

Youth & Policy Special Edition:
The Next Five Years: Prospects for young people

Innovation and Youth Work

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Abstract

Innovation has long been central to the survival of youth work as a form of welfare practice. During a period when local and central government spending is being curtailed how can we expect innovative practice to emerge without the stimulus of state funding and in the face of state indifference to youth work per se? The article considers the reasons behind that withdrawal and the impact it has had on practice before proceeding to consider what forms of innovative practice might emerge in the future in response to changes in the life-styles of young people and the social and political environment. It concludes by arguing for the location of youth within civil society and for the development of new forms of civic democratic practice.

Key words: civil society, informal education, development of youth work, contemporary youth work practice, civic and democratic practice.

INNOVATION WAS always woven into the fabric of youth work. From the outset youth work was obliged to remake itself as the social context and the needs of young people altered. Inflexibility was, therefore, never a viable option as practitioners risked being engulfed by technological and social change. During a two hundred year history, this occurred infrequently. Club leaders and youth workers, as a consequence of their recurring contact with young people and communities, most being part-time workers or volunteers functioning in their own neighbourhoods, have rarely been caught unawares by these transformations. They may, at times, have been one step behind. However, rarely was it more than one step. The dialogical basis of their practice helped ensure these men and women were, if they were going about their work correctly, incessantly engaged in conversation with young people. Therefore, those practitioners who listened and were embedded within the local community acquired distinctive insights into the lived experiences of the young. Unique knowledge of this kind meant a significant minority became 'practice-based' advocates arguing within public forums, nationally and locally, for greater public investment in and philanthropic support for youth work. Their practice equipped them to promote reforms able to improve the life-chances of those they worked alongside. From the 1900s onwards, letters penned by youth workers recurrently appeared in correspondence columns of *The Times*, *Manchester Guardian*, *News Chronicle* and *Daily Telegraph* as well as those of local press. These communicated the valuable work being undertaken by clubs and the like, described the challenges and difficulties facing members, and urged others to 'lend a hand'. Rightly, because their opinions were founded upon knowledge acquired from the arena of practice, politicians and policy-makers tended to pay

heed to their views. Prominent youth and settlement workers were frequently invited as experts in their field to serve on Royal Commissions, governmental standing committees, and study groups relating to educational and welfare issues. For much of the twentieth century, youth work enjoyed a presence on the political system's inside-track because many leading politicians either had direct experience of working in clubs and settlements or personal ties with those who did. For instance, in 1911, when the National Organisation of Girls' Clubs (NOGC) was founded the wives of both the Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, and the leader of the Labour Party Ramsey MacDonald, were active supporters of girls' club work. Margot Asquith, with her sister Laura Tennant, founded a girls' club linked to the Girls' Friendly Society in Scotland prior to her marriage. Subsequently, after moving to London she became a supporter of the Archie Gordon Boys' Club (Hoxton) (Dove, 1996). Margaret MacDonald (nee Gladstone) was a pioneer of club work who first introduced Lily Montagu to the work (Spence, 2004). Come 1945, little had changed. Clement Attlee, the Prime Minister, was an ex-boys' club leader and settlement worker and both his wife Violet, and the wife of the leader of the opposition, Clementine Churchill, actively supported the National Association of Girls' Clubs and Mixed Clubs (NAGC&MC). Moreover, the King, prior to his accession, had in 1921 (when he was Duke of York) launched, and unflinchingly attended the annual fourteen day camps named after him. The participants comprised in equal number members of boys' clubs and public school pupils. His brother, the Duke of Gloucester, was an exceptionally pro-active founder President of the National Association of Boys' Clubs (NABC). When the names of the first four women awarded life peerages were announced in 1958 it aroused no comment that two were longstanding club workers. Irene (Lady) Curzon was one who when elevated had already served for forty years as a leader at the Highway Club (Tower Hamlets) and was President of the London Union of Youth Clubs and Vice-President of the NAGC&MC (the latter, an organisation she almost single-handedly saved from bankruptcy by working almost full-time as an unpaid fundraiser between 1946 and 1947). The second was Katherine Elliot founder of the Pedro Club in 1929 and, for a decade, Chair of the NAGC&MC.

One by-product of this situation was that whenever youth work, or for that matter community work, was discussed in a public forum, amongst those taking part were individuals whose opinions were informed by practice and who retained an abiding affection for the work. A second spin-off was that their commitment provided abundant evidence that here was a valuable activity. After all if the Prime Minister, the King, a healthy smattering of public figures, and tens of thousands of less exalted citizens freely devoted time and energy to youth work and youth organisations then, self-evidently, here was a worthwhile enterprise. Because it was a 'mass movement' comprising thousands of clubs and units; hundreds of thousands of voluntary leaders; and over four million members, youth work encountered no obligation to justify or explain itself. Why should it? Especially when groups of young people often literally, built their own clubs brick-by-brick (Stimson, 1948) and hundreds of thousands raised substantial sums to sustain clubs or units.¹ The value and benefits of youth work were givens. It was as much an essential component of a mature democratic society as an ambulance service, adult education, or homes for the infirm. Moreover,

from this pot-pourri of talents, youthful zest and commitment to public service, emerged a constant flow of innovation. Usually this came from the grass-roots. National youth organisations were, as with so much else, products of this dynamic. Unlike today, when they have only tokenistic memberships, these bodies were controlled from below by active local branches. Innovation within this environment tended to arise as part of the natural order of things; driven by the desire of practitioners to better serve members' changing needs and likewise of the members to better serve their peers. Almost every innovation in relation to practice – be it the concept of the club itself; the idea of a youth centre; detached and outreach work; youth cafes; residential centres; outdoor and adventure provision; mobile facilities; and specialist work with girls and young women, disabled young people, ethnic minorities and gay, lesbian and transgender young people – as a consequence, initially surfaced at the local level.

The once vibrant grass-roots have withered. No longer is youth work a mass-movement but a remnant sustained, where it survives, by a rapidly decreasing posse of paid full and part-time workers. There are exceptions. Noticeably some uniformed youth organisations, specifically the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, who have enjoyed something of a revival in the last two decades and a faith-based sector which, although much smaller than it was a century ago, thrives thanks to a pool of voluntary leaders and an increasing cohort of often poorly remunerated staff. Indeed, in many localities, they are partially or wholly plugging the gap vacated by the once substantial statutory providers (Smith et al. 2015). Therefore, whenever discussion of 'a youth work crisis' occurs one should understand that 'crisis' relates almost exclusively to secular units and typically those that were previously fully or partially funded by local authorities or the boys' clubs.

Hard times

In April 2015, only 40 per cent of the government's proposed cuts to public expenditure have been implemented. The remaining 60 per cent will be imposed during the next three years (Emmerson et al, 2015). Given that expenditure on the National Health Service, schools, pensions and overseas aid is ring-fenced, and home care and related services are protected by other means, it is inevitable that the cutbacks imposed on youth services will exceed the levels experienced during the period 2010 – 2014.² Nationally, the current rate of depletion approximates to 12 per cent per annum (Department for Education, 2014). This will most likely accelerate to 20 per cent or more during the next few years as the search for reductions in non-protected areas of public finance intensifies (Emmerson et al, 2015). Therefore, by the time the process of rolling-back public expenditure is completed in 2017 or thereabouts,³ little is likely to remain of the once thriving statutory youth sector. A rump may linger here or there but overwhelmingly it, like the once flourishing statutory and university based adult education service, will become a fast-fading memory. Twice before, in the early 1920s and 1950s, local and central government, as a consequence of financial difficulties, withdrew funding leaving a vigorous voluntary sector to carry-on unaided (Davies, 1999; Jeffs, 2015). The Board of Education in the 1920s and the Ministry of Education in the late 1940s and

early 1950s did so apologetically. Not least because the decades prior to the decision being taken to step aside had witnessed substantive growth, in provision and membership. The ship was buoyant and the expectation was always that, once the economic crisis was vanquished, the government would rejoin the crew to lend a hand. Such expectations were well-founded because ministers, civil servants and educationalists believed, when making those cuts, that clubs and youth organisations made a valuable contribution towards the betterment of young people and national wellbeing. And that is what occurred, with reinvestment after the first round of cuts implemented from 1937 when economic recovery became a reality (Jeffs, 1979). After the next substantial cutbacks, reinvestment followed the publication of the Albemarle Report in 1960 in a period of sustained financial growth (Davies, 1999). On each occasion the case for renewal was articulated by authoritative political figures drawn from across the political spectrum abetted by self-confident and assertive national organisations such as the NABC, NAGC&MC (UK Youth since 2001), YWCA, YMCA and Standing Conference of National Voluntary Organisations (NCVYS since 1972)⁴ as well as the uniformed organisations. All had a genuine membership base, vigorous local branches and influential officers, which equipped them to lobby from positions of strength. Collectively their presence ensured a foundation existed upon which to build.

Things are radically different this time. Curtailment in state expenditure follows decades of a waning in the number of funded youth centres and clubs, a consistent falling away in their membership and an accelerating decline in the numbers of voluntary and paid workers. Trends that persist despite belated attempts by the last government to reverse them via cash injections, albeit short term, dispensed through schemes such as *Transforming Youth Work*, *Resourcing Excellent Youth Services*, the *Youth Service Development Fund* and the *myplace* initiative. Each in turn failed to bequeath a legacy or reverse the decline. Even after allowing for the fact these interventions were short-sighted, and generally incompetently managed, they nevertheless confirmed that heightened spending could not resolve the underlying structural problems besetting the youth service. *myplace*, in particular, demonstrated that even costly, well-equipped purpose-built, 'state-of-the-art' centres were incapable of attracting sufficient numbers to justify the investment (Spence et al, 2011). This confirmed that youth centres as a mode of intervention had no realistic future – they were incapable of attracting the great grandchildren of those who flocked to them in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Ominously, youth service managers and workers seemed incapable of proposing alternative ways of spending the government's largesse; no alternative *modus operandi* ever made it to the table. Therefore the abject failure of the *myplace* programme effectively sounded the death knell of the statutory sector. The flurry of initiatives ended with the departure of the Labour government and the arrival of the Conservative-Liberal coalition. Michael Gove, the incoming Education Secretary, adopted in relation to youth services a policy of benign neglect – during his first three years in post he chose not to visit a single youth centre, headquarters or project (Puffett, 2013). Eventually, in 2013, Gove decided the Department for Education (DfE) would cease paying the stable fees for a perennially losing horse and off-loaded responsibility onto the Cabinet Office. The rupture appears to have been total. One year on, the then Chief Executive of the National Youth Agency, who

initially welcomed the move (McCardle, 2014a), was complaining that: ‘despite our efforts, they [the DfE] won’t even talk to us’ (McCardle, 2014b). Since 1917, youth work at a national level had unambiguously been viewed as an educational service – residing alongside schools, FE and the universities. Now, it has been unceremoniously transferred to a dustbin department which, apart from co-ordinating the work of inter-departmental committees, undertakes those tasks in which the major spending departments have no interest.

Cut adrift

Both administratively and philosophically, relocation to the Cabinet Office signified an extraordinary rupture with the past. Administratively, it reflected a prevailing belief amongst ministers and senior civil servants that, when over 80 per cent of seventeen year olds were in full or part-time education and in excess of 50 per cent still there at age 20, it should be schools, colleges and universities who, besides providing education, must be the prime dispensers of support and leisure services for young people. Given the miniscule proportion of 15 to 20 year olds opting to engage with statutory youth workers, the logic underpinning this analysis is difficult to fault. Sixty plus years ago, when approaching 90 per cent of young people were in full-time employment by age 16, youth centres and organisations provided tangible services that addressed real needs. Here were venues where once over half our young workers made and sustained friendships, secured an entrée to leisure opportunities, accessed cultural activities and educational programmes, and sought the advice and support of responsive adults (for data on attendance rates see, for example, Reed, 1950). No longer is this so. Now it is within formal educational settings that the vast majority of young people’s friendships are initiated and sustained (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2013; Blatchford, 1998; Frank et al, 2013). Moreover, schools and colleges can also offer leisure facilities unmatched by any youth centre as well as increasingly professional guidance and support services. Couple this with the emergence of mass home entertainment, growing access to electronic means of communication, and the arrival of evermore sophisticated commercial leisure provision – and it becomes clear why a dramatic decline in the numbers frequenting youth centres or hanging around street corners has occurred and why the closure of centres has had no significant social impact.

Philosophically, the damage wrought by the uncoupling of youth work from the DfE is difficult to exaggerate. This is no minor administrative re-alignment for it speaks of a judgement made by civil servants and senior politicians that youth work has ceased to be an educational service. Youth organisations and leaders once perceived themselves to be simultaneous providers of welfare, educational and leisure provision. By 1939, a more confidently interventionist state had acquired the last vestiges of that welfare role. From that point onwards, their prime *raison d’être* became informal and social education; hence the logical belief amongst youth workers that they were, first and foremost, educators. Less than a decade earlier many had still, with good cause, referred to themselves as social workers, viewing this as a more accurate description of their role. Post 1939, this habit ceased. Legislation corroborated the intellectual re-alignment by making the Ministry

of Education and LEAs youth work's point of political reference. Justifiably, youth leaders now aspired to be designated as 'educators' fully equal to school-teachers and FE lecturers; certainly not mere overseers of unruly youth or leisure-centre managers (see, for example, Brew, 1943a; 1946). Such claims were not illusory. cursory examinations of the programmes and activities of clubs and centres, from their origins in the late nineteenth century until around the onset of the 1980s, would surely convince a fair-minded reader that most set out to provide members with a diet of educational experiences. Like settlements and adult education centres, to which many clubs were linked, they strove to offer working-class young people a *liberalia studia*.

Significant segments of the workforce embodied this commitment. Many were working-class autodidacts, often themselves the products of the Workers' Educational Association, Extra-Mural and Plebs League traditions, who aspired to communicate their own love of learning to an up-coming generation. Others recognised the benefits a grammar school, public school or university education had bestowed upon them and sought to share, via youth work, some of the cultural capital these institutions had given them with those less fortunate than themselves (see, for example, Berger-Hamerschlag, 1955; Blandy, 1967; Forrest, 2013; Jordan and Fisher, 1955; Jeffs, 2015). Together they were drawn to youth work because, via the medium of informal education and cultural activities, they believed they might be able to partially set aside the legacy of the impoverished and impoverishing education their members had received from elementary and secondary modern schools. Youth work was a way whereby they might widen horizons, expand perceptions, encourage empathy and instil respect for democracy. Hence the emphasis within club life not only upon democratic structures and equality but also opportunities to access those elements of a liberal education most likely to instil intellectual discernment, wisdom and a capacity to separate sense from nonsense. For both these constellations of leaders, youth work was an act of faith, based on a belief, articulated by Kant, that 'the human being can only become human through education. He is nothing except what education makes of him' (2008: 443). At their finest, youth clubs were, for a century or more, justifiably viewed by many as educational centres where, in comparison to the authoritarian classroom and hierarchical regimented school, it was possible to teach in ways that 'orient us in action' (Neiman, 2014: 42); enclaves where members might develop those 'habits of the heart' essential for democracy to flourish. Libraries and reading rooms could be encountered in most clubs; art and craft classes were routine; dramatic performances, choirs and music-making commonplace; discussion groups and visiting speakers a fixture within most programmes; and outings to the countryside, theatre, ballet and concerts as much a feature of club life as sport and dancing. Conversation, discussion and dialogue were the 'blood stream' of youth work just as they were of liberal adult education and the university seminar. Fostering an interest in cultural pursuits may have been an up-hill struggle for leaders catering for young people working long hours in arduous occupations but the clubs' gifted leaders offered a matchless opportunity to engage in dialogue with young people, to raise their sights and help them build the world anew. It was because they appreciated the educational value and potential of these small battalions that thousands of secular adults voluntarily sacrificed a portion of their spare time to club

work; to act in a modest way as a ‘guide, philosopher and friend’ (Brew, 1946: 14) to the young people who voluntarily opted to spend time in their company. Secular practitioners, it should be stressed, were often motivated by deeply-held political and educational ‘convictions’ much as others were stirred to engage in youth work by their religious faith. For these, youth work was a means of ‘giving something back’ and of contributing to the vitality of civil society.

What is the point?

Little remains of those radical secular traditions within youth work today. Pedagogic input is now increasingly dictated by funders – be they governmental departments, welfare agencies, local authorities or commercial concerns. Consequently, interventions are predominately concerned with behaviour modification rather than cultural or intellectual enrichment. The first three are willing to pay in the hope that by doing so they can reduce future calls upon their budgets. They want, for example, young people to not smoke, eat more healthily, steer clear of unprotected sex, do better at school, offend less, spend their money more wisely (thereby avoiding unmanageable debt), not do drugs, be sufficiently resilient to not need mental health services, and to become responsible consumers of alcohol – so they hire youth workers to ‘deliver’ packaged or approved programmes to the more ‘difficult to reach’. Reflection is sidelined by instruction; dialogue sacrificed in order to better meet a prescribed outcome. These ‘inputs’ tend to be ‘delivered’ in bite-size units mixing bribes to attend, such as a trip, with quasi-formulaic instruction. Commercial funders, on the other hand, exploit youth work as a means by which they can improve sales, raise product profile and fashion even more gullible consumers. The absurdity is that whereas one group of paymasters seek to foster a heightened sense of responsibility and (at least in some cases) critical judgement, another endeavours to generate irresponsibility and an unquestioning acceptance of consumerism. Unfortunately, and it says a great deal about the readiness of youth work agencies and staff to accept cash from any source in order to pay their wages, no meaningful debate at any level has taken place regarding the morality of taking money from commercial firms and some state funded agencies (Jeffs and Smith, 2010).

Irrespective of the morality of employing youth workers for the purposes of selling products and delivering behaviour modification, what is clear is that this is not an especially cost-effective means of securing the funders’ desired outcomes. For example, targeted policing, incarceration, electronic surveillance, psychological profiling and intensive casework all offer more effective means of reducing youth offending than detached youth work or programmes delivered to those who happen perchance to be attending a centre or project at a given time. Moreover, the evidence generally shows that if you wish to modify behaviour, it is best to start early. Hence the belief on the part of successive governments, especially since the imposition of a national curriculum, that the most efficient way to change future behaviour is by tinkering with the school curriculum: first, because this allows funders to reach the full cohort; second, because via the medium of inspection and testing, it becomes possible to guarantee what you want ‘delivered’ is actually ‘delivered’. An

almost perfect example of this thinking is embodied in the February 2015 Report of the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee on ‘Gangs and Youth Crime’ (HoC, 2015). This argues that the most effective strategy is to expand primary school anti-gang education programmes plus appoint a senior teacher to co-ordinate anti-gang measures in schools located in areas ‘blighted’ by gang violence. A second example is the decision of the DfE to establish a *Character Innovation* Fund to develop ‘character education’ in schools. Schools, in order to access this cash-cow, will be expected to teach (in line with the DfE’s definition of ‘character’) perseverance, resilience, grit, confidence, optimism, motivation, drive, ambition, neighbourliness, community spirit, tolerance, respect, honesty, integrity, dignity, conscientiousness, curiosity and focus. In both these instances, in times past, the prime mechanism for addressing these ‘issues’ would have been via the strengthening of the youth services’ capacity to intervene. Now government departments, like commercial firms, see youth organisations as the least attractive option. However, whereas governments can tweak the curriculum to achieve their ends, the corporate sector cannot. Instead, they seek by means, fair and foul, to get advertising materials into schools via such ploys as free ‘teaching’ materials, sponsorship and ‘mentoring’ (McLaren and Farahmander, 2005; Smith, et al, 2004). By 2012, cash incentives meant 80 per cent of public schools in the USA had contracts with either Coca-cola or Pepsi (Philpott, 2012). Similar levels of market penetration are likely to be achieved in the UK in the near future (Monbiot, 2013), unless the political climate changes. Consequently, such firms will surely pay diminishing heed to youth work.

The omens for youth work are not healthy. Salvation will not come via begging for work or by delivering the syllabi and ‘teaching materials’ of external agencies. No White Knight is on the horizon. ‘Something will turn up’ is not a helpful motto to adopt at this point in time. Deliverance will also not be secured by undertaking evaluations and impact studies. For, these ultimately confirm that those currently managing and funding youth work do not actually believe what they are doing has any intrinsic value and worth, that they are in effect flying on a wing and a prayer. Calls for more research into what youth work does and achieves on the part of universities and consultants is almost certainly motivated primarily by self-interest. Juicy contracts and income streams that may potentially stave off redundancies and boost research-ratings play a part in generating pleas for more research into outcomes. Others advocating this route simply raise questions regarding their impoverished knowledge of the field, for an abundant supply of research findings and evaluations already exists detailing what youth work does, can and fails to achieve, as well as an absence of faith regarding the efficacy of current practice (see for example Brent, 2009; Catalano, *et al*, 1990; Conrad and Hedin, 1981; Dishion, *et al*, 1999; Feinstein, *et al*, 2006; Furlong, *et al*, 1997; Goetschius and Tash, 1967; Hendry, *et al*, 1990; Osgood, *et al*, 1996).⁵ In this respect, it is difficult to visualize a more depressing council of despair, or admission of failure and irrelevance, than the plea of the recently launched Centre for *Youth Impact* which invites:

youth organisations and services to come together and address a key issue: the need to articulate how our work changes the lives of young people and how investment in youth

services is of benefit to everyone' (Centre for Youth Impact, 2014).

If, after decades of existence, the affiliated organisations cannot articulate what is worthwhile and valuable regarding what they and their affiliates 'do', one can only enquire why they have been 'doing youth work' and asking taxpayers and others to fund it? Why were they not asking those questions prior to this late stage? Probably these questions are now being posed because, whereas previously youth work had a clearly valued role and purpose, and like day centres for the elderly, nurseries and other welfare services was valued by the clientele and the wider public who willingly paid for it via taxation and charitable donations, this is no longer the case. Rather, the question that should be exercising the minds of those funding and supporting the *Centre for Youth Impact* is not 'what is youth work' but rather the far more pertinent 'what can youth work become'? If secular non-uniformed youth work has a future, which is far from certain, it is only by addressing that question that we will unearth the new roles and innovative ways of intervening in the lives of young people that justify the required investment of time and resources. In the meantime, rummaging around for 'best practice', 'impact measures' and 'innovation' will sadly, as before, prove a fruitless exercise.

Beginning afresh

Youth work has long been one of the many foundation stones that buttressed civil society alongside the churches, friendly societies, trade unions, co-operatives, cultural clubs, welfare associations, charitable bodies and social clubs. Some still prosper. Others, like youth work, have fallen on hard times and leached membership. Some, like the friendly societies, have virtually disappeared from view (Harris, 2004: 81-84) and others, such as churches and trade unions, have experienced relative decline.

Until recently, youth work was justifiably viewed by a substantive proportion of the population as something to be treasured and nurtured; our evidence for this being the extent to which it was sustained by voluntary effort, freely given gifts and donations, and the scale of membership which reflected, at the very least, tacit parental support. Here was a small but vital fragment of the wedge that kept the democratic system secure from disproportionate incursions by big government and big business. Youth provision linked to faith, cultural and sporting organisations remains rooted in civil society as do uniformed youth organisations such as the Girl Guides and Boy Scouts. And it is these, unlike the bulk of what is left after they have been subtracted from the equation, which have prospered during the last two decades; prospered to a significant degree because they possessed the freedom from state and commercial funding that enabled them to be more creative, imaginative and responsive to the changing environment. Because they are not funding led, what they offer is far less likely to be 'weary, stale, flat and unprofitable' (to borrow words from Shakespeare's Hamlet) for it tends to emerge from dialogue involving members and workers. Indeed, they have also held fast to the concept of membership, thereby avoiding the inherent hazards associated with

treating young people as consumers, users, victims or customers. For approaches that ‘marketise’ or ‘victimise’ them render meaningless the concepts of association, allegiance and obligation essential for the survival of civic bodies. A disproportionate reliance on voluntary and unpaid workers within the faith sector, although it brings in its wake different problems, ensures that paying staff wages and meeting overheads does not become the first priority for these groups. Finally, what more than anything else contributes to their flourishing is that these agencies and units customarily possess a clear sense of purpose. A rationale that permits them to be honest with young people; they offer members a transparent contract. Devoid of ambiguity, it guarantees the latter know what it is that motivates the worker and shapes their practice. Rarely is this the case regarding those working in secular and statutory provision.

Despite its relative success it is possible to identify certain weaknesses relating to faith-based youth work. The first flows from the reality that most British citizens are either indifferent to or antagonistic towards organised religion – which means only a minority will contemplate affiliating to faith based organisations. The second is the long-standing problem that faith based organisations, because they are founded on a given belief system, invariably find it difficult, even in some cases impossible, to collaborate with one another. Nevertheless, secular youth projects and the remnants of the statutory sector, evidently have much to learn from the faith-based and uniformed sectors. However, secular and statutory youth work would be seriously mistaken if they assume all that is needed to revive their fortunes would be to cherry-pick the best elements of the faith-based and uniformed sectors’ methodologies. Appropriating some of their practices will not, at this late stage, reverse a terminal decline. For this collapse of secular and statutory youth work does not predominately stem from poor practice or incompetent management, although both played their part, rather it derives from an absence of clarity regarding function and purpose. Faith-based youth work is holding its own primarily because it operates according to a set of shared internal beliefs – educational and spiritual. Beliefs that mean it has ambitions for itself and those it seeks to serve. Furthermore, as it inhabits civil society it enjoys two decisive advantages: (a) immeasurably greater freedom to act; and (b) meaningful linkages with entities possessing active adult memberships. The first means it can act on ideas. Being linked to a faith tradition may result in restrictions concerning what members can study and question. Nevertheless, within that framework, workers and young people can engage in dialogue that predicates autonomous action. This means that if, for example, the club or group wish to do something about, rather than merely discuss, poverty as an issue they can (in most cases) intervene locally, join national campaigns and even demonstrate. Crucially, they will not need to jump through the requisite bureaucratic hoops to acquire the permission of a distant youth office to act and engage.⁶ Second, the link to a wider movement means young people can, if they wish, move forward into adult membership. This was once also the case with regards the now defunct but previously substantive youth groups attached to political parties, trade unions and social movements such as the suffrage and co-operative societies – all of whom offered, like contemporary faith-based groups, an entree into an active life in civil society via evangelism, campaigning, social action and dynamic membership. Existing statutory youth provision tenders

no such promise. Membership is, therefore, ultimately a signifier of immaturity and implies an inability to participate unaided in the adult world. Worse, it gifts no toehold into that world. Essentially, it is an educational and social cul-de-sac. Compared to the faith-based sector, and the tiny pockets of provision linked to social and political movements, one encounters a void at the heart of state funded youth work. The latter needs a reason to exist; a justification over and above an ambition to pay wage-bills and service other agencies and commercial interests. This void exists at national and local levels. As a consequence, individuals are displaying a growing reluctance to give of their time to ‘dance to the tune of others’ – that is ‘deliver’ youth work according to the dictates of funders. Similarly, young people appear disinclined to affiliate to organisations that ultimately need them only to meet targets and secure yet more short-term funding. A predictable outcome of these trends has been the gradual, and seemingly irreversible, ‘hollowing-out’ of the national youth organisations. Lacking a membership to whom they are accountable, and a corpus of clubs and units they are obligated to serve, each now competes one-against-the-other to secure funding for themselves rather than for an increasingly mythical field. Paradoxically, they are now simultaneously in competition not only with each other for funding, which makes meaningful collaboration between them implausible, but also with what remains of their own membership. Little wonder they appear unable to protect what exists, let alone create what might be.

Maybe, just maybe

So, is it a pointless lament to bewail the passing of the secular and statutory youth services and clubs? Or might it be worth trying to invest them with a purpose that could enable them to once more flourish? The answer is perhaps a hesitant ‘yes’ to both questions. Unfortunately, as it currently exists, little is worth saving, so in that respect it would be a pointless lament. A combination of intrusive managerialism, short-term funding and intellectual drift have left a legacy, that apart from odd isolated pockets, does not deserve to survive. However, there may be a role and purpose for a revived and reconstructed secular and independent youth orientated service situated within the realm of civil society. Briefly, four possible roles that might fill the void and provide a new role and purpose are examined below. Doubtless, readers will have alternatives to add to the list, but for the moment these will have to suffice.

First, faith-based youth work acknowledges that schools and further education colleges with their regimented ethos; rigid hierarchies; single-minded focus on test scores, league tables and outcomes; and persistent prioritising of ‘good order’ and instruction, are unsuitable places for the fostering of a meaningful spirituality or empathy towards others. So also must secular youth workers and informal educators similarly accept these institutions are incapable of teaching a love of democracy let alone the competences required to ensure its long term wellbeing. Therefore within any democratic society, especially one such as the United Kingdom, where the central state rigidly controls both what is taught and the types of pedagogy teachers must employ, there exists a self-evident need for settings where young people, in the company of others, can acquire and rehearse

the arts of democracy. Places that will ‘enlarge their mentalities’ and where they can engage in collective action and dialogue in order to learn to become ‘completely human’ (Arendt, 1982: 43) and thereby secure ‘liberation from one’s own private interests’ (Arendt 1977: 242). The need is for settings wherein individuals can work together to build consensus and manage conflict, where the aptitude to live as free, autonomous citizens – rather than as docile consumers, compliant workers and submissive subjects – can be acquired. Settings where it becomes possible to learn alternatives to the narrow market logic of possessive individualism and encounter what Marquand (2004) calls the ‘public logic’. Environments which provide citizens with an opportunity to engage in the fertile life of a deliberative democracy, and which of themselves enrich civil society. As Arendt (1958), once herself a youth worker, reminds us, it is being able to ‘act’ that is the defining feature of freedom and therefore freedom only exists in the context of ‘action’. To give this meaning we must seek out forms of practice that marry philosophical reflection to political and social action. These are not unknown. Indeed, it was pioneered here by the NOGC (Jefferies, 2015) prior to 1914 and the Woodcraft Folk in the 1920s (Davies, 2000). It was also once a feature of the now moribund youth groups linked to the main political parties and now survives as a feature within some faith-based groups. However, it has not thrived for many years, primarily because LEAs, governments and commercial interests predictably refuse to underwrite it; indeed why should they? Yet, much as faith-based interventions involving young people are essential for the survival of a rich spiritual life within the community, similarly a secular civic practice is desperately required to help sustain the vitality of our democracy and encourage healthy public discourse. If Sen (2010) is correct and the essence of democracy lies in ‘public reasoning’ then the creation of new forms of ‘civic youth work’ becomes an urgent necessity. However, to acquire a presence it, like faith-based youth work and the Guides, will have to become predominately self-funding and self-managed. It is evident that existing funders lack any commitment to supporting such forms of practice and, given current funding mechanisms, this is the only way to protect its integrity. Much as the withdrawal from religious adherence can only be countered by direct action on the part of believers, so also the withdrawal from politics and civic engagement must be tackled by collective action undertaken by those similarly committed to sustaining the public realm.

Second, as formal education has expanded so its focus has narrowed. The curriculum has been tapered to embrace merely what is testable and proven to increase employability. Consequently, as Ball argues:

Generally speaking with the new episteme education is increasingly, indeed perhaps exclusively, spoken of within policy in terms of its economic value and its contribution to international market competitiveness (2007: 185).

This ‘businessification’ (Allen and Ainley, 2007) of education has resulted in the majority of those emerging from state schools being denied access to knowledge deemed ‘economically unproductive’. Even those who do study what were once called the ‘fine arts’ are now obliged to

do so within a framework that defines them ‘as creative industries’ and pathways leading to the acquisition of ‘flexible and transferrable skills’. Literature, art, music and dance are therefore not perceived as what Greene (1995) termed ‘openings’, aesthetic experiences that lead to what we do not know and have not yet experienced. Consequently, young people in the main now receive what Plutarch (1927) dismissed as ‘bottle’ education; one which serves up knowledge without judgement.⁷ State schools that once offered a host of after-hours clubs and societies now rarely do so. Partly their demise is an indicator of a weakening of civil society and erosion of the ‘gift relationship’ and altruism amongst teachers. Now few opt to live in the catchment area, frequently commuting long distances and rarely sacrifice their ‘free’ time to run clubs and teams. School managers also increasingly prefer to rent out facilities for profit rather than use them for ‘out-of-school’ activities for their students. Whatever the cause, and there are a number, within the realms of sport and culture it is primarily those fortunate enough to attend fee-paying and boarding schools, where staff reside on campus or close-by and are employed with the expectation they will contribute to extra-curricular programmes, who enjoy the benefits of a liberal education and an extensive range of cultural and sporting activities. Indeed, one survey estimates private schools provide three times more hours of sport per week than state schools (Espinoza, 2015). Inevitably, this had led to a growing ‘domination’ of the worlds of culture, arts and sport by the alumni of private schools and elite universities. It is a ‘domination’ that Michael Gove, in 2012, categorised as ‘morally indefensible’ but did nothing to address. To counter this growing form of inequality we need to construct novel forms of youth and community work and informal education. Much as liberal adult education is creating new formats offering low cost routes to learning such as the University of the Third Age, study circles, free universities, co-operatives and reading groups, similarly creative pathways are now required to tackle the wider educational needs of the majority of young people. In part, this may involve creating partnerships with existing cultural and sporting organisations to expand routes of entry. Equally, ways might be unearthed to replicate the successful 4-H model developed in rural America during the 1920s that enables adults to freely share their talents and skills with young people within their community. Whatever the means employed, it is important to begin by recognising that the unequal distribution of cultural capital is as damaging to the wellbeing of society and individuals as the lopsided distribution of financial resources. For it helps ensure the exclusion of too many citizens from public discourse as well as denying them access to the upper echelons of the job market. Formal education has not only failed to attend to the issue but, almost certainly through a philistine indifference to matters ‘cultural’, made a bad situation worse. Proven ways of addressing it exist, but it will require a shedding of our addiction to state funding and managerialism, and jettisoning our obsession with behaviour modification and measurable outcomes. Redirecting our focus instead on finding new as well as re-discovering old ways of offering young people access to cultural, educational and sporting experiences at nil or minimal cost would surely be at the heart of any project to create a secular civic youth work practice.

Third, we need to recognise that what has long served as a central justification for youth work no

longer has a realistic purchase. Traditionally it was argued youth clubs and groups were essential in order that young people might secure access to their own space. According to this analysis, youth workers and organisations must provide clientele with a haven and sanctuary wherein they might be themselves. When all but a tiny minority of young people aged 14 to 21 were in employment and during their working days in workshops and offices surrounded by adults this made apparent sense. Now it does not. Now the ‘problem’ is that young people spend virtually all their time in those ‘factories of adolescence’; schools, colleges or universities. Now their ‘working lives’ are almost exclusively spent in the company of their peers. And, when alone, they are likely to be in their room either communicating by phone or computer with other young people; usually it seems, their school or college friends (Subrahmanyam and Smahel, 2011). The result is the emergence of a dangerous form of epistemic closure. Hence the challenge now is not how best to create new sanctuaries and bolt-holes for young people but how to break down growing generational barriers. Fashioning ways of fostering inter-action and association between adults and young people. Encouraging mature behaviour and discouraging childishness amongst the young and self-imposed isolation amongst the older generations. These are again the sort of challenges a civic youth work might take up.

Finally, a civic secular provision is required as a counter-weight to faith-based youth work. The latter has manifest strengths and much to recommend it. However, un-challenged it poses real problems to the flourishing of a democratic society. For within that sector one encounters some practice that superficially has much in common with youth work but actually veers towards indoctrination. Groups and units where the leader or adult is not open to a questioning of their fundamental beliefs and assumptions and, therefore, eschews dialogue. Where the practice is driven, for the most part, by a desire to either convert or prevent members from rejecting the faith of their parent(s) and, as a consequence, habitually discourages dialogue based on a mutual search for truth. Where leaders discard the possibility of doubt (Davies, 2015) and opt instead to hold fast to a belief in an absolute truth, be it religious or ideological, this will result in ‘an end to discourse and thus to friendship, and thus to humanness’ (Arendt, 1968: 26). The proportion of pupils attending schools controlled by religious groups is currently 37 per cent and growing year-on-year. Much as we should offer alternative educational venues to those provided by the regimented school, so it is equally important to do so apropos to those ‘trapped’ in faith schools. Such young people should have alternatives to the closed world of the faith school and faith-based youth club. Places where they can freely mix with others of a different or no faith. Places where they can encounter ideas that demand they clarify their world view. Abundant examples exist, not least nearby in Northern Ireland, of the dangers originating from school systems structured to prevent young people from sharing a desk with those from differing religious traditions. Ultimately, religion is a matter of choice, unlike gender, age or race. Anything that restricts the capacity of individuals to make informed choices regarding their religious, political or cultural beliefs should therefore be challenged. Schooling and youth provision designed to prevent access to ideas that question a given religious, political or economic orthodoxy should be confronted for, as Camus put

it, 'We gasp for air among people who believe they are absolutely right' (2007: 252). Ultimately, a pluralist society requires pluralist informal education which will include provision for young people. The presence, and indeed the fostering, of doubt within education is crucial for individual and societal growth. Moreover:

if we are to live in harmony with ourselves and with nature, we need to be able to communicate freely in a creative movement in which no one permanently holds to or otherwise defends his own ideas. (Bohm, 1996:4)

Conclusion

Each of the four examples implies that secular civic youth work may have a future if it adopts new paradigms. The seemingly unstoppable rise of corporate capitalism and the unforeseen growth of digital communication and surveillance are coalescing in ways that will oblige youth work to entirely re-think its role and function if it is to survive, let alone flourish. However, what slim chance it does have of enduring depends on it first reclaiming its lost autonomy. An autonomy that allows it to practice in the realm of civil society. For that to happen, it must learn to operate according to a civic not a commercial or statist logic. A logic that will enable a genuinely secular civic youth work to engage with the lives of young people in ways that unambiguously prioritise their interests and those of their fellow citizens, rather than those of either the state or corporate sector. To achieve that end, secular civic youth work must stop trying to justify its existence by employing the language of others (Lakoff, 2006). Instead, we must seek to construct a democratic language and metaphors that enable us to explain what it does, both among ourselves and to others, without recourse to the terminology employed by the state and corporations (Lakoff and Wehling, 2012). Until we do so, we will continue to lose every debate regarding core priorities, and the slide into oblivion will not be arrested let alone reversed. Marketing youth work as a 'brand' or an agency for inculcating 'transferable skills' and 'delivering outcomes' will not arrest the current decline. This is because the collapse of youth services results from the same causal factors that are generating a wider withdrawal from politics and the public realm. Leading to what Unger describes as the thinning of the social bond 'to the point of breaking' (2007: 204). We can only begin re-building a battered youth service when that task is linked to the mission of re-building the battered public realm. In an environment where alienation and the retreat into the private sphere is a growing phenomena, that will not be an easy task; the number of people who report they feel isolated has doubled in the US and most of Europe (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008). Whilst in the UK, a quarter of the adult population feel emotionally unconnected to others, and one third do not feel connected to the wider community (Pinker, 2015). In slight but significant ways, youth work, liberal adult education, community work and social pedagogy historically strove to counteract isolation and alienation, to strengthen the frail bonds that give life to civil society. That was once a core role. Indeed, all those forms of practice at their best sought to foster what matters, namely:

the faculties of thought and Imagination that make us human and make our relationships rich human relationships, rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation (Nussbaum, 2010: 6-7).

Relationships that the author stresses make democracy a possibility. Perhaps it is time we acknowledged that creating the foundations upon which these can be built within the realm of civil society is now the prime function of youth work and informal education.

Given the dire position it currently finds itself in, secular youth work might as well strike out and begin seeking both new languages of practice and fresh paths to follow. After all, it has nothing to lose. Both these options require it to face up to the intellectual challenge of unearthing these; if it does so then innovations relating to practice will inevitably arrive in its wake. Form, as always, should follow function and in this instance the imperative is to uncover via collective debate a worthwhile function for youth work. A useful starting point for the debate might be to revisit the questions Brew asked of her fellow workers in 1943 during the midst of a world war, namely: 'How can the desire for truth be awakened, the love of beauty stimulated, the passion for righteousness quickened?' (1943b: 6). My own suspicion is that secular youth work will not be able to secure an independent future and that practitioners must be prepared to become members of a broader pedagogic church that will include all those other educators operating within civil society and outside the formal and statutory sectors (Jeffs, 2014). But, that does not mean that those who do believe youth work can carve out an independent future in that arena should not be encouraged to embark on a journey to discover it. We should wish them well, whilst preparing an alternative destination for them if they fail.

Note

This article is an extended version of the chapter entitled 'What sort of future?' by Tony Jeffs published in 'Innovation in Youth Work: Thinking in Practice by YMCA George Williams College in 2015. An e-version of the book can be downloaded from: www.infed.org/publications.

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Endnotes

- 1 *The author was a part-time leader at a club on a new housing estate which after operating for a couple of years in a school hall was given by the LEA three rather derelict huts that had previously served as over-spill classrooms for a local primary school. The members in the space of three months first reduced these to a shell then re-built and re-furbished them as a luxurious club complete with a coffee-bar, main auditorium with stage, meeting room, office and changing room. Everything was done by the membership, without outside help, which included in its ranks trainee dress-makers, milliners, plumbers, roofers, electricians, carpenters and engineers. During the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s this was a fairly commonplace story and no way exceptional. You did not consult with the young people as to the colour of the curtains they took the measurements then a week or so later appeared with them ready-made.*
- 2 *Although not officially 'ring-fenced' the Better Care Fund effectively ensures that home care and related services for the elderly cannot be cut by a local authority. In order to secure substantive cash transfers from the Better Care Fund a local authority must sign a legally binding document guaranteeing that they will continue current levels of expenditure. Obviously it is in their interests to therefore reduce expenditure in other 'optional' areas such as youth provision which is what is occurring.*
- 3 *Clearly the election taking place in 2015 may alter this date; however, it is unlikely to alter the outcome. The Conservative Party has announced its intention to eliminate the 'deficit' by 2017, the Liberals by 2019 and Labour by 2020. Both Labour and the Liberals suggest that by extending the timescale they will free up funds to spend on infrastructure projects. Given no infrastructure projects relating to youth work have been mooted this means the erosion in provision will almost certainly continue unabated whatever the outcome of the up-coming election.*
- 4 *The names used here are those current in 1960.*
- 5 *These are just a few examples. Many others can be cited: however it needs to be stressed that findings are not universally flattering or supportive. Indeed Coussee noted they do not always 'hold out a lot of hope' (2009: 7) for those seeking to promote youth work. Perhaps that is why they are overlooked and advocates continue to promote research in the hope it might produce more supportive 'outcomes'?*
- 6 *The author was recently involved in a community arts project designed to work alongside existing youth projects funded by the NHS. It was an experience that confirmed all one's worst fears concerning this problem. When it was suggested it might be worth asking some*

senior Girl Guides to be involved I phoned a local vicar and explained the project. She immediately responded by saying this was an excellent idea and that a member of the group would ring me to discuss their involvement. A few days later I was contacted by that member who asked me what it involved and said she would talk it over with her peers then ring me back. Two days later she did so and invited me and the photographer to their next meeting, and from that moment on they became active participants. When it came to co-operating with a statutory group it was little short of a nightmare. After contacting the youth worker I was invited to County Hall to be grilled. Then after a committee meeting I was called back again to answer more questions, supposedly raised by members of the committee. Finally after weeks of delay I was allowed to meet the worker I had originally contacted. However, when I and the arts worker arrived to do so I was ushered into a different office to be interviewed by a senior officer, who did not introduce herself and who I had never met before. After a bout of ill-mannered questioning we were finally allowed to meet the worker I had first contacted all those months earlier.

- 7 *The full quote is 'For the mind does not require filling like a bottle, but rather, like wood it only requires kindling to create in it an impulse to think independently and an ardent desire for truth'.*

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