

**“TROUBLOUS TIMES”:
YOUNG PEOPLE, CITIZENSHIP AND RESPECT**

“The world is passing through troublous times. The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age. They are impatient of all restraint. They talk as if they knew everything, and what passes for wisdom with us is foolishness with them.”¹

Believe it or not, this familiar lament comes not from Victor Meldrew, the Home Secretary, nor even the latest IPPR report, but from a sermon given by Peter the Hermit over seven hundred years ago.

Perhaps it was ever thus. But why? Is youth a particularly unpleasant condition that we grow out of, only in time to be plagued by the next generation of sufferers? Alternatively, is aging the problem? Does each aching limb, sagging muscle and reminder of mortality bring a little more

¹ Peter the Hermit A.D. 1274

inevitable jealousy of those who have the bulk of their lives and dreams still to come? I don't find either of these easy answers particularly compelling.

Instead, I believe that age is just one of numerous badges of difference amongst human beings. Difference in age, like race, faith, physique, gender or sexuality etc., is either interesting or nothing special or irritating or positively threatening- depending on your state of mind and point of view.

I also believe that there are moments in the history of societies when people can become so intolerant of difference, so fearful of "the other", that they would scapegoat their own shadows if they could pin them down. At such a moment, children and young people -as an obvious disenfranchised minority, without political, financial or physical power inevitably lose out, but so do adults and the whole of society, by squandering the future.

I am not certain that we have come to such a crisis point in Britain in 2006. But I do know that the danger is far too close for comfort, that every day is filled with another political speech or media commentary denigrating young people. I know that we neglect, abuse and imprison far

too many children and expect from them what we do not give in return.

That thing, that word from the language of human rights and common decency between people, perhaps used and abused almost as much as even the word “love”- “respect”.

So many people with power in Britain today seem strangely confused in their attitudes towards the young- little angels off to cello practice or the hoodies from hell- either way, cartoon caricatures bound to disappoint or offend us.

Similarly, the adult who harms children is named, shamed and loathed for preying on the vulnerable but the child who offends, even having been abused by an adult him or herself is named, shamed and loathed in equal measure.

But people are not cartoons, they are more complex; capable of vulnerability or menace depending on the circumstances, and a child who offends is always a child in need.

Children and young people are special because their particular vulnerability and continuing development, places on adults the privilege,

responsibility and joy of nurturing them in an atmosphere of both protection and respect.

It will not surprise you to learn that in my view, we do not just live in “troubled times” but rather “authoritarian” times as well. This brings particular problems to any discussion of young people and citizenship.

On the one hand, as people despair at the rapid rate of change in the world and corresponding pressures on and dangers for young people, it is easy to confuse responsibility for children with ownership of them.

Adults can come to think of children as possessions- precious possessions maybe, but possessions nonetheless.

Possessions intended to enhance our lives, add to our sense of worth and fulfil our failed ambitions. Possessions- not little or young people with thoughts, feelings and preferences, that surely must be considered if they are ever to learn consideration for others. Think about it- even the word “spoiled” makes a child sound more like an object than a person.

On the other hand, authoritarian times have unintended consequences. Year after year, dozens of laws are passed, to regulate every area of our lives and often under pain of criminal sanction. I have often spoken of the

injustice that such laws can bring; sweeping up the innocent and the vulnerable (particularly young people) with the guilty- accelerating the conveyor belt into the criminal justice system, rather than diverting it.

But perhaps something else- something more subtle but just as dangerous, happens as well. If every aspect of appropriate behaviour, every instinct towards courtesy as well as every restraint from abuse becomes a matter of legal obligation and criminal liability, what space is left for the individual ethical human being- the good citizen?

Where is the onus on neighbours even to attempt to rub along together if every difference becomes irritation, irritation becomes distress and distress is capable of prompting a race to the police officer and the magistrate?

And what exactly are the values that we are supposed to instil in the next generation other than: “There are a lot of things that are illegal, all the way from swearing in public to murder. Try not to do them and if you must- don’t get caught.”?

And whilst we’re on the subject of young people and respect for the law, why should a kid on an ASBO respect the authority of the local

magistrate, when he hears senior politicians taking pot shots at the highest courts in the land?

If I had a pound for every time I've heard the cliché that there are too many human rights and not enough responsibilities, I would be a very wealthy woman indeed. Our statute book is bursting with legal responsibilities, thousands of pages of them and many more to come. One little Act of fundamental rights and freedoms, a few pages, seventeen substantive protections and hardly any of them absolute and politicians and newspaper editors scream blue murder.

Yet this doesn't seem to happen in other great democracies. For reasons that I don't need to go into, in our present "troublous" times, a certain smug anti-americanism seems to come very easily. But think on this- whatever your particular take on the human rights record of the present US administration, can you really imagine a senior American politician or newspaper, however sleazy, suggesting that times are so bad, threats so great, that the US Bill of Rights must be repealed? Or that fundamental rights and freedoms are selfish anti-democratic nonsense?

No. Because to the vast majority of Americans- whatever their political persuasion- their rights and freedoms are up there with motherhood and

apple pie and essential to democracy itself. And on this essential matter at least, they are right.

Maybe because our Human Rights Act (unlike the values contained within it), was not born out of struggle or because its infancy coincided with the War on Terror or because its political parents leave it to the wolves, this wonderful statement of democratic values is almost as much maligned as Britain's youth.

If young people do well in their exams- the exams must be too easy but young people without such achievements are idle and worthless.

Similarly, in Britain today, human rights are said to be all about protecting the worthless individual and minority and of little or no value to the decent hardworking majority who vote for politicians, not judges and who live in fear.

This is neither a pretty nor optimistic picture of a confident civilised society comfortable in its own skin and traditions and ready to face the challenges of a new century. Why then do I remain optimistic about young people and their role in advancing rights, freedoms and an altogether better society in the years to come?

In short, I see the vital interests of children and young people and the inspiration of fundamental rights and freedoms coming together in my life-time for the long-term benefit of both.

I have no doubt that many will find this suggestion too much to swallow. Sure enough, I have ventured onto radio phone-in shows and read the correspondence of many people who find the idea of children having rights even less attractive than rights for terror suspects.

However, in some important respects, children and young people are different from other previously demonised minorities and these vital differences may yet make all the difference.

Firstly, whilst members of the so-called “decent hard-working majority” may never know what it feels like to be an asylum seeker or a suspect, we have all been children. Lest, we forget, a great many of us are fortunate enough somehow to have children in our lives. So, whatever the political rhetoric and media stereotypes, young people can never just become statistics or horror stories to us. They are connected to our real lives in all their complexity- in and out of trouble.

Secondly, by definition, children and young people do not stay disenfranchised forever. They quickly come to the age of working and voting and when they do, this latest generation, if not too embittered by experience, will have had some access to a citizenship education that may better connect them to those who remember how rights and freedoms were fought for, than the baby-boomers that came in between.

Further, whilst human rights values of dignity, equal treatment and fairness benefit everyone and are the essential to the survival of democratic society, it is in the context of children that they are best demonstrated and some of the myths surrounding them best exploded.

If for example, human rights really were about complete and unfettered freedom for parents, how could the Convention on Human Rights protect children and young people from inhuman and degrading treatment?

Conversely, if they were about unfettered freedom for children and young people, how could adults and governments be held accountable for their education and protection?

The reality, recognised if not honoured all over the free world and everywhere where people yearn to be free, is that rights for children, like

the wider human rights framework in which they sit, are as much about fairness as protection, as much about protection as liberty, as much about liberty as equality of esteem.

Yes- equality of esteem- even for the young, even though their contributions to society are all yet to come in the future when they inherit both the physical and constitutional environment that we middle-aged people have so polluted.

For this true respect is not earned by good behaviour nor by the number of years you have paid taxes or been alive. It cannot be forfeit by loss of self-respect or even by terrible crimes and the necessary and proportionate consequences that must follow. It comes from basic human dignity, from the mere but wonderful fact of existence.

Remembering this doesn't solve young people's problems, let alone those of society. It does provide the ethical framework with which to approach competing interests and our various troubles. And it will provide the inspiration for the survival and prosperity of our great democracy.

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