

YOUNG PEOPLE IN CHANGING SOCIETIES

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PART I: GUIDELINES

I would like to begin by suggesting one or two guidelines for our thinking together, approaches to our group discussions. They spring partly from reflections upon the short history of this seminar: our life together so far has led me to propose for your consideration ways in which we may come to practical and well-founded conclusions. I hope that nobody will think that what immediately follows is presumptuous or that it sounds severely didactic.

First, there is the question of how we relate to each other and how we bring some cohesion out of our different national experiences of young people. There is a temptation sometimes, I think, to generalise from our experience of young people in our society and think that it is the same everywhere. This is human and natural since we are deeply involved with and committed to our own people. But it will not lead to wise judgment or coherence or practical programmes which can be put before our respective governments. We have already learned in a fascinating session of the varying opportunities and problems that there are in our different countries. There can be no unconsidered transplant operations from one culture to another. But where it is hopeful we want, of course, to learn from each other. The question to ask about the Penang Youth Park, for example, should be: 'Is this right for Penang?' We can, of course, go on to ask whether the same idea would work in our own country but if the answer in this case is 'no', the Penang Youth Park may still be right for Penang. In this way we shall recognize in the practicality of our recommendations that in one sense youth are the same the world over and in another sense they are different in every place.

It goes without saying, of course, that in our discussions we shall be open with each other. This means a willingness to talk about our failures as well as our successes: understanding grows when we admit our perplexities. Again it is natural and human to concentrate on what we have been able to do. But what we have not been able to do may be more useful to talk about for all of us and even in the end for ourselves. It is in the gaps of

our provision for young people that there lie the growth points. It is not entirely unknown among some assemblies (present company excepted) for people to describe some new youth method or organisation in glowing terms. But on enquiry it is found that it has gained a response from a tiny percentage of the total youth population. Since our constituencies and our problems and opportunities are so large, numbers are the essence of any solutions.

Secondly, in my view, we must in our deliberations distinguish between long term and short solutions, or, to put the point differently, we must steer between the Scylla of utopianism and the Charybdis of despair. Perhaps in this form the thought is a little obscure. I mean that in many countries those who wish well to the young find themselves confronted by some daunting problems. Take the one which like a spectre must be present at all our deliberations - unemployment. We shall not keep faith unless we constantly remember how widespread this problem is and how discouraging for the young in particular, both in terms of poverty and a sense of social rejection and loss of social identity. Very little knowledge and thought is required to realize how complex and yet inter-related are the causes of this unemployment. It is a paradoxical fact known to all of us that those very means which might be presumed by all reasonable men to alleviate the problem may in fact make it worse. The introduction of technology into a country may reduce the number of jobs. The expansion of education may, with certain emphases, produce still more unemployed. We here cannot provide instant solutions: we lack the means. But because we cannot do everything, it is wrong to conclude that we can do nothing. (It is better to light a candle than to grumble at the darkness). We have in fact cases of contributions by youth programmes to the needs of unemployed youth. It is on these practical projects that I feel we need to concentrate our attention.

There will be those who will accuse us thereby of only patching over the problem, of only dealing in social amelioration. There is a not insignificant number of people - and they are well-represented among the young - who feel the old world has to be smashed before the new world can be built; they support the use of violence for a political creed. I personally think they are wrong. Reformation is to be preferred to revolution in that sense. It is a fruitless and doctrinaire approach which will sacrifice the happiness and well-being of individuals for the purity of a political orthodoxy. But these people serve to remind that, whilst looking round for immediately feasible programmes for youth in its plight, we must not withdraw from the struggle for larger and

deeper answers which deal with the reasons for the diminishing of the young. Sometimes, in order to protect the sheep from the wolf, it is necessary to go out and kill the wolf.

Thirdly, because we cannot everywhere do everything even in our specialised field of youth programmes, we shall face the painful necessity of having to decide priorities in our national programmes. We shall want to encourage success, for example, but not so as to further neglect those unresponsive youngsters who have not taken up our offers. We may have to decide between the priorities of certain social groups of youngsters in our society as, say, between rural and urban, educated and uneducated. If I may venture on a 'shopping list' which should be examined in the separate lights of each of our national situations, it would run as follows:

- (a) a national policy for youth which is well-supported politically and administratively, and which includes among its personnel those who constantly probe the frontiers of their needs, aspirations and opportunities;
- (b) the search for an effective and dynamic partnership between government and non-government agencies;
- (c) the search for new sectors in the community, as in industry, which can be involved in youth welfare and social education;
- (d) the mobilisation of total available resources and their proper utilisation;
- (e) the recruitment, selection, training, assessment and deployment of leadership.

A useful 'shopping list' from another point of view was provided at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in January 1969, emanating from British proposals drawing attention to:

"the special problems of rural youth, the special problems of urban youth, young social offenders, leisure, the best means of enabling young people to be more involved in the development of their country, the administrative framework at national level which is necessary for this involvement to become a reality and

the formulation of creative inter-Commonwealth relations among people through an expansion of existing facilities for youth and young teacher exchanges, school travel tours and students' work schemes within the Commonwealth".

PART II: FRAMEWORK

Almost without exception human societies are deeply interested in their young. The literature of almost every culture shows this perennial interest in youth. The reasons are obvious and twofold. First, the young are seen properly to represent the future: they are always 'the writing on the wall'. The national identity and the perpetuation of the culture is in the hands of the young, hence their socialisation is a major concern. But there is also a humane and liberal reason for this preoccupation. The young appeal to us by their innocence and vulnerability and we want them to have a good chance in life. (On a recent visit to the U.S.S.R. I was interested to find how strongly motivated by this notion are Russian parents in their attitudes to their children). Nevertheless, since it is unsophisticated, much of the public interest in the young proves not to be helpful, as we shall see.

The traditional norms of a society's attitudes to the young are seriously disturbed by rapid social change; in fact the young are in many ways the chief victims of rapid social change.* If I can tease out the argument a little it would go like this. All times are times of change. But some are times of rapid social change which are much more far-reaching in their consequences. Some social groups - like the intellectuals, for example, - are affected by rapid social change earlier and more profoundly than others. City dwellers are more quickly and profoundly affected than people who live in rural areas. Amongst those most affected are adolescents, and this is for a clear reason. In settled times, the society presents the youngster with a clear pattern of values; it clearly defines the social role of the adolescent. This was the meaning of the initiation rites for adolescents in earlier societies. They told him exactly where he stood, what he could expect from the community, and what the community expected from him.

* The classic work on this subject, a magnificent tour de force, is S.N. Eisenstadt, From Generation to Generation, Free Press of Chicago. His main argument is that in times of social change the family is no longer adequate for the total socialisation of the youngster, hence the need for youth movements.

Contrast that with the experience of youngsters in countries of rapid social change. He has perhaps more freedom but receives less emotional support. He may become a 'rebel without a cause'. Of some affluent modern countries it has been said that they have been able to give everything to their youngsters except a faith and a set of values: the signposts have been taken away. Among all the other psychological phenomena of young people today there is often confusion.

We cannot, however, lump together all the countries where rapid social change is taking place and say the experience of young people is the same in every one of them. Other factors have to be taken into account, and they reveal in a most interesting way that adolescence is more than a universal psychological experience: it is partly determined sociologically.

One of the big differences in our world in the social position of the young is whether or not they are being indoctrinated with a particular religious, political or nationalistic creed. I am using the word 'indoctrinated' in a specialised sense and I ought to define it. I mean an educational process where the young are not encouraged to think for themselves and come to their own conclusions about serious matters of philosophy and politics, but where there is a party line which all the youngsters must be made to toe. There is an official way to think, and moreover this ideology is for export. It is seen in totalitarian countries as a universal truth which everybody ought to accept. In East Berlin, for example, I know a girl who performed brilliantly at high school and applied for a place in the medical school of the university. The authorities, however, were interested not only in her school record; they wanted to know if she was a member of the Free German Youth Movement, the Government-sponsored state-run teaching youth movement. When she told them she was not a member, they replied that she could not have a place in the medical school until she joined.

The 'democracies', of course, shrink from this regimentation of their young. Whatever the inconsistencies of their practice, they regard attempts totally to direct the thinking of the new generation as one of the worst denials of human freedom and dignity. But the question has to be asked whether in recoiling from indoctrination they have not over-reacted against teaching social responsibility to their young.

There are several important issues here. Are we degrading or humiliating youth if we ask them to define the social

and national tasks as well as to share them? If the invitation is to 'come over and help us', is that not a form of respect? Is this not also a way of giving them status and identity, so ending the dilemma of the social role for the young in modern societies? Finally, is not the blunt truth that we need the young for community development - their ideas, their idealism, their energies, their decision-making, as well as their strength and loyalty? In times of rapid social change, it looks as though the 'democracies' have been overtaken by events. In eschewing regimentation they have not reached out to teaching discriminating social responsibility. This they cannot neglect.

One other fact needs to be noted. In the totalitarian countries where the young are mobilised, there always seem to be adequate resources. Ideology, it seems, is not enough. There must be the availability of adequate support for youth programmes of all kinds. In the democracies, too, the involvement of young people in the developing life of the nation will call for more than the right attitudes; it requires the production and availability of adequate resources.

In other ways, too, we have to think more carefully and analytically about our task. Very often in thinking about young people we are tempted to generalise. We must take the trouble to identify different areas of the situation.

It is easy, for example, to assume that there is in any society one fixed attitude of the older people to the younger generation; in fact there are many. In many countries in the world today public opinion tends to be compounded of four elements when it thinks about the young. There is first the view that the community has a responsibility towards the young; secondly, that the young have a responsibility to the community and have to be socialised; thirdly, there is a feeling that the young will have ideas of their own; lastly, the young are expected to enjoy themselves.

Where we have the development of unhelpful social attitudes to the young, it is because one of these elements is taken and exaggerated out of all proportion. Those who exaggerate the responsibility of the community tend to indulge the young; they cosset them and do not look for a positive contribution. A stress on the socialisation process leads to older people who are always critical of the behaviour of young adults and seem afraid of them, identifying them as enemies. If we identify in strongly revolutionary terms, we fail to see that though they should not be

enslaved by the past they should certainly be enriched by it. To overstress the hedonistic expectation is to fail to challenge the young with a destiny which they share to some extent with the rest of the community.

Even more common is the tendency to group together all the young people in a society and find one word which describes them all. Apart from the fact that every adolescent is a unique individual, there are discernible different social groups who can be measured by their dominant attitude to their society.

One brief typology that can be offered is as follows:

- (1) the assenters, the conformists, those who are content to go along with the tide and on the whole get a fair share of the benefits that are going;
- (2) the 'socially rejected', those who suffer serious deprivation relative to the majority, or to a favoured elite, or to the majority of youngsters in other countries of the world;
- (3) the 'socially rejecting', those who have the confidence, the education and the independence to look at their society and say they do not like a large part or even all of what they see and aim to change.

In conclusion, may I suggest that the following are our tasks and that if these are acceptable, we must keep to them, resolutely probing all the time (whatever our perplexity) for the growth points:

- (a) We want to have a clear picture of the youth situation in each country, concentrating on their problems, training and employment;
- (b) We need to see where we can help each other (because the features overlap) and what elements are unique to each national situation;
- (c) We shall work out national policies for youth which contain most hope and discuss how they can best be reinforced by political and administrative structures;

- (d) The availability of resources will feature in our thinking. What further possibilities are there in Commonwealth co-operation? in discovering new sources of support, say, amongst industrialists? What strength can come through developed patterns of co-operation between government and non-government agencies? Are the non-government agencies in a better position to play a pioneering role?
- (e) Can youth programmes for the support, welfare, freedom and community involvement of young people have more influence and power if we can gain stronger support from an informed public opinion? If this is so, how can this improvement best be secured?
- (f) One of the few universals about youth work is that it is heavily dependent on the quality of its leadership, especially at ground level. Do we have proposals here? A skilled, imaginative and devoted leader can very often overcome many other discouragements. This is probably in many countries the most direct line to some success. Have we thought through our training programmes and methods? Do we see the youth worker 'doing the job' as still being in a place of training?