

Young people: 21 years of policy

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Introduction

In the UK, the three major strands of government youth policy are employment, the use (or misuse) of leisure, and crime and disorder. Twenty-one years ago, in 1987, youth unemployment was running at record levels, the youth service was being ravaged by financial cutbacks and, despite record annual rises in the crime rate, the number of young people entering the criminal justice system was falling steadily and youth custody was at an all-time low.

Crime and justice

Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979 on a pledge to crack down on youth crime. However, the youth justice system was an area of government spending perceived to be spiralling out of control and this was acutely embarrassing for an administration elected on promises of low taxes, 'small government' and 'good housekeeping'.¹ In spite of Mrs Thatcher's 'law and order' rhetoric, the 1980s saw a sustained attempt to limit the numbers of young people entering the youth justice system. The police were encouraged to deal with first-time offenders informally and in 1983 the Department of Health launched its Intermediate Treatment Initiative, which gave voluntary sector projects £15 million over three years to develop 4,500 non-custodial 'alternatives to custody' for 'heavy end' (ie serious and persistent) young offenders. As a result, between 1981 and 1989 the number of juveniles imprisoned in custodial or secure establishments fell from 7,700 to 1,900 a year. The Criminal Justice Act 1991 aimed to enshrine the successes of the Intermediate Treatment Initiative in law by raising the

age at which a child or young person could be placed in custody or secure accommodation from 10 to 15.

However, record rises in crime from the mid-1980s and the murder in 1993 of two-year-old James Bulger put youth crime back on the 'front page'. As a result, the reforms of the 1991 Act were not implemented and in March 1993 Home Secretary Kenneth Clarke created 200 places for 12- to 14-year-old 'persistent offenders' in new 'secure training centres'. This about-face signalled a new era in which crime in general, and youth crime in particular, moved back to the centre of the political stage.

In the wake of the Bulger case, shadow Home Secretary Tony Blair mounted a full-scale attack on the Tory law and order record. Borrowing a phrase from Bill Clinton, Mr Blair asserted that 'New Labour' would be 'tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime' and in the ensuing debate, the Labour Party deployed the entire lexicon of 'get tough' soundbites in an attempt to wrest the political initiative on law and order from the Conservatives' grasp.² New Labour's electoral strategy echoed Mr Clinton's in many ways, striving to win over traditional Conservatives by making the issues of fiscal prudence, the family, welfare reform and law and order their own, always dominating the front pages and never allowing themselves to be outflanked on the political right.

The centrality of youth crime to the New Labour project derives from a particularly hard-nosed analysis of the imperatives of modern political life, which holds that because only the more prosperous sections of the 'working' and 'middle' classes are politically

engaged, it is in the suburbs, the small towns and the gentrified urban enclaves that elections are won and lost. It argues that this new constituency of the centre has rejected both right and left-wing dogmatism, preferring governments which administer the state in accordance with common sense, administrative and technical competence and value for money. This means establishing robust and rigorous mechanisms to ensure that neither policy ends nor policy means are subverted by managerial drift or professional self-interest. It also means ensuring that policy makers, administrators, managers, professionals, private and voluntary sector agencies and even volunteers are heard to be singing from the same hymn-sheet.

This is, as Peter Mair³ has argued, a politics driven largely by the anxieties of potential electors and those who wish to be elected by them. In a socially and culturally diverse and economically polarised society in which those who can make a difference electorally are disproportionately older, more prosperous and white, it is not surprising that the behaviour and attitudes of the young, relatively poor and non-white are a major focus of social and criminal justice policy.

Upon its election in 1997, New Labour's legislative intentions, embodied in the portentously titled *No more excuses* White Paper, were quickly translated into statute in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 ('CDA 1998'). The CDA 1998 and the government's subsequent flurry of criminal justice and anti-social behaviour legislation (between May 1997 and May 2007 the Blair government created 3,023 new offences, almost one a day) drew many more children, young people and parents into the purview of the youth justice system, including many who had committed no criminal offence. Yet it seemed to have occurred to nobody in government that the new youth offending teams (YOTs) created by the CDA 1998 were likely to be overwhelmed by this new influx. Very soon, YOTs confronted the all too familiar public sector dilemma of whether to maintain the quality of the service or to tailor the service to the achievement of the prescribed targets. Recent evaluations of their effectiveness suggest that many opted for the latter.⁴ Nor did anybody appear to have considered the evidence that early induction into the criminal justice system can, through a combination of stigmatisation, 'deviancy amplification'⁵ and administrative drift, accelerate young people's progress towards the 'heavy end'.

Whereas the youth justice strategies of the 1980s and early 1990s had aimed to minimise stigma by diverting youngsters in trouble out of the system, the 1998 Act was rooted in the belief that early

exposure to the youth justice system would have long-term deterrent and rehabilitative effects. Shelving 'alternatives to custody', it developed an expanded range of community penalties, while the new Detention and Training Order (a semi-indeterminate custodial penalty) could be imposed on children as young as 12, or 10 if the circumstances required. Meanwhile, the fast-tracking of persistent and/or serious young offenders, coupled with the tendency of the system to accelerate the progress of their less serious counterparts through it, created a custodial bonanza. Between 1992 and 2002 the number of children and young people aged 10 to 17 sentenced to security or custody in England and Wales rose by almost 90 per cent, while the number of under-15s held in security or custody increased by a remarkable 800 per cent.⁶ Following a brief dip in 2006–07, custodial numbers are once again on the rise. However, during this time crimes recorded as committed by children and young people fell by 20 per cent.⁷

The criminalisation of social policy

Because crime and disorder was so central to New Labour's youth policies, the dividing line between the criminal justice apparatus and education, employment and social welfare services became ever more blurred. The rationale for this integration of services is that because youth crime, disorder and social exclusion are inextricably linked, responses must also be 'joined-up'. Integration was achieved, in part, by re-configured funding regimes that required the plethora of would-be providers who were drawn into the youth services market by the proliferation of government initiatives to bid for tightly specified, time-limited contracts. A recent national study of street-based youth work⁸ found that by 2002, 52 per cent of the 564 projects surveyed had entered partnerships with criminal justice and community safety agencies and organisations. The same study revealed the extent to which these changed funding regimes have enabled government to determine the focus of social intervention with young people; it found a sharp decline in area-based 'social-education' work targeting socially disadvantaged young people in general, and a proliferation in work targeting individuals deemed to be 'at risk'.

Connexions, established in 2001 as a universal education, training and vocational guidance service for young people, exemplifies the way services for young people were progressively criminalised in the early years of the 21st century. As originally conceived, Connexions aimed to involve street-based youth workers in identifying, supporting, tracking

and sharing information about hard-to-reach young people not in education, employment or training. The Department for Education and Skills' (DfES) subsequent *Transforming youth work* (2002) observed that the Youth Service would be at the core of Connexions, contributing to 'cross-cutting preventive strategies, including identification, referral and tracking'. This proposal caused considerable disquiet amongst youth work professionals, who regarded client confidentiality and accountability to the young people with whom they worked as a fundamental ethical precept. However, for them there was worse to come when the *Respect and responsibility* White Paper (2003) identified the Youth Service and Connexions as key members of crime reduction partnerships, and suggested a more directly controlling role for both.

Volatility

Because New Labour ministers have been under constant pressure to dominate the front pages and outshine one another, policy and practice with young people has been dogged by perpetual change and ill-considered innovation. In September 2003 the DfES published the *Every Child Matters* Green Paper but because Home Secretary David Blunkett wished to retain control of youth offending he insisted upon a separate Home Office document, *Youth justice, the next steps*. This document ignored the five objectives of Every Child Matters, toughened existing sentences and court orders and rationalised administrative anomalies. Mr Blunkett fell from grace in December 2004 and the more liberal Charles Clarke quickly changed the tenor of youth policy. Thus, the *Youth Matters* Green Paper (2005) indicates that youth justice and anti-social behaviour might now become the responsibility of the new local authority children's trusts, set up in the aftermath of Every Child Matters, and that funding might be taken away from Connexions partnerships and handed directly to these trusts. By May 2006 Mr Clarke too was gone, replaced briefly by John Reid; raising the possibility that responsibility for youth justice might well be transferred to the ill-fated National Offender Management Service. However, with the ascendancy of Gordon Brown in June 2007 Mr Reid departed and Ed Balls, Mr Brown's right-hand man, became Minister for Children, Schools and Families; prising youth justice and Respect away from Home Secretary Jacqui Smith and Justice Minister Jack Straw, and sacking the Blairite 'anti-social behaviour tsar' Louise Casey, thus effectively junking the Respect agenda.

Conclusion

In spite of its avowed commitment to evidence-led policy and evidence-based practice, all too often New Labour's most imaginative and progressive youth policies have been undermined by political expediency and an unquestioning adherence to the demands of managerialism. Important policy initiatives have also been derailed or reduced in scope because of governmental acquiescence in the face of media criticism.

Had the government defended the integrity of its youth offending teams as settings in which experts from a range of disciplines would come together to fashion interventions tailored to the diverse needs of young people in trouble, this would have marked a real advance in our responses to youth crime. As it is, YOT personnel spend an inordinate amount of time putting their hapless subjects through demonstrably ineffective, but politically acceptable, off-the-shelf offending programmes, while generating mountains of irrelevant data to justify their existence.⁹ If Connexions had been allowed to develop into a national network of centres where socially excluded young people could access the requisite professional expertise, continuing support and, if necessary, vociferous advocacy, that too would have marked a major step forward. As it is, Connexions has become a neglected optional extra for local authorities.

Young people are an unpopular social group and youth policy is destined to attract media criticism. Governments that wish to respond intelligently to the 'youth question', developing progressive policies that address the realities of the lives of our most disadvantaged young people rather than media fantasies about them, must therefore hold their nerve.

Endnotes

1. Scull, A. (1977) *Decarceration*, New Jersey, Spectrum Books
2. Chapman, S. and Savage, P. (1999) 'The new politics in law and order: Labour, crime and justice', in Powell, M. (ed.) *New Labour, new welfare state: the third way in British social policy*, Bristol, the Policy Press
3. Mair P. (2000) 'Partyless democracy', *New Left Review*, 2, Mar/June
4. Bateman T. and Pitts J. (2004) *The Russell House companion to youth justice*, Lyme Regis Russell House Publishing
5. Wilkins, L. (1964) *Social deviance*, London, Tavistock (Note: 'Deviancy amplification' relates to making matters worse by focusing inordinate attention/ surveillance on young people who have been involved in the criminal justice system.)
6. Nacro (2003) *A failure of justice: Reducing child imprisonment*, London, Nacro
7. Nacro (2003) and Bateman and Pitts (2004)
8. Crimmens D. Factor F. Jeffs T. Pitts J. Pugh C. Spence J. Turner P. (2004) *Reaching socially excluded young people*, Leicester, Joseph Rowntree Foundation/ National Youth Agency
9. Bateman and Pitts (2004)

as long as it takes