

## 3 | GROWING UP

Dan Jarvis

*Today, the path into adulthood is a more bewildering experience than ever before, with rising inequality, new pressures and greater individualism. Many of the institutions that once supported the journey of growing up have been diminished by changes to our economy since the 1980s. In the decade ahead, the challenge for the left is to identify those that are not working and renew them. These institutions can be grouped into three separate phases of growing up: the early years of family; adolescence and the development of a sense of belonging; and the transition into work.*

I came into politics because I want to serve the country and contribute to the common good. What is most important to me, is that all our children should be able to make the best of themselves. I want the daughter of a cleaner from Kingstone in my Barnsley constituency to have the same chances in life as the son of a barrister from Kingston-upon-Thames in London.

The experience of growing up today is very different to my own in the 1980s. Then there was a belief that each new generation would be better off than their parents. That is no longer true today. A decade ago the Fabian Commission on Life Chances and Child Poverty highlighted the unequal life chances of young people. In this chapter I want to return to its principal question and ask how we can support children growing up in an increasingly unequal

world. How can we provide all our children with the capabilities they need to thrive?

## **Growing Up**

The sociologist Ken Roberts has a useful metaphor to describe how growing up has changed in the last 50 years. For those who were children in the mid-20th century, adolescence was like boarding a train together. Everyone shared the journey and each understood the destination of adulthood. There would be a job, marriage, children, and a home of one's own. Changes to the route could be made, but only at planned stops. There were first, second and third class carriages, so for some adolescence was much better catered for than for others.

This class inequality was reproduced at the destination. However, by the 1970s there was a greater degree of equality than at any other time in British history. Each generation thought they would do better than the last.

Growing up in late industrial Britain was a shared, if unequal experience. Stations along the way provided limited and standard provisions to improve the journey for all children. A policy of full employment, the growth of the professions and the welfare state allowed for greater social mobility. Many young people were able to move up from third class, to second or first. It was the experience of one of my predecessors as MP for Barnsley Central, Roy Mason. He literally worked his way up from the coal face to high government office.

Three generations on, growing up is more like a car journey. Young people share the same mode of transport but now each travels separately. There is much less sense of sharing an experience. Contact is maintained through the internet and mobile phones.

The car offers the appearance of freedom, but it comes with a much higher level of risk. Each driver has only

the resources available to them, some are driven by their parents, others are trying to hitch a lift. There are greater pressures on young people to make life changing choices and decisions. A successful journey requires a great deal of expense, preparation and planning.

Today's path into adulthood is a more bewildering experience than the train ride of 50 years ago. More than ever before young people must behave like entrepreneurs, inventing their own lives. The cost of this freedom and the loss of clear boundaries has arguably been a rise in mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety. There is confusion about identity, and concern about body image particularly for girls and women, who are still subject to the sexism of being defined by their appearance. Alongside William Beveridge's social evils are new ones like loneliness, a sense of meaninglessness, and the decline of community.

The shift of risk onto individuals and their families is a consequence of the transformation of Britain's industrial economy in the 1980s. The old collectivism has given way to a greater individualism. Millions of young people from low income families have been excluded from new opportunities. For many of them adulthood with its destination of a stable job and a home, marriage and children seems out of reach. The train has left the station.

## **A new approach**

New Labour in government embraced the car journey. In this newly mobile society, equality would be achieved through education and access to technology and skills. New Labour championed a meritocracy that would create social mobility for the most talented.

To stem growing levels of inequality Labour spent £134bn on tax credits in the period 1999–2008/9. They were a vital lifeline to families on low pay and succeeded in reducing poverty, but they were expensive. They

compensated for, rather than changed, an economy that kept generating inequality.

In 2010 Labour passed its Child Poverty Act, which set government targets for reducing both relative and absolute levels of child poverty. But by then Labour's strategy to reduce inequality was stalling. Concentrating on income targets tended to encourage short-term policies that increased benefit and tax credits for families, at the expense of longer-term solutions.

In July 2015, Iain Duncan Smith, then work and pensions secretary, scrapped the child poverty targets. The Conservative government adopted New Labour's social mobility agenda but with no commitment to greater equality. It is the worst of all worlds. With Britain's very high levels of inequality, class still largely defines life chances. A meritocracy that promotes the successful does not create greater equality, it simply legitimises the advantages of the rich and encourages contempt for the poor.

Social mobility is the journey between where you came from and your destination. How easy or hard the journey is depends upon two factors. The first is the labour market and the distribution of income – how many jobs there are in the middle and at the top end. The second is the institutions that enable individuals to make the journey. Social mobility does not create greater equality on its own. It is greater equality that improves social mobility. The approaches of both David Cameron and New Labour have shared a similar failing. Both ignored the economy that was generating increasing inequalities of income, power and opportunity not only between classes but between generations.

Tax and income transfers are not enough to resolve these structural problems. Education alone cannot deliver a fairer society. The economy has to be reengineered to produce a fairer distribution of opportunity and reward. To address this, the left must combine social renewal with

radical economic reform, and this will require transforming how we do politics.

What matters most to people is their family, their work and wages, and the place they live. Parents strive to give their children security, love and a sense of belonging. And yet the Labour party has stopped talking about these everyday issues. We have lost touch with people's lives and have suffered two devastating election defeats. Our party needs a root and branch rethink about who we are, our politics, and what we must do to meet the challenges of the future.

Labour has settled into a way of doing politics that reinforces our disconnection from voters. This is true of how we think about policy. Policy is about setting an approach, but we have reduced it to technical fixes and retail offers to the electorate. We identify problems to be solved and then we separate them out from the complex whole they belong to.

We focus on individuals but not on their relationships. We talk about child poverty as if family in all its different shapes and sizes is not the front and centre of children's lives. Too frequently we end up trying to tackle the symptom rather than deal with the cause. But instead we need to pioneer new approaches to policy making and focus on the institutions that govern our society and economy.

Institutions shape social order. They evolve in society to govern people's behaviour. They can be organisations of government and the economy, for example the Treasury or the public limited company. And they can be important social customs such as the family. The shift of our economy and society from industrial to post-industrial has left many of our institutions depleted, or redundant. In the decade ahead the challenge for the left is to identify those that are not working and renew them.

These institutions can be grouped into three separate phases of growing up: first, the antenatal and early years

of family. Second, adolescence and the development of a sense of belonging and identity, and third the transition into work.

## **Family**

What matters most to children's wellbeing is the emotional life of their family. Early relationships matter as much as money. Poor relationships in childhood lead to poorer employment outcomes, difficulties in making relationships, poorer physical health and mental health, and higher levels of smoking, substance abuse and overeating. Promoting the bonds between parents and children in their early years not only leads to happier and more prosperous lives, it saves considerable future spending on the costs of family failure. Tessa Jowell's Sure Start was an early example with its focus on mothers and babies.

Government spends far too much money dealing with the symptoms of problems. Labour's priority should be to shift spending to invest in preventing the causes of social problems. By shifting resources to targeted early years intervention, in the way pioneered by Labour MP Graham Allen and Jon Collins of Nottingham City Council, we can tackle the root causes of social and emotional problems among children and young people.

Every baby should receive the care it needs. The cross party manifesto, *1001 Critical Days*, sets out a policy framework for the period of conception to age two. Services and children's centres need to be coordinated in a whole family approach, working with all members of a family involved in the care, education and health of the children. Louise Casey's troubled families programme has been pioneering this approach. Free parenting classes should be available, addressing the pre-natal period and extending to the impact of parenting on the relationship of parents and their relationships with their children.

A whole family approach develops mutual support amongst family members, and so less dependence on services provided by the state. Alongside strengthening family life we need to provide affordable, high quality childcare, which is guaranteed for all parents of pre-school children from age one. And we need to give fathers the chance to be more involved in early parenting, allowing them time off for antenatal appointments and a four week paternity leave paid at least at the minimum wage.

We should look again at child trust funds. They provided all children with a start on their journey into adulthood. The coalition government scrapped them in 2010, but evidence showed they encouraged even poorer families to save for their children. Lastly we have to look at the way time is distributed unequally between men and women and across classes. It is a precious commodity and it is in short supply for young parents, particularly women, just when they need it the most. We must improve opportunities for flexible working and the balance between work and home. We must tackle low pay which forces parents to work all hours to make ends meet. A proper living wage allows mothers and fathers to spend more time with their children.

## **Belonging**

Adolescence is a time of change and uncertainty. Creating a sense of identity and belonging are a vital part of growing up. There is the excitement of new horizons. Discovery, curiosity, making relationships and testing one's self are experiences leading toward greater independence. But alongside these there are also feelings of loss at the passing of childhood. Early attachments are revived, and those who suffered adverse circumstances as children are often the least able to manage adolescence. They are vulnerable to anxiety, depression or self harm.

One million children suffer a mental illness, and many receive no treatment. It is a scandal. Luciana Berger, shadow mental health minister, describes children and adolescent mental health services as a “Cinderella service within a Cinderella service”. Treatment for mental illness should be as available as it is for physical illness. Approved psychological therapies need to be available in schools to all who need them.

Adolescents need challenges to test themselves, and helpful guidance in defining their identity. Both character building and identity making are connected to the larger task of improving the integration of society. We are becoming a deeply divided society along both class and ethnic lines. Relationships and social networks are essential for social mobility and yet we have one of the most segregated schools systems in the rich world.

We need to identify and develop institutions of social solidarity to bring people together to work for the common good. We need action to break down social segregation in both housing and schooling. We should introduce character education to help build young people’s resilience, their wellbeing, and their readiness to take opportunities.

The National Citizen Service could expand so that all 16 and 17 years olds get the opportunity to take part in a two month programme following GCSEs. These can include young people seeking British citizenship.

## **Work**

In the last decade, the transition into work has become more uncertain as more jobs have become low paid, insecure and casualised. Unemployment rates among 18–24 year olds are still over 13 per cent. Increasing numbers of graduates from the new universities struggle to find work in traditional graduate occupations. Young people not attending university have been left to fend for them-

selves in a jobs market where middle income jobs are disappearing.

IPPR's report *The Condition of Britain* sets out a distinct work, training and benefits pathway for young people. Its aim is to ensure they complete their basic education and gain work experience. Labour's 2015 manifesto called for a high quality vocational route from school through to employment, a guaranteed apprenticeship for all school leavers with the right grades, and a new, independent system of careers advice. Labour should now support extending the national living wage to workers under 25. And with less than 5 per cent of under 24 year olds, and around 16 per cent of 25–34 years, belonging to a trade union, more needs to be done to promote the benefits of trade union membership.

These proposals would create a framework of institutions to support young people's journey into adulthood. But we also need to support those who wander off track and end up in young offender institutions. In recent years the numbers have fallen dramatically but a small group remains and 67 per cent reoffend within 12 months of release. A recent report on the youth justice system for Michael Gove, the justice secretary, calls for the abolition of young offender institutions. It recommends their replacement with smaller local 'secure schools' and an ethos of tough love and learning.

In the decade ahead we will need a strong and stable society to provide security in a tempestuous and fast changing economy. By reforming our economy and rebuilding our institutions of social solidarity, we can distribute power, wealth, and opportunity more fairly across both classes and generations.

### **Labour's covenant**

Society is a covenant. It only thrives when its institutions are strong and its traditions are successfully handed on

from one generation to the next. Young people growing up must feel they can take their rightful place as free and equal citizens. This covenant is now under stress. The young are taking the burden of economic insecurity and inequality, and the institutions that once guided them into adulthood are no longer effective.

Labour needs a new approach to politics that is about institution building for the longer term. In the decade ahead as new technologies transform work and productivity there will be an opportunity for a great age of reform. Labour must become a credible and effective organisation capable of renewing and reforming the institutions that govern our economic and social life. It is not just the well-being of society at stake, but the future of Labour.

**EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE: YOUNG PEOPLE**

At the heart of growing up lies the education system. The education ideas of the last decade have resembled Michael Young's dystopian vision in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. This is a world in which learning is an individualised matter; the educational system has no role in addressing social inequalities. But in fact, the future of education will be highly dependent on its capacity to address social issues, both at school and in higher education.

When Sweden, formerly regarded as exemplifying an egalitarian educational system, tried to move towards a new voucher system to enhance competition, student performance dramatically declined. Yet as technology continues to advance, our European education systems will eventually need to decisively answer the recurrent question: what's the point of public education if Google can tell us everything (thus making learning a solely private endeavour)? Critical autonomy – the reflexive capacity to be critical of our own culture – can be central even if students engage in individualised digital learning. And as social inequalities are rising across the continent, compulsory public education could play a crucial role in creating a level playing field.

A key puzzle will be how our higher education systems challenge or reinforce inequalities. University has become increasingly popular across social classes, but brings high costs for young people and their families. Due to the pressures of gaining skills to compete in the labour market, higher education participation rates are likely to stay high. Without an increase in public investment, social inequalities will continue to be reproduced. The mismatch between labour market realities and higher education aspirations is likely to create generations of European graduates severely in debt and facing underemployment and unemployment.

**Lorenza Antonucci**