

HEADLINERS

Invisible Politics

Margaret Hodge defends Labour's policies affecting young people.

In an interview with Margaret Hodge, Annabel McLeod and Jon Hudson ask the new minister what is really being done for children and young people.

We were told things would get better when New Labour came to power in 1997. Tony Blair promised that education and young people would be a priority. But is the government working in our best interests? And do politicians really understand us? Around where I live, there's nothing for us to do... The government's done nothing for us

If you ask most young people what they think of politics, many are likely to tell you "it's boring!" Ask them what they think of politicians and you'll get a similar response. That's why the focus of this year's Local Democracy Week, which was held earlier this month, was on young people and connecting them with local government and democracy:

"Young people feel their votes make no difference or that their ideas and needs do not matter," says Julie Robertson from the Local Government Association, who headed the week. "This is reflected in a falling interest in local politics among young people and declining turnout at elections," she adds.

In fact according to a report conducted by the Electoral Commission, as few as 39% of young people aged between 18-24 voted in the last election. The turnout was the lowest since 1918. But these figures only represent young people over the age of 18 who can vote. What about those like us, who are not yet old enough?

We are among the most vulnerable in society - crime, poverty and education are issues affect us directly. Yet we cannot contribute or influence policy-making. Many of us just aren't interested because we feel powerless, as Jenny Roe-Stanton, 17, points out:

"A lot of young people think they can't do anything to change or influence the decisions the government makes on our behalf, so why should we be interested?"

Emma Roberts, 15, agrees. In the area she lives, young people have no where to go and they just hang out on the streets. She reckons the government is interested in young people and their needs.

Emma and Jenny are not alone in feeling this way. Almost all of the young people we spoke to leading up to and during Local Democracy Week said they didn't even know the event was happening and that they had better things to think about than politics. We put their views to the newly appointed Minister for Children, Margaret Hodge. It's her job in the government to represent our views and our voices.

When we told Mrs Hodge that many of the young people we'd spoken to felt the government had done very little for them, she strongly disagreed:

"We've done a lot. People always want more. They forget about what has happened and go onto the next demands," she told us.

"One of the worst legacies New Labour inherited when it came into government... was one of the highest child poverty rates ever. I think the money we've put into child poverty is probably one of the most important things this government has done. I also think our investment in schools has been pretty key... I don't go to a school nowadays where there's no evidence of physical changes - new buildings, better facilities," said Mrs Hodge.

But this is not 15-year-old Emma Sermidi's experience:

"Around where I live, there's nothing for us to do. We need youth clubs that stay open late and in the weekends. The government's done nothing for us."



It's not only that young people feel let down by the Government, they also feel out of touch with the people who are making decisions on our behalf. Hardly anyone we spoke to knew there was a Minister for Children, let alone that her name was Margaret Hodge. Which raises the question, how can someone in such an important role stand for the voice of all of us?

Mrs Hodge accepted that she was not a "household" name:

"It's new job and it takes time for people to get used to that. Most people would just about know Tony Blair's name, possibly some members of the Cabinet, but not much beyond that."

Jon and Annabel interview
Margaret Hodge

But she refuted that it was her responsibility alone to ensure the issues surrounding all young people were taken seriously in government. Instead she believed that young people who were involved in organisations such as the UK Youth Parliament and Children's Express should share the load:

"This can't be top-down or a one way process. What I can do, is find some more money to help make your lives easier and I can provide the structure and opportunities. But actually, you too have got a job to do."

Still, Mrs Hodge accepted there was a lot more that the government could do:

"We've got to get better at making sure that the way we do our politics encourages you. We need to get out there and use ways that engage young people. You care about transport, you care about having facilities, and you care about having a place to go. It's linking these things to the decisions that are made in government."

She is right - we are interested. But we need the opportunity to be more involved in the political process. With no vote until we are 18, any involvement we do have just seems tokenistic.

The United Nations Special Session on Children and the many Youth forums across the country are a positive step. The youth focus of Local Democracy Week in October also shows us that politicians are at least trying to listen and respond to us. If things have got better, as the government claims, young people are yet to see the results. And as Margaret Hodge admitted there is still a long way to go.

Young people need to know that the government is not only interested in them at election time. We also want to know that the promises made will be kept. Some of us will be eligible to vote at the next election. What politicians say now will not only influence whether we vote, but also how we vote.

About the team

This story was produced by Annabel McLeod, 17, and Jon Hudson, 16. It was published in the November/December 2003 issue of YoungMinds Magazine.

0 comments

- [Add a comment to this page](#)

Built on [Cubik](#)
©2012 Headliners

Registered Charity Number 1043300. Supported by the [Department for Children, Schools and Families](#)