

# Britain's lost generation

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LAST weekend I went to Hyde Park to see Bobby Dylan, Eric Clapton and The Who, where those icons of 60's English youth revolt gave the first live performance of *Quadrophenia*, their second rock opera.

*Quadrophenia* is the story of a young mod riding around on a scooter wearing a sharp suit, whose mum throws him out when she finds a box of blues. His revolt was stylistic with a bit of street-fighting to focus a wet Bank Holiday weekend in Brighton, and a diet of pills and alcohol. His adolescent angst was cushioned by a regular wage packet: this mod had a job. His mates had jobs too. Mods didn't like their jobs — but they paid for their petrol and haircuts.

They did not need to go out on the rob and they certainly did not need to rob their neighbours — which rather dates the story. It's a far cry from the lifestyles of some of the current generation of should-be-mods.

Excluded from commodity consumption, but subject to the same incitements and need to join in, so many of the young lads who live in the area I work in have got nothing to do, no-where to go and nothing to look forward to. It's not surprising that they hang around street corners, when in better times they would have been out in clubs or at the beach.

It's not surprising either that so many of them have taken up house-breaking and car crime as the most lucrative occupation they can find.

It's a vicious circle because they frighten the other residents on their street. Even when the gang who sit on the wall are not doing any harm — nor would they ever — it's still alarming to walk past them: they seem so hostile. As I know from experience, a couple of burglaries does make you jumpy and tense. It is bad for morale to turn the last corner on the way home looking to see if the front door has been kicked-in.

THIS week Labour came up with their pre-election statement about these lads and my mate Mickey. Mickey is a nice enough lad, once you get to know him. He has just finished his GCSE's. There is talk of him doing a training scheme to work in the building industry: his dad says, when he was young there would have been an apprenticeship for him. I guess Mickey is just a normal lad and it's normal for him to hang about with his mates and nick the odd thing. He is no pro, but he might be come Autumn if the training scheme he wants does not suit or does not exist.

I was hoping Labour would announce their intention to re-instate Income Support for 16-18 year olds to give Mickey a bit of

money to get by on. But Blair did not say that. It would have been a good starting point with Mickey and his mates: they hate what the Tories have done to their lives but do not see Labour as anything to do with them.

Not only did Blair not offer a legal way for Mickey to get some money, he has made it worse by threatening to take away his mother's Child Benefit. His silence was bad enough but now he is fuelling people's hatred and fears of Mickey. According to Blair, Mickey's problem is that he was not smacked.

Again, according to Blair, Mickey's other problem is that he was allowed to roam the streets until late into the evening when he was still at primary school. Mickey does not quite get the point Blair is making: he *was* smacked, especially if he was not home by 9pm.

LAST Sunday's tabloids carried a small story about another lad I used to work with. Alan made the papers because he cooked his ex-girlfriend's cat. When I knew him Alan had done a bunk from Social Services and ended up sleeping rough in the youth club. He would let himself in through a hole in the roof when everyone else had gone home.

I liked him too, but there was not much that could be done — the police were after him and picked him up the day he turned 15 and so became eligible for punishment.

It might have been possible to help Alan sort himself out earlier on when he had first been excluded from school. But there was not enough money, nor imagination, to set up some form of alternative schooling that he might have found more to his taste.

The best youth workers around the streets where Alan used to slide down terraced roofs on black plastic bags while doped out of his skull, were a couple of private landlords. They had grown up in children's homes themselves and had a good sense unbridled by the professionalism of the welfare services. The memory of these two is why today I promised to find the money to pay the fees for a local tenant's activist to take a youth work course.

It's unfortunate that I do not have a budget to meet this debt, and it's unfortunate too that the Council no longer pays college fees. But £80 a year seemed like a good investment to me, and my boss is a sensible bloke who is bound to see things my way. From where I stand, we need people like her to work with the youth and talk with them. They are all we have to combat the rising tide of youthphobia.

TWO or three times a week I go to public meetings where other residents are baying for young people's blood. I find it hard to work out why they do not make the connections. Everyone agrees the youths have got nothing and that neglect breeds retalia-

tion and contempt, but there seldom is a willingness to look for answers beyond the stock, 'move them on and fine the parents'. And that's the cue for the police to chime in.

For the last six or seven years I have watched the police agenda become the community agenda. With skill, or with a belligerence matched only by the most truculent 17 year old, the police wind up residents with tales of underfunding and of a 'soggy-liberal' criminal justice system which forbids the common sense solution to the problem of youth crime — a clip around the ear for a minor offence, followed by a secure unit for persistent offenders.

Within minutes of a copper taking the floor at these meetings the residents bond with the platform: they all agree — the Government is to blame for under-funding the police and being wet liberals. From where I stand, the residents have a point.

They would indeed benefit from more police on the beat to protect their cars and empty houses, and a spell in custody for the most persistent offenders would certainly ease the pressure on an area. I have yet to find a way to win the argument.

The youths who do all the robbing and taxing of younger kids are indeed anti-social and should be stopped, but there have to be better answers than seeing the youth as the source of the problem. They are as much victims as the people they rob. The woman I agreed to fund on the course knows the kids are victims and she has earned their respect by talking to them and running the playschemes they enjoyed when they were still little. She has never been robbed nor is she abused in the street.

WHEN Labour wins the next election there will be an expectation that something will be done about these disaffected young people. I think it's likely that there will be improvements in training and further education, but as for community safety, I am not so sure. In fact, I am sure that it's going to get a lot hotter.

A month ago Mandelson was on Radio 4's "Any Questions" arguing that Labour would do all it can to develop an alliance between 'the community' and the police. Such a force, said Mandelson, is the only way to drive out the problem of nuisance neighbours, and reclaim the streets for decent people. I bet this will go down very well with people whose lives are hurt by crime and the fear of crime.

It does not go down well with me — I cannot but shudder at the idea of an organised network of street informers who are the eyes and ears of the police. It echoes the Soviet Union and makes you long for socialism or even boom-time capitalism when youth cheerfully fought the police on the seafront, and middle England had its nose rubbed in it by the healthy protest of three chord songs, parkas and Lambrettas. ■