

A Question Of Balance

Thursday, 27 February 2014

Right Honorable Tony Blair, Past-Prime Minister [from the letter received during the conference]: 'Everything we do in our everyday activity, in our work and leisure involves some element of risk. Risk is an inescapable part of our lives. The challenge for all of us, both within and outside Government is to manage risk in a way which gives us the necessary protection we need without constraining what we do beyond a level that is justified. I very much welcome your conference today as a vital contribution to this debate. I hope that you will enjoy what I am sure will be a very stimulating and productive day.'

HRH The Duke of Edinburgh: "However, genuine accidents do happen and it is important to differentiate between incidents which are due to lack of knowledge and experience and those which are genuinely unforeseeable accidents. There is naturally an emphasis on the risks inherent in all adventurous activities, but this needs to be balanced against the risks of not being allowed to take part. We should take into account the consequences to young people of not being exposed to any form of physical challenge. It can result in a lack of fitness and resistance to disease, to obesity. It can lead to the choice of alternative 'thrills', such as drugs, drink and crime; and it can lead to alienation from the family and to becoming unsuitable for employment. The question that the safety-obsessed need to answer is, are the risks in adventurous activities more acceptable than the risks of the alternatives? It seems evident to me that much of the anxiety about the perceived risk in adventurous activities comes from people with limited knowledge of the facts. I am certain that there is much to be said for the proposed 'Campaign for Adventure' which I hope will result in a continuation of this conference towards greater understanding of risk and adventure by society at large. The real danger is not that we take risks, it is that we do not take enough risks."

"A QUESTION OF BALANCE" - Risk and Adventure in Society. A conference was held on Wednesday 29th November, 2000 at the Royal Geographical Society, London.

The conference aim: 'Speakers will challenge the trend towards excessive caution, explore the positive benefits of sensible risk taking and bring a sense of realism to questions of risk and safety. The conference will show how important it is that young people have the opportunity to develop balanced attitudes to risk and will highlight the need to maintain challenge and adventure in a healthy society'

This Summary Report comprises statements made at the conference which reflect the main views expressed on the day. It is hoped they both provide an aide memoire for those who attended and, for those who were unable to attend, form an introduction to the wider arguments encompassed within the Campaign for Adventure.

Dr Frank Furedi: I have talked to two mothers who were petrified when they discovered - this is mothers living in Lambeth - that their two young sons and one of their daughters had gone on the train to Margate to find out what was going on there. It might not be adventure in the way that we are discussing it here, but it is very much driven by the same spirit: the spirit of enterprise, of doing new things. With the growth of the middle class a lot of parents are rhetorically committed to adventure but are physiologically against it. The way they reconcile this is by making sure that their children are driven by car from one 'exciting thing' to another. Adventure is 'institutionalised' creating the pretence of adventure; in reality is not only very safe, but is terribly boring for the children. I would say children of all classes, regardless of what their parents do, have this inner striving for adventure and find ways and means, sometimes destructive, unfortunately, of realising that ambition.

Sir Michael Hobbs: I think it ties in with the Duke of Edinburgh's Award expedition, where the young people take responsibility for and ownership of their expedition. I think, if I may touch wood when I do it, the reason why there is such a very small accident rate for those expeditions among a very, very large number of people doing it, is because they have taken responsibility for it themselves.

Right Honorable Tony Blair, Prime Minister [from the letter received during the conference]: 'Everything we do in our everyday activity, in our work and leisure involves some element of risk. Risk is an inescapable part of our lives. The challenge for all of us, both within and outside Government is to manage risk in a way which gives us the necessary protection we need without constraining what we do beyond a level that is justified. I very much welcome your conference today as a vital contribution to this debate. I hope that you will enjoy what I am sure will be a very stimulating and productive day.'

Libby Purves: All these feelings are things you have for life, you have for ever to hold on to. They enrich everything else that ever happens to you and this curiously applies even if you never do it again.

The richness of it has stayed with them, and the human dimension has stayed with them and they do have reunions: the people who led you into these experiences, who shared these experiences, are your brothers and sisters for life. But none of these very personal feelings are things you can easily weigh or measure or tick off in a nice little book of achievement set out on a National Curriculum Grid Key Stages, 1, 2, 3 and 4.

It gets fatally easy for the adults, parents, the people who make educational decisions and the politicians to underestimate what the adventure has actually given in this very private, secret, modest way to individuals.

Of course, sometimes the individual might not look much from outside, but if you are partially disabled and have been canoeing off the West Coast of Scotland, my God, that is the equivalent to someone else sailing the Atlantic

That awful publicness of things that go wrong is intense compared to the private unpublicised satisfaction of all the adventures that go right.

One way it could be addressed is by pointing out, more forcefully and more often, that without outdoor education, people actually put themselves in more danger through life not less.

A real adventure shows children the real eternal truth of everything that lies under the thick skin of civilisation; it takes you out of the shallowness of fashion, it points out basic truths about food and shelter and fear and co-operation without which a great deal of history and literature and art will be completely inaccessible to you: it will never touch you properly.

â€‘if you no longer have a cultural norm of something happening after death and trust in God, then you are a pagan society and a pagan society is always full of fear: it cowers in the woods and terrible things wait in every shadow.

Bob Barton: The balancing of risk and benefit has always been at the core of adventure activities. We seem to be under threat of this being widely replaced by the virtual elimination of risk. We are in danger of risk being sidelined as an undesirable by-product of so-called 'adventurous activity'. The real difficulty is a combination - of the way people behave (and people are difficult!) and a wonderfully uncertain wild environment. 'The best safety lies not so much in the avoidance of danger, but in learning how to deal with it.' [Price]

Young People Panel: [Six young people attended the conference to talk about the difference that involvement in Adventure has made to their lives. They were interviewed by Steve Lenartowicz of Brathay, answered audience questions and were invited to respond to Mr Blair's letter.]

Andrew: It was dealing with different people from different backgrounds and cultures. I had to share a room with someone that I did not like, we did not get along. We kept on bitching at each other and then we sat down and said that we did not like each other but we had to make the best of it and after that we just got on great.

Chris:it ended with me overdosing and ending up in hospital in a bad way. From then I got my own flat and I thought 'Right this cannot go on, I have got to do something about it'. I tried counselling and counselling didn't work so I thought 'What can I do?'. I did the Prince's Trust and I got a bit of confidence and motivation and that was when I heard about Raleigh International. I went to Belize, three months, had a fantastic time, came back - after that I volunteered with Raleigh for a year and dedicated all my time to Raleigh. From there, I got a post as a youth worker and after that I got offered six months to start my own project called 'The London Project'.

Holly: I think the best part, the thing that always attracts, especially people from London or any inner cities, is the residential - a week away, getting out of your environment, the council estate, the drugs, the alcohol. Just being in Wales for a whole week away from everything. All there is sheep, trees and water and it is an experience that I never experienced before it was brilliant and I loved it.

HRH The Duke of Edinburgh: However, genuine accidents do happen and it is important to differentiate between incidents which are due to lack of knowledge and experience and those which are genuinely unforeseeable accidents. There is naturally an emphasis on the risks inherent in all adventurous activities, but this needs to be balanced against the risks of not being allowed to take part. We should take into account the consequences to young people of not being exposed to any form of physical challenge. It can result in a lack of fitness and resistance to disease, to obesity. It can lead to the choice of alternative 'thrills', such as drugs, drink and crime; and it can lead to alienation from the family and to becoming unsuitable for employment. The question that the safety-obsessed need to answer is, are the risks in adventurous activities more acceptable than the risks of the alternatives? It seems evident to me that much of the anxiety about the perceived risk in adventurous activities comes from people with limited knowledge of the facts. I am certain that there is much to be said for the proposed 'Campaign for Adventure' which I hope will result in a continuation of this conference towards greater understanding of risk and adventure by society at large.

A verbatim report on the conference is available [price Â£10] from the Bookshop, Institute for Outdoor Learning, 12 St. Andrews Churchyard, Penrith, Cumbria, CA11 7YE. Telephone 01768 891065/01768 891065, Fax 01768 891914 or e-mail: bookshop@outdoor-learning.org.

For information on, or to join, the Campaign for Adventure, contact: Institute for Outdoor Learning, or see the campaign website: www.campaignforadventure.org

The conference was organized by the Institute for Outdoor Learning, the English Outdoor Council and the Foundation for Outdoor Adventure and was supported by 'Go Outdoors'
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