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# Young Scots

Ian Fyfe

## Introduction

*No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth.*

(Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations addressing the First World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, Lisbon, August 1999)

The public image of young people relies on common sense assumptions about their expectations, roles and responsibilities as potential citizens which are often confusing and contradictory. On the one hand, young people have become objects of policies which construct them as citizens, stakeholders and potential partners in local governance; on the other, they are presented as threatening to others or at risk themselves. The lives and lifestyles of young people have been directly affected in recent years by significant technological, social and economic forces; they face a wide range of pressures and problems, not least their co-option into the prevalent consumerist culture. Increased surveillance and regulation of their use of public space – both physically and in the media – add to a growing sense of alienation. Furthermore, their potential political agency is undermined by a managerial state that seems more concerned with performance outcomes than democratic processes.

The ideologically driven policy intervention in the lives of young people, over the past twenty years, has contributed to the creation of, what some commentators have called the 'risk society' in which young people face a set of risks largely unknown to their parents' generation. A raft of policy

initiatives which have been implemented since the 1980s have included: the removal of welfare benefits, restricted access to suitable and affordable housing, rapid expansion and diversification of post-16 education and training and increased access to, but reduced financing of, higher education. As a result, Scotland has witnessed growing youth unemployment, young homeless people begging on the streets of our towns and cities, rising youth crime, drug and alcohol abuse and teenage suicide. In addition, the reconstruction of the youth labour market has resulted in some young people becoming excluded from the very political and social institutions of society which should sustain their involvement as citizens in public and civic life.

## Young people, transition and citizenship

Youth is a period that embraces a related set of transitions in economic, interpersonal and political roles. The often complex trajectories along which young people move are directly affected by a range of indicators including educational attainment, social class, race and gender. Whilst the period of youth is seen as a bridge between childhood and adulthood, it also represents a time of transition to the rights and responsibilities of adult citizenship. For the majority of young people this transition is negotiated successfully, but for many it can be a hazardous journey. Until they successfully navigate the staged and often protracted pathways towards adulthood, young people are not formally regarded as citizens.

The concept of 'youth' is generally viewed as a stage of deficiency in relation to adulthood. However, the understanding of

youth as a relational concept brings power to the forefront of the analysis of young people's role as citizens. Although they have 'rights' as young citizens, these are relatively easily denied, and they have very little say in the institutions in which they have most at stake. At best, their participation in decision-making processes seems to be little more than consultation, which easily becomes tokenistic. The social rights of citizenship appear to accrue to them indirectly through the adults responsible for their care and development as future citizens. In other words, it could be said that young people are accorded citizenship rights not as a result of their own status but, rather, via the rights acquired through their parents - 'citizenship by proxy'. Historically, the welfare state has been primarily concerned with locating the rights of children and young people within the family as a whole. Consequently, young people's ability to access and exercise their rights as citizens is further undermined by wider socio-economic inequalities - especially differential access to financial support from families during an extended period of economic dependency. The outcome is that young people are generally viewed as 'quasi-citizens', 'deferred-citizens' or 'proto-citizens' whose status is controlled by the policy mechanisms of the state as they move through the stages of transition towards adulthood. This attenuated process of transition results in the postponement of the opportunity to engage with the responsibilities of adulthood. So in what ways are young people currently engaging collectively and critically as real stakeholders in the 'new' Scotland?

### **Young people and politics**

Over the past few years there has been evidence of increasing disillusionment with traditional politics among young people. Research undertaken prior to the General Election of 1997 found that only 5% of 12 to 25 year olds identified with any political

party. Only 37% of the young people surveyed across the UK stated any interest in politics, with only 5% claiming involvement. In the same year a survey by Connect Youth found that 39% of young people living in Scotland were either undecided about voting or stated that if there were an election tomorrow they would not vote. This apparent lack of interest in party politics is also reflected in the low levels of youth membership of mainstream political parties in the UK. From a study of the main political parties conducted in 1996 (which excluded the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Socialist Party), the percentage of under 25 year olds in membership was 1% of the Conservative Party, 3% of the Liberal Democrats, 4% of Labour and 12% of the Green Party. However, such apparent lack of interest in party politics should not necessarily be taken as an indication of political apathy because there has been a dramatic increase in young people's membership of other organisations and social movements. For example, the British Youth Council recorded that between 1988 and 1995 the membership of the Amnesty International Youth Section increased from 1300 to 15,000; the youth membership of Greenpeace expanded from 80,000 in 1987 to 420,000 in 1995; over the same period Friends of the Earth reported a growth of 125,000 in new young members. This would suggest that they strongly identify with issues that concern them directly and engage them actively. During the past decade in particular, many young people have also expressed their politics in protest and resistance eg through involvement in organisations addressing animal rights, nuclear disarmament, environmental concerns and more recently, anti-capitalist protests.

Active involvement of this kind generally takes place outside the terrain of mainstream party politics and relies on alternative and creative forms of participation, protest and action. It is

significant that some organisations and movements have quite deliberately targeted young people - as both citizens and consumers - through the recruitment of high profile media figures. For example, in their global campaign to challenge debt in the developing world, Jubilee 2000 employed the services of stars from the world of pop and rock, and Amnesty International promoted campaigns and raised funds through the sale of clothing and other merchandise styled by high profile designers and modelled by Hollywood celebrities.

### **Citizens in waiting?**

Whilst young people are less likely than adults to participate in party politics, they can influence the cultural politics of civil society through their personal lifestyles and roles within communities. The often subversive activities of youth subcultures enables young people to form a critical detachment from mainstream politics, and may occasionally lead them to create support for oppositional groups. However, the social construction of young people as citizens is largely framed by the policy interventions of the state. Their opportunity to participate is governed by a contradictory framework that describes them as both the future generation of the nation as well as a threat to the stability of community life. The media persists in reporting a decline of morality (eg drug abuse) and the rise of deviancy (eg anti-social behaviour) amongst the young of Scotland. Within communities, when groups of young people meet in public spaces they generate suspicion by adults. They are seen to be in need of control, or protection, rather than citizens with the ability and desire to make informed, responsible and active contributions to society. Few opportunities exist for them to engage in dialogue and decision making around important issues in their lives, outside of adult orientated structures and institutions. Attempts to involve them in local governance can result in young people becoming objects of

concern as opposed to subjects of collective social action. This often results in them feeling ignored, isolated, under-represented and patronised. Research supports the view that their opinions, experiences and aspirations are not taken seriously by politicians. In recent elections thousands of eligible young people have not exercised their right to vote and, in many cases, either through choice or ignorance, not even registering as members of the electorate. The result is that many young people are excluded or exclude themselves from mainstream politics. Despite these observations, there are examples of them engaging in political activity.

The role of young people as political agents in conflict and change across the world and the direct impact of their collective action was nowhere more apparent than in the events in Eastern Europe during the period from 1989 to 1991. The informal organisation of students had a major influence during the democratic 'revolutions' in Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. Militant young people orchestrated the political demonstrations in Tiananman Square in China. Young people from the townships were also critical and innovative participants in the widespread militancy that eventually led to the transition to democracy in South Africa. Through self-organisation these movements have challenged the local and central state to recognise and respect their civil and human rights. What appears to have driven the young people involved in these collective struggles was their participation in a new kind of political force, challenging adult order and structures. So what does this mean for the potential political agency of young people within Scotland?

Here too there is some evidence of young people organising collectively to effect social and political reform. For instance, the organisation Connect Youth was established in 1995 to create, develop and

support a national network of grassroots local youth forums and participative events across the country. This initiative also contributed to the creation of the Scottish Youth Parliament in July 1999, which is composed of around 200 democratically elected delegates between the ages of 14 and 25 representing young people from all parts of Scotland. The Scottish Youth Parliament is currently working towards an agreed plan of action, but its impact is still to be tested.

The challenge to the state and civil society within the 'new' Scotland is to recognise the potential of young people as active partners in the ongoing process of democratic renewal. Their political agency needs to be recognised for the diversity, creativity, dynamism and energy it can offer. For example, new public spaces opened up by social movements provide young people with an arena for collective political expression and action on the issues that they think are important. The active participation of young people in decision making now requires a new relationship between the state and civil society - one in which young people are regarded not simply as vulnerable and needy, nor as problems to be solved, but as citizens in their own right.

## Questions for discussion

1. What do young people have to offer to the process of democratic renewal in Scotland today?
2. How could the Scottish Parliament better represent young peoples' interests? Will the Scottish Youth Parliament help?
3. Why do you think so many young people are alienated from traditional politics? Does it matter?

## Further reading

Dorrian, A., Tisdall, K and Hamilton, D (2001) *Taking the Initiative: Promoting Young People's Participation in Public Decision Making in Scotland*, Carnegie Young People Initiative, London & Children in Scotland.

Madden, S (2001) *Re:action Consultation Toolkit: A Practical Toolkit for Consulting with Children and Young People on Policy Issues*, Save the Children Scotland and Scottish Executive.

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