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Making a Difference?
Political Participation
of Young People in the UK

This paper discusses some more recent studies about young people's political participation in Britain, considering the reasons why there seems to be little interest in formal politics –much less than in many other European countries. The focus on politics in general is then evaluated in relation to a potentially fuller concept of political participation and citizenship. The chapter engages with discussions which critique the narrow definition of 'the political' which is seen to ignore young people's own social experiences and definitions of civil engagement. Research on young people's own understanding of citizenship and their widespread experience of exclusion from public decision-making is discussed in the context of social inequality, child poverty and levels of deprivation in contemporary Britain, where young people are all too often seen as objects of political intervention, instead of citizens in their own right.

Key words: Political participation, United Kingdom, qualitative research, social exclusion, social experiences of young people.

Introduction

In mainstream media discourses in Britain today, children and young people are often depicted as a highly problematic and socially disruptive group. There is a widespread moral panic about the young who appear in headlines mainly in the context of violent street crime, binge-drinking, drug-taking, teenage pregnancy and homelessness. Unease about young people in the UK and their relationship to the older generation is also reflected in a report published by the left-leaning think tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research. The IPPR's director, Nick Pearce, is quoted in the following way: '[Young people] are not learning how to behave –how to get on in life'. According to Pearce, there is an 'increasing disconnect' between adults and children in Britain, as the young are mainly socialized in their own peer groups, without positive interaction between the generations (BBC Online, 2006).

More recently, the UNICEF Report, 'Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries' (UNICEF 2007) has sparked off widespread debate in the media, as the report's findings seem to point to serious failure of past public policies:

> The UK finished in the bottom third of 21 industrialised countries in five out of six categories –material well-being; health and safety; educational well-being; relationships; behaviour and risks; and subjective well-being– ending up overall last, after the United States. The Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Finland topped the standings. (Knight, 2007).

At the time of writing, this report seems to have shocked the Labour government under Gordon Brown into activity to devise plans intended to lead to 'fitter, happier and better educated' young people (Curtis, 2007). The concerns about British young people's relative lack of well-being on the one side, and their perceived disruptive behaviour on the other have also led to questions as to why this generation seems to be little engaged with politics or in how far they are prepared to play an active role as citizens (Henn, 2002; Henn and Weinstein, 2004; Kimberlee, 2002; O'Toole, Lister, Marsh, Jones, McDonagh, 2003; White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). The interest of young people in politics seems to be very low today, indeed, opinion polls suggest that in Britain, 'the term and word "politics" has an extremely off-putting effect for young people' (Make Space Youth Review, 2007: 92). Not surprisingly, the political class in Britain is seriously worried about the very low turn-out of young people in elections and their general low interest in conventional politics which is feared to undermine the legitimacy of the political system itself. As a study of young people's political participation says:

> The government is ... concerned. In 1997 it commissioned the Crick Report, *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools*, which recommended that citizenship education should be compulsory for secondary school pupils, in order to tackle problems of declining political and civic participation among young people' (O'Toole et al., 2003: 45).

Since then, the turn-out of young people in elections has further declined, while 'media speculation and academic debate have been increasingly exercised over the alienation of young people from British political life' (White et al., 2000:1).

This paper will look at a number of recent studies to consider the political participation of young people in the UK, how they define politics themselves, what the reasons are for their disengagement with formal politics and in how far their distrust of politicians and parties, but also their attitudes towards wider political issues may be seen as a form of civil commitment. It will consider further whether social inequality experienced by large numbers of young people and their feelings of public powerlessness and marginalisation are responsible for the perceived political alienation of the young.

Young People and Politics in the UK – A Special Case?

In international comparison, participation in elections, whether at national, local or European level, is relatively low in all age groups. According to the Electoral Commission, there is clear evidence that turn-out in elections in the UK is declining among the population as a whole. Thus for instance in the 2001 General Election, the numbers of abstainers outweighed the numbers of people who cast their vote for Labour, the party elected to form the government. In the 2005 General Election, only 61.4% of the electorate bothered to vote; this was slightly higher than in 2001, but it was 10% lower than in 1997, itself a post-war low at the time (Electoral Commission, 2005). However, according to the Electoral Commission, the participation figures for young people –aged between 18 and 24– were only half as high as those for older people; according to Mori, only 37% of young people voted in 2005, thus two percent less than in 2001 (Electoral Commission, 2005).

Researchers working for the Electoral Commission believe that 'non-voting is the product of a broader political disengagement and that a section of the electorate are sceptical about the efficacy of voting at any election' (ibid.). However, this disengagement with parliamentary politics seems to be particularly true for the young.

When one considers the much better turn-out of older age groups, one might hope that with increasing age, today's young people would also learn to become more interested in voting. However, researchers are less optimistic. They identify 'the apparent beginnings of a cohort effect with young age groups carrying forward the habit of non-voting into older age', and they assume that 'this suggests a very real risk that it will be even harder to mobilise turnout next time' (Electoral Commission, 2005). Thus, young people's low interest in the formal political process and their low turnout –as an indication of the growing irrelevance of 'politics' to increasingly larger groups of the British population– can certainly alarm all those who see the legitimacy of representative democracy being eroded.

There are also serious discussions as to whether lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 might instil a more active feeling of citizenship in young Britons, turning them not just into 'citizens in the making' (Marshall, 1950) but into 'citizens of today', leading to more active social and political participation. One might indeed ask why the young in Britain are deemed criminally responsible at the age of 10 –and there are calls in the tabloid media even to lower this– while they are sexually competent at the age of 16, but not politically responsible until 18 (Matthews et al., 1999). The broad range of academic discussion on political participation and citizenship of the young sheds light on the issue from a range of different perspectives, but it does not provide simple solutions for the political class who see the young as apathetic and elusive.

According to an international study which compared the political participation of young people in eight European countries –Austria, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Slovakia and the United Kingdom– the young in Britain seem to be more disengaged from institutional political life than any other age-group, but also more than the young in most other European countries (Institute for Social Research and Analysis, Vienna, 2005). This suggests that there may be particular factors affecting the young in Britain leading to especially high rates of disengagement.

The study, coordinated by the Institute for Social Research and Analysis at the University of Vienna, Austria, considered both participation *within* and *outside* the representative democratic system. It focused on attitudinal, behavioural and socio-demographic variables to identify the degree of and reasons for participation. Although the study underlines in its introduction that there are limits to comparability as a result of differences in terminology, opportunity structures and political culture in the eight different countries, it nevertheless identifies clear differences in political participation between the countries –and on the whole the UK does not compare well.

The study shows the politicisation of young people in graphs which plot Italy and Austria in the quadrant at the top left, corresponding to the most leftist and protest politicisation; in contrast to this, the UK is located at the opposite and is associated with a very low level of political participation and to a very weak politicisation (Institute for Social Research and Analysis, 2005: 106). Similarly, in relation to parental politicisation, the UK is seen 'by

far the country with the lowest level of politicisation. The same type of weak political socialisation and politicisation can also be observed with Estonia, Slovakia and Finland' (ibid., 109).

Asked about their trust in political organisations or institutions, the UK sample has a distinctively low level of trust in parties, namely only 6% seem to have trust, while 9% say they trust in politicians, 12% in the British government and the European parliament, followed by 18% for the UK parliament, 33% for Green Peace and 35% for Amnesty International. Thus, institutions of formal politics rate much worse than informal organisations. Compared to other European countries, the study shows that the lowest party trust rates are found in Slovakia and the UK (ibid., 130). Interestingly, at the European level, all countries show an overall higher trust in the European Commission than in their own national government, with the exception however of Italy and the UK where it is the other way round (ibid., 135). The study also says that in the UK, 'a remarkable number of young people does not make use of any mass media for political information' (ibid., 188), and it adds: 'Significantly more young people in the UK (61%), in Slovakia (53%), Italy (53%) and France (46%) feel that politics is too complicated to understand' (ibid., 229).

In the study's summary, it is highlighted that young people in Italy have the highest participation rate in elections, while the UK rate is lowest. It is also maintained here that '[t]he better educated young people are, the higher their voting rate and their perceived effectiveness of voting are' and adds that in 'Estonia and the UK membership as well as participation and volunteering are least common throughout all political organisations (ibid., 244).

The UK national report of this study highlights again that young people in Britain are little interested in institutional politics and are much more involved with environmental and animal rights groups rather than political parties and trade unions (Moore and Longhurst, 2005). In its summary the report concludes that fewer than 30% of young people in Britain take an interest in political issues, and the interest that does exist is directed mainly at national events, with least attention given to European/EU-level politics (Moore and Longhurst, 2005: 32). 'Over one third of young Britons (35%) felt politics is simply a game conducted by old men, with the vast majority of young people (75%) regarding "politics" as discussions conducted within parliament.' (ibid., 32). However, the authors see signs of optimism: 'Young people strongly believe that being politically active is important if the world is to become a better place, and very few believe that it is pointless to change the status quo.' (ibid., 32).

The low turn-out in elections and the rejection of mainstream politics is also discussed in many other studies (for instance Henn and Weinstein, 2004 or Kimberlee, 2002). A qualitative study by White et al. and supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation explores the political views and behaviour of young people, consulting a cross-section of people aged 14-24 who come from diverse backgrounds. As the authors say, their aim is not to provide statistical evidence, but to show how young people themselves assess their interest in politics. The study demonstrates that different groups of young people are not uniform in their attitude towards politics, and it discusses the factors why young people generally are turned off politics. According to the authors, the research shows that young people in Britain feel that firstly,

politics are not interesting and accessible, secondly, that politicians are not responsive to their needs, and thirdly that there are not enough opportunities for them to enter the political process.

More specifically, when asking the question: 'What turns young people off politics?', the authors find that this age group feels that 'politics lack relevance to their lives at present' and that politics are 'for older and more responsible people whose lives are affected by politics' (White et al., 2000: 15); they feel that they do not have enough understanding about politics, and that the very language used in politics turns them off. The study also confirms the lack of trust in politicians and the feeling among young people that politicians are not interested in the views and concerns of the young (ibid., 16).

The study is based on in-depth discussions with young people, and these show that they 'feel powerless and excluded from the political process' (ibid., 34). Generally, the interviewees noted that there were not enough opportunities for them to participate in the political process. Especially the younger ones believed that there were no ways of participating until they were old enough to vote.

Even where young people acknowledged there were opportunities to participate in the political process, either through conventional methods, such as voting or lobbying MPs, or less conventional methods, such as youth forums, they felt they lacked knowledge about the process of engagement. Underpinning this barrier was the perception that politics was a complex and alien subject, which they found hard to grasp and understand. (ibid., 35)

They also said that only the views of those with money and status were listened to, while their own were dismissed by politicians as childish and unrealistic (ibid., 35).

According to White et al., young people's reluctance to take part in elections was also due to their lack of trust in politicians and the fact that they felt ignored. Interestingly, other reasons why they felt that there was no point in voting was 'that a party was unlikely to win in a particular constituency where another party was dominant' and another reason was that 'there appeared to be so many similarities between the Conservative and Labour party; it was also believed that there was no opportunity to bring about change or make a difference to the way the country is governed' (ibid.: 39)

To be more responsive to the needs of young people, the interviewees felt that politicians would have to 'abandon the pomp and ceremony, removing the wigs and gowns' (ibid.: 42), and that they could represent young people much better if they were from a wider cross-section of society in terms of age, sex, ethnicity and class. There should be new opportunities for young people to participate more, by bringing them into contact with politicians who were less remote, by lowering the voting age and by empowering them to make their own decisions and give them more control over more aspects of their own lives, so that they could learn about civic responsibility by practising it. Some young people warned that the introduction of new youth forums might raise expectations among the young which, if they could not be met, would lead to even more cynicism and apathy.

White et al. suggest that young people might develop more interest in politics with increasing age and changing life circumstances, but they believe that 'the age at which this is activated is now delayed, as a result of the

changing social and economic environment in which young people now live'
(ibid., 44).

According to White et al., issues that concern young people cover indeed a broad political agenda, even if they are not termed as such by them. The authors also believe that there is evidence that many of the young people already had engaged in a range activities which can be seen as political such as attending demonstrations and signing petitions, although they saw themselves being excluded from politics. It is suggested that an important factor discouraging more interest in politics is the narrow way in which young people conceive of politics as institutional and especially party politics. The teaching of citizenship at school is seen to be a step towards overcoming this, but the authors also feel that this would only work together with real empowerment in young people's everyday life, within the family, at school and in the local community, thus listening and responding to their own needs and allowing them to practise their role as citizens.

Many of the previous findings are echoed by the study by Mahendran and Cook, (2007) who say that 'young people in the UK report lower levels of political participation and engagement.' (5) compared to other European Union member states, and they are the least likely to vote in European Parliament elections. However, they maintain that young people who lived in rich households with adults with higher educational qualifications were most likely to be interested in politics. In addition, they believe that early exposure to talk about politics has an important influence on young people's eventual interest in the subject (Mahendran/Cook, 2007: 10). They also find that 'generally young people (15-24 year olds) claim to know less about the EU than older people. 43% state that they know nothing at all about it. … When young people are asked specific questions which test their knowledge, this relative ignorance is born out. For example, in 2005 only 22% of 15-24 year olds knew that the UK was holding the European Presidency, compared to 62% of over 55 year olds.' (Mahendran and Cook, 2007: 15).

The Political System in the UK: A Turn-Off?

When comparing the political participation of young people in the UK with that in other European countries, it may not be too far-fetched to consider the particular institutional features of the political system and the political culture in which the individuals are socialised.

Despite more recent developments of devolution of political power to Scotland and Wales, Britain has been a highly centralised state where most decision-making comes from London. The Thatcher years have certainly meant a reduction of decision-making at the local level, and together with neo-liberal deregulation, the political accountability of democratically elected bodies has been greatly reduced.

The simple majority, first-past-the-post system for general elections works towards a two-party system, which means on the one hand that small parties have hardly any chance of influencing the democratic process, while on the other hand voters will be discouraged to vote for them, as this means wasting their vote. According to research by the Electoral Commission, there are strong associations between turnout and people's perceptions of the importance, or otherwise, of the election and whether their vote will make a difference in some way. Our research after the 2005 general election found

people reporting difficulties in deciding who to vote for, in part because of weakening political alignments but also because of the perceived similarities between the main parties. (Electoral Commission, 2005)

The feeling that casting one's vote will not make a difference may be particularly strong for young people who have not had any positive experience of having influenced any public matters. Also, in contrast to older people who may still identify with the fundamental ideological differences between the two main parties that existed in the past, the young today live in a culture where both Labour and the Conservatives exert themselves in scrambling for the political middle ground. A populist homogenisation of politics has taken place where both large parties try to 'modernise' themselves to gain the voters' attention. Blair's New Labour has certainly not left the Thatcherite neo-liberal path in terms of economic policy, while his successor as Labour prime-minister, Gordon Brown, found it necessary to express his admiration for Lady Thatcher soon after he became head of government. The party politics of the past seem to be turned upside down when the leader of the opposition, David Cameron, goes out of his way to show how 'touchy-feely', socially and environmentally conscious the Conservative Party has become.

In addition to the blurring of party-political ideologies, one reason why parties and individual politicians in the UK have become distrusted by the electoral in general is the fact that the two-party system has during the last few decades led to the long duration of, first, the Conservative government (1979-1997) and, then, the Labour government (1997 to date), thus providing ample potential for corruption and personal scandals.

It is not surprising that the electorate as a whole, but especially the young, are confused about their ability to bring about real political alternatives in a political culture dominated by populism, where politicians vie with each other to base their public statements on the results of opinion polls and focus groups. This trivialisation and personalisation of politics may be seen as a reaction to the tabloidisation of the media in Britain, but it is also actively engaged in by the politicians themselves and their media 'spin doctors'. Young people's low trust in parties and politicians may indeed be seen as a 'political' reaction, just as abstaining might be interpreted as a positive choice, especially when non-voters may still behave as active citizens by taking part in other political activities (Todd/Taylor, 2004).

If centralisation, the two-party system without real alternatives and the trivialisation of politics give young people the impression that they are remote from political decision-making, then this is also compounded by the fact that Britain has no written constitution which might make the distribution of political powers more accountable and transparent. Many of the procedures of life at Westminster are run according to arcane rules, and the 'pomp and circumstance' of the opening of parliament are re-constructions of feudal medieval pageants which have not much to do with expressions of democratic governance. It may not baffle only the young as to why 'Her Majesty's government' needs to publish its new set of policies via a speech read out by the Queen! And the more recent 'reforms' of the House of Lords have only led to highlight the anachronism and lack of democratic legitimacy of this institution which –just like the buildings of the Houses of Parliament– hark back to the 19th century. It is difficult to imagine that the compulsory introduction of citizenship studies at school, including

'work on British values and national identity' (Woodward,2007), has managed to convince the young in general that they could have a say within this institutional system.

The Young in British Society: Disinterested or Disempowered?

Thus, the young themselves do not seem to believe that their voice counts very much. Research into the views of first-time voters shows that they do not feel that they can influence the decision-making process (Henn and Weinstein, 2003; Henn, Weinstein and Hodgkinson, 2007; Make Space Youth Review, 2007). Other studies conclude that

> there is a growing recognition that within the UK young people are not given the respect or listened to with the seriousness that they deserve. … in contrast to Britain, in mainland Europe … there is ample evidence of effective ombudswork, national frameworks for the coordination of young people's affairs and well-established participatory structures which operate at grass-roots level. At a broader international scale, too, there is evidence that the Articles of the UNCRC are reaching out to incorporate growing numbers of young people world-wide. We suggest that the UK has much to learn from these experiences and until this happens, young people will remain largely invisible in public-policy making at all levels. (Matthews, Limb and Taylor, 1999: 10-11)

So what is it that seems to exclude young people in this country more than in other countries? Before we consider this question further, it should be worthwhile hearing more about the perceptions the young themselves have about their role as citizens.

An empirical, three-year-long study of young people between the ages of 16-23 set out to explore the way in which they understand themselves as citizens (Lister et al, 2003). The participants were stratified according to 'insider' and 'outsider' status, representing on the one hand the young person on the path to graduate-type employment, and on the other the person with few or no qualifications and a record of unemployment (ibid., 236). The researchers identified five models of citizenship in the discussions:

a) the universal status

b) respectable economic independence

c) constructive social participation

d) social-contractual

e) right to a voice

These models were not mutually exclusive. Overall, analysis showed that the 'universal' one dominated, but in the course of the study it became less important, while the 'respectable economic independence' and 'constructive social participation' types were emphasised more, 'with their invocation of economic and civic responsibility' (ibid., 239).

The discussions on the meanings of citizenship showed the participants as a highly responsible group. The authors conclude that

[the] young people found it much easier to talk about responsibilities than rights and when they did identify rights they were more likely to be civil than political or social rights. ... Few saw social security rights as unconditional. The young people also tended to place a high premium on constructive social participation in the local community. Such participation represented for many of them the essence of good citizenship and was one of two more responsibility-based models that emerged as prominent from general discussions of the meanings of citizenship. (ibid., 2003: 251) ... Liberal rights-based and civic republican political participation-based models did not figure prominently in their discussions. This suggests that they have taken on board political messages about active citizenship and about responsibilities over rights (though not the related social-contractual model propounded by New Labour) that have become increasingly dominant over the past couple of decades in the UK. Similarly, the young people's image of the first class citizen is redolent of the successful citizen promoted by Thatcherism and to a degree under New Labour: economically independent, with money, own home and a family. For some of those classified as 'outsiders', this meant that they themselves identified with the label of 'second class citizen', below everyone else. (ibid., 251).

According to Lister et al., the potentially divisive and exclusionary character of the economic independence model is in conflict with the more inclusive universal membership model: 'Instead of challenging class divisions, the respectable economic independence model of citizenship reinforces them. (ibid., 251).

Thus, many of the 'outsiders' see themselves as 'second class citizens' without a say in public life. It would perhaps be surprising if the young in Britain –whether they are brought up in more privileged or deprived areas, thus segregated into educational establishments reflecting their parents' privileged or deprived status (see for instance: Curtis, 2007a; Meickle, 2007; Palmer, 2007; Russell, 2007)– were immune to the dominant ideology where both success and failure are seen to be the result of 'individual rational choice', instead of structural advantages and disadvantages. The 'winners' on the way to respectable economic independence may thus also feel more empowered to express their political voice, while the 'losers' feel that they deserve to be excluded. As Louise Vincent puts it in a critique of the ideologies dominating education today: 'Individual consumer choice and satisfaction rather than the world of political ideas, communities and social relationships are the benchmark against which success is measured.' (Vincent, 2004: 106).

Thus, the participation in public decision-making is not something which the young in Britain experience very often in their everyday life in education, training and (un-)employment, and so it is not surprising that they see political decision-making as an elite role to which only few aspire (Todd and Taylor, 2004), especially as their experience of politics may be more likely to be that as objects of government policies.

Young People and Social Inequality in the UK

This would also suggest that the young people growing up in today's neo-liberal climate are aware of the divisive forces in this society where all too early the young are sorted into 'insiders' and 'outsiders', 'winners' and

'losers', and this mainly according to the social background into which they were born. Thus, research supported by the Sutton Trust reports:

> International comparisons of intergenerational mobility show that Britain, like the United States, is at the lower end of international comparisons of mobility. Also intergenerational mobility has declined in Britain at a time of rising income inequality. The strength of the relationship between educational attainment and family income, especially for access to higher education, is at the heart of Britain's low mobility culture. (Blanden et al., 2005: 3)

A more recent report by the same team confirms again that bright children from poor backgrounds fall behind in their development within the first few years of their schooling (Curtis, 2007b). Since the 1990s, child poverty in Britain has tripled, and despite efforts of the Labour government to reverse the trend, this has not done much more than to stop the increase. Child poverty is measured as the proportion of children in households with incomes below 60 per cent of contemporary median income. Child poverty is clearly hampering the development of the child and of course reflects the poverty in which the child and young person grows up; it is in many cases a reflection of the mother's, i.e. women's poverty –or the fact that in a country with an eroding welfare state, having children means risking poverty for all but the more comfortably off. According to a recent summary report by Middleton and Sandu on child poverty, 'by 2000 the UK had the highest child poverty rate in the EU' (Middleton and Sandu, 2006). The authors also identify a clear correlation between child poverty and lack of educational achievement, i.e. the potential for educational and also social exclusion as a result of poverty.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that official statistics show that more than 3 million children are in poverty in Britain, research undertaken for the Department for Work and Pensions shows that the population as a whole believe that there is 'very little poverty', and the researchers find that there is a view that 'the poor have themselves to blame' (Wintour, 2007).

Thus, despite the clear evidence that Britain as a whole is a rich country, while a lot of its population –and many of them children and young adults– are deprived and marginalised, there is no general awareness of this. Many of the young people in this country have been poor all their lives, as they grow up in a society which is more unequal than most other EU countries. This is also reflected in the income inequality in Britain measured by the Gini Coefficient which shows that among EU countries, only Latvia, Lithuania, Poland –three former eastern bloc countries– and Portugal –a country still characterised by its lack of a developed secondary and tertiary economic sector– have an even greater income inequality than the rich, developed UK (Poverty Organisation, 2007). The government's own statistics show: 'Income inequality still remains high by historical standards –the large increase which took place in the second half of the 1980s has not been reversed.' (National Statistics Online, 2007) As a result of economic restructuring and neo-liberal policies since the 1980s, Britain has become a polarised society. The same source informs us:

> The rate of male participation in the labour market has fallen, often in the households where there is no other earner. Conversely, there has been increased female participation among those with working partners. This has led to an increased polarisation between two-earner and zero-earner households …. (ibid.)

Deindustrialisation in Britain over the last three decades has certainly also led to a geographical polarisation between areas of thriving new service sector economies –mainly in the south-east around London but also in some other big cities– and declining areas of former industrial production where employment opportunities have become scarce. But there is also polarisation within urban areas, with high unemployment and lucrative jobs side-by-side in the big cities where poor migrants and poor British people live in housing conditions reminiscent of the 19th century. As the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) warns: "The pace of change in Britain over the last few years has unsettled many, and caused people to retreat into and reinforce narrower ethnic and religious ties**. Bonds of solidarity across different groups have reduced and tensions between people have increased" (CRE Report, quoted in Travis, 2007).

Segregation between poor and rich communities is also a result of the housing policies of past governments, which are particularly problematic for the young. The extraordinarily steep increase in house prices over recent decades has led to overcrowding and homelessness for many families, especially for the young. In a country where home ownership was the norm for the majority of the population, young people in education and training are either forced to live with their parents or have to pay extortionate prices for sub-standard housing. Increasingly, it is middle-class young people at the beginning of their working life who are lucky enough to have parents prepared to share their housing wealth with them, while it is increasingly difficult for the young to get their foot on the ladder to home ownership (Sampson, 2007).

This social inequality is disempowering and marginalising many young people today, and if most of the research into political behaviour shows that better educated, more advantaged young people are more likely to take part in elections and believe that they can have a political voice, then this may reflect the fact that they can envisage the chance for a self-determined life within the existing system, as it allows them already the experience of agency, while the more marginalised groups cannot imagine how they could exert real political power within a system that constantly confronts them with their own powerlessness.

Policies for the Young?

So what can be done in an unequal society to overcome the 'political apathy' and the marginalisation of the young? The government during the last ten years certainly has been under pressure to devise policies aiming towards a greater social inclusion of the young to promote their transition to adult citizenship. However, as Alan France finds in an article focusing on more recent government policies towards the young, the debate is largely influenced by a media-led moral crusade which sees in the young the a single cause of panic for the adult population (France, 2007b). Core values such as self-reliance, economic independence, respect and civic responsibility are emphasised, with the aim to create 'good citizens' who are able to take responsibility for their families and communities (Home Office, 2006). A range of policy initiatives and programmes on education, training and employment have been introduced with the aim of targeting the most socially excluded young people. At the same time, New Labour has been keen to make benefits conditional on work, as part of a new 'social contract'

(France, 2007b). The political climate determined by the right-wing media in which policies are shaped can be seen from an article in the *Sunday Telegraph*: Here, the authors comment on research commissioned by the Prince's Trust charity and carried out by the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics into the behaviour of young people who drop out of education, the so-called NEETs –'Not in Education, Employment or Training'. The paper claims that 'this "lost generation" is costing the country £3.65 billion a year– enough to fund a 1p cut in income tax. Indeed, the Government's own figures estimate that each new NEET dropping out of education at 16 will cost the taxpayer an average of £97,000 during their lifetime. The worst will cost more than £300,000' (Henrie and Goslett, 2007). Thus the traditional political Right sees the young merely in terms of a danger to the public or cost to the tax-payer, but certainly not as present or future citizens with a voice of their own.

That the mainstream adult population expects youth policies to be instruments of controlling and disciplining the young also becomes clear in the way that the idea of volunteering and 'active citizenship' is discussed, for instance in the *Daily Mail* where specific government plans are welcomed in the following way: 'Premier Gordon Brown is keen to promote activities which encourage responsible citizenship, community service and volunteering and has already championed the spread of combined cadet forces to state schools.' (Clark, 2007).

Thus, according to France, New Labour policies aimed at overcoming exclusion are characterised by a strong moral agenda that is 'victim-blaming', while issues of structural inequality or lack of economic resources are ignored. 'Many of the risk factors identified as "causal" are related to failings by individuals, and therefore the problems are seen as being located in poor parenting, bad influences from peers, and lack of interest in school' (France, 2007b: 5). This individualising of problems also means that individuals, families and whole communities are pathologised and seen to be in need of coercive intervention. As France says, 'social policy in education therefore has taken a regulatory and disciplinary function for those defined outside the parameters of middle-class social acceptability.' (ibid., 7). This, together with New Labour's continued commitment to a hard line on Law and Order towards the young, has led to the expansion of juvenile secure units and giving courts new powers to lock up children under the age of fifteen, while courts have been given increased powers to create Detention and Training Orders for 12 to 17 year-olds (ibid.: 10-11). According to France, the government's policies to encourage greater social participation through volunteering, leisure and sports activities are based on an agenda oriented towards the *employability* of the young, with the aim of providing the labour market with suitable 'human capital'. Questioning the effectiveness of such policies to overcome exclusion, France maintains that 'historical evidence shows that participation in these areas of social life has always been shaped by inequalities between different classes, genders and ethnicities' (ibid., 14). The government's idea of 'good citizenship' is thus based on values reflecting a moral order which is white, male, Anglo-Saxon and middle-class. 'To be included, young people must not only accept and conform to such values, but be seen to act upon them. Acting outside of this "normality" is then constructed as a "problem"' (ibid., 15). Policies to promote forms of participation, while claiming to 'empower' young people, thus also have forms of social control built into them. As France maintains, the 'issue of

power either between adults and young people or policy, professional practice and young people is rarely considered in debates about participation' (ibid.: 17). The young remain the passive objects of policies, and it is not surprising that this objectification does not encourage them to experience their own political agency, fostering the feeling that their actions might *make a positive difference* in a public context that goes beyond their own, individual private life.

So what should be done? In a study which aims to understand why young people in Britain today are politically disengaged, the researchers look at the relative effects of socio-economic location and social capital, to consider the potential of policies which might increase social engagement (Henn et al., 2007). The research was based on a nation-wide survey of 'attainers', young people who were voting for the first time. The complex study which considered political engagement, support for the democratic process, political efficacy and perception of political parties and professional politicians, came to the conclusion that government policies to mobilise social capital may encourage more civic engagement, while measures to improve socio-economic factors in general seem to be what is needed to make a real difference in terms of participation. Indeed, the recommendations are surprisingly direct, if challenging for a government that tries to appease the *Daily Mail* readers:

> Policy which succeeds in expanding educational participation, reducing social class differences and social exclusion, regenerating neighbourhoods and communities, strengthening local community networks and promoting social cohesion, and fostering volunteering and self-help, may contribute in helping to at least limit the drift towards political disengagement among youth in Britain (Henn et al., 2007: 475-6).

Conclusion

As this discussion of recent research has shown, British young people are less politicised than most other young people in the EU, they are reluctant to take part in elections, have relatively little trust in parties and individual politicians, are not very interested in the EU and generally sceptical about formal, institutional politics. However, they are more interested in general political issues and believe that being politically active is important if the world is to become a better place. Nevertheless, they don't seem to see how they themselves could *make a difference* in the political world.

Their alienation from the formal political process can be explained in terms of the system itself –with its archaic and absurd procedures and its lack of real alternatives– not encouraging the participation of the young for whom political decision-making is an elite occupation, but not part of their daily life where they could experience their own political agency and learn about democratic processes. The feeling of being ignored by the politicians is particularly acute among the more disadvantaged young in a society which is materially very unequal, and where a large part of the young have grown up in relative poverty. Past and present governments inspired by neo-liberal policies have also intensified the experience of alienation and powerlessness of the young, especially as government policies to tackle exclusion have been predicated on objectifying children and young people, with the clear agenda of containing, disciplining and controlling them.

It seems, therefore, that the problem does not lie with the young, but with those who are in power in this socio-economic reality. Empowering the young to participate more in politics is a difficult task in a society that is becoming increasingly fragmented and polarised.

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