

BECOMING AND STAYING CONNECTED
Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa Seminar
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Introduction

It is both an honour and a pleasure to be helping Minister Laila Harre and her officials to launch what I see, for the English-speaking world, as a ground-breaking national *Youth Development Strategy*. Many people have already contributed to this strategic plan, but, naturally, stamina will be needed in many quarters to drive its excellent principles forward.

The Strategy, published and launched today, is far from simply a reflection of the interests of a few whose professionalism lies in public policy development. Its existence reflects a culmination of long-standing but often unsharpened concerns of parents, grandparents, employers, teachers, youth workers, clergy, community leaders, health professionals, police, and not least young people themselves.

Naturally, I am delighted to be here at this time in your lovely country. This, my 14th visit to New Zealand since 1974, suggests that I am far from superficially 'connected', that keyword which is arguably the most central concept in the *Youth Development Strategy*. The linking focus of my talk today is the nature of human connectedness, and how in broad terms that is both formed and is sustained.

In proportion to its relatively low population, New Zealand has unique opportunities as a small democracy to demonstrate how we might live more appropriately together. The 12 to 24 age-range, replete with its varied 'transitions', embodies crucial links in chains of connectedness. 'Living together' needs of course to be far more than a bland or standoffish co-existence. It means being seriously connected across divisions of age, ethnicity, spiritual perception and culture in this complex and confused modern world. I believe that this *Youth Development Strategy* is not only an important template for New Zealand. I dare you all to see this Strategy as a prototype that, in the fullness of time, could aid progress for young people in other nations, not least those of the Commonwealth. But that depends upon there being both political and community will to drive the detail forward. The Strategy now requires many promoting groups, such as the Headteachers' and Employers' Associations, so I hope that the media will give prominence to this vital element of Government social policy.

Politics and policy connectedness

In March 1998 I was privileged to act briefly as a consultant to the Ministry of Youth Affairs. During that time at least a few seeds of what has now emerged were discussed with a range of people with, properly, some cross-departmental representation. I am delighted that, at least in this case, an intervening General Election has here eventually permitted appropriate threads of continuity that are so essential for all efficient social and educational development.

Voters now expect their elected representatives, regardless of party, to demonstrate *constructive connectedness* in actions intended to promote human welfare, and dependent upon tax dollars. As I have already noted, *connectedness lies at the heart of this Youth Development Strategy*. Young people, like the rest of us, need connectedness, and want connectedness of the kind that does not banish but enriches and adds meaning to personal space. At worst, some die all too young through suicide, in the despair of meaninglessness and inner loneliness that arises from an absence of that deep connectedness which bestows experience of personal inner value.

Connectedness too is an essential component of modern government, what our UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has called 'joined-up government', so much easier to talk about than to deliver through teamwork. As the Strategy notes in its programme listings, several departments of government have to be seriously 'on board' this venture, as well as a wide range of voluntary agencies, both local and national. It is good to note that the Minister of Social Services has co-signed the Foreword. But there are real consequences for other sections of government, particularly post-primary education activities and styles of institutional operation that I will mention later.

Connectedness is what I want to term the 'thick glue' of any society. It requires commitment and graft. Bonds worthy of the name are resilient under stress; and that is what connectedness seeks to achieve. Resilient connectedness is what all of us need in varied forms at each life stage.

Nurture and inter-dependence

Under the many pressures of rapid change, and a simultaneous disdain for ancient wisdom, Western societies have become cavalier about connectedness. Distress more than deviance, let alone defiance amongst the young is now our wake-up call about connectedness.

In an unusually varied career, starting in antibiotic research, but largely focused upon the development of children, youth and families, I have been fortunate as well as challenged both to see and to be involved in a wide range of contexts of activity pertaining to human development. Across a wide range of socio-economic circumstances, including young offenders, potential 'high-flyers' and the variously distressed, I have seen many sad, expensive and avoidable consequences of the generally unintentional cultural disregard for the core conditions of youth nurture.

While the world is arguably a safer place than it was in my early childhood during World War Two, notwithstanding last September 11th, some of our current settings for youth formation embody alien features that vie with a culture of sometimes impossibly high emotional and material expectations. Some of our

yearnings for connection are easily misplaced, especially when we are young and inexperienced, and perhaps lack steady mentors.

I wish to emphasise that we cannot take one step into the concept and reality of 'connectedness' without considering the heart of youth's nurture, and the conditions for establishing trust, commitment and mutuality. For all sorts of reasons those are in short supply for people of all age groups, a reality that tends to be self-perpetuating. Given the strong emphasis upon individualism, we need to be continually reminded that we can neither 'be' nor 'become' without each other. The reality of our *inter-dependence*, which operates at different levels of intimacy, is no mushy sentiment, but **a prime law of human motion and emotion.**

My earlier consultancy with the Ministry of Youth affairs occurred not long after the publication in the closing weeks of John Major's Government of an independent Youth Policy report '*Young People as Citizens Now*' (Youth Work Press, 1997). That arose from the modest work of a nationally experienced UK committee that I chaired during 1996. In its turn, that built upon a few short residential 'Consultations' that I had convened in Windsor Castle, including input from 'disadvantaged' young people, during my period as Warden of St George's House, a unique study centre co-founded by HRH the Duke of Edinburgh. Those Consultations were in part influenced by a longer running series on 'family policy', from which serious policies for youth can never be disaggregated, as I shall emphasise later.

[It is perhaps appropriate to pause here to reflect that Prince Philip, in his youth an orphaned refugee and now an octogenarian, has probably influenced Youth Work (as well as the green movement) more than anyone else now alive. He has, as many know, been a far-sighted catalyst and patient encourager of good youth practices through, particularly, The Duke of Edinburgh Awards from which huge numbers of young people have benefited across the globe.]

Youth issues in context

So much by way of background, an important aspect of which is for all of us to recognise that youth development now has important international perspectives. Youth's transitions towards full citizenship participation will I believe increasingly appear on governmental and community agendas, and act as a more dynamic catalyst than in the past upon social and educational policies more widely.

Figure 1 is the summary of the context and risks associated with contemporary youth adapted from my Windsor committee's 1997 report.

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Youth contexts and risks

Implicit in this chart is marked doubt about the overall cultural preparation of young people for shaping a full life, and the associated need for a range of preventative measures that will help to maximise youth's personal and civic potentials.

As the *Youth Development Strategy* points out, the young are our future, and are becoming proportionately fewer. Age is perhaps the last major bastion of at least some improper division that undermines our sense of inter-dependence. Hence it is adults' responsibility, as well as self-interest, to provide the kinds of relational foundations that we now know scientifically (and not only through precept and tradition) are likely to establish young people as healthy, responsive and reliable citizens.

It is clear that the concept of 'Youth Development', as copiously reflected in the Strategy, has a far wider remit than engagement in voluntary youth clubs, for which we have long used the generic term 'Youth Work'. Furthermore, it is widely recognised that 'Youth Work' was so often, and still is a poor relation to, for example, that monstrous misnomer 'full-time schooling'.

Connectedness and nurture

So now I turn to that crucial concept of '*human connectedness*' particularly as it applies to the young. The now published Strategy provides an excellent springboard for this, and not least also for pithy practicalities, for none of us here will wish to see the Strategy Document become but another 'toothless paper tiger'. However, courage and persistence will be necessary, for changes in perception and cultural action are demanded. The challenge is pictorially reflected in the second transparency.

Insert figures 2A/2B (transparency No2) here (NOT AVAILABLE)
Diagrams of connected and disconnected youth (upper and lower)

These two excellent summarising diagrams were included in the Ministry's public consultation exercise last year. The task is to extend the proportion of youngsters with the (upper) positive connectedness pattern, by shrinking the proportion of those at risk of the (lower) negative pattern of disconnectedness or excessive peer group domination of relational space.

These diagrams need a really high profile, along with a third, yet to be shown, that of **unconnected** youth, which are those dangerous 'loners' about whom we should be most concerned. Unconnected young people are those likely never to have experienced serious connection to anyone, even a peer group. They are and feel 'outsiders'; they are hidden by their very isolation. Developmental psychologists classify such youngsters as 'non-attached'; together with those having 'disorganised attachment' patterns, they make up about 10% of all young people. These groups have serious social pathologies and come to form about 90% of the prison population.

Our sense of 'separateness' and 'connectedness' as individuals is one of life's givens, as far back as the point at which we first began as the fertilized ovum from our birth parents became attached, or meaningfully connected, to the uterine wall. We begin and grow through that strong connection for about 9 months; without such strong connection, or 'attachment' the developing foetus miscarries. Then during our passage down the birth canal we experience the first struggle to separate, a necessity if we are to be born and to thrive beyond what has become a claustrophobically tight space within the womb. Very soon, even minutes if not seconds thereafter, we now know how important it is to the

baby's total welfare that a close bond of a different kind is soon established with first mother, and hopefully next, father.

What we call 'nurture' is the social glue for this process of early bonding. But nurture is not only important for infants and young children. It remains fundamental to our sense of relationship, to human society and to personal and emotional health. Nurture, or its absence, cascades through all stages of life-cycle time. Nurture, felt as reliable, is the strong fuel for our emotional and spiritual centres, and we become literally 'lost' minds and souls without it.

Yet nurture is neither experienced nor felt without time and opportunity for both its copious expression and accurate communication. Those are fundamental social commitments and skills that must be both caught and taught if culture and society are to be sustained, let alone improved. In some recent activity-based teaching materials I have shown this pictorially (see transparency 3) as a cycle of 'tender loving care' that, yes, literally makes a decent social world go round.

Insert figure/transparency No.3 here (NOT AVAILABLE)
Cycle of social glue

(Richard Whitfield, *Foundations for a Good Life*, Leader Guide page 154, Marriage Care, London, 2001)

Far from being 'sissy', nurture is the base propellant for community; the specific 'input' that optimises 'social output'. It embodies self-other virtue, reflection, emotional 'mind-reading', mentoring and genuine collaboration. To give reliable nurture demands commitment through choices which inevitably exclude other options.

Emotional minds and attachment

Neuroscience is confirming that we are first emotional beings, with intellectual growth being significantly predicated upon emotional dispositions that are hugely influenced by the social environment. Hence reliable nurturing relationships, embodying what developmental psychologists call 'secure attachment', are crucial for healthy emotional, social, moral and intellectual development.

Sadly, though there never was a golden age, only about half of Westernised children appear to become securely attached, or 'well-connected', by around primary school age. Though there are many causal contributions, that variable seems to be the best predictor available for *all* subsequent indices of civic performance, including educational, economic, health, relational and legal fortunes. We humans are both resilient and vulnerable, and good early attachments are protective of negative outcomes, such as crime, an echo of the earlier connectedness and disconnectedness charts.

If children become securely attached, and the sooner the better, it is likely that good patterns of attachment will be sustained over later years, including their teens when there are other developmental risks, provided that the core carers,

mostly parents, remain positively available. Without reasonably reliable experience of attachment, later relational life often remains impoverished, and is the basic reason why, for example, the adventures of marriage and parenthood are generally very demanding, not least emotionally. For many young people with behavioural difficulties, their key therapeutic need is the creation of a latent reliable parental form of attachment; and after years of insecurity, and the distrust that accompanies it, this is often both expensive and demanding.

Here, this morning, time does not permit me to elaborate details of important findings that have been emerging from relevant neuropsychological and attachment studies, and which now have policy significance. Pictorially much of this can be summarised through the simple contrasting cycles of the next transparency.

Insert figure/transparency No.4 here (NOT AVAILABLE)
Cycles of Emotional Affirmation and Deprivation (upper and lower)

So illustrated, this is hardly rocket science! Indeed, many will properly reflect that these cycles of affirmation and deprivation only confirm what wise people and many ancient teachings in different cultures have known for centuries, often through hard experience.

Connection and commitment

There can however be no serious human connectedness without human commitment.

There is no delivery of children's and young people's 'rights' without particular adults accepting and being actively supported in their care and nurturing responsibilities. The delivery of tender loving care, of loving concern experienced as reliable, always has a practical context. Cultural recognition, resources, status and support for parenting, partnering and mentoring are crucial. As I am prone to say, '*we are nobodies without committed somebodies*'; and carers of all kinds need nurture also, for nobody can give nurture effectively for long upon undercurrents of psychic pain and empty feelings, as the illustrative cycles have shown.

Emerging now from our problematic social ecology are too many emotionally wounded children and young people, including those of what has been properly termed 'affluent neglect'. Nobody has planned such outfalls. They have arisen from neglect amid macro socio-economic change in which some core personal and social values have slipped through our fingers. School and youth-work systems cannot be expected rescue all the harshly wounded, and we know that 'rescue' is generally fiscally expensive. Nor can we rely for the most part upon the various forms of what I call 'outsourced parenting' for the management of upbringing.

Nation States should however be careful about the extent to which they become involved in details of the delivery of the multiplicity of nurturing services. States cannot deliver reliable love and nurture, or the base ingredients of connectedness and identity. Their record of trying to be a caring surrogate

parent is poor, an object lesson of which is embodied in the relatively brief history of the USSR.

States' crucial responsibility is to create the permitting conditions for the solid social experience and exchange of reliable love at the local and family levels.

Thereby sufficient social trust becomes established through the particular and continuing life of community. Stable social budgets can encourage our natural mutuality that, amongst many other positive outcomes, forms the feedstock for managing and sustaining democracy.

Hence a *Youth Development Strategy*, provided it is backed up with interdepartmental goodwill and shifts in resources, has the right kind of hue, and it has to be implemented through delegated trust at the local level.

Implicit agenda challenges: some propositions

This *Youth Development Strategy* embodies much good sense, and should be widely welcomed. On the surface, little of the Strategy appears threatening, nor should it be, at least in principle. However underlying the need for connectedness are matters of how we may practically create and sustain that precious commodity. Over that there are some hard choices to be made about lifestyles and values, about teaching priorities and about the re-making and use of adults' discretionary time. There is no connection without attention, and attention demands more than fleeting focus-time; and as far as young people are concerned (and I have shared intimately in the rearing of four of them) such times are often not 'convenient' amid adult life-patterns. Yet if we do not give our free and welcoming attention, as acts of love, how can we expect pro-social responses?

I would be failing in my duty this morning if I failed to make explicit at least some of these hard choices that real leadership in this field will demand if many of the sentiments of the *Youth Development Strategy* are to be realised. The ambition to make New Zealand a great environment, both natural and social, in which the young can develop is fine, provided movement from such sentiment to the hard realities of the delivery of connectedness is addressed.

So in moving to my concluding remarks for this part of our proceedings, I sharpen some of what is I believe crucial agenda by making propositions concerning five arenas. These propositions will no doubt set a part of the scene for our later panel discussions, and will hopefully be picked up in practical debates about programme development well beyond this launch.

Associated propositions

Proposition 1. The Agenda for Children

Any Youth Development Strategy unavoidably builds upon the preceding stages of infant and child development, and upon the interest, practical concern, skills and emotional resources of the adult population.

Hence, *New Zealand's emerging 'Agenda for Children' must be fully informed by all relevant developmental research, and public policies, including parents' working patterns, and associated fiscal redistribution adapted accordingly.*

Interactions between early childhood science, public policy and practice in most Western societies lack synergy and coherence, and demand dramatic rethinking if a much higher proportion of children are to receive a warm and secure emotional start to life that makes the most of their neurobiological potentials. The later stage of youth well-being and development would benefit directly from this.

Proposition 2. Educational reforms to favour the relational

The Youth Development Strategy requires major changes of style, and shifts in emphasis in the curriculum of particularly the secondary sector, so as to ensure that all young people are better prepared to construct a life in which relational and emotional literacy are central. Such work must also be a part of the ongoing general provision in the tertiary sector, and in community education.

The concerns and implications of contemporary human relational dimensions have to date been barely explored let alone grasped by educational systems. Still we tend to study almost everything under the sun except ourselves. Even much theology is sadly distant from humanity, and therefore our natural spirituality.

Personal, social and civic education have had relatively low status, and the associated curricula have often been insufficiently demanding and lacking scholarly foundations in models of holistic human health. The somewhat paternalistic 'problem-based' approaches to sexual touch, drugs, smoking and so on have made few deep behavioural impacts partly because of a lack of prior understanding of healthy human nature and its development, including our fundamental emotional and moral character.

Few beyond those entering the remedial professions gain serious opportunities for reflection upon the human person in relationship, in connection. A redesigned field of study, freely available to all, should include the following topics:

human development over the life course, study and mapping of human emotions and of the growth of conscience, communication skills and the management of conflict, preparation for dating, partner choice, the possibilities of coupledness (married or otherwise), and the option and skills of parenthood.

With all too few resources, I have spent several years both advocating such high status action, and preparing relevant curriculum and tutor training materials for a wide age range (see for example, *Foundations for a Good Life*, Phase 1, 2001, previously cited).

Proposition 3. Flexible forms for facilitating youth transitions

Young people will in general be better supported and encouraged by much more flexible approaches to periods of time for study and mentored work experience, including 'citizen service work', particularly from the age of 14 upwards.

Over the post-war years we became rather too wedded to the idea of extending upwards the age of obligatory 'full-time' schooling. Given the complexities of managing large secondary schools, their styles of organisation and climate have perhaps always been too frequently 'brain unfriendly' for many young people. Smaller-scale practical settings, at least on a part-time basis, now need to be available, adapting the best of the old apprenticeship schemes for the modern environment, and without any sense that such routes are second-class. Given modern technology, all-age flexible hours 'community learning centres', having panels of youth and adult tutors, could be a helpful part of a fresh, flexible response to the over 14s to which I am drawing attention.

More widely we are going to have to rethink the form and boundaries of employment if we are to revitalise communities, public services and care better for our children and young people. Concerning civic participation, my Windsor Youth Policy Committee wished to promote structured and well-supervised approaches to what we called 'citizen (or civic) service work' (CSW). Such CSW would last for at least six months, and preferably a year, and even become an 'expected' or at least a normal if not obligatory phase of youth/adult transition, even for academic high-fliers. Continuous full-time education is not the best route towards graduate maturity in any case, as many university teachers know only too well.

'Gap' years, an understandable individualistic response, are not universally well used, and do not feed directly into the interstices of social cohesion. Furthermore, there are many avenues in any society through which some form of CSW could be creatively arranged, as a collective marker of a 'rite of passage', now that we have so extended young peoples' phase of dependence, often on family, with the pivotal leaving home processes evolving more slowly.

Proposition 4. Family structures

Policies that encourage the stable two-parent family now need active and sensitive promotion to aid the optimum flowering of youth, without improperly discriminating against young people because of their family circumstances.

The issue of family structures is a delicate one, for there is an enormous cancer of family-related pain in society as a result of the collapse of intimacy and trust, and therefore the dashing of hopes and connectedness for many people. However, the quality and quantity of family relationships is not unrelated to structure if representative samples of families are studied. In general and on average family structure is actually of enormous consequence; for example, we are now very aware of many downstream negative consequences of absent fatherhood. So while we must take especial care over our judgements about particular cases, no serious children and youth policy can duck the family structure variable, not least because attachment systems from childhood impact later partnering and parenting profoundly.

Any society in which the bonds between fathers and mothers are weakening undermines the legitimate interests of children and young people. While an effective net of support from extended families can compensate, that in its turn depends greatly upon on-going male/female bonds between grandparents, aunts, uncles and so on. Now there is a wealth of research that has established beyond doubt the generally protective character of the two-parent family that manages, against so much contemporary discouragement, to hold firm over the life course on a range of health, educational and economic indices. [Here I choose my words most carefully, and I repeat that I am not speaking of particular cases.]

Proposition 5. Dominant cultural values

The on-going sporadic national debate in New Zealand about values and identity is crucial for youth's future.

Many young people are often struggling to define themselves under complex cultural circumstances where it is not clear what adults truly believe in any more, except, apparently, self-protection, excessive competitiveness, materialism and busyness. Their angst of identity is hard for them to name, let alone to address and resolve through new connections. Adult absence or emotional disinterest are aspects of their situation, while advertising and peer pressures help to deaden their spiritual longings. Hence, serious reflection upon our young, and their needs and rights, is properly a challenge to our existing priorities and world-views.

The question of our core values is always fundamental. That issue will never simply evaporate, and hinges upon our views about whom we really are as individuals and as a species, and what are our ultimate purposes. I have noted, for example, that New Zealand's excellent recent Royal Commission Report on Genetic Modification records similar sentiments, and is explicit about the human values underpinning its proposals.

In my view, we might yet benefit from a switch of terminology from values to *virtues*, so gaining more of a policy grip upon the social wounds that so restrict economic performance no less than our human contentment.

From this signal concerning core values and human virtues, it seems natural to conclude with an apt, even prophetic quotation from the late Sir Laurens van der Post, and to follow this with one of my recently published poems that seems to fit this occasion.

Sir Laurens writes implicitly of connectedness, and of our wider purpose.

'As a matter of honour, we must go on working to prevent cultural disaster. Aloneness is a sickness of our time, and civilisation is no longer in possession of any dream to serve. Many of the troubles of modern peoples arise from the fact that we had a deep, warm primitive self from which we became divorced, and that we now despise and repress with deadly ruthlessness.'

Laurens van der Post

(Adapted from his book *Jung and the Story of our Time*, Penguin, 1978)

This poem, that appears in the final part of my unplanned trilogy of prose-poem commentaries on life, its phases, nature, forms and purposes, does I know echo the feelings of many at this crucial phase of our evolutionary history, where our 'smartness' has been found wanting and our values adrift. It speaks of renewal for social sustainability.

We travelled to meet the moon,
Yet it is hard to meet our neighbour.
Striving to conquer outer space,
We neglect our inner space.
We scrape the sky, but reduce our vision,
We plumb the depths of the sea,
Yet board over the unconscious.

Multiplying our possessions and knowledge,
We have shrunken our ethics and lost our judgement.
Information rich, relationship poor,
We have built finer houses,
Yet created more broken homes.
We have more medicines, yet less mental health;
More weapons, yet less security;
Wider highways and more choices amid less trust.

We will remain an unsustainable people
Until we accept that liberty is not licence.
Since Peace on Earth begins in hearts at home,
Home defence is now global defence.

(From *Messages in Time: Life Path and Love's Pattern*, Bracken Bank Books, 2002)

Finally, I note that the womb of the home is where our best hope of connectedness begins, and signals a spectrum of family-friendly policies that will also under-gird support our young people.

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