into the United Kingdom and local authorities would appreciate that such ceremonies will undoubtedly enhance the status of ceremonies generally and potentially encourage more people to apply for citizenship.

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I recommend that the first ceremony of this kind should take place in the House of Commons and that the Prime Minister should act in the capacity of dignitary. He is a strong advocate of volunteering and of active citizenship and hosting such a ceremony would send out a very strong message that the acquisition of citizenship, and engagement with the community, was valued and appreciated at the highest level of government.

It would also raise the profile of ceremonies with elected representatives and generate significant interest from the media. I think it would be extremely beneficial for the media and the public to be presented with positive images of the diverse communities in this country and that many applicants for British citizenship are making a valuable contribution to their local communities and to society in general. Following a launch ceremony like this, these special ceremonies could be conducted on an annual or six

monthly basis in different parts of the UK. In fact, if the first ceremony was held in the House of Commons it would make sense that the following three should be held in the devolved regions.

# The national dimension

I have said already that it is crucial to use the ceremony to engage citizens in their local community. We should also ensure that the ceremony makes citizens feel part of a broader, national community.

One way to do this would be to use the high-profile citizenship ceremonies that reward community engagement as the showcase for a national Citizenship Day. All local authorities throughout the United Kingdom should be encouraged to hold ceremonies on the same day and these ceremonies should preferably be held within local communities, perhaps in community centres, libraries or even, as happens in the United States, local shopping centres.

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I suggest that they could also be hosted in venues owned by employers of significant numbers of migrant workers and these could include NHS Trust properties, hotels and restaurants or in the headquarters buildings of multi national companies. Although these ceremonies would be administered by the local authority they would be held in partnership with the hosting organisation and in addition to a dignitary from the local authority there should be a welcome from a senior executive of the host company. This would provide an opportunity for them to express how important migrant labour is to the British economy in general and to their organisation in particular.

However, beyond creating these local links, embedding the ceremonies within the concept of a national Citizenship Day would mean that the new citizens, and other people attending the ceremonies, will feel that they are part of a national conversation about our civic identity.

For those of us who take our citizenship for granted, hearing the stories of those who have moved to this country either fleeing from persecution or having made an active choice to combine their future with that of this country can be an inspiring experience. Citizenship is a powerful concept, a mark of membership and responsibility, and we can use citizenship ceremonies to make it feel that way – for new and existing citizens alike.

# Conclusion

I believe these initiatives represent an exciting opportunity for the future of citizenship ceremonies and a huge opportunity to make them more meaningful to the citizens acquiring British nationality, as well as others.

Ceremonies have become an important rite of passage for new citizens at the conclusion of the application process but have not been linked to the citizenship curriculum in schools or to other community cohesion projects. I think the ceremony should be used as a focal point on which to concentrate such initiatives.

The involvement of young people in the ceremony as a formal element of their citizenship education will help to make the subject come to life for them and discussing with new citizens the reasons why they have chosen to become British has the potential to be very powerful. Raising public awareness of ceremonies by holding, as a minimum, an annual very high profile event in an iconic British building could generate a more positive dialogue about citizenship. Once again the ceremony could provide the opportunity for new citizens to articulate publicly their reasons for embracing the nationality of the country in which they have decided to make their home.

Linking these high profile ceremonies to a National Citizenship Day will provide a focus for other events that celebrate British values and promote community cohesion and social integration. In order for such a day to have the desired impact it will need to be publicized well in advance, have support and guidance from central government departments and, most importantly, be financed appropriately. I don't think that the costs are very high and I think it might be possible to obtain financial support from the private sector, for whom new citizens can often be valuable employees.

There is a massive opportunity here. I think that we are doing our best to take that opportunity in Brent. I hope that others will join us in doing so.

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