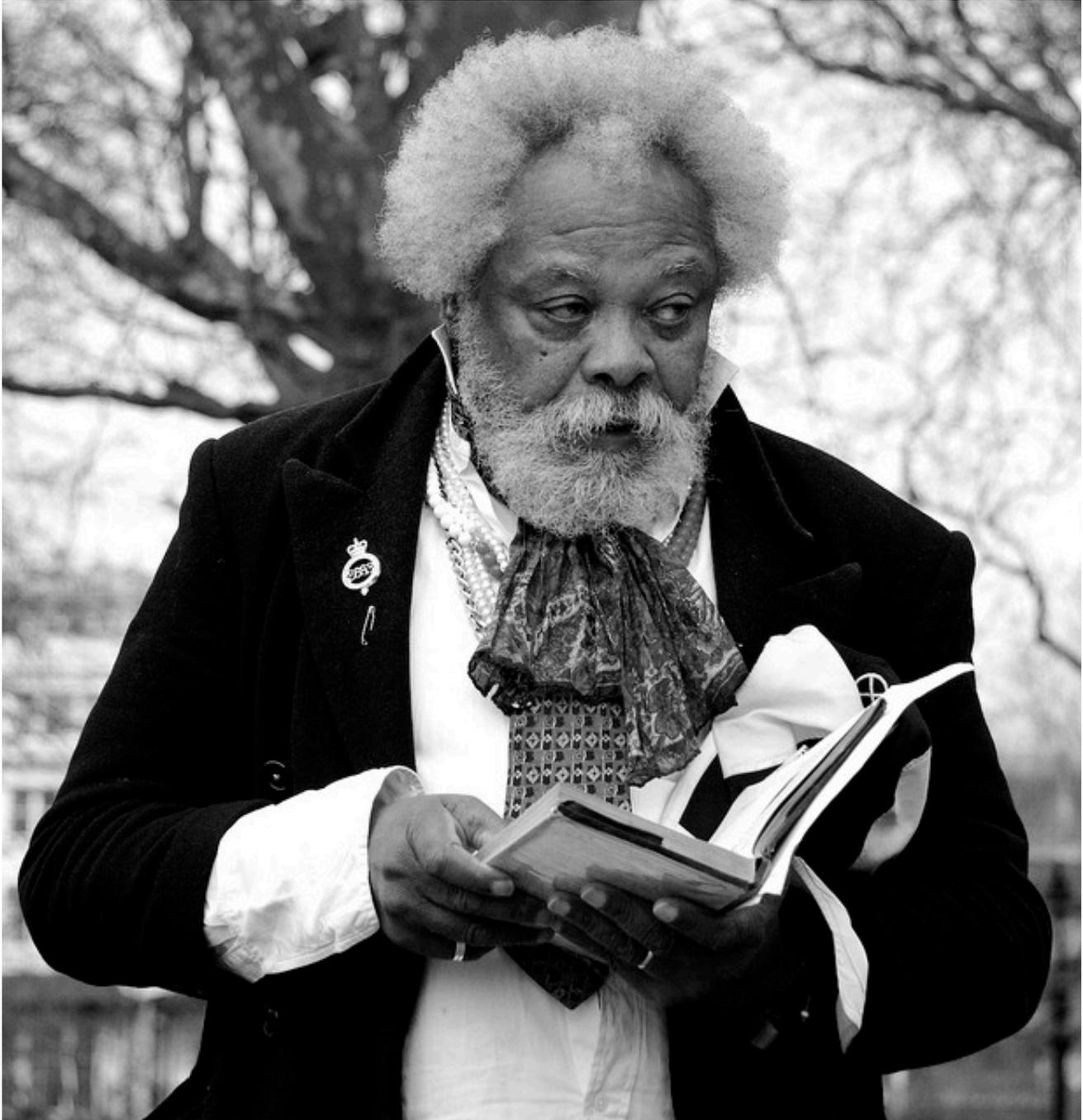


## “Speakers’ Corner” What should it mean today?

**Peter Bradley describes a British initiative promoting free expression, public debate and active citizenship.**



Almost 150 years after it was established, Speakers’ Corner in London’s Hyde Park remains a powerful inspiration to the millions all over the world who are still struggling for the rights to free

## Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.  
<https://freespeechdebate.com>

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expression and public assembly that we in Britain have enjoyed for generations.

Those freedoms were as hard won here as elsewhere. But there is a danger that we are beginning to take them for granted. Disillusion with our democratic institutions, preoccupation with our aspirant lifestyles and the seduction of social media mean that today we spend less time discussing each other's ideas and opinions face to face. This erosion of traditional forms of relationship can in turn make it more difficult both to build common cause and to win respect for alternative opinions.

[Speakers' Corner Trust](#) believes that the engagement of citizens with each other as well as with decision-makers is a key to rebuilding active communities at home and to the development of robust civil society in emerging democracies.

We seek to create new opportunities for more open, public debate and, in doing so, remind people that – as the ancient Greeks understood – citizenship is a challenge: democracy is only as good as we collectively make it; rights, like muscles, must be exercised if they are not to become weak and flabby.

Our approach is distinguished by our emphasis on face-to-face debate.

The internet is an invaluable resource. It has given us unparalleled access to information and to each other. It can educate, enlighten and enfranchise. But it has limitations too. As well as engaging people in genuine interaction, it can also detach them from it. It offers a wide diversity of information and opinion but cannot guarantee that we will seek or find it or that, if we do, it will be true. It provides opportunities to debate but online anonymity can also undermine the quality and accountability of the opinions we encounter or express. Activity on the internet can look like the democratic process but in fact be a substitute for it.

In contrast, our [local Speakers' Corner](#) projects seek to encourage people back down the garden path to discuss with their neighbours the issues which really matter to them. Several are already under way in UK towns and a national initiative was launched in [Nigeria](#) in November 2012.

Their success has been based on their capacity to harness the ideas, energy, goodwill and voluntary commitment which can be found, often untapped, in every community. Encouragingly, we have encountered extraordinary enthusiasm for our very simple proposition and no shortage of volunteers to join the Speakers' Corner Committees which own and manage the projects.

Their work often includes establishing Speakers' Corners as physical platforms for expression and engagement. Creating a genuinely public space in the heart of our city centres conveys a potent symbolism. Knowing that when we stand there we are the equal of anyone else in our community can be hugely empowering.

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But at the heart of each initiative lies a programme of events designed to appeal to every sector of the local community. Some may take place at the Speakers' Corner; others in a range of venues, from Council Chambers to community centres, schools and workplaces.

They might include debates led by voluntary groups, consultations mounted by public services or discussions stimulated by academics, campaigners or enthusiasts on subjects from the global to the parochial.

Some may lead to greater public influence on local decision-making and increased confidence in the democratic process; some may inspire practical community action; others may help improve understanding between or within communities. Some may simply be personally enriching.

In our experience, when participants feel that they rather than powerful and usually unpopular institutions genuinely own the platform and the agenda, they express their ideas and opinions far more willingly, creatively and constructively than could otherwise be expected.

Of course, we also embrace the power and reach of the internet. Indeed, within the last few months, we've launched [Youth Amplified](#) an innovative website developed with Professor Stephen Coleman and his team at Leeds University to help young people acquire essential speaking and listening skills.

Moreover, our [Forum for Debate](#) has become the most visited page on our website. It provides protagonists on either side of an issue (including think tanks, commentators, academics and campaigners) with an opportunity to match well-considered, rational arguments on sometimes complex and controversial issues, including the cases for and against assisted dying, GM food technology, the legalisation of drugs, humanitarian intervention, animal experimentation and electoral reform. Appropriately, the next debate, to be published in early March, focuses on the impact of new media on human behaviour.

These debates are designed not to begin and end on the screen but to encourage readers, guided by bibliographies provided by the British Library, to seek out further information and perhaps engage in face-to-face debate themselves.

Long may the internet flourish as a modern marketplace for ideas and opinions! But may it be a supplement to rather than a substitute for the humanising, civilising experience of face to face deliberation and debate.

Peter Bradley is the director of the Speakers' Corner Trust.

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