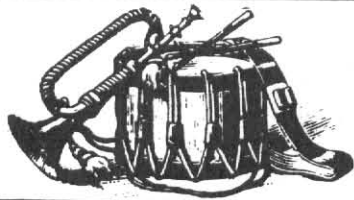


Stand



The children of the welfare state

John Ashton

In Salman Rushdie's novel, *Midnight's Children*, he takes as his theme the generation of Indian babies born at midnight on the fateful day in June 1947 when India threw off the yoke of imperial rule. In a rich mixture of fantasy and historical fact, the ensuing years of independence are described through the eyes of one of those children. A special, almost magical importance is attached to the main character—who is somehow present at all the significant events which occur after independence, and establishes a telepathic communications network with all the *Midnight's Children* throughout the country.

Perhaps we should look at our own post-imperial past the same way. If it were a novel, the title might be *Children of the Welfare State* because the best starting point would be the babies born on 5 July 1948, which you could reasonably describe as Day One of the Welfare State. It was the day when Aneurin Bevan's Health Service Act came into effect.

The welfare state arrived not a moment too soon to provide for the needs of a birth bulge which had started in 1946 and peaked in 1947. These were the demob babies, the babies postponed from the war years. The recent Royal Commission on Population had expressed concern at an apparent decline in birth during the previous depression, and saw a need to replace the war dead. Its opinions were overtaken by a bulge that almost exactly replicated that which had followed the first world war a generation earlier.

The babies born after the first world war were seen as a precious generation, which would expiate the aftertaste of war and build a golden and more egalitarian future. These babies grew up among recession and poverty. But the members of the 1946-48 bulge were born with spoonfuls of National dried milk and welfare orange in their mouths, and an expanding economy before them.

The 1930s sharpened the feeling that there must be a better way to ensure social justice. This was consolidated in the Beveridge report and manifested itself in the legislation of the Attlee government. Aneurin Bevan was born in 1898. The midwives of the welfare state were the generation of politicians who were born towards the end of the 19th century, adolescents during the first world war, job-seeking

adults in the recession, and who then lived through the tribulations of the second world war. The birth bulge of 1946-48 contained the first to benefit from it.

There is a deterministic view of history which assumes an automatic progression to better things against a background of swings in fashion and attitude. One implication of this idea is that, if we only hang on long enough, we'll be back to where we felt most comfortable in our own personal golden age. But presumably, all other things being equal, a child growing up in the twenties and thirties will have turned into a very different adult from one growing up in the fifties and sixties.

So far, very little attention seems to have been paid to this aspect of our social ecology. How are our political leaders shaped by their birth date? The present government seems to be committed to dismantling, or at least questioning, the welfare state. The generation in the ascendant in the Conservative Party now are people

in their fifties who were born during the twenties and thirties. They were children in the thirties, adolescents in the forties, and entered the labour market after the war. Unlike the generation before them (which included Edward Heath and Harold Wilson, both born in 1916), they were too young to have been socially conscious during the general strike of 1926, which was the year in which Margaret Thatcher was born and Rhodes Boyson celebrated his first birthday. When Wall Street crashed in 1929, Norman Tebbit was still a glint in his father's eye. Tebbit wasn't born till 1931. In that same year, also, when the national insurance fund collapsed, overburdened by the weight of unemployment benefit claims, Cecil Parkinson was born.

Some of these future Tory leaders, of course, experienced the hardships of their parents at second hand, and Tebbit senior's bicycle made its now-famous journey. But none of these adulators of Adam Smith

The Pandora's box of the 1960s



personally witnessed the hunger marches of 1931-32. For many of their families, as for many middle class and professional families today, their standard of living actually increased as labour and unit manufacturing costs fell. Like today's adolescents, they were enjoined to work hard and compete with everyone else in order to get a good job (or, indeed, any job) when they grew up.

Some of that generation were evacuated during the war, with all that that implied in terms of emotional deprivation and a hardening of attitudes and personalities. Christianity, sublimation and the Protestant work ethic were still the key elements in the adult response to natural instincts. Adolescence can't have been much fun; the teenager had yet to be discovered; and sex was something you did when you were married. All in all, not a very promising start.

The Thatcher generation

The Thatcher interwar generation was a small one, compared with the birth bulge that preceded it. The awful experiences of these elder children and cousins presumably shaped the attitudes of parents in giving the Thatcher generation their social training as the thirties unfolded. When *this* generation entered the labour market after the war, they enjoyed all the benefits of an expanding economy run by their parents' generation to the Butskellite formula (Butler born 1902, Gaitskell born 1906). Their standard of living was expanding all the time. It must have seemed to them that these were the rewards for their self-denial and hard work: an ultimate reinforcement of the work ethic.

Then somebody changed the rules. The consumer-led boom of the fifties needed to expand its markets; trade with the Commonwealth was in decline; the teenager was discovered. 1941 had been a low point for births, but thereafter each year picked up until 1947. From 1955 onwards, a bigger crop of teenagers came to market every year. Not only were these Children of the Welfare State potential customers, but also they were needed in the workforce. They became a major source of purchasing power.

Although they were a bulge generation, labour was in short supply and they enjoyed full employment. They bought clothes and records, flaunted their sexuality and energy, and were pandered to by the marketers of ephemera. A Pandora's box was opened, which would lead to the drugs and sex and rock'n'roll of the sixties and seventies. Their shared experience of growing up together under the spotlight led to as intense a sense of group identity and shared consciousness as among the Midnight's Children.

The barriers were coming down one by one, ushered in by the benign hand of an older generation with a sympathy for the young. The generations of Macmillan (born 1894) and Wilson were old enough to understand the meaning of war, poverty and unemployment. They were the archi-

fects of the swinging sixties and the representatives of a generation which invested generously in youth. Their mission was to build an affluent future for the postwar generation.

The way they did it has become unfashionable, but what they achieved now seems remarkable. Full employment, rising living standards, expansion of the arts and of human horizons on an unprecedentedly popular scale: no wonder there was a constant sense of euphoria. The Wilson governments of 1964-70 presided over a whole string of enlightened social legislation, covering the death penalty, divorce, abortion, sexual offences and censorship. There was a flowering of youth culture among the Children of the Welfare State. Never in our history has there been such a high investment in material standards of living and educational and cultural opportunities. It is this investment which is now under attack from the grey generation in power.

Speaking to a meeting of Conservatives in Harrogate last year, Mrs Thatcher took the opportunity to attack what she called the "claptrap of the sixties": "We are reaping what was sown in the sixties. The fashionable theories and permissive claptrap set the scene for a society in which the old virtues of discipline and self-restraint were denigrated."

In making this speech, she alluded to increases in the recorded crime rates (though the growth in these rates has in fact been fairly steady since the war and continues under the present government). Rhodes Boyson has frequently warmed to this theme, also. In a speech at Poole, he laid the responsibility for rioting youths, football hooligans and murderous muggings on the sins committed by the parents of today's disillusioned youths: "These were the years when anything went and all sets of values were under attack. Children were brought up in a pathless desert where the world was to be exploited not served."

The shadow of the sixties

He seems to have got his generations muddled up. Presumably he had in mind the brief grey generation who had just passed through their teens in the slipstream of the bulge generation. They were the younger siblings or cousins of the Children of the Welfare State. They lived in the shadow of the sixties, and had the dubious advantage of being brought up by the Thatcher generation. This group of babies, born in the trough of 1952-55, is generally credited with having grown up into the most boring and unimaginative teenagers for a long time. Their peak of achievement was to give us punk. Their cultural expression contained large elements of crypto-fascism.

Those who were actually teenagers as Rhodes Boyson spoke deserve more careful consideration. Those with an average age of 17 in 1982 (ie, born 1965) were a much larger bulge population even than the 1947 generation. They are already being called the new Lost Generation. There may be no silver lining for them in the form of a

new postwar boom. After all, another war would be one big boom.

The teenagers who took part in the riots and street fighting of 1981 are united in a common sense of betrayal, and they are thoroughly alienated. Their spontaneous intelligence networks and telepathy were evident in the spring and summer of that year. It is salutary to note how much effort the government made to put the blame on outside organisers and agitators. The idea that a generation can spontaneously organise itself is far too threatening.

One of the interesting dimensions to this collective consciousness is the way in which there seems to be some bridge of understanding between different bulge-generations. Like recognises like. The CND torch has been handed down to the Children of the Welfare State, and now on again to the generation of 1965.

It is difficult to know at this stage quite what has happened to all those Children of the Welfare State (18 in 1968; 35 now). You can only go on hearsay and some tit-bits of information. Some dropped out, some died as a result of drugs, some dropped in and became respectable; some got married. But it still claims a collective consciousness *à la* Rushdie. Some have only recently started to have their children, but most have had children already. A sizeable proportion of those who married are by now divorced and re-married.

Challenging the status quo

But the key question is: what will this generation itself be like when it has the opportunity to assume the mantle of power?

As a Child of the Welfare State myself (born 27 May 1947), I am very aware that Ken Livingstone and his colleagues on the GLC have their counterparts all round the country, who are committed to a form of real, libertarian, socialist change (see John Gyford's article on page 91 this week), far removed from the stultifying, bureaucratic, eastern-type socialism of which they are accused. This new generation of activists is well educated, culturally diverse and confident in its challenge to the status quo.

And will these Children of the Welfare State turn out to have cloned another "1968" generation of adolescents as their own children? If so, *those* children will begin to hit the streets about 1986, if you assume that on average they were born when their parents were 23.

But even if these children reproduce their parents' attitudes, we shall in due course—if my general hypothesis here is correct—witness another conservative group. This will be the small generation of 1977, who are now entering primary school at a time of dire social malaise.

Will they attempt to wreak havoc with any remaining enlightened social programmes, when they come to power towards the end of the 2020s? Or will the generations of 1947 and 1965—the Children and Grandchildren of the Welfare State?—coalesce to achieve the sort of irreversible social change which the Bennite left advocates?