

‘Young people are presented not as individuals, but as a menacing plague’



‘Young people are presented not as individuals, but as a menacing plague’ It is not, by common consent, a good time to be young. When I was 18 and heading off for university, the question of who paid my tuition fees never even occurred to me. By contrast today, if my children and their contemporaries want to get a degree, it is going to require them to be willing to carry £27,000 in debt into their working lives, plus whatever they rack up on a student loan.

And the alternative is hardly more palatable. Youth unemployment runs at one in five. It is tempting to put it down to the credit crunchcum-eurozone crisis, but the trend in the UK has been rising since 2004 – and that was regarded as a time of plenty. Employers, it seems, just don’t want to be bothered with shaping a new generation. They want to buy them in ready-made. Worst of all, though, is the day-by-day, week-by-week, drip-feed of rhetoric and branding of today’s youth as part of “broken Britain”, encouraged to his shame by our Prime Minister.

Young people are presented not as individuals, but as a single, menacing plague. They are not victims of tough economic times, or of a society’s failure to understand and address their needs, but instead are routinely labelled as rioters, members of gangs, habitual carriers of knives, threats to the rest of us if we bump into a group of them in our street late at night, amoral, ill-educated, drugged-up, celebrity obsessed halfwits whose only ambition is to win a talent contest and get rich quick.

Perhaps the most depressing aspect of all of this is the willingness of the rest of us to be seduced by these stereotypes. This fits into a bigger pattern. We want to believe the worst, not the best, the dark not the light, our own corruption not our own virtue. Perhaps it is part of our fallen state. A few years ago, I wrote, in quick succession, a book about hell and then one about heaven. The first sold much better than the second, though the second is a better read.

So it is in our nature to believe the worst of our young people. I find myself doing it far too often, even as a parent of two of them, but a couple of encounters in recent days have forced me to think again. The first was a meeting with a young actor-turned-journalist called Max Benitz. As he describes in a new book, *Six Months Without Sundays*, he talked his way into working alongside other young men in

their early twenties as part of the Scots Guards in Afghanistan.

Having witnessed at first hand the courage, professionalism and endurance of these men in the front line, Benitz told me he was appalled by the talk back home of Britain's youth being "broken". He juxtaposed an image popular with the doom-merchants as the epitome of feckless, almost feral youth – of the drunken student who was caught urinating on a war memorial in Sheffield – with the commitment of our teenage and twentysomething troops in Helmand.

And, before you say it, he accepts that there is an element of many of them joining up because they could not see other economic opportunities, especially in the north of England and Scotland, from where the regiment draws many of its recruits, but he added that this was not always the case.

Moreover, he was angered that the reasons behind their decision to enlist was somehow being used to take the edge off the commitment that underpinned their courage and sacrifice. Then, the other week, there was the annual Longford Lecture, now in its tenth year, a chance for a well-qualified individual to address in depth matters of crime, punishment and our justice system.

This year the speaker was journalist Jon Snow, who for 43 years – a longer stint even than his tenure as the face of Channel 4 News – has worked in various capacities at New Horizon, a centre for homeless and vulnerable teenagers in London. Snow's account of what can be achieved by giving these youngsters help and encouragement was inspiring. Equally so was the presence in an audience of 600-plus

of a fair proportion of young faces. They wanted to debate these issues about their own future and those of our society, not the latest results from The X-Factor. So next time I am tempted to give way to the prevailing knee-jerk mood of negativity about young people in society, I'm going to think of those voices in the audience, and of the soldiers in Afghanistan, and reflect instead that, though there are problems and challenges, there is also so much potential out there to give rise to optimism.

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