

COMMENT

“ WE NEED TO ENABLE YOUNG PEOPLE TO STAND UP FOR THEMSELVES



Jamie Cutteridge,
Deputy Editor of *Premier Youthwork*

In the run up to this year’s General Election, David Cameron has announced the Conservative Party’s latest plan to curb youth unemployment and balance the benefit budget. The plan would involve young people classed as NEET (Not in education, employment or training) only receiving Job Seeker’s Allowance (£57.35) if they carry out 30 hours of community work a week. In essence, if 18-21 year-olds want to receive benefits from the state, they need to take a job that pays under £2 an hour. This not only ensures young people won’t be sitting around doing

nothing all day, but will also allow the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training to fall. Win-win for the government.

Hopefully, as people passionate about young people, the above has set some alarm bells ringing. This policy is nothing short of scandalous. It’s political engineering and exploitative. Work shouldn’t exist because young people need something to do, it



The new Conservative policy around youth employment is nothing short of scandalous

should exist to allow them to gain skills and fend for themselves. If this work is essential and worth doing, young people should be paid properly for it. Young people are worth far more than £2 an hour. Why do we treat young people like adults at 18, yet make them work for their benefits, unlike the rest of society?

What this boils down to then is a cynical piece of electioneering. The Conservative Party is well aware that young people, for

the most part, don’t vote. They’re certainly far less likely to vote than older members of society, and so this policy will save money, look like it’s making a difference and cost him no votes – what a combo!

This is far from the first time young people have been mistreated by politicians. It’s not a party-political issue, it’s a pragmatic one. Labour’s Shadow Justice Secretary Sadiq Khan admitted earlier this year that politicians ignore young people in order to appeal to ‘silver voters’, saying that politicians are more likely to visit an old people’s home than a sixth form college, as they know those at the latter have a higher propensity to vote. The only way to flip this script is to help young people engage with politics. While we can bang the drum for young people, there comes a point where they have to stand up and have their say over issues such as youth unemployment and benefits for young people. Helping young people grapple with these issues, sort out their voter registration and make their way to the ballot box might be the most important bit of youth work you do this year. **JC**

“ YOUNG PEOPLE, SYRIA AND ISIS



Tim Fawssett, CEO of *The Feast*

As a youth worker I have followed closely the recent news of young Londoners who have left the UK for a new life in Syria with the frightening organisation ISIS. I am grasping for reasons why a young IT graduate from North Kensington might transform into a brutal on-camera murderer and why three young girls from Bethnal Green turned their backs on their loved ones, education and homes, to enter a war-zone in order to, apparently, become ISIS brides.

Understandably these events have led to a fierce debate about the role of the security services, and whether they cause extremism or are not hard enough on potential extremists. We have heard impassioned but contrasting opinions, heavily laden with fear, anger and calls for justice.

Yet I cannot stop thinking about the young people in the centre. They were not just ‘Muslims’, they had real people with names like Mohammed and Shamima. They were normal teenagers, and like so many of their peers of other faiths and none, they make wrong decisions. It is just that theirs are influenced by their Muslim faith, and played out on a scale we have never seen before.

At The Feast we work and live among kids with names like this, as do many youth workers around the country. So, are our young people being monitored by the security services? Could they be considering going to Syria or turning into extremists? I hate wondering about these questions.

I have seen the transformation that happens when a young person realises they can be accepted for who they are: treated with respect, invited to trust others and offered genuine friendship. One of our leaders recently called it his ‘hope moment’ when he first saw a group of Christians and Muslims talking, openly and passionately about their faith together, and finding ways to love each other despite their real differences.

There was once another young terrorist who persecuted Christians, and even oversaw

their public murder. His name was Saul. God is weird with people like him. Instead of destruction, God offered him forgiveness. Instead of a life of hate, God called him to a life sharing the good news. And for those around him, instead of fear, God brought peace. Where was the justice in this? It was earned by Jesus, on the cross. Inspired by the radical, amazing grace we see God lavish on a man like Saul, let us seek out his weird response to the challenges we face regarding Islam in our midst.

Let us not regard all Muslims like ISIS, but confront our own fears and lack of information to find that most of them around us are as afraid and confused as we are.

Let us run to fill the gaps opening up in our society, building bridges of friendships with Muslims, and so offer them a taste of the goodness of God.

Let us pray for our security services as they strive to do an impossible job. May they be given his wisdom to find a balance between finding and prosecuting criminals, and protecting and honouring communities.

Let us pray for these young people who have gone to Syria - even Jihadi John - that they might yet be saved, in every sense of the word.

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