**Youth Unemployment in the United Kingdom: The Inside Story**

**The increasing politicisation of the recession and the closely associated spectre of youth unemployment is addressed first hand**

With the continuing emergence of a political class increasingly disassociated from the real effects of the recession, the ever-increasing size of the unemployed population appears to be becoming little more than a pawn in the context of political game playing. The Conservatives continually attribute the escalating numbers of unemployed to the legacy of New Labour's economic project, while the new Labour leader Ed Milliband claims the coalition Government's speedy attempt to resolve the budget deficit is to blame for the highest levels of youth unemployment seen in this country since 1989. What is indisputable is that the youth of this country are having their position in society stripped away by politicians who value populism over and above the interests of those becoming increasingly alienated from active, working society.

**Increasingly alienated**

The argument by the Minister for Work and Pensions, Chris Grayling, that recent figures revealing a jump of 32,000 young unemployed to 951,000 are 'deceptive and misleading' simply doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Upt o one-fifth of youths in Britain are now consigned to the dole queue, leading the Institute for Public Policy Research to warn of an imminent 'double dip' recession. As fears of the spectre of Thatcherism continue to grow, the tendency for most politically active writers has been to seek to apportion blame for the recession and its subsequent effects. In doing so however, they continually fail to appreciate the cultural and psychological effects such issues are having on a generation that has done little to deserve the ill-effects of the previous generation's mistakes. Not until January this year have politicians finally recognised the need to detach political point scoring from the real issue at hand, how to get to grips with the worrying 'long-term structural problem of youth unemployment' as David Cameron, said before Parliament on 19th January 2011. This recognition may have come far too late to prevent many long-term cultural implications.

Inevitably, the nature of the unemployment is unevenly distributed. Recent figures published by The Sun suggest that rates are as high as 35% in South Tyneside and conversely as low as 15% in Central London, with an estimated 60 percent of those aged between 18 and 24-years-old who having never even held a single job. Likewise as many as 260,000 under 16s have grown up in houses where nobody has ever worked. Too regularly journalists are willing to write about the emergence of a 'lost generation' neither in work, education or training, but very rarely do they consider the unfortunate position of the youths themselves. This year alone the Centre for Cities has estimated that 300,000 new graduates and 400,000 school leavers will swell the numbers of job seekers, with only a limited pool of 18,000 new vacancies to compete for as the private sector struggles to fill the void left by the decline in public sector investment (Centreforcities.org/unemployment). As a plethora of new job seekers join the 2.5 million already unemployed, the role of the politicians should be to focus upon preventing as many young people as possible from the 'professional scarring' that accompanies long-term unemployment, rather than simply focusing upon where to apportion blame for the current position of those unable to find work.

**Professional scarring**

The coalition appears to have finally awoken from its financial slumber. The commitment to austerity has finally been replaced by a fresh impetus to provide greater employment opportunities and long-term career prospects. Outside of government, key economists including Ed Balls, are agreed that when the job market picks up young people will benefit as the first in line for prospective employers. Perhaps the economic consequences, along with any social stimuli are registering amongst senior officials for the first time. As the Princes Trust recently estimated that youth unemployment was costing the U.K economy a staggering £4.7 billion a year, the coalition must recognise the need to find a cost effective solution before any long term implications are realised, and has to put the politicisation of the recession and its numerous implications aside until the dust has settled. This solution must be found not only for the sake of the economic recovery, but for the sake of the young unemployed who are increasingly at risk of suffering damage to their long-term career prospects.

In particular, there needs to be a radical rethink on graduate employment, with each graduate in 2011 competing with an average 68 other candidates for each role. The AGR recently estimated that graduate vacancies had fallen by 6.9 percent in the last economic year, and that there are now only 1.8 vacancies available per 100 employees in this country. With numerous employers retreating to the comfort of the 2:1 academic grade for university degrees, many of those who previously regarded university as a stepping stone to a lucrative career have found that they are being locked out of the labour market by a combination of more suitable competition and the existence of a minimum wage that continues to exclude the over 21's from basic positions. These graduates, including myself, appear over-qualified for some jobs and under-experienced for others, as existing career preparation in schools and universities continues to fall below the standard rightfully demanded by employers. The coalition government has to resolve the position of those stranded between two levels of employment, or risk losing some of the most talented individuals abroad in search of employment and further study. The solution must include a readjustment of the hardline stance toward the minimum wage, an acknowledgement of the true extent of the problem, and a much greater understanding of the many sub-sections of 'youth unemployment'.

This argument is supported by the REC's Youth Unemployment Taskforce, having recently argued in favour of a refocusing of government strategy toward the problem of employment between the ages of 18 and 24. Their argument, that young people are ill-prepared to compete in an increasingly challenging employment landscape, is appropriate in places. Certainly higher education needs to do much more to prepare graduates for employment, rather than simply focusing upon the attainment of certain grades. A recently graduated HR student for example will struggle to compete against an experienced member of agency staff, particularly when as of April 2011 agency employees are entitled to equal parity and pay as permanent members of staff. There must also be a much greater acknowledgement of the different issues facing the unemployed. The challenges facing university graduates for example are much different from those facing school leavers, wherein there is a systemic problem with the benefits system that continues to keep young people on a minimum level of sustenance while avoiding the acquisition of new skills.

**An 'increasingly challenging employment landscape'**

There is evidence that such an acknowledgement is beginning to emerge. As of the 24th January 2010, the government announced a new focus upon internships and work experience, to improve the career development young economically active individuals. This new scheme seeks to provide the unemployed with 8 weeks work experience before their benefits are cut, an increase from the previous level of 2. The Confederation of British Industry agrees that it is a positive move for business and jobseekers alike and will help to 'mitigate the worst impacts of the recession'. Such measures are required urgently; with the ILO estimating youth unemployment will reach over 1 million by 2011, and the Oxford Economics Project highlighting the emergence of a further 600,000 graduates and school leavers in 2011 that are set to join a significant unemployed minority.

Clearly, this is not to say that everything in the United Kingdom's employment structure is broken. There has been significant growth in employment in the developing technological industries; the private sector gradually appears to generating new employment opportunities - with an estimated 11,000 new jobs created in the last third of 2010 as indicated in the report Recruitment and Employment Confederation, by Kevin Green, and in some areas such as Southampton and Halton youth unemployment rates have fallen significantly over the past year. There is also significant evidence to suggest that, in relative terms, youth unemployment is not as significant as first feared. We have avoided the 30 percent unemployment rates previously seen throughout the recessions of the 1980s, and even in contemporary economics we remain in a much stronger position than the likes of Spain where youth unemployment has hit a record 38 percent of those eligible to work. The truth is that the government must respond to the evolution of new patterns of employment, just as it always has done before. A new appreciation of issues and employment is required, in the same way that a new approach to education was required under the New Labour government. That I'm unfortunately part of a sizeable unemployed minority as a graduate is unfortunate, but entirely unforeseen. It remains to be seen whether the coalition are upto the task of restoring our country's well-established right to work, before I myself begin to fear that an aspirational career is merely a thing of the past.