



Frank Glendenning Memorial Lecture 2007

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THE FRANK GLENDENNING MEMORIAL LECTURE

U3ALOGY; THE THINKING BEHIND THE U3A IN THE UK

It is pleasant to join again with old acquaintances in the field of older age learning, with many of whom I've pursued varied campaign trails in the cause of a more positive older age. I've been of late out of what now is, I think, termed the loop, but I trust you would accept that I have been, in the stirring words of the old Salvation Army slogan, 'not lost, but gone before.'

And it is doubly pleasing to be invited to speak on a topic in remembrance of Frank Glendenning's own professional and, indeed, social concerns. Like many of you, I benefited from an association with him, and thereby with his combine of careful scholarship, burning conviction and active participation. The connections of the work of the Centre for Policy on Ageing, during my directorate there, with that of the University of Keele and, equally, the Beth Johnson Foundation, both of which agencies were fortunate in Frank's indefatigable involvement at that same time, form my own special memories of an important and compassionate figure.

In discussing the University of the Third Age as an ideological construct, however, I am well aware that theory and practice are not the most comfortable of bedfellows, but I did think it appropriate, on a day devoted to older age learning and in a talk dedicated to one of its most illustrious advocates, to analyse some of the thought that guided its founders towards the peculiar styling of the U3A in the UK, not without some apology for the autobiographical notes that occasionally seem to have intervened in the discourse

The U3A in the UK was founded in 1982 and this year celebrates its 25th anniversary. A generation has passed. All the original members of my own local group have died and I am able to cite cases, in some groups, of the children of former members joining, on retirement, in their parent's footsteps. There are now 621 groups and the total number of current members is 168,000. However, having conducted a count based on the continuous records of 105 U3As, I have been able to estimate that approaching 400,000 people have been members of British U3As.

There are 33 regional or area networks, and, across this warp, there is threaded the weft of 40 subject networks. I have calculated that there were, in 2004, 14,000 interest groups in mostly weekly operation. In Guildford I found two women who each attended eight such groups; in Swindon a man and a woman who were members of nine groups, and, finally, a woman in Dunstable who contrives to go to eleven activities. I suspect there are orthodox university tutors who would welcome this degree of engagement by their students.

It is occasionally said that some of the activities are trivial, as in bridge or scrabble. One must assume that these puritanical souls critics, when at university themselves, played football or joined the drama society. When it comes to such roundedness, I

was much attracted to the man I met in Sheffield who was in three interest-groups – walking, painting and philosophy. The Renaissance lives yet!

The U3A in the UK, then, is bustlingly alive and briskly kicking. The ‘how’ question is straightforwardly answered. It is the ‘why’ question that is more problematic. Why was it resolved to establish this style of U3A action? The responsibility lies with the founding fathers, recognised by the U3A as Michael Young, Peter Laslett and myself, although, as the two older men had been my gurus for some considerable time, I was inclined, were I a founding father, to view them as founding grandfathers. Moreover, the fourth and executive member of the initial national committee was Diane Norton, and to sustain that familial analogue, possibly she should be described as a founding niece. The committee was very mobile, laterally if not upwardly, to the extent of holding meetings whilst travelling, somewhat perilously, in Michael Young’s jalopy, itself a tribute to the Fourth Age. Mobility was, nonetheless, the key. We assumed the task of establishing a self-mobilising mesh of learning circles.

But why? The U3A did not spring from nowhere. The first assumption might, of course, be that it took its cue, as well as its name, from the French version. It would be difficult to exaggerate the inspiration that we gained from the success of the French U3A, with its wondrous proof that there could be educational life after the economic death of retirement. Equally, it would be difficult to exaggerate the distance we set between the working of the French U3A and what we had in mind for Britain. Much as we admired the effectiveness of the French model, neither Michael Young nor myself felt comfortable with the concept in terms of our own thinking and professional concerns. Peter Laslett recognised, as we did, its value, but he became increasingly less enamoured of its workings as time passed. It has sometimes been suggested that he turned to the British U3A alternative when thwarted by Cambridge University’s refusal to adopt the French U3A model as such. This is not strictly true. What he had sought, and was certainly refused, was some university support for something closer to the new concept. Indeed, I recall one meeting when he argued that colleges, which denied free assistance to retired people who had paid up front in a lifetime of taxes, should be ‘pilloried in the press’.

Peter Laslett’s contribution to an understanding of older age requires little rehearsal in this assembly. His spirited definition of the Third Age as an unprecedented phase in the life-cycle has proved seminal. For the first time in any society anywhere a large bloc of inhabitants was surviving the normal chores of adulthood, that is, work and family-raising, and enduring in that phase for lengthy periods. So unprecedented was this phenomenon that it might be described as ‘post-adult’, in that hitherto, for both demographic and socio-economic reasons, few had survived for long the self-defining vocational and child-rearing roles of adult life. This, then, was the framework. What could one do to foster the ideal of the ‘new’ old person, positively as active citizen rather than negatively as social casualty?

For myself, I had been inducted into this kind of thinking, when I was working for and with Michael Young, for Peter Laslett was a vital cog in the Youngian circle, and the pair had been heavily involved, for instance, in the establishment of the Open University and other distance learning schemes, like the National and International Extension Colleges. Having worked under Michael Young’s aegis on Plowden-orientated community education projects for socially disadvantaged areas, I had

joined him at the newly created National Consumer Council, where he was the founder-chairman, and I became Head of the Public Affairs Unit, with, as well as a remit in parliamentary and media relations, instructions to further the cause of the users of public services, like education, but also health, social services, transport and other public utilities.

I recall Peter Laslett visiting me there and, in his vigorous manner, demanding that 'I forget all this obsessive nonsense about children, youth and what not and concentrate on the real coming issue, that of old age'. Suitably chastened, I looked about me and soon spotted the opportunity to apply to become Director of the Centre for Policy on Ageing, just at the point where it changed its role to that of a think-tank. Michael Young was also showing a particular interest in older age. As early as 1978 he had asked me to draft an internal paper on education for older people, called 'Ruskins for the Retired', while no one has ever taken a more fundamentalist view than he did on age discrimination, with his startling demand at the British Association in 1990 that the official use of birthdays should be banned under data protection legislation. Moreover, the late 1970s was a time of quite bustling activity in this field, with charters and analyses and conferences, and with scholars like Brian Groombridge, David James and, of course, Frank Glendenning himself playing outstanding and crucial parts in the unfolding drama.

Thus there was little doubt that, for the three of us, the moment and the atmosphere was propitious, first, for a foray into the old age field, and, second, for a venture of an educational kind. But what sort of social organisation should it take?

The first clue to the answer is that, apart from being lifelong Labour Party supporters, with Michael Young famous for being the drafter of the celebrated 1945 Labour manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*, we were each Utopian or Ethical Socialists. In Peter Laslett's case, this was forcefully demonstrated in his insistence that older people had their personal gifts and experience suffocated by a lethargic and unimaginative officialdom. In my case, it was matter of sitting at the feet of Gamaliel in the person of Michael Young.

Michael Young, for his generation, inherited the mantle of what is sometimes called English Ethical Socialism from R.H. Tawney and, beforehand, the likes of Robert Owen, or, seeking further afield, the European communitarians, such as Etienne Cabet, Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier. Scornfully dismissed as 'utopian' by the so-called Scientific Socialists of Marxist vintage, they were and remained less apocalyptic and triumphalist than these revolutionaries. It was a wryer, more whimsical creed, one that recognised the possibility of setbacks, and acknowledged that it might be a case of one step forwards, two steps back. Where the Scientific Socialists might have sung *The Red Flag*, Michael Young, had he been as musically talented as his father who led huge hosts in community singing in Hyde Park, would have warbled, after Fred Astaire, 'Pick yourself up, dust yourself down and start all over again.'

The three great demands of revolutionary France were 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. Liberty has done particularly well, while equality, at least in the guise of uniformity of opportunity, has enjoyed an occasional outing. Fraternity, to which we should add sorority, for Robespierre and company were not too hot on gender equity,

has scarcely had a look in. The three should be in creative tension; liberty, without the checks and balances of the other two, produces, as witness today, a society of licence and privilege. Not long before he died, Michael Young told me that, had he been twenty years younger, he would have launched a society for the procurement of socio-economic equality; alas, alas, for that. And how poignant that, fifty years after the publication of his award-winning satire, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, we have Labour politicians using the word 'meritocracy' admiringly.

However, behind most of his many social entrepreneurial exercises lurked the fraternal/sororial motif. Although he never envisaged, like Robert Owen, the actual and discrete fraternal community, it was his method to inveigle popular democracy and co-operative practice into the interstices of everyday life. He was cute, too. He advised his henchmen, such as myself, that when we trying to start such schemes in Labour local authorities we should call it 'mutual aid' and in Conservative authorities, 'self-help'. The enemy was what he called 'Giantism'. These were the huge bodies that controlled access to services and products. They might be nationalised industries, governmental concerns, and large private commercial operations or, for that matter, heavyweight trades unions. The user, the citizen, the little man, woman or child, all those passengers on the Clapham Omnibus, could be crushed by their weight. I recall vividly a moment in the 1970s, when, with industrial action threatening the NHS, he spoke of the forces of management ranged against the forces of the unionised workers, with the patients, lying supine in their hospital cots, and with no one properly to represent their interest.

This yearning for life on a human scale, and with a human face, led him to back plans to foster consumer input into the control of schools, health centres and hospitals, social housing, a wide range of local authority services, transport (he landed me with a role in that field for almost twenty years) the public utilities, but also overtly private concerns, like the motor car and garage services, and the old-style building societies. As one picturesque example, I ran, on his behalf, and for some years, the Bulk Buy Bureau, an advisory point for groups that wished to purchase foodstuffs co-operatively. For a number of years I organised, under his generalship, educational advice points in Butlin's Holiday camps – the *Guardian* headline ran 'The Coming Together of Two Ghastly British Institutions; Butlin's and State Education'. He also arranged for a series of commuter learning circles on the then British Rail network, dubbed by the press, 'the brain train.' One Tuesday morning he came in the office and told us he had begun talks with a view to its readers owning and running the *Observer* newspaper.

Thus the ancestors of the U3A were, not, for him, the fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge, but the Rochdale Pioneers. Nearer in time, it was the Pre-school Playgroup movement, with which both Michael Young and I had had dealings. We regarded it as the finest exercise in social co-operation in Britain since World War II. When I have referred at U3A meetings to playgroups as a model, I have received answering nods from people who, having been pre-school mums and dads in mid 20th century, recognised the 'mutual aid' connections.

Hence we embarked, apropos older people, on the application of the co-operative principle to learning, to the process of learning and to the organisation of learning. It should never be thought that we adopted a second-string order of practice because we

had no money and could not afford a luxurious option. It is correct that we would, given the circumstances, have had to make a virtue of necessity, but, on this occasion, the virtue was uppermost. Not only did we assume that, in quotes, 'ordinary' people could run their own affairs, but that it was appropriate for them to do so by threading their educational activities into the general fabric of the community, not only in local amenities, like church halls, but, crucially, in people's own homes, a mile and a culture away from what that leading and salient community educator, Henry Morris, inventor of the Cambridgeshire Village Colleges, called the 'secluded school', the cloistered, self-absorbed, embattled scholastic fortress or monastery, deliberately cutting itself off from its host community. This de-institutionalisation of education was a critical item on the agenda, for no other reason that we firmly believed that this U3A notion was not a pragmatic, reach-me-down version, but a genuine improvement on past and current practice.

Even at the methodological level, we favoured, to employ the Sunday-go-to-meeting words, the 'andragogic' over the 'pedagogic' approach, where, instead of a deficit model of didactic knowledge-processing and bespoke instruction, one might encourage a credit model of dialogic knowledge-sharing and reflective problem-solving. Ideally, the tutor/student mode is replaced in the U3A by group membership, with the group leader the steward rather than the dictator of the process. Above all, there was a confirmation of that relishable sense that there is no genuine education without enjoyment, preferably in pleasing social fellowship. There was, importantly, a realistic endorsement of that fine phrase of the American educational philosopher, John Dewey, that education should not be 'preparation for' but 'participation in'.

Next, we had all sadly experienced both the local project that succeeded, but for which there was no national agency to proclaim its benefits, and the national voice that advanced a solution, but for which there were no local demonstrations to illustrate it. So we were determined to establish both local portrayals, with, initially, some fifteen starters, alongside, with Dianne Norton at the resilient helm, a national focus. At the same time, we were well aware that, by cultivating largely autonomous groups within a national frame, we were obeying a chief tenet of Utopian Socialist practice, that is the conjoining of the circles of activity in what, in political science jargon, is legally and effectively, a confederation. With a democratic line running from the interest-groups, through the overall local U3A, via the area or regional network, to the national fount, we come close to what the communitarian Socialist, Kropotkin, called 'a league of leagues.'

The spontaneity of response to the idea was breathtaking in many places. One of Michael Young's criticisms of the bureaucracy and officialdom of Giantism was its tedium, caution and prolixity. In my monograph, *500 Beacons; the U3A Story*, I juxtaposed the tale of Manchester, where 30 professional adult educators met in committee for eighteen months and never created even one tiny U3A, and the opening of the Taunton U3A in the words of Jean Frost: 'Come to the meeting in the municipal hall', said Marion Harvey as we walked together out of church, taking it for granted that I had read her letter in the church magazine. I had not and asked what it was about. 'I want to start a University of the Third Age', she said, 'three o'clock next Tuesday'. And she did.

There was professional opposition, chiefly from protectionist tutors who believed their jobs would be imperilled by the spread of collaborative learning. Peter Shea, a familiar name to many of you, was one who was hauled before his trade union branch to explain his misdeeds in assisting an organisation that did not pay its tutors. The most extreme example of professional self-absorption that I ever encountered was in Glasgow, where, at the behest of Robin Webster, another name familiar to many of you, I was attempting vainly to sell the concept to an audience that included several adult educators. I was told in very choleric and outraged terms that it was, and I quote, 'dangerous' to permit lay people to organise their own educational affairs.

There was also an interesting moment in 1996 when U3A moved to protect its logo and title in the face of maverick and now illegal usage. Two arms of government – Companies House and the Charity Commission – endorsed this, but a third, the Privy Council, dispatched county trading standards officers to the home of Gerry Hitchens, then the U3A national secretary. His explanation was, of course, accepted, for there had apparently been some suspicion that a gimcrack agency had been uncovered selling degrees at extravagant prices to a gullible public. Our innocence thus denied me the delight of watching Peter Laslett fiercely addressing the Privy Council on the meaning of 'university', for he firmly believed that U3A was closer to the original medieval mould of collective discourse than any of the modern, rat-racing establishments.

As to the spread of U3As all over the nation, the liberation of this kind of energy of older people to develop the U3A idea genuinely astonished those three of who had let free the genie of self-mobilised learning from the bottle. Speaking to both Peter Laslett and Michael Young close to their deaths, I found them judging, from among the treasury of their brilliantly glittering careers, the U3A in the UK as among their choicest nuggets.

Yet there was a muted note in the glee. We were pluralists. There had been a hope among the founders that U3A would act as a catalyst for the development of a host of Third Age organisations and initiatives, new bodies for a new older age. In this we were very disappointed, for there have been relatively few other like nationwide essays. Michael Young had visions of a vast distance teaching venture, of the kind with which he had been internationally involved; Peter Laslett imagined a Third Age television network; more mundanely, but equally vainly, I had unproductive talks with one or two housing charities about a Third Age initiative in that field. One might have hoped for openings in the areas of health, of finance, of design, of architecture, in every aspect of life, from Third Age theatre or arts to - and only last month I was approached with this idea – a Third Age orchestra.

One reason this has not happened was the extraordinary belief that somehow U3A was the answer to whatever was considered the problem. The poor old U3A became the victim of its own immediate success. It was, and is, constantly berated for not doing everything for everybody. As its general secretary at the time of its foundation, I found myself assailed within weeks by thoughtless critics who were yelping about what was the U3A doing for the working classes, the ethnic minorities, disabled older people, housebound older people and so on. Rather intemperately, I found myself explaining that, with sixpence in the bank, I would get on to it tomorrow, and, while I was at it, I would reform the National Health Service, settle the national debt, deal

with global warming and select the England cricket team – I was, of course, exaggerating when I included the England cricket team.

There are 12m people in the Third Age in Britain. My own view, based on research into the pattern of membership, is that about 0.5/1.0m would at any one time benefit from U3A practices – that is, I believe its incidence of groups is close to the optimum – and that is a matter for immense celebration - but that its membership could be higher. That would still leave an awful lot of people for whom there may be unmet challenges and needs, within the generalised frame of reference of Third Age citizenship. I have constantly drummed home to the U3A the mantra that the people who benefit from the U3A are those who benefit from the U3A.

What is alarming is the absence of such novel ventures. The subject had been education and the client group had been Third Agers, but the driving force had been the anocratic anti-state, de-institutionalising motif of social mutuality, with the laity forearmed to negotiate with and control the professional cadres and the professional cadres forewarned to transform themselves into confidence-boosting facilitators. Michael Young never forgot the key message of his own mentor, R.H.Tawney, that the opposite of private enterprise was not only centralised public ownership – better still, it could be decentralised public ownership, with popular rather than parliamentary democracy in the van. Here the citizens would be inventing their own destiny, as the masters rather than the servants in the process, the Svengali not the Trilby, or, a more homely instance, the Peter Brough rather than the Archie Andrews.

Thus, beyond Third Age education, we yearned, first, for the adoption by the education industry of U3A principles, that education might become a service rather than a system; second, for the growth of agencies in all fields, founded in U3A principles, for the enhancement of life in the Third Age; and, third, the evolution of a whole social, cultural and economic society established on U3A principles.

Idealistic? Is that what some might wonder? I can barely keep count of the number of meetings and conferences in the company of Michael Young over a thirty year period of collaboration and tutelage, when he would be attacked on the grounds of being idealistic. ‘Oh, I do hope so’, he would murmur quietly, ‘I do hope so.’

Twenty years ago a newspaper asked me among other several policy analysts in the charity sector, to provide, for a new year's feature, the news item we would most like to see in the coming year. They were printed and, of course, mine has never happened for real, so you will forgive me if I read it out now, as an illustration or flavour of the themes of this talk.

The picture showed a residential care home, with soldiers outside, and a caption that ran 'All looks quiet at the Karl Marx home but security forces are ready for developments'.

ARMY TAKES POSITIONS AFTER RESIDENTS' COUP

SAS personnel were put on alert and worried government ministers and senior police officers worked around the clock, as the residents' revolution at the Karl Marx Residential care home at Trotcastor entered its fourth day. The local authority home was seized in a bloodless coup last Wednesday morning when, during the staff coffee break, an intrepid gang of residents took control of keys, telephone, food stores and medicine cabinet. Reports of casualties have been denied although there is a rumour that the officer in charge, Mrs Czarina (58) is said to be suffering from shock bordering on hysteria.

A spokesman for the rebel movement, Walter Lenin (79) urged pensioners everywhere to take charge of their facilities in the very name of the watchwords – dignity, independence, autonomy – which their overseers had previously used to justify their reactionary regimes. He claimed messages of support were pouring in from all over the country. 'The staff here are now doing what we believe is right for our welfare', cried Lenin, 'I know it is revolutionary, but our cause is just.'

*Late News. Unconfirmed reports claim that two day centres in Gorbashire have fallen into rebel hands, while a meals on wheels van in Engelstown has been overturned by an enraged group of marauding pensioners. 'We were going to set fire to it', their leader is reported as saying, 'but the vegetables were already overcooked.'

It is in that positive spirit that I commend to you the promise of self-mobilised learning for older people.

Eric Midwinter