

Why are our children so miserable?

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In this morning's video I note that a survey has suggested that young people in the UK are much more dissatisfied with their lives than equivalent teenagers are in other countries. Could it be that our economic model is depriving them of hope, opportunity and the chance of well-being?

https://youtu.be/UJ2yQXYzJzk?si=B0WcOhoHHLte4k_-

The audio file is here:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=ksdz8-16be536-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=c73a3a&font-color=&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=ff6d00

This is the transcript:

Why are children in the UK so miserable?

In the last week, the Children's Society, a well-known charity operating in this country, has published a survey that suggests 15-year-olds living in the UK are the most unhappy children in Europe.

Now, I admit that they did not survey every country in Europe, but they did survey a wide selection of countries, from relatively low-earning Romania, through to high earning the Netherlands and Germany, and whoever we are compared with our 15-year-olds are the most miserable.

22 per cent of young people in the UK are not satisfied with their life prospects. When

we get to the Netherlands, it's only 6 per cent, and that is a stark contrast.

So why are young people in the UK Likely to be so unhappy? It's a subject to which I've given quite a lot of thought because, quite clearly, they have a right to well-being.

If you don't have well-being at the age of 15, when are you ever going to get it?

And yet it appears that a great many of our young people feel that way. There are a great many reasons for this, which I think are peculiar to the UK, and which we could address, and which Labour should be addressing, although I doubt that it will. Let me run through some of them.

One very obvious reason why young people in this country feel that they are being victimised if you like, is Brexit. They're being denied the opportunity to move freely in Europe. Keir Starmer is standing up and proudly saying he is going to deny this opportunity to people under the age of 30, even though other countries in Europe want our young people to have that chance. It's quite extraordinary that he is picking on our young people in this way. No wonder they feel as though they have a government that is not on their side.

They also have good reason to feel that the government is not on their side when it comes to poverty. Remember that nearly a million children in the UK as a whole live in poverty, and sometimes in extreme poverty, because of the government's choice to impose a two-child benefit cap. But there are plenty of other benefits that also impact seriously on the well-being of young children. And that is something that Labour could do something about.

Housing is also a big issue. We know that far too many people live in poor-quality private rented accommodation, subject to the vagaries of the market, and having to change schools and homes and friendship groups and everything else as a consequence, far too often. People are too vulnerable when they're living in poverty. Families are at risk as a consequence. And children bear the price for that. Labour needs to improve the security of tenants in private rented accommodation so that children have the certainty that they need to develop as young people. But it isn't planning to do it.

There are many other things. For example, in the UK we eat more ultra-processed food than any other country in Europe. And poor diet, which is heavily associated with the consumption of ultra-processed foods, is a major factor in the creation of depression.

Excess fructose in a young person's diet is very likely to lead to depression. We consume too much fructose. Our young people consume too much fast food. The consequence is plain to see. They are unhappy. They're also obese, and the two might well go together.

What else is there? There's a lack of opportunity. Young people are treated as a commodity in the UK. We see that in our education system. Decades of largely Tory, but also Labour, education reforms have tried to standardise the educational process in this country to the point where a child feels as though they are pushed through an education process where they have to perform to pre-agreed standards or they are deemed to be a failure.

Michael Gove's insistence that every child must retake English and Maths GCSEs, even though the content of much of the syllabus in both those subjects is completely irrelevant to their ability to actually function in the world at large, is a clear indication of this. Quality control of childhood is a feature of our education system when the ability to explore, explain and understand is ignored.

No wonder children feel as though they're being denied opportunity by the education system that doesn't let them explore who they might wish to be. One of the refrains I often hear amongst my friendship group, when we look back at our careers, and that is something we now do, is that most of us did things that we were never told that we were able to undertake when at school.

Schools narrowly focus young people on an academic career. That is just so wrong for so many young people. I might have benefited from an academic career because I ended up as an academic. But a tiny proportion of people in this country do, and most do not benefit from the way we teach. Of course, young people are unhappy as a result.

And what else is there? There is the political environment. When we have had 14 years of austerity that has deliberately undermined the well-being of people in this country, and with Labour now talking about the fact that there will be more pain, is it really any great surprise that young people are unhappy?

Where is the politics of hope that young people should have an entitlement to enjoy?

I know it is commonly said that the 1970s were, apparently, a terrible time to be alive. Well, I'll tell you. I don't believe that was true, and I happened to be growing up and did my teenage years pretty much throughout the 1970s. And they were a great time to be alive, for a very simple and straightforward reason. There was hope.

I don't think anyone I knew - and I knew a wide range of people in the 1970s, young people that is - felt that we were without prospects. Whether we wanted to be a gardener, or a professor, or an accountant, or a tax official, a civil servant, a builder, whatever it might have been.

It was easy to achieve that goal. We all knew that, in effect, we could do what we wanted.

There was an apprenticeship available to us. A genuine apprenticeship, if that's what

we wanted. Not some faux one of the sort now made available by large companies because they wish to use up government funding. No, there was real training in very many skills within the economy so that people had a chance of acquiring the opportunity to maintain themselves, maintain a family, have children in a home that they might well own or live in with security of tenure. And none of that exists now for young people. Are you surprised that they're miserable?

I'm not. If we are to have genuine reform in this country, we have to recreate that hope. And we could. Hope is not dependent on owning the highest grade of iPad, or phone, or the greatest number of clothes, or whatever it is. Hope is dependent on having opportunity. And we have a political system that is intent on denying it.

And that is why so many young people are living in a world where they don't feel, in this country at least, that they have the chance to flourish. And that really worries me.