

# Next generation gets to grips with global relationships

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**I**HAVE recently returned from a schools' conference hosted by Appleby College near Toronto in Canada.

The theme of the conference was 'Bring Your Difference' and, with more than 300 students representing 60 schools from over 50 countries, there were plenty of differences.

The conference was organised by Round Square, an association representing member schools from around the world that share a common ethos, to promote internationalism, democracy, care for the environment, a sense of adventure, leadership and a spirit of service within their students.

By the end of our time in Canada my students from Westfield had made firm friends with peers all around the world. This is where social media has a positive role to play, making it easier to keep in touch; I know that past students who have attended similar conferences have kept in contact for years.

However, this is not the real purpose of any Round Square conference, the key idea is to promote openness and tolerance of others and understanding of each other to help build a stronger, more cohesive future for all.

One of the keynote speakers we heard from was a former Governor-General of Canada. She spoke to us about citizenship and what it means to create a civil society. We were reminded that a good society will not mirror the human heart but will mitigate against the darkness within the human psyche. To create a society that we can all be proud of we must take only the good things from ourselves and work to counter the pettiness, jealousy and fear of difference that is within each of us.

It is crucial to remember that we cannot create a civil society only with those whom we like and who are like us.

She reminded us that a full society must also contain all those with whom we wouldn't even want to share a bus, never mind sit down to dinner with every day.

We also heard that, from the other side, 'Citizenship is not a buffet, it's a fixed menu.' In other words, those who wish to become a part of our society cannot pick and choose only what suits them. When someone becomes a citizen of a country as well as taking on the bene-

fits of the society they also take on responsibility for its history.

This is clearly especially pertinent in Canada where there is a growing recognition of the role that settlers, particularly Western Europeans, played in the genocide, alienation and disenfranchisement of the indigenous peoples and their societies over the last five hundred years.

One way in which Canada has attempted to integrate new citizens is by giving them a cultural access pass which allows them to explore, travel, and discover Canada. It includes free admission to over 1,400 museums, galleries and national parks plus reduced travel costs for their first year of citizenship.

The idea behind this is that when you understand your community then you are more likely to take on civic responsibility. The quicker that incomers to the country gain an understanding of the society, the faster they will integrate and contribute.

Service is a way of not only cementing your place in society but also of ensuring the place of others in that society. This may explain why, at any one time, 25-30% of Canadians are actively involved in volunteering.

Perhaps we have some things to learn from this attitude towards newcomers and outsiders in our society, our city or our street. If we can understand the reality of others we can help them understand us and become a part of our nation and our story.

We are at a critical point in our relationship with our closest neighbours, in order to forge a new understanding we need to reconnect with who we are and ensure that those who are joining our society understand this too.

Through the relationships forged by the students who attended this conference the next generation has at least begun to develop a better understanding of their global neighbours. By bringing and sharing our differences we found that we are more alike than it might appear.

At a time when Britain, and Britons, are wrestling with a change in our global identity and relationships maybe the lead from the young people at this conference can show us all a more fruitful path to a better future.

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