
TOWARDS A DEMOCRATIC YOUTH POLICY
- A YOUNG WESTERN EUROPEAN VIEW

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Young people are not often asked to contribute their views on the subject of youth policy. I am glad that our Meeting is an exception. In presenting my paper, I am doing so as a young person and as a representative leader whose responsibility is to articulate the feelings and views of others.

I wish to advance the view that, in developing a coherent national youth policy, the most legitimate group to define the needs of young people are young people themselves and, therefore, we must have autonomous structures within which to do so. That if policies for young people are to be implemented by governments, all the major pressure groups, including the political parties, must be active in developing them. And that if such bodies as trade unions claim that young people do have special needs, they have a responsibility to change their own structures so that young people can participate in them effectively on their own terms.

At two recent meetings, in Ocho Rios and Ottawa, young leaders from Commonwealth countries have met and exchanged views. There will be a further opportunity to do so in May in Sri Lanka. I attended the Ottawa meeting and I remember being struck by two things, apart from the realisation of how ignorant are most people in Britain about the Commonwealth and especially about how far the Anglo-centricity of the Commonwealth has been dispelled. The first thing that struck me was the excitement and also the simplicity of talking in such an international group, where there was a basis of respect and friendship. The descriptions of our countries, and of our social and economic conditions, came tumbling out. We all became aware of the great variety that exists in the Commonwealth, and it is important to bear that in mind in our Meeting.

But the second thing that struck me was this: there are clear differences in our political systems and in our stages of economic development, but amongst the young there are a lot of common problems and attitudes. There are problems which are of concern to all of us, no matter the social or political background from which we come together at this Meeting, and I know you appreciate them.

OUR NEEDS

Our needs as young people are central to the issues of national and economic development. They relate to at least three areas.

The first is educational provision which equips us to understand how our society works and its history. It enables us to play our part in producing goods and services, as well as to enjoy cultural and leisure pursuits. It also enables us to be active political citizens rather than passive bystanders. The second area of need is work which satisfies our aspirations and potential abilities, as well as giving us an adequate income. The third area of need is the opportunity and ability to play a full part in democratic processes which perhaps, fundamentally, is the most important of all.

These needs are not restricted to young people: but they are especially important to the growth of the young and to our ability to become active, balanced citizens.

As young people, we have energy and ideas to contribute to our society; we also have rights and responsibilities. We do not understand why political leaders and officials frequently appear to wish to cut us off from debate, from decision-making or from elections. Furthermore, the fast expanding youth population in our countries creates an urgent need for national leaders to consider how we are to be integrated into the process of policy debate and government in order to make democracy work now and for the future.

In my opinion, this is as true for Britain as it is for any other Commonwealth country involved in nation building. At least in new Commonwealth countries, there are the overriding objectives of national development which do tend to unify and motivate the population as a whole.

But in Britain, and in other industrialised countries, our economy, our living standards and our democratic values are at stake because there is not adequate consensus, mobilisation and dedication amongst the population as a whole. This is particularly true for young people and we must ask ourselves why the young have an ambiguous identity, why there is little sense of mobilisation and why there is more disenchantment than dedication.

There will be different answers to these questions from different parts of the political spectrum. But I think there are some explanations which will be common to whatever the political analysis.

The most obvious explanation is that as we grow up we are going through all sorts of new experiences which make up our transition from childhood to adulthood, from school to work and from dependency to independence. There is bound to be confusion, tension and conflicts. But the reasons for our behaviour and apparent lack of motivation can be more specific than this.

We are growing into responsibility and independence, and yet we come up against a brick wall in society which consists of patronising adult attitudes, positions of authority and party-political influence which can only be filled by adults, and of media which usually portray us as hooligans or naive idealists. Either way, our status is not high. Furthermore, we are educated to expect fulfilling work to do when we leave school but find ourselves in the most menial and the poorest paid jobs, or without jobs at all.

In our lives outside school or work, we have little chance to develop our leisure pursuits or our social skills because of the limited number of opportunities available. There is minimal contact between ourselves as individuals and wider community activities and organisations in which we can find identity or formulate group responses to the problems and conditions of our lives. This is because only a small minority of young people are ever engaged in any organisation at all.

Few young people have the chance to travel within our countries, let alone to other countries, and this is important because it allows us to get out of a dull routine and exposes us to different values and attitudes and a broader spectrum of activity. This is something that schools cannot provide and, indeed, for many young people school does not provide a great deal else either. The rituals of discipline are oppressive and the academic domination of teaching is boring and seems irrelevant. For many of us, it is not surprising that school merely heightens our sense of frustration rather than offering employment and prospects.

I wanted to raise these issues at the outset because they are the important questions for us as young people. What additional education and experience can we obtain outside the school? Why are existing leisure facilities not what we want in our free time or too expensive for us to use? Why is it so difficult to find decent, satisfying work? Why can't we travel more? Why can't we change things and take decisions like older people?

These are the questions to which youth policy must be addressed. They are questions which are not only relevant to those young people who, in industrialised countries, have been traditionally regarded as the subjects of youth policy in the years between 14 and 21 but are also relevant to us as young adults.

BRITISH EXPERIENCE

The symptoms of these problems and unrest amongst young people are there for all to see, even if the bulk of young people manage their transition to adulthood with apparent ease. In Britain today, violence amongst pupils and growing levels of truancy are beginning to threaten the normal operation of

secondary education. Juvenile crime is rising: over 50% of all arrests in London are of people below 20 years of age. Racial hostility is experienced between blacks and whites. Vandalism is widespread, particularly in inner city areas where community relations have broken down and many traditional leisure pursuits, as well as sources of employment for young people, have been destroyed. Alcohol and drugs are used amongst a greater number of young people as forms of escape.

These actions symbolise unrest amongst young people. There are, of course, class dimensions to young people's struggles and there are struggles which are particular to nationalities and to races. Young women face further obstacles in their lives. But this does not deny that some struggles are common to our age. There is a struggle for recognition of us as a legitimate force in society; for greater control of our lives and greater influence in institutions where wisdom is seen only to come with increasing age: for greater financial means and opportunities to enjoy leisure and recreation; and for improved conditions and ideals in society. These struggles are ones that we would ask governments to recognise and respond to.

I come from a country in which successive governments have recognised these problems and they have made large sums of money available to meet the needs of young people. However, this response has tended too often to be limited to the expansion of academic education. There has been no coherent, national policy to create other channels through which we can express ourselves and gain practical learning. The development of our social and political skills remains unaccepted as an objective of policy, as does our participation in our local communities and places of school or work, except in terms of general endorsement.

Most out-of-school activities have been left to voluntary bodies to organise, with tiny grants of government money. The youth service funded by local authorities is small and limited in resources. Only recently have levels of unemployment of young people reached such heights that the British Government, like others in western industrialised countries, has been forced to spend millions of pounds on activities for young people apart from the traditional pursuits of academic education and leisure.

This is a significant development: for the first time, governments have really been forced to think about the needs of young people out of school. Formerly, they have been able to assume that the conditions of the labour market will provide the experience, adjustment and skills needed for adulthood. They now have to consider what (in addition to a job) can provide the self-respect, status and a sense of security needed by young people if the personal effects of unemployment are to be minimised and the unstable social consequences which are emerging, are to be channelled into more positive avenues.

The rising levels of unemployment are posing this challenge to governments. We can see that they relied on secondary education to provide learning for the masses, leaving a labour market, inexperienced in the problems of youth, to pick up where education ends. Except for those continuing to pursue education at the tertiary level, government interest and responsibility has tapered off.

Why has there been an absence of imagination in policy? Why, within the machinery of government, has there been a lack of co-ordination between departmental functions for those who continue studies? I think that there are three parts to the answer.

The first part is that the basic needs of young people are seen by government as the same as those for the population as a whole - housing, medical care, transport. These are provided universally as part of Britain's enlightened social planning. In this context, young people have not been regarded as a special target group and have received the benefits of this social provision like everyone else.

The second part of the answer lies in the exaggerated expectations and demands of formal education. The development of the school system has been regarded as virtually the sole requirement for equipping young people for adulthood and for those who leave the formal education system, there seems to have been an assumption that there is nothing further the government should or could provide.

The third part of the answer, I think, is based on fear. Politicians and officials have been frightened of giving us too many opportunities to question and to criticise, and to mobilise our views and strength as a social force, especially at the transition stage of the late teens, for fear of what we might say and what effect we might have on the established social order.

We are now coming to see that these past attitudes have not served society well. Of course, young people need not be a special target group for all areas of social provision, and the solution of many young people's problems cannot be isolated from the solution of problems for the community as a whole. However, there are areas where the young do have needs arising from their age; for example, personal counselling, single housing, and employment. Furthermore, the important but limited character of formal school and its ability to meet all needs is being questioned; and the frightened response of those in authority to demands by young people is giving way in some instances to a more accommodating approach. It is now necessary to develop further a wider and more imaginative policy.

A MORE COHERENT YOUTH POLICY

Young people ask governments to consider the merits of a coherent youth policy which both draws on current aspects of provision and expenditure (such as education, training, recreation and the youth service) and also consists of new activities (such as opportunities for leisure, travel, community work and political participation). We believe that the policy should be based on the following recognised needs: - more realistic and technical preparation for vocational work as well as academic learning; - informal education opportunities out of school, in leisure pursuits, youth group activities in clubs and the local community and travel; - higher political status in society, through access to decision-making wherever we learn, work or live; - and greater financial independence through an extension of student grants to those in training or otherwise engaged in worthwhile activity up to a certain age, between school and full-time work.

These are the ingredients of a youth policy; it should have certain operational targets which need not, of course, be pursued by a single ministry in government but should be part of a co-ordinated strategy in government.

The first target should be a guarantee for all those in the first three years after leaving compulsory secondary school of a place in full-time education, a full-time job with proper training, a full-time training place with associated work experience, or full-time worthwhile activity in community work or abroad.

The second target should be a national wage paid to all under nineteen years, either by employers or by the State in whatever activity, and income support for those who choose to do nothing.

The third target should be national standards of leisure and recreation provision in each locality, approved by central government.

The fourth target should be rights of representation. There should be access for young people's representative councils and forums to established local and national government institutions; and membership of other directly relevant bodies, for example, school and university governing boards, youth service committees, trades councils, political associations, sports councils. Where possible, this representative access should be secured by law.

These targets clearly constitute a major claim on national resources and the economic constraints of developing countries need to be recognised. But the right of representation and participation is not an expensive one and we believe that, taken as a whole, they are necessary targets

because they occupy areas of policy which are relatively under-developed at present and because they can make a major contribution to creating greater equality in society.

At the moment, the economic status of adults and families depends largely on their families, their experiences and their education and training when young. Everyone would have a better chance and place later in life if they had more equal opportunities and more equal access to resources and political processes when growing up. This means making the resources currently available to the most fortunate young people - that is, those who remain as students - also available to those who leave full-time education and have their needs in informal, leisure and community activities.

A QUALIFIED APPROACH

The development of a youth policy (which is mostly, but not entirely, in the hands of the government) needs to be qualified in certain ways and by certain principles. The first major qualification is that there is a limit to the feasibility and desirability of drawing young people into institutions, activities or courses.

The important principle which is at the root of this is non-compulsion: individuals must retain the right to opt out and they must be able to choose between education and work and unemployment. This means that enforced, as opposed to voluntary, national service is not the right approach to meeting young people's needs: we would say that this infringes individual rights of freedom and does not enable young people to find the most satisfying activity or to establish their identity in the way that is best for them.

The second qualification is that the means and vehicles for implementing youth policies should not be in the exclusive hands of the State. Voluntary agencies and organisations have proven ability to work locally and flexibly amongst young people, and to fill needs which may be ignored by statutory services. Last of all, the third qualification to youth policies is that they will lose their validity to the extent that they are not determined and accepted by the young people themselves.

THE YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICE

This last point is very important and it is at the heart of what I want to say today. There are normal democratic processes in society in which some young people will participate and one aim must be to increase this participation. Furthermore, I do not argue that everything young people advocate is necessarily correct or feasible. But if young people count at all in society, they surely must count enough to be given their say about how things are run for them. They must participate in these policies as well as being given their own channels to overcome the age-domination which

militates against their natural involvement in voluntary and political associations. But how does the head of a school, let alone a Ministry of Education or Youth Affairs, involve all school students in policy and decision-making? How does the full-time worker in a youth club, let alone the area youth service officers, get the young people together who may use local youth club facilities and enable them to help determine how much money is spent on which clubs and activities

There is no simple answer. But how many times has any attempt been made? More often than not, it does not occur to the adults to consult us. There is a tacit assumption that we will not care to be involved, or we will not have sufficient experience to make a proper judgement or we will not be expressing a view that is representative of all the young people concerned.

But what a state of democracy we would all have if these same criteria were applied to the electorate as a whole in any election or vote. We have seen on many occasions what happens in countries when leaders decide that the electorate are too unconcerned, or too ill-informed or too unrepresentative to be worth consulting.

Therefore, I think that adults' assumptions about us are wrong because many of us, if not all, are willing to be and capable of being involved. Furthermore, democracy cannot afford to make judgements at whim about who may and who may not be involved in democratic practice. In this context, also, I want to repeat something I said at the beginning. If there was greater consensus, mobilisation and dedication amongst the population our economies could work better for all and our democratic processes would be strengthened. For this reason, society can ill afford to ignore young people's views and to deprive us of the educational and practical opportunities to be better informed and to exercise our democratic rights.

How can this be done? What real effect can we have on the policies you construct? One example I would like to describe in Britain is a project called 'Into Work' which the British Youth Council originated. It is funded by the Manpower Services Commission in three areas of the country to collect the views of young people who are participating in or eligible for its special employment programme. The 'consumer view' which is being presented is a unique and constructive statement about the government's measures and has many lessons for the capacity of young people to determine the content and delivery of government policies.

But to extend these lessons, three developments are necessary. The first is that those in authority and with power, should recognise the political wisdom of meeting and talking to young people. Ministries of Education and Youth Affairs, area boards responsible for youth service or other

provision, head teachers and youth club leaders must understand the necessity of communicating with young people effectively at the appropriate levels and in the appropriate contexts.

This leads me to the second development. We must be allowed and encouraged to set up our own school or club committees, our own area youth forums and our own national youth councils with which the authorities can consult. These bodies need to be representative and democratic (that is elected from an identifiable constituency of school students, club members or youth organisations) and they need to have control over their own business and be accountable for what they do to their constituency as a whole.

Such bodies cannot be conjured up by magic; they need working at by trial and error, and they will rise and falter on occasions. But they cannot be created in a vacuum. The will must be developed amongst all those in authority, the politicians, officials and others, to sustain the efforts of the young to participate.

The third development that is required is political education-not political indoctrination. Such political education should consist of factual information about political procedures, information about who takes decisions and how they do so, and information about the issues which are important to us. In this education, actual practice and experience count for a great deal. That is why all these developments go hand in hand. Young people must be invited to get involved; we must have our own representative forums and structures to do this; and we must have a framework of knowledge and practice to make us skilful and effective in our interventions. This, obviously, not only has implications for the democratisation of youth policy, but applies to young people's interest and involvement in democratic practice throughout society.

ENCOURAGING DEVELOPMENTS AND THE VOLUNTARY YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

In Britain during the past two years (and this is only the beginning) the British Youth Council and other bodies have stimulated much discussion about these issues. At the national level, the Council has fought for recognition as a national forum of young people from all voluntary youth organisations (non-party political as well as party political) which is competent and equipped to intervene with the young people's voice in policy matters of interest to us. The National Union of Students in Britain has demonstrated how effectively this can be done. We now receive public funds to promote political education and develop local youth councils, where mobilisation and involvement can take place in a more relevant setting.

But the speed with which we have progressed should not disguise the battles we have fought or the obstacles we face. Those in government still tend to be wary of political

education and mobilisation of the young. And many of those adults who work with young people still believe that we are too fickle and too inexperienced to organise ourselves, and they still prefer to talk on behalf of us rather than let us speak for ourselves. This must now become something of the past.

In this context, I think the voluntary youth organisations have a great role and responsibility. One of the original qualifications I made to national youth policy was that its operation should not rest exclusively with State agencies. I also observed that a great deal of out-of-school activity has been created by voluntary youth organisations which has tended to reduce the pressure on government to provide facilities directly itself.

There needs to be better balance in this provision. The operational target for youth policy of 'national standards of leisure and recreation provision in each locality, approved by central government' can never be realised unless public funds are used by authorities to create directly the sort of facilities desperately needed by young people in many localities.

At the same time, government aid to voluntary youth work organisations should be considerably increased. But, equally, our expectations of these organisations should be higher. If they choose a regimented style or a religious framework for their activities, that is up to them. They are voluntary organisations. But we ask for more from them. There should be opportunities to raise discussion of the problems facing us as young people, whether they be political, social, racial or sexual. This does not mean that we want the ideas and prejudices of adult workers forced upon us. But equally these subjects should cease having a taboo attached to them in the traditional youth service organisations.

This leads me on to two related developments needed in these organisations if we, as young people, are to find the status and means of expression that we demand. At the moment, the way that youth organisations are run tends to reflect the age domination throughout society. In reality, young people have little say in the running of youth organisations. In many cases they are as undemocratic, paternalistic and exclusive as are most other bodies in society towards young people.

We would like to see firm principles and democratic structures being created in these organisations to allow young people within them to be involved in policy-making. Second, we would like to see these organisations providing a public platform for the expression of their young members' views. This should be done both from within the individual organisation and on the basis of collective actions and initiatives of a number of youth organisations nationally and locally.

The important principle to stress is that it is the young people taking the action for which the organisations provide the framework. If these dual developments took place, some of the questions I raised about how young people could be consulted and involved in decision-making might be answered.

As I said, we have the seeds of these developments at national level in Britain. But this is at a remote level from the mass of young people. Youth participation really must start at home, within youth organisations and in localities. It is partly an attitude of mind on everyone's behalf, and partly a question of creating the structures; and this must grow from daily practice and local situations. Only in this way will the prejudices against young people be overcome and the mass of young people find an outlet for their views and a means of influencing the conditions closest to them.

Of course, only a minority (although a large minority) of young people are associated with youth organisations and groups at any one time. This makes it all the more important for schools, workplaces and trade unions to provide a wider role for us.

Industry, in particular, is intensely hierarchical and although trade unions have done so much to democratise the workplace and obtain greater rights and benefits for working people, we, as young people, are allowed only a small role in this process.

Trade unions have traditionally opposed special mechanisms for young people to express their views and to organise as young people within the trade union movement. Their fear has been that this will be divisive when unity and solidarity are at a premium. The situation does not appear like this from our viewpoint. It is a battle for young workers to play their full role in trade union affairs and, far from wanting separate structures, we merely want special mechanisms and bodies through which we can get more involved in existing structures. This is a crucial issue for young people's relation and attitude to work. Our alienation from the production process must be overcome and one way of doing this (apart from raising the conditions and terms of employment) must be greater involvement in the political and social affairs of the workplace through trade unions, and with the co-operation of employers.

CONCLUSION

My purpose in this paper has been to say how, as young people, I think our isolation can be reduced and how we can obtain a fuller education in the widest sense as well as a more equal role in society. These should be the objectives of national youth policy, with the operational targets I have stated.

There is so little thought in the political parties on these issues and so little research in government. Parliament

does not bother to monitor the effects of its legislation on the welfare and the rights of young people. Trade unions have not established channels through which these issues can be brought to the fore and debated.

Even those in the youth service, who are most in touch with the everyday conditions, seem to lack coherence and commitment in their approach. And the reason for this, I think, is that they are not listening to what young people are saying and are insecure in their own views because they are members of a different generation.

The attainment of many national goals in our countries depends on the extent to which dialogue sufficiently exists between the generations. But in a Commonwealth gathering like this, we can realise that there are even wider objectives. These concern the relations and differences between our countries, the understanding of our peoples and the solution of our common international problems. They all depend, in addition to the actions of government, on the attitudes and mobilisation of the young.

We must make sure that nobody overlooks what is at stake. It is not just a question of the degree of success of youth policies: what is at stake is the whole future of popular democracy in our societies and the attitudes generated amongst young people towards this. Unless we succeed in making the changes necessary to give people a democratic voice when they are young, many of them will turn their backs on democracy, with the consequences for all of us to pay.