

Young once, or young for ever?

Doug Nicholls, Chair of Chooseyouth and General Secretary of the General Federation of Trade Unions, argues that it is acutely undemocratic to continue to refuse to invest in the Youth Service and make it statutory and welcomes the recent Labour Party plans for statutory youth service provision.

Ignoring the majority

We are getting painfully accustomed to strong popular consensus being ignored by politicians. Parliament, it seems, thinks it can overturn the biggest ever mandate given to it by the people in its history.

For most young people and most of the population, providing better support and opportunities for young people remains one of the top political priorities. This is codified as the eloquently straightforward demand for a statutory Youth Service. This has been the policy of every parliamentary party except the Conservative Party.

Yet it has been historically one of the lowest priorities for politicians to implement despite their party policies. It's been a promise made in opposition and forgotten in power.

It was the great youth worker and trade unionist Paul Boskett who significantly helped establish the Youth Parliament in the House of Commons. What is consistently expressed in their debates is the aspiration for a national infrastructure of youth support staffed by professionally qualified youth workers – a statutory Youth Service.

No one until recently has been listening to this popular demand.

Young into old age

There is an instinctive, very human general recognition that as you are only young once, your life in those shaping, exploratory years should be as beautiful and trouble free and nurtured as possible.

Yet we have seen the misery and prolongation of youth. People are young for a long time now as they are forced to live with their families longer because of the housing market, they are forced to stay indoors more because of the dangers on our streets, and their field of vision rather than being, as it once was through the youth service, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally extended, is withered and shrunk to the narrow horizons of the virtual reality of the gaming industry.

Pervasive violence of culture

The gaming industry is now more profitable than the entire entertainments and music industries. It is imbued by the culture of violence that dominates the United States and most games are aggressive and violent. Hardly surprising then to read of the Pentagon's involvement with gaming designers to ensure that US imperialism infects the ideology of shooting tooting war games. The US did this with comics in Latin America and they are doing it again more influentially perhaps with games that, in essence, support the serial killer and mass shootings.¹

There's a seamless relationship between the dominant culture of violence and mutual disrespect and the worsening instances of actual youth on youth and child on child crime. The instant point of reference following another real mass killing in the US is gun laws. It should also refer now to the culture of violence in its popular culture. Practically every American film is basically a cowboy film and the good guys are those fastest on the draw. You can't turn the television on without hearing gunfire or seeing some glorification of the gangster life. This is starting to pollute British drama also with the gripping, yet pseudo Americanised, quasi mafia series like Peaky Blinders.

Remember when the great sociologists of youth described the 'risk society' in which young people were growing up in the nineties? Risks have been replaced by a minefield of indescribably terrible dangers which have caused the plague of mental health issues, communal breakdown and a severe sense of alienation and most startlingly of all – youth loneliness.

Risks you can avoid by beneficial social reforms and community programmes. Dangers are of a different order. They are engrained in the landscape, a menace at every turn, armed with knives. The whole environment gets hostile.

The danger of purism.

A friend of mine, in fact a mentor, in the seventies and eighties, one of Britain's greatest industrial trade unionists, used to comment on the absolutism of some political positions in the Movement by saying that its proponents would "suffocate on pure air". There has been a strand of purism in the support of quality youth work which in abstract is quite right: youth work is only youth work if it is working to the young person's agenda and seeking to empower through a voluntary relationship. Trouble is, it is not like that in practice. You can't as a young person choose to relate to a youth worker if there are none left to relate to.

We should appreciate, especially at a time when young people have never had it so bad, that good, liberatory, enlightening youth work, can and indeed must take place in a variety of settings. I have heard of youth workers' contact between young, immediate victims of stabbings in hospital and at the same time with their assailants, all voluntarily undertaken. I know that many young prisoners are nourished, cheered and brilliantly supported by youth workers working in prisons.

Some young people forced into the most extraordinary isolation these days by disability or destitution, deserve to be sought out, to see if they might like the humour, the good nature, the warmth, the quirky character and the interesting information a youth worker can bring to them. Not to mention the ability of a youth worker to challenge a young person in a uniquely influential way.

Not exactly open access contexts you might say, but young people, wherever they are, need that distinctive, trusted, inspiring relationship with a youth worker. I am not suggesting we rush to provide youth workers to Eton and Harrow public schools to assist the offspring of the super-rich to behave a little more modestly, or deal with the traumas of being bred to lead, but I do not believe this is a time for pure air. The benefits of youth work need to be structured, targeted and resourced as well as available in the general ether. The real defence of youth work has involved creating tangible structures and defending the hardware of buildings, pay, organisational architecture and so on.

The culture of youth work must replace the culture of violence.

Open access and targeted provision disappeared

So severe did the public sector underfunding become that, particularly for local authority providers the illusion that they were replacing generic youth work with targeted intervention, became what it always was, an illusion, and even meaningful targeted work disappeared. Now local authorities with a few pennies left in the kitty are forced to throw these at the 'most vulnerable', usually adults at the end of their lives needing urgent social care.

If you were to take a kind of anthropological analysis of it, civilising social structures were removed and young people were forced to become feral. When society abandons its social contract with young people, they inevitably are forced to abandon it and run up the County lines.

In such extreme circumstances, when things are so bad and the centre ground of politics has shifted so far to the right, even the humblest reform can appear earth shatteringly difficult. So it is for the Youth Service. To argue for it in some quarters is like arguing for the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, likely to get you hung drawn and quartered and your tongue pulled out.

Rejecting the majority

This has only exacerbated the alienation of young people themselves. When the first proposals to abolish the Youth Service emerged in various Counties and Boroughs in 2010, young people were eloquently and responsibly at the forefront of huge public campaigns in defence of their services – hence the birth of Chooseyouth in 2011. Time and time again we saw young people’s imaginative and good natured public campaigns attracting the largest petitions of support and sometimes the largest demonstrations on the street that certain areas of the country had ever seen.

Support for the Youth Service became a popular campaigning issue alongside and in the same breath as the National Health Service.

Young people went through the established routes – lobbying councillors, lobbying MPs, making presentations to full Councils, visiting Parliament, attracting media support, winning hundreds of thousands, in fact in total, millions to their cause. They exhausted many of the established avenues of the lobbying and democratic channels and in nearly every case were rejected, sometimes rudely and usually in contravention of the existing legislation which requires full consultation with young people if their services are to be remodelled.

In fact in most parts of the country their services were being demolished.

As you are only young once, it’s perhaps not the best use of your time to have to campaign endlessly for your rights and services. If you are rebuffed the impression you get of the political system which callously rejects your campaigning will live with you for life. What’s the point of being an active citizen if the political system dismisses you? This is why the idea of social inclusion was always doomed to fail. People don’t like to be included in things which are kicking them in the teeth.

At one end of the spectrum in 2011 when we held a Chooseyouth rally in London, it was obvious to all youth workers that there would be trouble on the streets that summer. There was. Just as it had been obvious to youth workers in other parts of the country that their absence would endanger more young women being targeted by criminal gangs, or would lead to more becoming susceptible to death cults promoting terrorism.

Revolutionary reform.

There used to be lively debates amongst progressive people about the difference between reformism and revolution. Some said reforms enabled the state to quell and appropriate discontent. Some said revolution was a simultaneous cataclysmic reordering of every part of the social system. For some, evolution meant the gradual accumulation of positive reforms leading to socialism. For others, revolution meant either a quicker accumulation of reforms, or perhaps the creation of a society that no longer needed reforms!

It would be nice to have either of the options available to us today perhaps, but both have receded.

The contexts in which previous debates about open access or targeted youth work, social risks or dangers, reform or revolution have all completely changed. The neoliberal agenda has made society so suspect that the very formation of consciousness and our categories of social analysis and aspiration have been transformed. Better put: perverted. Agency and collectivism have been replaced by individualism and a sense of passivity.

It's easy to forget how revolutionary certain reforms have been. I think a lot these days about the impact of winning votes for all those over the age of 17. Eventually after the bitter struggle for a 150 years and more for the universal franchise, our predecessors won the 1969 Representation of the People Act. Young people were enfranchised and empowered. An articulate electorate with political education in schools and youth centres, music and popular culture, a sense of history, was capable of setting the pace of change. Young people developed a counter culture and progressive politics.

No sooner was this achieved than the Tories, as we now know through the state papers released relating to Heath's European negotiations, were planning to take us deep into, not a European Common Market, but into a European federal state run by corporations and unelected commissioners with powers over and above those of individual nations.

In other words the voice of the people was being silenced before it had been heard.

Parliament giving away new powers.

Having won the argument to embroil us in the European Union, Parliament set about giving away its powers. Controls on the exchange of capital were lifted and the casino gambling economy developed at the expense of industry. Then the Tories signed the Maastricht Treaty to put others in control of our fiscal policies and limit our public spending. Not long after some of the fatal cuts to the non-statutory youth service followed.

What was public was vilified and our national assets and utilities were privatised, putting foreign owned businesses and sometimes governments in complete control.

The Tories signed up to the Single European Act and in effect put the neoliberal policy of freedom of movement of capital, labour, goods and services, the free hand of the market, regulated only by the faceless commissioners in Brussels, in charge of our whole economy which was skewed to the needs of financial speculation in London and the South East.

Laws were made by the European Court of Justice not Westminster. Westminster became an empty transmission belt of Treaties and laws made by others. A slow motion coup d'état had taken place.

The EU, through the Pensions Directive said get rid of the irksome and very good British final salary pension schemes, raise the pension age and reduce the value of pensions' benefits. What greater attack have we seen on the financial security of young people in our time? Only perhaps the collapse of affordable housing.

So Parliament gave so much away and became so restricted in its spending and economic scope that it could not legislate for positive reforms. Worse than this of course, it actually believed that the banks and EU Commissioners would save us. So it gave billions to the banks when their criminal speculation brought the world economy to a near collapse. They were rewarded for vandalism on a grand scale while the people paid for it, without of course ever voting to do so. Banks gave us food banks.

Reverting to childhood.

So we have a young democracy based on the universal franchise and a young Youth Service, both dating to 1969 in their modern forms.

What then does it represent to drain the sense of democracy and its structures and hand powers over to those we do not elect and to destroy the Youth Service?

It meant for one thing public services like the Youth Service were abandoned completely, not just cut, and the mechanisms for democratic resistance against their abandonment were removed. The politics of progressive reformism was taken away also.

Arguing to restore and rebuild a once proud Youth Service became like arguing for the restoration of the Garden of Eden.

Youth work – advanced education.

Youth work had always been a sophisticated expression of the advances of educational methodology. It refined and improved over the years and developed democratic ways of ‘teaching’ and learning that engaged, inspired and collectivised in parts and places that other techniques could not reach.

Youth work is a refined educational approach, not a remedial, pale version of classroom teaching or university education. Its techniques represent the historic advances of all of the spectrum of education. It embodied a powerful social commitment to the present and future.

It also pioneered access to higher education for trainee youth workers and generations, only recruitable onto training courses over the age of 25 years and having spent a year volunteering in the sector, sacrificed jobs and careers in other fields to dedicate themselves to youth work.

From the struggles to create compulsory elementary education in the nineteenth century, through to the building of adult education, play work, comprehensive schools and youth work, society established lifelong learning and ways of informal and community learning that empowered participants to be more active and aware citizens.

Hence at a very simple level youth work was a threat to the new neoliberal order because it enabled young people to ask articulate yet awkward questions.

In abandoning lifelong education, society wanted to revert to a pre nineteenth century, primitive condition.

Let’s put this primitive condition in perspective. The combined private wealth of the top 1,000 richest people in England in 2019 could pay for the entire Youth Service in England and Wales at its 2010 funding levels for 1,714 years. Yes. I have done the maths.

Some hope.

Only one Parliamentary party fully registered the severity of what was happening. Through patient informed discussion with us, the leadership of the Labour Party committed to a statutory youth service and then, having looked at the needs and structures required to deliver this. Jeremy Corbyn and Cat Smith launched this pioneering policy on 8th October 2019.

If elected the Labour Party would build a new delivery structure funding a national body to fund local partnerships of providers on the basis of their submitted development plans. They would enhance national collective bargaining, workforce development, insist on the provision of JNC qualified youth workers and recreate safe buildings and places of association. Young people would be involved in all key parts of the system.

The commitments to this are unequivocal, but will of course need to be in the general election manifesto, and the manifesto will need to win the majority of voters.

We also have to ensure that the behind the scenes Labour Party discussions that this will require a direct Treasury allocation of £1 billion per annum is secured. Without this the startling new commitments will be hollow.

For my personal part, having lobbied every single government, every single opposition party and, campaigned with every single organisation seeking this modest reform since 1979, it seems to me that this is the only chance society has to redeem itself in the eyes of young people and all those who believe that life chances really should be enhanced from cradle to grave and that education is something we should all benefit from every day of our lives.

Our minds are only formed once, we are only young once. Remove social, communal support and care from us when we are forming our opinions and exploring our identities as young people, as has been so brutally done in recent history, means that tomorrow's adults will even more ruthlessly emulate the US war games they played alone in their bedrooms as youngsters and fail to appreciate that accountability to each other through democracy is a joy.

Capture joy as it flies, and live in eternity's sun rise, said William Blake one of our greatest poets sensitive to the prime importance of the flowering of children's and young people's minds.

Let young people enjoy and relish their youth like never before, we are only young once and cannot miss the opportunity to fully indulge to express our full humanity. This is usually expressed in face to face contact and to our endless pride, the JNC grading criteria for youth and community work jobs always included a section called 'face to face work'. That was the most highly valued section, a precious commodity indeed, far more powerful and peaceful than any screen.

ⁱ Cowboy Imperialism and Hollywood Film. Mark Cronlund Anderson, Peter Lang Publishing, 2007.

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