

Thursday 4 February at 6.00pm
Highgate Literary & Scientific Institution
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The **Highgate Debates** at HLSI bring lively argument on topical issues to the people of Highgate and beyond. We use a traditional format in which proposers and opposers of a motion put their case in turn. We are lucky to have welcomed many authoritative main speakers to debate a wide range of motions. They are seconded (supported) by students from local sixth forms who make their statements after the main speakers. Their excellently expressed and fresh perspectives on the topic give depth to their arguments. Members of the audience then have a chance to sway the audience to their point of view before a vote is taken.

The seconders supporting the main speakers at our debate about Identity Politics on 4 February 2021 were sixth formers from London Academy of Excellence, Tottenham. We felt that their impressive contribution to the debate should be honoured by re-printing their speeches here.



Naomi Hunter-Epson is in her final year at school and has a place at university this autumn. She spoke to propose the motion, *This House Believes that Identity Politics is Harming Society*.

Good evening. My name is Naomi Hunter-Epson and I'm a student at London Academy of Excellence Tottenham. I will be arguing for the motion this evening on the grounds that Identity politics is a symptom of failing democracy; that it is simplistic and reductive to one's identity; that it encourages and reinforces stereotypes; and that ultimately what I call "descriptive representation" doesn't promote or guarantee an effective voice.

The increase in public interest in identity politics is a symptom of failing democracy. Democracy is a system of government in which the electorate has the authority to choose; power is held by the people. An effective democracy should result in a majority rule that also protects the rights of minorities. The growth of identity Politics as a political force is a sign that our democracy is not working properly. Instead of the state providing protection, minorities are having to take it upon themselves to organise and lobby for their basic human rights. Therefore, we shouldn't be looking to identity politics as a solution for our broken democracy. It should be seen as a primary consequence of our democracies inability to protect the rights of all.

Identity Politics is a simplistic notion that is reductive to an individual's identity. It reduces identity to a series of tick boxes such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class etc. There is so much more to a person's identity than simple tickbox characteristics. Identity Politics however, feeds off these one-dimensional notions of categorisation. To assume that because 2 people share a quality e.g. are of the same race or gender, that they also share a similar identity, is at best simplistic and reductive and at worst creates a social pressure that leads to the control and manipulation of thought and expression. If we make the assumption that facets of identity dictate people's views, then we are effectively reducing that person to their traits. This is particularly uncomfortable and dangerous because it means minorities get viewed as a single collective. Let's take an example, I'm sure many people are familiar with the term 'BAME', which stands for Black, Asian, Minority, Ethnic. I have a particular dislike for this term as it erases the very real differences and nuances in the rich history and vibrant culture of these communities; it views identity through the lens of the white man, it says you are not white European thus you are other, and any differences between your communities are insignificant. Identity Politics emboldens this reductive and simplistic thinking. It reduces identity from what lies in one's heart, merely to what is palatable and can be presented as a tick box on a form.

Thus, Identity politics reinforces stereotypes and pigeon holes voters. This happens because (in the easily digestible structures of race, gender, sexuality etc) identity can be weaponized to limit the individual autonomy of the voter. Let's take an example, if we make the assumption that all black voters in the US are Democrats, then we are not only denying the possibility of individual choice, but we are ignoring the diverse shades and textures of cultural and political differences. Under the guise of identity politics, people may superficially have a shared identity, but that is no reason to expect them to vote the same way. What is very telling in this example, is how this expectation of shared identity voting only applies to minority groups. There is never any assumption that the white voters that make up the majority in the US, should vote either Republican or Democrat; there is an automatic assumption that there will of course be a diverse spread of opinion among white voters. However among Black voters, there is an automatic assumption that they will vote Democrat. That's where the real issue with identity politics lies. It produces a double standard. That double standard enables majority groups of shared identities to explore electoral freedom while suppressing the political opinion of already marginalised minorities.

Even when a minority group succeeds in gaining representation, that doesn't guarantee it an effective voice. Of course, Identity politics will put identity at the forefront of their political campaigns. But, with identity at the forefront other important things such as ideology, the political voting history of candidates, policy, are left behind. Identity politics prioritises descriptive representation which (while indisputably important) is surely not the sole determinant of effective representation. Identity Politics doesn't empower structural change; it doesn't even necessarily increase descriptive representation - it increases tokenism, it thrusts minorities into positions of power - not based on credentials, policy, ideology, voting history - but based on descriptive characteristics.

This year, I'm going to leave sixth form and venture out into uni and the real world. I want to be judged for my character, my integrity, my ambition. Not the superficial characteristics that Identity Politics reinforces. People with my genetic inheritance know only too well where tick boxes can take you.

Thank you.



Sophie Eziuloh is 16 years old and a student in her first year of sixth form study at London Academy of Excellence, Tottenham. Sophie spoke to oppose the motion.

Good evening, my name is Sophie Eziuloh and I am a student at London Academy of Excellence Tottenham. I will be arguing against the motion as a seconder, on the grounds that identity politics is **not** a harm to society.

□ **Opening statement - inevitability of identity politics**

Identity politics is a modern social and political phenomenon that mostly attracts those who cannot make their way in life simply by means of merit (pause) because they are held back by attributes that cannot be changed or are an essential part of their identity but yet are used against them. For example, people of ethnic backgrounds, Women, the working class, religious minorities, people of the LGBTQ+ community and many more marginalised groups in society.

This then allows us to propose that identity politics is an inevitable consequence of the society that we live in - a society that, dare I say, continues to oppress and even profit off those people not given equal opportunities. Considering this, we must come to see that some form of identity politics is necessary for the representation of such groups - to provide a sense of belonging to the many who have timelessly been treated as outsiders.

To say that identity politics is a harm to society is almost to say that solidarity of experience, challenging the status quo and building a platform to speak from (pause) - exercising democratic rights - is a harm to society. As if the lives of those constantly underrepresented are not significant enough to make noise for.

□ **BLM**

An example of such campaigns were demonstrated in the summer of 2020 by the Black Lives Matter social movement that took the world by storm. It was triggered by the untimely and brutal death of George Floyd. This organisation campaigns for the equality of life for black people - trying to tell the world that our lives matter enough not to be killed in the name of authority; that our lives matter enough not to be ridiculed by the half-baked ideas of people insisting 'all lives matter'. Because if all lives really did matter the idea of identity politics would not be seen as a harm to society because it would simply cease to exist.

□ **Representation**

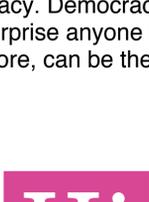
This in my opinion, is at the core of identity politics and one of, if not the most important parts of politics. It gives the greatest possible representation to those who might well be left behind when campaigning for marginalised groups as a whole.

The importance of such specific sections of identity politics is that they can bring to light the individual differences within an already marginalised group. For example, like the difference between being a black man and being a black woman or even being a black gay woman. With such 'hyper specific' groups, one of the worst things that can come to them, would be the absence of identity politics (as a shield and recourse). As a black woman I can easily understand the conflict of having two tribes to belong to, that often clash with each other. I understand the fear of being discriminated against. Not only of my gender as well as being discriminated against because of my race. It would be injustice if we did not have such outlets as identity politics and intersectionality in our democracy. *(We have indeed a long way in there is but there is still a long way to go.)*

Therefore the presence of it (identity politics) allows the energy of these affected groups (minorities) to be involved in democracy rather than find extreme outlets outside the system that would be disruptive to society. Making smaller the threat of extremist groups.

Of course, there is a danger that identity politics can be taken to an extreme where people only consider themselves and their welfare at the expense of others, and take protest to extremes of confrontation making it a problem for any democratic society. However, I must make clear that I disagree with this form of identity politics. But it is something that society has to address, because it is a challenge - and a necessary challenge - to our system of democracy. Democracy must be able to cater for minorities. If it doesn't it shouldn't surprise anyone if things get out of hand. Intersectional identity politics, therefore, can be the peaceful way ahead.

Thank you for listening.



Please join us for a future debate.

These are motions that we have debated in the past four years:

This House Believes that.....

- Gender equality is unachievable
- The use of Social media undermines democracy
- The policy of student loans and university fees is a mistake
- Tackling the housing crisis cannot be left to the market
- Westminster Politics is broken
- The climate change crisis calls for mass civil disobedience
- Instagram mass media has had its day - a student debate
- Facial recognition technology is a force for good
- Private schools are bad for society
- Sponsorship compromises art
- The BBC is a National Treasure that we all need to pay for
- This is the End of Capitalism
- Identity Politics is harming society

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