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# The ways of the young

How comfortable are the children of the Thatcher revolution with the world they find themselves in?

Are young people more or less alienated from their society and social institutions than adults? Is the bravado of alternative dress, tastes in music and leisure activities matched by a different view of the world? Are Thatcher's children, those whose school life has been lived entirely within the period of the present Prime Minister, optimistic or pessimistic about the future? Have they got faith in our institutions and future?

In order to answer some of these questions, I and my colleague Barrie Gunter coordinated a national survey of over 500 twelve to 18 year olds. So that we could compare our adolescents' views with those of adults, we used the same questions as Jowell and Airey in their survey of British Social Attitudes. Among other investigations, we looked at young people's trust in public and private institutions; at their views on the problems facing Britain, on the monarchy, nuclear defence and the law—topics which relate to the question of the extent to which young Britons feel alienated from the adult-dominated society.

We came up with some surprising findings—for example, adolescents seemed to believe that our major institutions were *better* run than did adults (table 1). This applied especially to the banks—which, you might think, would particularly alienate the young; and to independent radio and television, the police and the BBC. Cynics, however, might argue that this is purely because they did not have as much contact with them as adults who were more aware of their shortcomings.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the adults and the adolescents was in their attitudes to the nationalised industries—only 20 per cent of the former thought they were well run compared with 51 per cent of the latter. So much for the Thatcher revolution and the faith in privatisation!

We also found consistent evidence of sex differences with females believing all institutions except the press and prisons to be better run than males who seemed on the whole more sceptical.

Looking to the future (table 2), our adolescents appear to be pretty pessimistic. About 80 per cent expected to see more political terrorism and 73 per cent more city riots and civil disturbance. About half thought a serious nuclear accident likely, and the same number believed that the police in our cities will be able to protect personal property. However, more than two thirds (68 per cent) believe a world war involving Britain and Europe is unlikely, as is the overthrow of the British government.

The rank order of the probability of occurrence is almost identical for adolescents and adults. But the

young are much more likely to think that these horrible events will occur, particularly political terrorism.

Has the obsession of the tabloid press with the royal family changed adolescents' attitudes to the monarchy? Overall, it seemed that young people were less favourably disposed to the monarchy compared with adults (69 against 87 per cent—see table 3). Similarly, whereas 10 per cent of our adolescent sample were in favour of abolishing the monarchy, only 3 per cent of the adult sample expressed these views. Once again there were dramatic sex differences—females were much more in favour of the monarchy (79 per cent) than males (63 per cent) and many fewer women (4 per cent) believed it should be abolished compared with men (15 per cent).

The results from our three questions on nuclear defence show some interesting differences from adults and striking sex variations. Far more of our adolescents (68 per cent) than the adult sample (48 per cent) thought Britain was a *less safe* place to live in because of the siting of American nuclear missiles in the country. Similarly, many more adolescents (49 per cent) than adults (28 per cent) thought Britain *less safe* by having its own independent nuclear missiles—although it should be pointed out that over half (51 per cent) of adolescents thought missiles made Britain safer.

Thirty nine per cent of the adolescents believed that we should get rid of our nuclear weapons, compared with only 19 per cent of the adult sample. And only 42 per cent wanted to keep nuclear weapons compared with 77 per cent of adults, confirming the widely held view that hostility to nuclear weapons in general comes primarily from the young and decreases with age. However, the females in our sample were more for the status quo and for nuclear weapons than males, which seems contrary to some of the statements from women's movements who claim a majority of females against the bomb.

Finally, what about respect for the law? Whereas 53 per cent of adults said that they would obey the law without exception, only 36 per cent of the adolescents agreed that they would. And while 46 per cent of the adults said that they would occasionally break the law to follow their conscience, nearly two thirds (64 per cent) of the adolescents said the same. Thus, whereas less than a third of adults (30 per cent) thought there might be circumstances where they would break the law, over half (51 per cent) of the adolescents could think of such examples.

How do these findings inform current stereotypes



of Britain's adolescents? Do they seem alienated? Optimistic about the future? Law abiding? Apart from their faith in major institutions, adolescents seem to have less respect for the monarchy and are certainly more willing to break the law. Do these results show them to be ignorant, sceptical, naive or anarchic? Clearly the complexity of these (and many other findings) means that no simple label is appropriate. But the overall picture suggests that youth's optimism is now confined more to personal ambitions and aspirations than to the way they perceive the future of their homeland.

*‘Youth's optimism is confined more to personal ambitions and aspirations than to the future of their homeland.’*

Table 1: Faith in institutions

Listed are some of Britain's institutions. From what you know or have heard about each one can you say whether, on the whole, you think it is well run?

	adolescents (per cent)	adults (per cent)
banks	91	85
the police	74	72
independent TV and radio	76	69
the BBC	69	67
the press	50	49
the national health service	42	49
prisons	42	46
manufacturing industry	54	40
the civil service	57	40
local government	41	33
the trade unions	36	27
nationalised industries	51	20

Table 2: The problems facing Britain

		very likely (per cent)	quite likely (per cent)	not very likely (per cent)	not at all likely (per cent)
acts of political terrorism in Britain will be more common events	adolescents	30	50	18	2
	adults	15	38	33	6
riots and civil disturbance in our cities will be common	adolescents	21	43	31	5
	adults	15	41	31	5
there will be a world war involving Britain and Europe	adolescents	11	21	48	20
	adults	6	17	45	23
there will be a serious accident at a British nuclear power station	adolescents	17	40	33	10
	adults	10	32	40	9
the police in our cities will find it impossible to protect our personal safety on the streets	adolescents	16	35	40	9
	adults	17	33	35	8
the government in Britain will be overthrown by revolution	adolescents	11	14	40	35
	adults	2	5	31	54

Table 3: The monarchy

How about the monarchy or the Royal Family in Britain. How important or unimportant do you think it is for Britain to continue to have a monarchy?

	adolescents (per cent)	adults (per cent)
very important	37	65
quite important	32	21
not very important	17	8
not at all important	4	3
should be abolished	10	3

Furnham is  
er in  
ology at the  
city of London.  
findings are  
from his  
oming book  
with Barrie  
, *Anatomy of  
cents*, to be  
ed by  
in 1988.