

Comment

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COMMENT

GETTING THE YOUNG TO CO-OPERATE

The Government is having a closer look at its youth policy. In fact, it is considering the problem from a completely new angle. It is as yet only an idea, which will be examined by the political parties and other responsible bodies of the Swiss community, but the Government plans to institute a "Delegate for Youth" following recommendations by a special working committee. After the various Federal Council "delegates" (namely in the field of housing and prices, not counting delegates within the federal departments, such as those to commercial agreements and development aid) a "delegate to youth" will be appointed. This person would have the task of advising the Government on the policy it should adopt towards youth. He should be in contact with young people and be aware of their needs and aspirations. He would act as an ombudsman between "youth" and the "State". This, at least, is what the Government has in mind.

Mr. Hans Peter Tschudi, Head of the Department of the Interior, stressed in a news conference in September that youth was the "propulsive element" on which the future of our society rested. It was essential to ensure its integration to Society and the State. To obtain this participation it was necessary to define a youth policy.

The Report which prompted the Government's thinking was not as blunt in outlining the necessary objectives, and admitted that any youth policy should be carried out at a local level with the cooperation of youth representatives. But the plan remained vague and immediately prompted pessimistic and sometimes plainly negative comments.

Youth policy in modern democracies consists basically in supplying grants and making more sports or entertainment facilities available. It has also meant employing more social workers

and youth organisers. It has necessarily remained pragmatic and a non-civically motivated affair. The picture is different in totalitarian states. The organisation of Fascist youth movements in Italy and Germany or the cultural revolution in China involved submitting youth to the State which virtually replaced the educational and moral role of the family. Since this is out of question in our individualistic democracies, one wonders what the State can do in the way of "youth policy" other than offer more practical amenities in the way of entertainment, personality development and training.

In his 10th September news conference, Mr. Tschudi spoke of something more fundamental, namely, the participation and contribution of youth to the community. That implicitly involved making young people accept and cooperate with the community's institutions. So what was at stake was, really, how to combat growing dissent among youth and bring young people back into the fold of the established institutions which have made Switzerland what it is.

To our knowledge, no modern European democracy has envisaged a youth policy from such a civically-minded angle. There is no youth policy of this kind in Britain. Giving grants and building polytechnics will not change youth. One wonders to what extent a democratic government can possibly influence the thinking of young people in this day and age. The influence of the State in this respect has diminished progressively with the cracking of other traditional values. In Switzerland, where the State has a stronger hold on youth than elsewhere in the West with civic instruction starting at primary school and obligatory national service, there is a steady dislocation of this framework, as attested by growing voting absentees, demonstrations, drug-addiction, marginal living and rebellion to national service.

But such a description fortunately doesn't apply to all youth. Youth cannot simply be considered as a socially sick group at variance with the remainder of the community and requiring special

attention. As a matter of fact, the vast majority of Swiss youth comply to the system. They may not be ideal citizens — and avoid becoming officers in the Army, fail to vote and be uninterested in the affairs of the State, but work hard to reap the material rewards of the system, abstain from crime and keep the economy running. They do not need to be "nursed" following Mr. Tschudi's terms of reference because they are not a threat to the continuity of the State.

A youth policy would rather aim to reach the margin of youth, the fringe, those that fight in the streets against Zurich police and hide stolen guns. It is most doubtful, however, that any overtures by the establishment would lead to a conversion of these dissenters. It is more likely that they will accept their share of responsibilities in due course as they get older and more aware of the realities of life. The study group sounding the opinion of young people on the relevance of a youth policy noted one young man demanding subsidies from the Confederation in order to build a counter-society!

A further danger stems from the "segregation" of youth implicit in a "youth policy". This means that young people are considered as an outside group, rather in the same way as Old People. The State is traditionally run by successful middle-aged professional men halfway between youth and Old Age both of which are to be treated as special cases. The generation gap is characteristic of our society, but has served to alienate youth. The probable effect of a "youth policy" would be to step up this process.

It seems that, the moral education and welfare of youth being a matter of concern to the whole of Society, the State resting on and defending this society should assume part of the responsibility. Such responsibilities would call however, for a relationship between State, Society and Youth which is disappearing. There is no longer the mutual influence and cohesion which could make a civically-minded youth policy efficient. The role of the State has now been reduced to economic, urban and environmental management. Thus the idea of a youth policy that would aim further than building cultural centres and youth clubs is against the trend of history. Although the idea deserves to be debated, one cannot help viewing the development of western society with fatalism. Lofty exhortations, when they are uttered by the leaders of western countries, fail to change the attitude of those they are meant to convert. These very people will have the most influence in the future development of a society presently losing its guiding principles and threatening to drift into unknown currents.

(PMB)