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Engagement is kids' stuff

The Government wants to connect with young people and has set up a 'youth advisers' panel to hear their views. **Claire Fox** questions the approach

But was it in that damn to be alive

Paul Wheeler is the
Political Skills For



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The nation's teenagers are no doubt feeling Wordsworth's words keenly as we start 2009. Never mind the French Revolution. The DCLG's unveiling of its youth advisers' scheme must surely have got some young hearts racing.

The revolution started before Christmas. Communities secretary, Hazel Blears, declared that her two new 'youth advisers' will act as a 'voice for young people', and tell government what young people want.

They have been chosen from a 300-strong national pool of 15 to 20-year-olds who have all received 'accredited training' as 'young consultants to help public bodies engage meaningfully with young people'. OK, less manning of the barricades and more armed with diplomas, but it does seem youngsters are being given a real say.

Last summer's *Communities in control* White Paper explicitly promised to 'put more power into the hands of younger people' in terms of local decision-making.

More generally, this new fashion for setting up endless youth consultation panels is often posed as a means of engaging youth in the democratic process. But for all the talk of empowerment, there are some dangerously-disempowering and anti-democratic assumptions at play.

Ms Blears enthuses: 'My youth advisers' panel will champion young people, their views and ideas.' We might ask, what gives these advisers the authority to champion their peers' views?

One of them, 20-year-old Rory Birch from

Lancashire, says: 'We... you have our own views on how Who is this 'we' he refers to? lective based on shared political merely an accident of birth-da

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Birch from

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Who is this 'we' he refers to? It is not a col-
lective based on shared political beliefs, but
merely an accident of birth-date.

For all the talk of representing youth per-
spectives, these schemes fly in the face of
representative democracy.

When Mr Birch says he is 'privileged to
be selected to work on the panel', the key
word is selected – note, not elected.

So much for introducing young people to
the principle of democratic mandate. Mr
Birch's colleague Jacqueline Macaulay, 19,
from Southwark, sees her role as demon-
strating 'that young people are... responsi-
ble enough to make important decisions
that affect a large number of people'. But at
her age, she should prove that responsibil-
ity by standing for election and holding her
decisions accountable to the electorate.

It is assumed that the demographic cate-
gory, 'youth', is an undifferentiated bloc
with uniform opinions. When Ms Blears
met her advisers, they focused on 'young
people's views on making green spaces –
like parks, piers and town centres – more
attractive to young people, and protecting
them from vandalism' (riveting stuff).

But is there really a distinct 'youth per-
spective' on green spaces? After all, some
youth may be happy vandals, others may
be nature-lovers, more might be indiffer-
ent. And what about those youth who want
town centres unregulated?

Somehow I doubt Ms Blears will want to

hear from those who like a
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centre on a Saturday night.

Why are politicians interested in young
people's opinions anyway? Is it because
these opinions are riveting or merely
because they are being uttered by a key
demographic from which adults feel dis-
connected?

Surely, it is patronising to clap young peo-
ple's views indiscriminately. Undoubtedly,
16-year-olds can sometimes be insightful.
But let's be honest, more often they are
likely to be banal and derivative because of
their immaturity. That is youth's preroga-
tive. The real problem lies in the fawning
way adults hang on their every word.

When Andy Sawford, chief executive of
the LGiU, suggests council staff need
'training and skills' in Facebook, and Bebo
– 'by far the most popular site for eight to
17-year-olds' – does he really think we can
win authority from young people by aping
their technological gossiping tools?

Does this mean that if every adult politi-
cian learned txt language, donned a hoodie
and gave speeches in rap, young people
would respect them?

Adults should not need to flatter the
young to connect with them. Real connec-
tions occur when youth realise that adults
are wiser, and inhabit a fascinating world of
politics to grow up into, more inspiring
than childish things. ■

Claire Fox is director of the Institute of Ideas

concerted focus on a specific
problem – how to remove
children from harm by violent
adults – rather than general
policy statements.

The response from the Df
since the public outcry over
Haringey has seen a huge
centralisation of decision-making
over child protection, just
time when we want local
councils to be working more effec-
tively with police and health
organisations in their areas.

The recent decision to
appoint directors of children's services
on an intensive retraining
programme at the National
Institute of School Leadership is
an object example of how
politicians look for quick

The college may have
strengths but I am not sure
one of them is knowing
how to use local intelligence to
identify and support
criminally-minded parents.

One big challenge for
councils is how they can
use information provided by
concerned neighbours and
professionals to identify
children at risk to make
more informed decisions about
the welfare of vulnerable children.

None of this will be easy,
especially at a time of diminished
resources. It may well be that
in the short term, we see more
children in the care of the
state authority.

If that is the case, then
councillors in their role as
representative of the
ratepayers' really need
to think about the future for those
children. ■

