



HANSARD
SOCIETY

HeadsUp Forum

www.headsup.org.uk

'Living the Law - the Anti-social Behaviour Bill and young people.'
(November 17th - 28th 2003)

A debate offering students space to discuss their views on the Anti-social Behaviour Bill and raise their awareness of the law-making process in Parliament.

Anti-social behaviour is an important issue in the UK. The Home Office places the cost to taxpayers at £3.4 billion a year. Reports of anti-social behaviour regularly appear in national media and, according to recent research, young people are not only the most at risk from anti-social behaviour but are also seen by the public as the main perpetrators. Identifying anti-social behaviour as a major concern in UK communities, the Home Office laid out its strategy to tackle the problems in the Anti-social Behaviour Bill (which became an Act on November 19th).

The Anti-social Behaviour Act and its progress through Parliament proved to be a contentious issue. There was widespread concern that the pre-legislative consultation held with young people was inadequate, especially in relation to the potential impact on the 11 - 18 age group. Therefore, we decided to step in by holding a forum on HeadsUp.

The forum offered a space for students to discuss their views on the Anti-social Behaviour Bill and raise their awareness of the law-making process in Parliament, including the opportunities for the public to contribute. That the legislation was still in its Bill form and being discussed in Parliament also added a compelling factor to this HeadsUp.

The main questions used to frame the debate were:

- Will the proposed anti-social behaviour legislation protect or stigmatise young people?
- Is anti-social behaviour really a big concern or just hype?
- Will the legislation deal with root causes of anti-social behaviour or is it just a quick fix?
- Which measures in the Bill do young people welcome and which do they take issue with?
- What part should young people play in the formulation of new laws and policy?

'Living the Law' was the third UK-wide forum to be held on HeadsUp. Some of the schools taking part had been involved in the previous forums, but for a number of others it was their first experience of using the HeadsUp Forum.

What really set this forum apart from its predecessors was the active involvement of MPs from across the political divide. Home Office Minister, Hazel Blears MP, and John Denham MP, contributed to the student notes by outlining the Government's strategy for tackling anti-social behaviour. And Matthew Green MP, Youth Spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, became the first parliamentarian to make a post into the live flow of the debate.

The participation of these MPs opens up an exciting new dynamic in the HeadsUp project and demonstrates the possibilities for establishing and sustaining an effective dialogue between young people and their parliamentary representatives.

Living the Law: Young people and the Anti-social Behaviour Bill

Key Findings

The process behind the formulation of new laws is complex and difficult enough for the average adult citizen to understand, never mind young people of secondary school age with little prior study of the laws and rules that frame UK society. However, with the assistance of their teachers and by utilising the student-centred breakdowns provided on the HeadsUp site, students were given as much support as possible. As ever, they showed themselves to be confident in approaching and expressing an opinion on the subject matter.

Each HeadsUp forum, though falling some way short of being a comprehensive study, does provide a representative sample of the views and experiences of young people in communities across the UK. The students recognised in anti-social behaviour a serious issue which was disruptive and detrimental to the quality of life for communities and individuals. The offences identified by the students as anti-social behaviour corresponded, in the main, to those highlighted in the Anti-social Behaviour Bill.

Direct Impact

Some of the participants asserted that anti-social behaviour was having a measurably debilitating affect on their community:

Spike... anti-social behaviour is badly effecting our comunity especially Vandalism, drunkenness, litter, and noise polution! Our community has changed so much in such a short space of time!

However, where others conceded the existence in their community of the sort of activity regarded as anti-social behaviour, they did not view it as a problem issue:

Genius... I live in an area where teenage gangs constantly roam the streets at night. They may be noisy, but they've never actually done anything to harm or affect anyone. I realise this isn't the case everywhere, but from my experience it seems the problem of anti-social behaviour has been blown rediculously out of proportion and makes everyone have stereotypical views of all young people!

Whether or not anti-social behaviour affected them directly, the students were supportive of the notion that efforts should be made to tackle it and that the Government were right to lead on the endeavour. Indeed, some proposals laid out in the Anti-social Behaviour Bill were welcomed. The escalation of gun crime, for instance, was a big concern for a number of students:

fred1... we are worried about the increase in gun crime around the country, because nearly everyday you hear of someone being killed through gun crime.

Despite support for certain measures, it was the inclusion of others that led young people to view the Bill as divisive and discriminating. Two specific proposals generated the majority of the students' discussion; these were the plans to give police a) the ability to disperse groups of two or more young people behaving, or with the potential to behave, anti-socially and b) the option of enforcing a curfew on under-16s out after 9pm when not accompanied by an adult.

Controversy

The two proposals were viewed as discriminatory because they inhibited young people from engaging in normal teenage behaviour. Young people manifestly enjoy spending time socialising with each other. At this highly-pressurised age, the group plays an important role in terms of personal and social development:

rambo... I think the part that gives police the power to split up groups is unfair. The main reason we do stand together is because it is safer!

The 'group', 'gang', 'crew', or whatever, is a valued feature in most young peoples' lives. The potential denial of their ability to gather together in social groups was difficult for the participants to accept.

The propensity of young people to hang around in groups is made all the more problematic by the fact that much of this activity takes place out-of-doors after 9pm. The proposal to place a curfew on under-16s out after 9pm without the supervision of an adult was again criticised by the young people taking part:

Keren... Children are worried that plans in the anti-social bill will cause tension between them and the police is this really necessary why should there be a curfew for 9pm the childs curfew should be left up to their parents to decide. If their not causing a nuisance which most people don't then whats the problem.

Singled Out

At the root of the students' opposition to the proposals in the Bill was a perception of unfairness. These young people evidently felt that they were being discriminated against because of their age, which is a form of prejudice. They were also passionately opposed to what they viewed as a proposal to curtail the freedom of the majority as a result of trouble caused by a minority:

Genius... I think the bill is really unfair and takes away young people's freedom! the bill is generally saying all teenagers are anti-social thugs, this isn't true! It looks like the government are looking for a scapegoat for the anti-social behavior problems!

The students were not unreasonable; they recognised the fact that those committing low-level crimes can often be under 18, and that the actions of these young people have an effect on others in the community:

Grace... How can someone not realise that wrecking bus shelters etc. will be payed for by their parents through taxes?

However, they were also keen to point out that young people were by no means solely responsible and, therefore, should not be the only group held culpable:

peacemaker... Vandalism is selfish and thoughtless. It happens everywhere from schools to shops. And teenagers aren't the only people who are anti social or vandals. Adults can be too.

Whether or not the Government are intent on clearing the streets of young people, those taking part in the HeadsUp forum evidently felt their age group had been unfairly singled out for attention in the Anti-social

Behaviour Bill. Indeed, on no other issue raised in any previous HeadsUp Forum had the participants been as united as in their criticism of these two proposals:

Goldilocks... I think the government havn't really bothered to think this one through and should go back to the drawing board.

Roots

In this forum, the students were encouraged not only to express their opinion on the Bill but also to think about the roots of anti-social behaviour and to suggest means of tackling the problem effectively.

They were asked to think about the causes of anti-social behaviour, particularly when it came to young offenders. Imitation was pinpointed as potential source and participants identified not only their peers but older citizens as well:

fred1... i think that some children get their bad habits from examples they see on the streets from adults and this rubs off on them.

Successful television programmes like 'Jackass' and its British spin-offs, 'Dirty Sanchez' and 'Team Squirrel', were also mentioned because they involve skits using self-harm and humiliation of members of the public for humour value.

On a more substantial level, some students believed that an unhappy personal life, low self-esteem or unstable family circumstances at home, were often to blame for anti-social behaviour. Many of the students did pick up on environment as a major factor, and the lack of facilities for under-18s:

Trevor... I think kids do these things because all the places to go are closed down. They are finding new ways to get a BUZZ. All the chances to do things are ruind, so they find something else to do.

Although the conventional wisdom might suggest that lack of facilities is an urban issue, a number of participants spoke of the problem in a rural context:

rouge... in quiet villages there is probaly mre drugs going on dan big 1's coz der is les 2 do.dats y they shud make mre parks and stuff 4 kids 2 play and it shud b supervised so dat it wont get vandilised!

Solutions

When it came to ways of protecting communities and individuals against anti-social behaviour, the students showed support for existing initiatives -

for example, increasing the numbers of undercover officers, CCTV cameras and on-the-spot fines. The intention behind Anti-social Behaviour Orders was also lauded but their effectiveness was questioned:

DarkAngel... There are certain areas in the town that I live that people prefer to stay away from. These are the areas that are over-run by anti-social jobs, who definately deserve to get an ASBO. Unfortunately, as there are so many of them, the idea would be pretty pointless, as the police force would spend their time following all the jobs with ASBOs instead of doing something worthwhile with their jobs.

One other route put forward as a solution was to directly engage young people in efforts set up to deal with anti-social behaviour:

Rudi... I live in Hartlepool and I run a project which helps protect the elderly from violent jobs in their homes and help deter violent youths from targeting them. I do believe that large groups of kids are intimidating but most of them mean no harm at all.

Participation in similar initiatives could without doubt be promoted in the community involvement strand of Citizenship Education.

Consultation

At the core of the controversy over the proposals contained in the Anti-social Behaviour Bill was a concern about the lack of consultation, especially with young people, carried out prior to the drafting of the Bill.

All the students who took part in this HeadsUp Forum demonstrated their willingness and ability to put forward their views and experiences. Indeed, as a suggestion for a solution to offences involving incidents of anti-social behaviour committed by young people, one student posted:

rambo... I think we should get more say in what the govenment do. This could be done by organising more talks with politicians

Encouraging the input of young people in the early stages of the Bill could have helped the Government to identify many of the more controversial elements being proposed. Both Government and Parliament have shown interest in entering into dialogue with young people. With resources, like HeadsUp, established to facilitate it, this dialogue should now become routine procedure

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Key Quotes

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Genius... I live in an area where teenage gangs constantly roam the streets at night. They may be noisy, but they've never actually done anything to harm or affect anyone. I realise this isn't the case everywhere, but from my experience it seems the problem of anti-social behaviour has been blown rediculously out of proportion and makes everyone have stereotypical views of all young people!

fred1... we are worried about the increase in gun crime around the country, because nearly everyday you hear of someone being killed through gun crime.

HeVa03... i dont think thats its veryfair that pepole are blaming all teenagers because it isnt it just some of them but they pull down their community!

Goldilocks... I think quite a few things on this bill are completely unfair. This bill is sterotyping children to make them ALL seem as though they are juvenile deliquints and can't find anything better to do than cause problems, which is totaly wrong! I agree with genius, being taken home by the police if you are under 16 and found on the streets after 9pm, is ridiculous, there may well be some thugs who terrorise people, but we shouldn't all be punished for their actions!! This bill is taking away our freedom, and it doesn't look like anybody is going to give us a say!!!

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Keren... Children are worried that plans in the anti-social bill will cause tension between them and the police is this really necessary why should there be a curfew for 9pm the childs curfew should be left up to their parents to decide. If their not causing a nuisance which most people don't then whats the problem.

rouge... usaly people act anti social becoz they av proz at hme or with dem selves bt der is no need 2 b lke dat 2 other people!!!!

Genius... I think the bill is really unfair and takes away young people's freedom! the bill is generally saying all teenagers are anti-social thugs, this isn't true! It looks like the government are looking for a scapegoat for the anti-social behavoir problems!

batleax... young people are pushed aside by the government. we are all looked on as vandals and criminals because of what a few people do

Grace... How can someone not realise that wrecking bus shelters etc. will be paid for by their parents through taxes?

peacemaker... Vandalism is selfish and thoughtless. It happens everywhere from schools to shops. And teenagers aren't the only people who are anti social or vandals. Adults can be too.

Goldilocks... I think the government havn't really bothered to think this one through and should go back to the drawing board.

rambo... Teenagers should be allowed out after 9pm as long as they dont cause trouble. I think they should change this to under 13. Their parents should be able to decide wether or not they can go out. If there was more police officers driving around towns and citys then their would be less anti social behaviour in the first place. I do agree that there should be curfews for people who have already offended though.

fred1... i think that some children get their bad habits from examples they see on the streets from adults and this rubs off on them.

Trevor... I think kids do these things because all the places to go are closed down. They are finding new ways to get a BUZZ. All the chances to do things are ruind, so they find something else to do.

rouge... in quiet villages there is probaly mre drugs going on dan big 1's coz der is les 2 do.dats y they shud make mre parks and stuff 4 kids 2 play and it shud b supervised so dat it wont get vandilised!

Cinderella... The government has to be seen to be doing something about 'anti-social' behaviour but this isn't the answer. they Should think about their own childhood, and how they would have felt to be blamed for every thing. they think times have changed but we aren't any more anti social than they would have been

DarkAngel... There are certain areas in the town that I live that people prefer to stay away from. These are the areas that are over-run by anti-social yobs, who definately deserve to get an ASBO. Unfortunately, as there are so many of them, the idea would be pretty pointless

Rudi... I live in Hartlepool and I run a project which helps protect the elderly from violent yobs in their homes and help deter violent youths from targeting them. I do believe that large groups of kids are intimidating but most of them mean no harm at all.

Morpheus... I see gangs of youths every day and I'm sure that most people find them intimidating. Maybe the teachers should make more emphasis about the effects of anti-social behavior

sum41... I don't think that it is fair to take under 16's of the street after 9'oclock. i understand if you are doing something wrong and it can be proven but otherwise i think it is really unfair.

spike... I don't think that it is fair to send parents of young offenders to a residential course as it is not really there fault especially if their children don't tell them the truth about where they are going. Why can't they send the offenders away to a course about their behaviours!

rambo... I think we should get more say in what the govenment do. This could be done by organising more talks with politicians