CHAPTER 1

YOUTH AND SOCIETY

In Malta, as elsewhere in the Commonwealth, "youth problems" do not necessarily originate in factors intrinsic to youth. They originate in changes, developments and uncertainties which affect society as a whole. Every day which passes sees "young people" absorbed into the mass of "adults". Their problems do not change overnight. They find a balance for their fears, hopes and pressures only over extended periods of time. Any attempt, therefore, to treat the problems of young people as an issue distinct from those affecting society as a whole, any effort to compartmentalise youth as a separate sub-species of society and deal with it in isolation can result only in an unjustified and unprofitable oversimplification of the issues involved. Society is a living organism, growing and changing to meet the changing needs of a changing world. The younger element of that society, to whom its future will be entrusted, to some of whom its future is entrusted every day, live out their problems in the environment created for them by their elders. The whole community has a direct interest in youth problems.

Defining 'youth'

Traditional societies normally assign specific roles to their members. Initiation rites and ceremonies leave no doubt about the status, rights and obligations of the individual. Increasingly these 'rites of passage' are falling into disuse, clear distinctions are disappearing or becoming blurred. Other criteria, however, to replace them are lacking. Age alone provides an unsatisfactory yardstick for "youth"; systems of education and training result in some young people earning wages at 15 years of age, while others earn nothing until 24 or 25. Which is the adult in terms of living an "adult" life? It is equally difficult to define youth in terms of status. Does youth necessarily relate to dependence? Is the student of 21 who votes in parliamentary elections a youth or an adult? Or is he both at different times when playing different roles in his society? Do young men and young women achieve adult status at different ages, and, if so, what is the basis for judgment? Age, educational level, degree of productivity or responsibility have all been put forward as possible criteria by which "youth" may be defined, but none proves wholly acceptable. The uncertainty of the definition, the fact that the same person may be considered both youth and adult for different purposes, the fact that physical maturity now occurs earlier and economic independence

later, all serve to exaggerate the disorientation and insecurity of many younger members of society. Subject as they are to double standards in this way it should not be surprising if some abandon the attempt to conform to either set and seek instead to establish anew systems of attitudes and values appropriate to their needs and conforming to their ideals.

Social attitudes towards youth

Despite the varied population represented by young people, - rich and poor, rural and urban, employed or unemployed, at various educational levels, - they tend to be regarded by their elders as a homogeneous group and have generalised judgments applied to them. Young people themselves respond not infrequently with equally sweeping generalities to categorise their elders. During the Malta seminar one (older) member asked in his village for immediate reactions to "youth". The older villagers responded with a range of uncomplimentary epithets: "dirt", "drugs", "long hair", "indiscipline", "permissiveness", "disrespect"; the young people saw themselves in a very different light: "purity", "peace", "love". Unthinking, second-hand, conventional attitudes serve only to widen the generation gap and reinforce mutual suspicion. To this extent at least the youth problem is an adult problem. Young people, it appeared, have a poor image among their elders which factual evidence could probably do little to change in the short term. An explanation of the facts alone is unlikely to change entrenched attitudes quickly, yet the need for communication is clear as a contributory factor to the long-term improvement in relations between the age groups.

Youth in conflict

Youth, said the Minister of Education, is in conflict with itself, with society and with the future. Young people are maturing earlier in physical and psychological terms yet find their acceptance as adults ever longer delayed as the preparatory period of education and training lengthens. Youngsters consistently bruise their idealism against social and economic realities. Seeking to influence the future which they will inherit they find themselves impotent in terms of actual power. The generation gap is two-way. If adults reject young people as idealistic, inexperienced and impractical, then the youngsters equally reject their elders as cynical and hyper-critical, advocating norms and values by which they have no intention of conducting their affairs. "Future shock" is now accepted as a standard term to describe the frequent reaction of young people to the realisation that the values and

attitudes presented to them in school as desirable and "right" conflict seriously with those by which the world actually lives. It is little wonder that the characteristics of young people, as they emerged from the seminar, were dominated by two: a deep anxiety and a permeating sense of insecurity. Feeling themselves mistrusted, misunderstood and underestimated by their elders, haunted by the fear of unemployment, subjected to residual traditional sanctions, most of which appear outmoded and unnecessary, young people tend to respond either with apathy, resigning themselves to their social impotence, or with energy, not always directed into constructive activities.

Youth in distress

(a) Insecurity

A constant theme underlying the seminar contributions by the younger participants was that of insecurity. This seemed to arise from uncertainty about their role and status in society, uncertainty about employment prospects, uncertainty about the future. "The future is a question-mark", said one. Few would object to the need for an element of discipline and order, provided that it made reasonable sense in the context of the social structure and the roles expected of its younger and older members. As the paper on juvenile delinquency pointed out, however, the greatest undermining of an individual's sense of security results from inconsistent attitudes on the part of his seniors. Part-child and part-adult, alternately consulted and directed, discounted as immature and criticised as unwilling to accept responsibility, the young person's confidence not infrequently declines through a stage of anxious insecurity to reach a base of critical apathy. The dynamic child becomes the bored, lonely and potentially antisocial youth.

Young people find themselves adrift in a strange environment for which they have not been prepared. The traditional allocation of roles is disappearing, traditional forms of authority appear less sure of themselves. Family loyalties remain, and with them the constraints of life in a small community. Tensions within families seem particularly acute. Young people enjoy better educational opportunities than their parents, frequently have broader horizons and new vision. Not infrequently when they start work they find themselves supporting their parents financially; a state of "reversed dependence" is created, yet older members of families tend to resist any diminishing of their control within the family. While their status has changed and the world

has changed, elders attempt to maintain the family hierarchy intact. Once again, young people find themselves subjected to double standards and playing two social roles, one in the community at large, another within the family. In some cases parents, unsure of themselves, do abdicate their role as guides and counsellors of their children, so making essential the provision of substitute figures in the form of Church, Government or voluntary youth workers. Where these are not effective, young people may seek to establish fresh norms within their peer group. But before they can be "with it" they have to define the "it" to be "with".

(b) Delinquency

Unemployment and an unwillingness to participate in existing forms of youth activities reinforce the loneliness and boredom of many young people. The problem of the "unhappy loner" appears to be increasing. The numbers of "affectionless" young delinquents also gives cause for concern. (Admittedly, many petty delinquents tend to come from among the mentally unstable and the mentally less able, for whom it is highly desirable that special provision should be made). The "unattached" young person "at risk" tends to fall into one of five categories; the under-privileged and deprived; the disillusioned; the embittered (often from broken homes); the eccentric; or the rebellious. A disconcerning number of delinquents, however are to be found among people of high intelligence and from relatively affluent. The needs of all these categories must be met by both prevention and cure.

Prevention of delinquency may be less visible and less measurable than curative measures such as probation or detention yet may well be less costly and less damaging socially. While delinquency can result from undesirable attitudes acquired from antisocial peer groups, positive attitudes can also be acquired from well motivated peer groups. The use of young volunteers as informal probation officers could help to minimise recurrent delinquency while also offering the volunteer the opportunity to contribute to the well-being of his community. "Detached" youth workers, not attached to youth clubs or formal youth groups, offer the best opportunity to reach the "unhappy loner" and groups of "unclubbables", as is demonstrated by the successful activities of detached workers in countries such as Hong Kong and Britain. The Young Volunteer Force Foundation in Britain illustrates how potential delinquency may be turned to the social benefit by harnessing the energies of anti-social young people to the service of the community. Many potential delinquents have welcomed the opportunity to serve, to achieve a spiritual fulfilment.

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Prevention is not only better than cure, it is also cheaper.
Prevention services in the youth field, however, must be recog-
nised as desirable and funded realistically. Costs will be kept
to a minimum if official and non-official bodies co-operate and
co-ordinate their activities, thus pooling available resources.

(c) Exploitation

Young people see themselves exploited at work and in
their leisure time. At work they tend to be given the least
desirable jobs or to be required to do an adult's work for an
adolescent's pay. In their leisure time they are the objectives
of intense campaigns designed to relieve them of some of the least
committed money in the economy. As they are aware of their
being exploited so they are also aware of their deprivation. Any
youngster in Malta has only to switch on television to see the apparent
quality of life in Britain, France, Italy or America. Discontent
breeds easily. For the benefit of both the individual and society
all young people should be taught the elements of judgment and dis-
crimination, to analyse the data presented and make a rational
choice.

(d) Women and girls

New opportunities have arisen for women outside the home,
yet this in itself may contribute to social problems. The working
daughter with money in her pocket may assist her family but seek
in return a more responsible role within the family. Where mothers
are employed, the danger of "latch-key" children arises, children
who at the end of the school day cannot expect to find their mothers
awaiting them at home, a disturbingly frequent phenomenon at
many social levels in some Western countries.

(e) Spiritual values

Considerable unease characterises the search for an
individual commitment to a code of spiritual values. Many young
people declare their need to seek for themselves a personal belief
yet find difficulty in accommodating to lack of external direction.
Some spoke at the seminar of the problem which they encountered
in trying to determine how far their code of values represented
genuine conviction and how far simply a response to pressures
exerted explicitly and implicitly by their elders. The issue of
"conscience" versus "rules" is a matter of much concern

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for young people. The constructive participation of older and younger members of the community in a movement to establish positive and satisfying moral and spiritual tenets could reinforce the cohesion and strength of the whole society. It will not, however, be easy to achieve.

The needs of youth

Despite the clamour for greater independence and fewer constraints these issues may not reflect the fundamental needs of young people. The two basic needs are more probably for confidence and participation. Although they may ask to go their own way, young people would almost certainly respond readily to expressions of confidence on the part of their elders and consequent invitations to co-operate in operating the machinery of their community. A lowering of the age of franchise to 18 years, for example, would provide a practical demonstration of confidence in young people by the older generation and also open the way to direct involvement by young people in the conduct of public affairs; the right to vote carries with it the obligation to participate responsibly.

It is not only at the political level that young people seek status and reassurance, although seminar participants spoke on several occasions of the apprehension occasioned by the apparent lack of cohesive planning for their future. The functions of the Malaysian National Youth Consultative Council were noted with interest and it was thought that these might serve as a useful pattern for replication elsewhere, since the direct link of the Council with the Government ensured that the opinions of the younger element in the society were adequately presented at the highest national level.

Other forms of participation seemed to be both practical and possible. It was suggested,for example, that outlets for the expression of youth's opinions and vehicles for youth's ideas could well be found in both existing and new magazines and periodicals. Articles, news briefs, letters and illustrations circulated to existing media, and possibly gathered into a new periodical devoted to the dissemination of information about youth's contribution to national development, could do much to improve the image of young people and exchange views and opinions.

When considering the special contribution which might be made by educated youth, seminar members felt strongly that real opportunities existed for service by the linking of research studies

and projects to the expressed needs of the society. Theses and dissertations, studies and investigations would lose nothing of their academic validity for being more directly oriented towards practical contemporary issues. Such a redirection of specialist effort could usefully complement and support the practical service by students (and their teachers) to the wellbeing of those less privileged than themselves. Were the major educational institutions thus linked with the national development effort their privileged status would be less open to criticism and their students would have less cause to criticise the irrelevance of their education to the realities of their future lives and careers. Such a re-orientation on the part of higher educational establishments would call for an initial act of commitment to the nation and a continuing reassessment and readjustment of their activities to ensure that they did not run the risk of perpetuating programmes for which the need has passed.

Determining priorities

Four categories of young people were suggested deserving priority when plans and programmes are being considered: educated young people; those in rural areas; the handicapped; and the eldest child in a family (especially the eldest girl).

(a) Educated young people

In the course of the seminar continuing concern was expressed about the under-utilisation of young people with third-level educational and technical qualifications. This group, who would appear at first sight to be counted among the most privileged and favoured of their age-groups, seems to lack the vocational guidance and assistance in finding employment which is organised for those leaving schools. Many of those leaving the University and other higher institutions find themselves unable to obtain posts of a type commensurate with their expectations and unsupported in their search by any agency suited to the purpose. It may be that one practical solution may lie in the young people themselves organising a clearing-house where those in search of employment could be made aware of existing opportunities: the idea that this sort of solution lay in their own hands did not emerge at the seminar.

While accepting that highly educated young people feel a real sense of grievance if their employment expectations remain unrealised, it may be that a general raising of educational levels must result in young people accepting work of a more modest

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nature than that which was available to persons with similar qualifications a decade ago. As the number of young people achieving particular educational standards increases, so the requirements for entry to occupations rise. While this may be inevitable, it still results in much individual disappointment.

(b) <u>Young people in rural areas</u>

Despite the relatively small size of the Maltese islands and the ease of communications, there was a general consensus that young people living outside the major urban areas deserved a degree of priority. Perhaps this was due in part to the fact that traditional constraints and attitudes persist more strongly in the villages and act to the detriment of young people seeking emancipation. In part, too, it may be justified by the desirability of improving material conditions in the villages and so reducing the imbalance of opportunities between the town-bred and the village child. Although deprivation, both social and economic, is not confined to the rural areas, the seminar believed that in setting priorities the rural areas should be given the benefit of "positive discrimination."

(c) <u>The handicapped</u>

Physical or metal handicap add immeasurably to the problems of the young person seeking acceptance by the community at large. At times of full employment the difficulties are less, but the handicapped are particularly exposed to loss of employment during times of economic recession. In school, few teachers are skilled in detecting minor handicaps, so that many inadequately-sighted and hearing-impaired children must pass unsuccessfully through the school system, their poor progress attributed to dulness. In the case of children who are in fact dull or mentally retarded, effective means of diagnosis need to be devised and compensatory measures generally introduced. The success of a society in dealing with its handicapped population is not measured in terms only of the special services which are made available, however essential these may be, but by the degree to which the handicapped are integrated into the society at large and encouraged to contribute to the full extent of their abilities.

(d) <u>The eldest child</u>

The eldest child of a family, and especially the eldest daughter, were considered to merit priority because the particular duties normally required of this child by the parents may result in a form of deprivation. This situation might be

resolved in part were young people to organise themselves to provide, as a form of community service, a system whereby volunteers on a rota basis could relieve these eldest children of some of the more time-consuming tasks with which they are entrusted.

Clearing the lines of communication

It became apparent at the seminar that much goodwill is forfeited and co-operation frustrated because of inadequate lines of communication, vertically, horizontally and chronologically. Vertical communication (between people of different age-groups or of different professional or social standing, for example) ensures that needs are known and policies understood. Horizontal communication (among Ministries, youth workers, groups of young people) helps to create a body of informed opinion, define a common purpose and encourage effective co-operation. Chronological communication (a knowledge of past endeavour) helps to minimise wasted time, money and effort through repetition of previous unsuccessful activities. As Mr. Trudeau, the Canadian Prime Minister, said last year:

"The most striking flaw of the information deluge is the absence of a sense of history which is indispensable to all wisdom."

General observations

"People are human," the Minister of Education remarked to the seminar, implying that change can come about only if based on the realities of the contemporary situation. Malta reflects all the advantages of a homogeneous and tightly-knit island community providing a place and a sense of security for all its members who are content to abide by its custom and tradition. It also displays the constricting effect of the small group wary of upheavel, apprehensive of the threat to its structures occasioned by innovation and change. The younger section of the community recognise that change must come and , indeed, has come. Where are the f.aldettas of twenty years ago? Tourism, television and travel, the three T's now influencing young people even more than the three R's did their grandparents, are broadening horizons, raising aspirations, restructuring the economy, affecting the distribution of wealth and calling into question established attitudes and values. Young people tend to respond more sensitively to these changes, and naturally so, for they have less experience of the existing system and less to lose from changes.

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Their elders, equally naturally, tend to hold fast to the way of life which is familiar and which has proved largely satisfactory. Hence the mutual suspicion between the age-groups, hence the well-advertised "generation gap". If Malta's youth is to build for itself the future which it deserves it will come about through a recognition that the present situation is not unique: every generation views its offspring with apprehension founded in love. Change is inevitable, only the pace of change is now faster than ever before. Youth is not apart from the mainstream of society but an integral component of it. Youth today demands "a piece of the action", meaningful participation, a recognised place in the order of things. It looks to its elders to provide the basis of guidance and initial training; it looks to itself to use those tools to fashion its own destiny.