

Message for Big Brum's 25th birthday
Shami Chakrabarti

Firstly I would like to send my sincere apologies that I cannot be there with you all to celebrate Big Brum's 25th birthday. I hope all those participating within the event have a fantastic time and that the event is a great success.

At a time when children are being increasingly demonized and criminalized by both the government and the broader populations it is important to have constructive outlets within which children can channel their energy in a more positive way.

‘The world is passing through troublous times. The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age. They are impatient of all restraint. They talk as if they knew everything, and what passes for wisdom with us is foolishness with them’.

This familiar lament was in fact made by Peter the Hermit over seven hundred years ago suggesting that perhaps many of the social issues frequently splashed across our headlines surrounding the ‘Youth of today’ are not so new as we might first think.

Many people with power and influence in Britain today seem strangely confused in their attitudes towards the young, separating them off into clearly defined categories - little angels off to cello practice or hoodies from hell, with children as with all people it is never that clear cut.

I too fear we are living in increasingly ‘troublous times’ not from youth on the rampage but from dozens of ‘authoritarian’ laws being passed to regulate every area of our lives. In relation to children ‘asbomania’ has led many young individuals up an accelerating conveyor belt into the criminal justice system, rather than diverting them. In an attempt to be seen to be taking decisive action the government is often guilty of sweeping up the innocent and vulnerable (particularly young people) with the guilty.

Politicians preach from a new hymn sheet of ‘respect’ when talking about the young, as though respect were the preserve of the older generation and not a two way street. Respect is not earned by good behavior nor by the number of years you have paid taxes or been alive. It cannot be forfeited by loss of self-respect or even by terrible crimes and necessary and proportionate consequences that must follow. It comes from basic human dignity, from the mere but wonderful fact of existence.

The government, when searching for solutions to many of the social issues surrounding young people today should stop and think before passing draconian laws that marginalize and criminalize this highly vulnerable sector of our society. Instead, I would suggest that the focus be on creating and nurturing positive spaces in areas such as education and culture within which we can allow young individuals to learn and develop their social skills to the benefit of all.

Big Brum offers a fantastic combination of education and culture to produce a constructive space within which children can become acquainted with themselves, developing confidences as well as practical skills that will stand them in good stead in later life. It is for this reason that I have chosen to support this organisation and everything it stands for, and I wish you all the best for the next 25 years.