

Youth, volunteering and society

A speech by Ed Miliband MP to the Rainer conference on youth volunteering

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As given

Introduction

Thank you Bilén.

The last time I was with Bilén Ainealem was at the launch of V. It shows you what youth volunteering can achieve, because this was run by v20, and I was there with Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. And believe it or not, we had to make seal noises, in order to warm everyone up. And I can just imagine if the government had been running that event, somebody would say: "well, the first thing we'll do is get the Chancellor of the Exchequer to make seal noises..."

So I think V is a great thing.

And I'm also glad to be here because of Rainer, and all the work they do.

Elizabeth Filken and I first met two or three years ago, and since then I've found out a lot more about Rainer's work. I think it's great that there is an organisation which tries to understand young people, to help them to take control of their lives, and do great things for themselves.

I want to talk about volunteering and the contribution it makes to our society.

But before I do, I just want to say a word about V.

V was set up on the recommendations of the Russell Commission. There was up to £100 million of government money available to invest in youth volunteering, and the view of Ian Russell, who chaired the Russell Commission, was that the government shouldn't be overseeing this, or at least, shouldn't be giving out the money. He believed it was better to have an independent, arms-length organisation to think about the strategy.

The Government wanted a million extra youth volunteering options over the next five years, and V has been tasked with taking that forward. V is the main way in which, centrally, we are funding youth volunteering. But of course, there's also a huge amount of youth volunteering going on which obviously isn't coming through central government.

Young people in society

So the thing I want to talk about today is how I think youth volunteering is part of a wider agenda about the place of young people in our society.

Because I think that young people don't get a very fair deal in our society. I don't think they get a very fair deal from the way that politics talks about them, and I just want to reflect a bit on the way in which I think volunteering is part of the solution to this.

There are four areas where I think young people get a raw deal in our society.

The first is that their voices need to be heard more than they are.

Secondly, I think they need the spaces and activities in their communities which can help expand their horizons.

Thirdly, they need – and this is a two-way street – they need to respect society, yes, but they also need respect *from* society. And I'll say a little bit more about what I mean by that.

And then fourthly, I think they need a fairer portrayal in the media.

And I think volunteering can contribute to all these things.

Hearing the voices of young people

Of course, volunteering is great, and all the people in this room know that it's great for the person who volunteers, and it can also have an effect on society.

But let's take this first issue of the voice of young people. Take the debate about votes at 16. Now, I am personally in favour of votes at 16. But I think it's a very, very small part of the answer. And the answer is, we need to take these young people's voices seriously in our society. The practical way forward on this is volunteering.

Some councils have set up a Youth Council. Actually, I think it's only one-quarter of councils who have Youth Councils, but I know that in my constituency in Doncaster there is a Youth Council, and it is incredibly effective. It is listened to. The Mayor meets them regularly. I think we need to see a lot more of that.

And we need to see it in schools. If I go to schools in my constituency, one of the ways I can tell whether it's a good school or not – and it may surprise you to hear this - is whether there is a functioning school council where the kids have a sense of ownership.

Of course, what happens in the classroom is incredibly important. But those head teachers who realise that you've got to hear the voices of young people, and give them a sense of ownership about what happens in the school are, I think, the most effective head teachers.

I also think – and there's very important pioneering work in this respect – that we have to think about the way in which young people can be engaged in designing and helping to ensure better public services.

There's a Young Advocates Programme, run by Changemakers, which involves young people thinking about the way services are delivered, and how they can be better delivered in the near future.

So the first thing I think we need to do – and volunteering is a big part of this – is to hear young people's voices, and engage them in the things that matter to them. And that takes us onto my second point, which is about the spaces and activities available to young people.

Providing youth with adequate spaces and activities

Now, I got elected in May 2005. As a back bencher, I had always thought there was an issue about services for young people. But coming into a constituency, which was an ex-mining constituency of Doncaster North that has faced real, and obviously big issues, and seeing the extent to which young people just had no places to go and no activities to divert them, was quite shocking to me.

And what was remarkable about this was that when you talk to any Member of Parliament, as I did as Chair of the backbench group on young people, and whether they're Labour, Conservative, Liberal or whatever, they all say the same thing. They all say: "yes, there's not enough things for young people to do in our area."

Now, there is great work being done by lots of youth services, and I don't want in any sense to say there isn't. But the truth is, the heyday of investment in youth services was about 40 years ago. It was taken very seriously in the 1960s, over a ten year period there was a big investment in youth services, and it hasn't been taken seriously since.

Therefore, one of the things that we're doing is a big review in government, to try to come up with a 10-year vision for youth services, and to give it a higher priority. And I think part of what we've got to do in this review is to hear the voices of young people. We need to help them – and this is also about volunteering – to design the services that they want.

A chastening experience for me occurred when I was at one of my local schools, and in the way that earnest young MPs, do, I asked one of the kids on the School Council: "Tell me, Kate, why don't you go to your local Youth Service?" And she said: "Because I don't have a sexual health problem."

Now I think that the work that is done by youth services, in terms of sexual health and other things, is important. But I think there's a real sense in which we have to have more of a universal offer, a wider offer, for young people, so that they have places to go in every constituency across the country.

And the other thing I will say about this is that it's not just about places to go – and Tom Wiley at the National Youth Agency made me realise this. It's also about expanding horizons.

One of the exciting things we are doing is to introduce Youth Capital Budgets across the country. It's on a small scale at the moment, but they are about young people directing themselves how they think services should be improved in their area. Having a say in the local council. That's such a good thing, and I think we need to be making real progress with these sorts of activities.

Respect and inter-generational volunteering

The third area that I think is important – and this is hard – is the question of respect.

I think politicians are right to raise the issue of respect, and society also needs to respect young people – and I talked about this in my maiden speech.

There are issues around voice, and space and activities.

But I think it's also about understanding. One of the things that I find in my constituency, and again, I'm speaking from my own experience, is that there is a sort of two-way street of intolerance between older people and younger people.

The younger people don't necessarily understand the fears and anxieties of older people. And older people don't necessarily understand the fears and anxieties and difficulties that young people face.

This has been brought home to me by a local example. They built a bowls park in one part of my constituency. Next door to the bowls park a multi-use games area was put. There was a huge expanse of space, but unfortunately the powers that be in their infinite wisdom put them next to each other - it led to no end of conflict between the two groups.

I went and tried to mediate - not that successfully – between the two groups. And I thought what was most interesting was as I was leaving this session where I had gone to see the older people who use the bowls park. One of them said to me, “they're hooligans”, and this that and the other, and he ended by saying, “and they can't even play football very well.” I asked him why he said that and he replied: “I played football a lot when I was younger.” And they ended up having a lot to talk about, if you can find the common ground. And that made me realise that we've got to find ways in which young people and old people can come together.

This is why I am quite interested in this notion of inter-generational volunteering, which is already happening in some parts of the country. This is not about saying it's the only kind of volunteering – there are all kinds that are important. But at least part of the problem is that in our more fluid communities, younger and older people are less likely to know each other. And if people don't know each other, they're much less likely to have understanding and respect for each other.

So one of the things I'm quite interested in – and which is for v to take forward if they think this is right – is how volunteering can encourage younger people and older people to come together and to help each other, and build a greater understanding and respect.

Young people in the press

The fourth area is the question of media portrayal. Young people get a pretty bad press. The Magazine *Young People Now*, which is represented here, is an honourable exception to this, and give a very accurate and fair portrayal. They also sponsor awards each year and reward those who give a true portrayal.

The Institute of Public Research is about to publish some research which shows that on average, on any one day, there are 57 stories about young people and anti-social behaviour in the media.

But the facts are that 98 per cent of young people are not cautioned or convicted of anything in any given year. So we know that this is not an accurate portrayal.

New media, and the other opportunities that are out there, do provide a way in which young people can volunteer and get involved in media activities. There's nothing like having young people working in and involved in media activities to give a fairer portrayal. For example, I recently visited a project in London called YCTV, which is a television channel run by and for young people.

Conclusion

So these are the four areas where I think young people can and should get a better deal in our society.

- Their voice
- Space and activities
- The respect they are shown

- And their portrayal

There needs to be a much bigger campaign about these issues.

I think, if I can be bold enough to say this, that if I were not an MP, and not a government minister, I would say there needs to be a much bigger campaign about these issues.

There are a whole number of incredibly effective charities and organisations which act for and on behalf of young people. Yet their messages – which I suspect we all share in this room- are not penetrating into the public consciousness.

It's not for government ministers necessarily to suggest a campaign, but I am very struck by Make Poverty History. Make Poverty History brought together a whole range of groups in an incredibly diverse area into one central set of messages.

If a campaign were to be formed between the different organisations representing young people, with a set of demands about society and politics treats young people – a campaign for young people - what effect could it have?

It's not for me to pursue, but I hope others may do so.

I know, from my own experience, that the work that you do is some of the hardest work that there is. Often it is about engaging some of the most disaffected young people and it is transforming their lives.

So I want to pay tribute to you, and the work you do. It is incredibly important. It doesn't show up in GDP or national statistics, but it is a hugely valuable contribution to our society.