

The NCS: Strange Fruit Hanging From The “Magic Money Tree”

Abstract

This article draws on research data from a series of qualitative interviews with professional youth workers to suggest that contemporary English youth policy on citizenship and social action is problematic. It concludes that the civic engagement of young people is best supported by sustained youth and community work, rather than through the National Citizen Service (NCS).

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Introduction

We are living in precarious times, Theresa May’s ‘snap election’ has catapulted the United Kingdom into a minority Conservative administration, and a far cry from the ‘strong and stable’ pre-election mantra. The nation is careering towards a Brexit with a limited mandate, its government, the economy and politics are in a state of flux. As Youniss et al. (2002) suggest, these changes can easily reshape concepts such as national identity, nationhood, and multiculturalism within a globalised world; and in such a moment, the meaning of citizenship can no longer be taken for granted. Moreover, the ‘snap election’ has led to the Conservative government devising a political deal with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) reportedly worth over £1.5 billion additional public spending for Northern Ireland.

The “Magic Money Tree”

The idea of the “Magic Money Tree” was introduced during the 2017 Election campaign debate by Theresa May ([Tapsfield and Ferguson, 2017](#)). It was used as a rhetorical device, a type of loaded language which sought to elicit an emotional response from the audience without further judgement. The phrase can be considered as a political euphemism for “austerity”, intended to deflect any counter political claims, by positing any suggestion that public funding can be unshackled as either folly or foolhardy. The recent ‘[DUP deal](#)’ has been roundly criticised both inside and outside of parliament, with concerns expressed about Unionist party’s ‘social conservative’ agenda. It has sparked a political uproar about the cost of deal at a time of ongoing austerity cuts in the public sector, with cries of “Where is the money for the Tory-DUP deal coming from?” ([Smith and Bloom, 2017](#) online).

Now it would appear that in contrast to Theresa May’s proclamation, a “Magic Money Tree” does exist. Thus, far from a rhetorical device to debunk counter-arguments to austerity cuts, Theresa May’s “Magic Money Tree” represents an ideological tool for allocating funding

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towards the government’s political priorities. It symbolises a unique type of “tree” that bears a particular type of fruit which looks rather rotten to any onlookers, as the ‘new’ NCS funding and contested ‘DUP-deal’ both aptly illustrate. Recent social media debate has seen [#MagicMoneyTree](#) trending on Twitter, and the conclusion from the public is that as we are in the midst of austerity with the public purse strings tightly drawn, this ‘new’ public funding from the “Magic Money Tree” is bearing a very controversial and strange fruit. Moreover, such rhetorical devices can be turned back on those that proposed them, which is precisely the case with the ‘Tory-DUP deal’.

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The idea of an extra pot of money for a youth volunteering scheme in a time of austerity appears at best foolhardy, at worst an absolute folly. In January 2016, then Prime Minister, David Cameron announced the ‘new’ NCS funding, what began as murmurs of surprise have grown steadily as youth centres closures were being widely reported in the British press (see [Butler, 2017](#); [Presser, 2016](#); [UNISON, 2016](#)), further exacerbated by financial pressure placed on local authorities to adopt a social enterprise model for universal provision.

The Daily Mail has described it as a “£1.5billion flop”, declaring that the ‘Flagship scheme facing the axe unless bosses can prove it is value money’ ([Doyle, 2017](#), Online). Also, the National Audit Office ([NAO, 2017](#)) has highlighted concerns about the NCS Trust’s operational accountability and service effectiveness; and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) has questioned its governance arrangements, high operational costs, and expressed serious concerns about its safeguarding arrangements ([House of Commons, 2017](#)).

In his analysis, [Bernard Davies \(2017\)](#) notes that the ‘new’ £1.5 billion NCS money has been dedicated towards a specific type of youth short-term social action initiatives which are restricting other forms of youth social action. A case in point is The Scouting Association, whose evidence submitted to the PAC indicated that its organisation provides children and

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young people with a sustained weekly programme of youth engagement and skills development, at a cost of £550 per participant. In contrast, the latest estimate for the NCS cost per participant is £1,863, for a four week scheme ([NAO, 2017](#)).

So, whilst it could be argued that ‘new’ spending for youth volunteering is welcomed, as it represents the government’s response towards enabling young people to ‘develop greater confidence, self-awareness and responsibility ... encourages personal and social development by working on skills like leadership, teamwork and communication’ ([GOV.UK, 2017](#), online). The concern for youth work practice and young people’s citizenship is that this ‘new’ investment from the “Magic Money Tree” will be allocated to short-term civic activism, designed to produce a type of rotten fruit, namely a subject-citizen who is more ‘active compliant’ (Kennelly and Llewellyn, 2011) rather than a participatory or justice orientated envisaged for the 21st Century citizen (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004).

Research findings: Fresh fruit for rotten vegetables?

The findings presented here are drawn from data collected from in-depth qualitative interviews with ten professional youth worker with a broad range of practice roles, experience and knowledge across a diverse curriculum areas (see [Murphy, 2017](#) for a more detailed methodology). Now, whilst the “Magic Money Tree” may be the source of the ‘new’ money, this analysis provides a more nuanced understanding of the impact of the NCS, and ask the question: Does this new social investment mean we are exchanging fresh fruit for rotten vegetables?

Firstly, the study provides evidence that young people participating in the NCS schemes were already involved in volunteering opportunities; bringing with them key skills such as team-working and inter-personal skills.

We get loads come in saying that they haven’t done any volunteering work, oh I did a weekend away with the scouts, you say that voluntary work ... they say oh I didn’t know that.

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(NCS Worker)

The findings illustrated how young people should be recognised as active citizens as they already demonstrate a commitment to positive social action within their everyday lives. Such examples provide a counter-claims to the negative perceptions of young people as disengaged and anti-social.

I think there are a lot of young people that are doing things that possible don't get recognised, if you look at the Scouts, the Guides, Sunday League football. There are groups of young people that get involved and volunteer, help out; do a whole hoard of different things without necessarily under a badge of citizenship.

(Youth Work Manager)

Secondly, whilst the research indicated that the NCS offered young people an opportunity participate in pro-social civic action, e.g. planting communal gardens. It seems clear that there was less evidence of how the NCS facilitated young people's engagement in more challenging and controversial aspects of their lives:

I think it is very structured rather than say a youth club session where you would just be sitting, being able to chat, and projects would naturally develop from what you talk about with young people. I think the NCS is very much focused without much room for manoeuvre, if they were coming out with racism, for example, I don't know if NCS would have the time to work around that or to stick to the schedule.

(Youth Worker)

This structured approach to learning and participation was also evident in the pedagogy of the NCS and the assumption about how young people need to learn about citizenship. It suggests an incremental and staged approach.

I think before they can understand citizenship in the wider community they definitely need to focus on their local community to start with and slowly graduate their way up as they work their way through education – start local community move on to next transition and you start to broaden your horizons.

(NCS youth worker)

Thirdly, the research study revealed that the NCS programme is having a marked effect on the style and delivery of youth provision, in particular the short-term, and intensive nature of the programme was problematic for sustaining young people's engagement in social

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action and volunteering. The study found that the NCS provided insufficient time to build relationships or support young people in any meaningful ways:

It's a quick fix, I don't think the staff on NCS have time to build relationships with young people, so you wouldn't get to find out any needs they have; for me it's a quick fix, look at me I've got a certificate. I am youth worker I build relationships up with young people so that they can come and tell me things; you haven't got time to do that on NCS. It's a tick box exercise.

(Youth Worker)

Also, these findings suggest the NCS offers a limited scope for critical thinking about citizenship, as one NCS Youth Worker stated “*Social action isn't about social change*”, and that the NCS should be considered as less transformative than youth work. For Westheimer and Kahne, citizenship is conceived as a continuum encompassing a range of social actions, including ‘formal political acts such as voting, political actions such as protesting for a moral cause, and performing a service’ (2004:126). But what emerges from the study is that the focused and time bound design of the NCS projects mean it represents a distinct type of community engagement work.

They want to be involved, but you can't say its youth work. It is very much focused youth work, they have a set agenda, this is what we are gonna do: community project, we gonna do a residential.

(NCS Team Leader)

Finally, there was also evidence that the NCS approach to citizenship is premised on the idea of youth as ‘assets’ within a productive economy and society (Biesta et al. 2009; Bagnall, 2010; [Davies, 2013](#)). Similarly, de [St Croix \(2011\)](#) indicated that NCS programmes are marketed a contributing towards CV-enhancement, and these sentiments were reflected in the research study findings.

Those joining the Spring and Autumn programmes do tend to be college students that are switched on, they know what they're doing and it's about a CV for them.

(NCS Team Leader)

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Moreover, the research findings suggest that the participation rate, becomes a key success factor, and leads to a type of recruitment which negates the principles of social inclusion and equity.

I work a lot in colleges and we see the NCS recruiting in the colleges, so again they recruiting the type of young people who are already motivated and got aspirations to go to college. We don't see any NCS people coming here on our estate to recruit our young people who maybes don't go to college.

(Youth Support Worker)

Furthermore, when the NCS sought to engage disadvantaged young people it often problematised their engagement, suggesting “hard to reach” young people needed to be “fixed” to become socially responsible citizens. Such an approach has been criticised as a ‘deficit model’ of citizenship ([Murphy, 2014b, 2017](#); [de St Croix, 2017](#)).

In most cases the young people that we worked with on the NCS were “hard to reach” ... at times it seemed like you only see their faults, as if we are going to fix them ... the NCS programme will “fix them”. But you also need to see what they have done. So I think sometimes you don't see what they have actually done, you work with them but you don't see how they contribute to society or the community they are living in.

(NCS Project Worker)

Conclusions

There is clear evidence that the NCS makes a significant contribution towards young people's civic engagement through social action projects, including some challenging examples such as awareness-raising activities, which is reflected in evaluation of the programme (see [Murphy, 2014a](#)). These research findings suggest that NCS can be described as a neo-communitarian ([Murphy, 2017](#)) model for youth social action, based on a normative ideal of social justice which emphasises the individual and self-responsibility. In the context of the current political and economic climate it can be argued that the NCS nurtures a form of youth work practice which ‘imposes constraints and raises contradictions; complicating the delivery of services, at the same time as diminishing the rewards of inspired practice at all levels’ ([Mason, 2015](#):19). These changes are emblematic of the ‘new outcome-focused and

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curriculum-led culture’ (Smith, 1988:5) which have resulted in spaces for critical youth work practice becoming more problematic (Cooper, 2012) and is now refashioning youth citizenship in the 21st century.

There is now growing evidence to show that the monies from the “Magic Money Tree” will be used to enable the NCS funding to act as a vanguard for the new market for youth service providers, as the recommendations from the [National Audit Office](#) (2017) indicate the NCS Trust should ‘consider the full range of options for potentially delivering NCS, from contracting to setting a regulatory framework for a market of providers’ (p.11). It suggest that the fruit produced as a result of such investment is reconfiguring the meaning of youth citizenship in the UK. The research findings concord with recent NCS research studies (Mills and Waite, 2017; [Murphy, 2014b](#), [de St Croix, 2017](#)) which demonstrate that the Government rhetoric on citizenship across England implies that young people are identified as consumers of a product, a particular ‘brand’ of citizenship which invokes civic acts such as volunteering, self-restraint and duty to others. It therefore provides some evidence that NCS conflates the notion of ‘rites of passage’ with employability skills as part of successful transitions into adulthood (Bacon, et al., 2013).

The study also revealed a counter-narrative to notion that “*Social action isn’t about social change*”. It suggests citizenship should be part of the everyday language of youth and community work practice, an integral part of progressive and emancipatory practice. The findings indicate that effective practice is based on sustained relationships with young people. Several practitioners were critical of the time-bound and structured nature of the NCS programme, which was categorised as a ‘quick fix’ or ‘tick-box’ type of citizenship, devoid of any meaningful form of criticality.

Therefore, if there is a genuine desire to empower young people to shape their lives in the 21st century, policy makers, educationalists and researchers need to adopt a more nuanced

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understanding of citizenship. It needs to be acknowledged that the most favourable ground for harvesting the best fruit can be found in sustained youth and community based work. These locales provide the most effective space for nurturing such opportunities; a space which recognises that young people already possess the competency to identify solutions to local issues, if only adults would take the time to listen.

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