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The 'Big Society' and the National Citizen Service: Young people, volunteering and engagement with charities c.1900-1960

Whilst the 'big society' has yet to be firmly defined as a concept, certain elements that formed part of the picture had crystallised before the General Election in 2010. One was the need to involve more young people in volunteering projects, to encourage them to mix with other young people from different backgrounds and to then take up positions of leadership in their local communities. This element came together under the banner of the 'National Citizen Service' scheme. The National Citizen Service (NCS) will be piloted in summer 2011, when twelve schemes will roll out a seven or eight week programme of vigorous outdoor activities followed by action in the community to some 11,000 sixteen year olds in England. A nation-wide scheme will roll out in 2012. Government figures suggest that the first year of the scheme will cost £13 million, rising to £37 million in 2012.

The NCS will not be a compulsory scheme, unlike its namesake, the National Service that was operational between 1939 and the early 1960s. The choice of the scheme's title very clearly aims to tap into the popular idea of National Service as a period of positive transformation in the lives of young people, without conveying the more problematic aspects of National Service or the real differences between what is suggested by this evocation and what is actually proposed. National Service was conscription into the armed forces in order to fight the Second World War and later to aid Britain's commitments to its Empire and peacekeeping activities during the Cold War. As the actor Michael Caine's enthusiastic endorsement of the NCS launch in 2010 suggests, National Service has come to be seen as a positive, 'character-building' force in the lives of young men in the mid-twentieth century. In this way, the NCS is an attempt to hark back to a 'golden age' of disciplined young people who gave their time to their country and their community. To see the period from 1945 to

1960 as a 'golden age' of socially engaged young people is inaccurate. Throughout this period, contemporaries were anxious about rising crime figures for all age groups, but especially amongst children, young people and young adults. Corporal punishment as a recourse of the courts had been abolished in 1948, but as a result of the upward trend in the crime figures there were frequent calls for its restitution in the 1950s. Finally, there is much evidence to suggest that many young men dreaded receiving their call-up papers, on account of the disruption it would cause to their education, as well as their working and private lives. For some, National Service was a rewarding period in their lives, and in some cases, it got young men away from bad influences, such as 'Teddy Boy' gangs, but it would be incorrect to see it as a panacea for the problem of wayward youth. Rather, it should be seen as what it was: a military expediency, not a form of deliberate and purposive youth work. The NCS is deliberately positioned to evoke to a highly selective account of the past, and thus it is essential that it is given thorough interrogation by historians.

The National Citizen Service is an investment in young people, and this is to be welcomed, at least in principle. However, the expenditure on the NCS needs to be set next to cuts in local government spending following the Spending Review of October 2010, which in some areas have led to the cutting of youth services – notably in Prime Minister David Cameron's constituency in Oxfordshire. A young man who organised a picket of Cameron's constituency office to protest the closure of local youth clubs was pulled out of class by anti-terrorism police to be given a stern warning about his activities. At the time of writing, Oxfordshire youth clubs are being shut down, but not without a vigorous campaign by the young people of the county to prevent this. These are young people who have clearly benefitted from youth clubs in stimulating their abilities to take the lead on issues of concern to them, to organise themselves and to work in a team, yet their participation in the 'big society' is not recognised as being a positive force. One form of youth work is being instituted at the cost of another that can be seen to be delivering its social goods.

Whilst the NCS evokes compulsory military service through its name, in its execution it draws upon long traditions of organised youth work in Britain. The aim of this chapter is to

take a longer view of youth work, using the case study of the settlement movement in the twentieth century to explore which factors determine the relative success or failures of youth clubs in engaging young people over time, as a counterpoint to the ‘historicism’ of the NCS project. The settlement movement is useful as a case study because these were charities that deliberately brought young graduates to the deprived areas of British towns and cities in order that they might live, learn something of what it meant to be poor and become leaders in these communities. In this way, the settlements resonate with many elements of the aims of the NCS and the ‘big society’ more broadly: ideas around building social cohesion through bringing people of different backgrounds together. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, much settlement youth work succeeded not because it necessarily brought people together, but because it appealed to a sense of locality and community, and created space for young people.

Samuel Barnett, an Anglican priest working in the East End of London from the 1870s, was inspired to set up a ‘settlement of university men’ in the early 1880s in order to engage young Oxbridge men with social questions and philanthropic solutions. Barnett was dissatisfied with the volunteers who came to his parish to volunteer, who were typically women from the more affluent parts of London who came to do their work and went home, as he saw it, without engaging with the needs of East London. The settlement was a means of encouraging young men to become involved in volunteering, to ‘defeminise’ social action, to provide an outlet for religious service and also to create supposedly positive role models for boys and men in the East End. Barnett believed that the working classes of East London were too tired or incapable of leading themselves, and also that exposure to middle and upper class standards of behaviour would have an uplifting effect on the ways in which the poor organised their home lives. Barnett’s idea was an extremely popular one, leading to the formation of the first settlement, Toynbee Hall, in Whitechapel in 1884, which was named for Arnold Toynbee, the Balliol economist who had spent his vacations volunteering with Barnett before his death in 1883. Settlements sprang up across London and other major British towns and cities, across the North Americas, Europe and Asia. Some had an overtly

religious agenda and affiliation, whilst others, like Toynbee Hall, took a non-sectarian approach. Although Barnett was interested in creating a space for men's volunteering (Toynbee Hall was exclusively for male volunteers), women actively embraced settlements and the opportunities they provided for single women to live away from the family home and to do voluntary or paid work with the needy. Settlements were principally a means to engage the young middle and upper classes with voluntary work, but they were secondarily concerned with getting these young volunteers to work with the children and young people who thronged the city and town streets of the later nineteenth century.

One of the most popular solutions to the question of children and young people on the streets with (supposedly) nothing to do was the boys' or girls' club, which was embraced by many settlements. Such youth clubs appealed to settlement staff because they were relatively cheap and cost effective: the basic need of a club was a room. Some settlements were purpose-built and thus had suitable rooms that could be given over to clubs, or those who had converted houses often hired or borrowed space elsewhere, at the local church or neighbourhood school. Club membership was dependent upon the payment of a small weekly fee or 'sub', which provided an income that could be given over to meeting running costs and buying equipment. In time, some clubs – like the Oxford House clubs in Bethnal Green, the Fairbairn Club at Mansfield House in Canning Town or the clubs at the Bernhard Baron Settlement in Stepney, all in the East End – had purpose-built facilities that included libraries, gyms, woodwork rooms and theatres, along with grounds outside London that were used for sporting events or annual camps. Boys' and girls' clubs were also highly photogenic and newsworthy. Visits by dignitaries to clubs made for excellent newsreel footage and photo opportunities; club football teams and boxing players featured in the local newspaper sports pages. For the young settlement residents, they were also exciting places to work. As many settlement residents' memoirs suggest, working in a club was exciting and frightening in equal measure, taking the affluent resident into a very different world for young people.

However tempting the fare on offer, settlement club leaders recognised the need to treat new members well, and to encourage existing members to bring new people in. The manager of the Fairbairn House boys' club wrote in the settlement's magazine that:

They [the former club members] have made an atmosphere, and in Fairbairn House the beginnings of gambling are soon checked, bullying is discouraged, a foul word is seldom heard, clear eyes look into clear eyes, and boys can grow up to be strong, healthy, clean-minded, helpful men. One can watch the progress. The newcomer is brought in by a pal; he is welcomed to the Club, and put in the friendly care of an older member; he is shown the glories of the place, the gym., the boxing room, the tennis court, the library. ('The Need for Boys' Clubs', *Mansfield House Magazine*, 1918, p.160)

The club managers were interested in improving the behaviour of the young men. Here, the check on gambling sat well with the Non-Conformist ethos of Mansfield House, if religion was otherwise worn lightly at such clubs. For example, at both the Mansfield House clubs and those at the Jewish Bernhard Baron Settlement, prayers often formed part of the opening and closing rituals of club evenings, but otherwise religious practice was kept to a discreet minimum in order to avoid deterring the less observant. It is also clear that joining a club offered affordable access to a range of tempting leisure pursuits that were not easily come by in the home or on the streets. Formally and informally, the club worked to make the experience of joining as friendly as possible.

At the most basic level, clubs were an affordable and congenial place to go to meet one's friends and acquaintances away from home or work. However, clubs were more than just a space to go to. Clubs provided opportunities for young people to demonstrate their prowess in sports and cultural activities, with the possibility of making one's way out of a working class district into other worlds. In his memoir, *Stamp Album*, the actor Terence Stamp recalled how he had initially relished life at the Mansfield House clubs, waiting eagerly for the clubhouse doors to open so that he could get on with discovering the joys of

the theatre. Sports of all varieties were important at boys' clubs, providing opportunities to compete with other clubs in the region as well as nationally. The Fairbairn House clubs produced major sporting stars, including Jimmy Barrett, the West Ham and England football player. Clubs were a place of discovery through the array of workshops, classes and activities that were provided for members, but this discovery need not to be limited within the club walls. For both boys and girls, the year was topped off by the annual summer holiday to a camp on the English coast, a chance to enjoy the fresh air and to try out different kinds of physical activities.

Aspirational and creative fare was not just available to boys. The girls who attended the Canning Town Women's Settlement clubs were active in regional club competitions in the interwar period, often coming first. Some of the most common girls' club activities were based around homemaking and beauty. Such classes tapped into concerns at the start of the twentieth century that the working classes were physically degenerating through poor diets, household management and child-rearing practices. For the settlers, this was one way of tackling a national problem; for the young women, this was useful preparation for their adult lives as wives and mothers. Yet the club also brought in women who had become successful in public life. In 1937, Daisy Parsons, a former club member, became the first female Mayor of West Ham. Parsons had been a domestic servant after leaving school, before embracing the suffragette movement and becoming a Labour councillor in the early 1920s, and returned in her mayoral year to address the settlement girls about her work. Other speakers included, in 1924, Margaret Bondfield, then the first female Cabinet member. The club's activities can be seen as being grounded in the realities of the girls' lives in the not-so-distant future, but also as opening up much wider horizons at the same time.

A club is, by definition, an exclusive entity, and in the case of the settlement clubs, exclusion and inclusion were defined by territory. As the Fairbairn House membership books reveal, groups of boys from the same or neighbouring streets joined up at the same time; shared surnames indicate that family also had an important role to play in joining clubs. The use of neighbourhood and community operated in other ways. At Bernhard Baron Settlement

in Stepney, membership of the adults' clubs was conditional on having been a member of the youth clubs and further agreeing to help manage these clubs. The researchers of the *New Survey of London Life and Labour*, undertaken in the 1930s, commented on how well this worked in terms of bonding the community together. Parents could also get involved in helping to run the clubs. Whilst appealing to a sense of neighbourhood was an effective means of including everyone within that community, it was also an exclusive measure. Stepney, Limehouse, Wapping, Whitechapel and Bethnal Green – where Bernhard Baron, Oxford House and Toynbee Hall were located – were ethnically and religiously diverse areas, if the various communities were concentrated around particular streets, went to different places of worship, and sometimes different shops, schools and clubs. As Jerry White's book *Rothschild Buildings* shows, children played on 'their' own streets in order to avoid fights with children from other groups or abuse from adults. Apart from intra-club sporting matches and competitions – which certainly introduced young people from different backgrounds to each other, if in a combative fashion – clubs did not necessarily encourage Jewish children from Stepney to mix with Irish Catholic children from Wapping. If the local neighbourhood did not shape the club's intake, the club managers sometimes actively encouraged the club to become the province of one group. Bernhard Baron grew out of the Oxford and St George's Club founded by Basil Henriques in 1913 in order to provide a club specifically for Jewish children and young people, as all the others in the district were run by Gentiles, some of whom were proselytising. Where there was an element of extending links across different social groups in settlement youth work, it occurred at the level of the young middle and upper class volunteers and project workers attached to the clubs, who came from very different backgrounds to their young charges.

The other way in which clubs brought people together – or kept them apart – was through gender. As has already been suggested, clubs ran separate clubs for boys and girls, certainly before the 1960s when, as Marcus Collins has shown, it became more fashionable for mixed clubs to be offered and there was less consternation about the ability of either sex to lead the other astray. By the same token, the settlements were also segregated by sex, and

it followed that men's settlement residents would become involved in running boys' clubs whilst women's settlement residents would run girls' clubs – if women also ran clubs for the younger boys. This model of organisation reflected wider sensibilities about the desirability of the sexes mixing, but also ideas about suitable adult [middle class] role models. However, the young people did not blindly accept their leadership by the settlement residents. Miss M. Child of the Lady Margaret Hall Settlement in Lambeth took to his challenge with aplomb, as she recalled in 1957:

I do not know whether a man would have thrown some of them out early on or put up with their pretty ways long enough for taming to set in as we did. They mostly turned out good enough boys after a bit. I reckoned on a real Rough House about once a year when the lights would suddenly go out & chairs fly through the air & tables be hurled over.

In Miss Child's account, her success with the boys of Lambeth arose from her tenacity - not an uncommon theme in club workers' accounts of building trust with their young charges. This annual rough house was tolerated, even expected, as a form of safety valve. On the other hand, Canning Town had a period in the 1920s in which they found it difficult to keep leaders for their boys' clubs, as the women volunteers found the boys' behaviour too challenging. It was not the case that men found it easier to establish order in the clubs. Basil Henriques, later Warden of the Bernhard Baron Settlement, recalled in his memoirs how he had to prove himself to the boys of a club in Bermondsey through showing prowess and leadership in sports in order to have their attentions. Of course, some children and young people were impervious to attempts to mould them into club members, and thus were thrown out or prevented from joining if they had a reputation for being troublesome at other clubs. Innovative attempts to try to bring these young people into youth work were made from the 1950s onwards by detached youth workers, who provided 'clubs' that were not 'clubs' – facilities on Thames barges, cafes and the like – in order to engage these hard-to-reach young people. Whilst the Warden of Toynbee Hall was on the committee of such an experiment in East London – the Hoxton Café Project – such work nonetheless remained outside the

mainstream of settlement youth club work before the 1980s. By the later 1970s, a combination of new immigrant communities into the East End and the movement of older groups out of the area disrupted these older territorialities, bringing new community groups into the youth work market and thus forcing a repositioning of the existing settlement projects.

What comes out most clearly in these accounts of instilling discipline in club boys is the way in which the settlement residents felt that *they* succeeded in imposing *their* will upon the boys. What is more implicit is the way in which this experience changed the residents as young people *themselves*. For example, Henriques admitted that before attending the club his only experience with the working classes had been through having domestic servants; he was surprised that the boys' club members would speak to him as though he was their social equal. The settlement residents were young people used to a middle or even upper class world: encountering this working class environment required reflection, flexibility and adaptation. These settlement workers may have been young, but they still had considerable power to shut clubs down or to exclude members, not to mention the power exerted in their other roles as home visitors and the like. Yet it would be wrong to say that the working class users of the settlements were without power of their own, as if the club leader wanted an easier time, they had to alter their behaviour in order to be listened to. Whilst hard-up working class parents may have had greater difficulties in navigating welfare workers in times of trouble, their children certainly had the power to make the lives of inexperienced club leaders miserable.

An important precept, once order had been established in the club, was the creation of democratic principles of management. Fairbairn House had a standing committee drawn from its membership, whose role was to oversee the daily management of the clubs, supported by a member of settlement staff. The boys were keen to ensure that their fellow members participated as fully as possible, demanding to see members who were not felt to be as energetic as they could be in joining in with the full range of club activities. Membership of the standing committee was something taken on only by those who were sufficiently dedicated to the club and willing to police their friends and neighbours. Whilst settlement

residents would often overlook certain behaviours as expediency in maintaining overall standards, the boys at Fairbairn had no such qualms, but unlike their leaders they were part of the community and evidently felt more comfortable in being stricter. Taking up the leadership of one's club was a first step in becoming socially active. Some of the young women at Canning Town offered to take on the running of the senior club themselves, as another volunteered to take the Sunday afternoon Bible class. In 1930 some of the older girls took it upon themselves to run their own club for younger children. These cases were not radically innovative by any measure, but they were nonetheless examples of young people being empowered to take responsibility for the well-being of others, an opportunity that would likely not have been there without the settlement as a framework.

Despite the perils of overly punitive club members, the boys' club sometimes came to occupy a special place in the affections of its members. This was most clearly seen during the Second World War, when young men regularly wrote home to their club leaders to give them news about what was happening in their lives and to catch up with events at home. A common feature of many of the letters was the feeling that the experience of being in a boys' club in their youth had helped to prepare them for the trials of war:

The spirit of the Club has made each of us, I am sure, give that little extra bit over the next man. All those little extra bits add up to something, and the final amount is but part of the Club's total effort.

Crisis gave the members the opportunity to reflect upon what the clubs had offered them as boys and young men:

Over the impressionable ages of boyhood and youth, the Club convoyed me safely through the temptations that breed on the street corners of slums, where youth is like a high-speed ship without a rudder.

The former youth club members believed that the experience of the clubs had changed their lives. Some saw the experience as putting them on the right path, or of providing opportunities they may not otherwise have experienced. But for many, clubs provided opportunities to make new friends and to further develop their sense of identity and self. Writing back to the club also gave the young men a sense of stability in a world which was

both boring and dangerous.

Where settlement youth clubs were successful in creating vibrant cultures, it followed that they had, whether by accident or design, provided a club environment which provided a range of opportunities to suit a variety of tastes, whilst also fitting into the rhythms and networks of the neighbourhood. The club members felt an ownership over their clubs, and settlement residents, managers, club members and alumni worked hard to sustain the clubs over longer periods of time, literally bringing in different generations of club members. Whilst this integrated the club in the immediate community, the club did not necessarily open up the community to anyone other than the settlement workers it brought in. If a desire to serve others for religious ends brought young people to settlements as residents, religion was also a powerful divisive force between communities. Clubs were not specifically about getting young people to volunteer. What they were concerned with was getting children and young people to act in collegiate ways with each other, and in several cases social action followed from that, on however small a scale. If club leaders were very clear that their agenda was to create good, all-round citizens, their methods on the ground were often more subtle: and they were far from immune from the process themselves. What is less tangible to the historian is the way in which this general sense of fellowship, religious or otherwise, impacted on the community more generally, in the ways in which people behaved with each other beyond the club, whether individuals might otherwise have taken different directions through life had they not had the opportunities the club provided.

In comparing the work of the settlement clubs with the present day some important caveats apply. First, clubs thrived in a world before individual bedrooms for children in a family, central heating, television and computer games; second, they also grew in an environment shaped by the public school ethos of team sports, houses and (religious) service. Yet youth clubs and organisations remain important for young people, as evidenced by the enduring popularity of the Scouts and Guides. Youth clubs are still going strong: London Youth alone has over 400 youth clubs working with 75,000 young people, or 5 percent of the London population aged 10-25 (Census 2001 estimates). There are far more leisure

opportunities for young people, but clubs remain popular, for the fellowship they offer and the broader field of opportunities. The NCS, with its short burst of volunteering, may well appeal to young people who otherwise remain outside current programmes, but given the range of youth work that already achieves the NCS's aims – and the importance of building up relationships with the community over time in order to get young people and their families to engage with it – the NCS runs the risk of duplicating existing work and being something that has only a transitory impact on the young people who participate in it. It is not clear how the NCS will differ from older forms of youth work in bringing young people from different backgrounds together. The money would perhaps be better directed to those groups who are quietly working towards such objectives already.

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