

Transcript of Eric Midwinter's address at the 1000th U3A Celebration

1000 U3As; LOOKING BACK; LOOKING FORWARD

Today, given that I wish to talk partly about the past and partly about the future, perhaps Hugh Lofting's Dr Dolittle tales and his fabulous animal the Pushmepullyou would be an effective animal metaphor.

Firstly, I want to speak, certainly with I hope understandable nostalgia about the astounding success of U3A, but, more compellingly, about the originating precepts of our movement. It is essential, I think, to preach to the converted, lest, over time and caught up in the bric-a-brac of day to day administering, the crucial base might become hazy or lost. Second, I want to speak, ambition buoyed by the amazing growth of U3A, of the years to come. For passivity is the curse and often the ruin of human institutions. During World War II there were more desertions in the American army, not when they were advancing or retreating, but when they were bogged down motionless in the Ardennes in the last winter of the war. Static is perilous.

LOOKING BACK - THE PRINCIPLES

The background to this is familiar to you, 1000 U3As and approaching 400,000 members. With, on my estimate; something like 40,000 interest groups operating. Those recurring letters have turned up again in the last two editions of 'Third Age Matters', the ones I suspect my old pal its assiduous editor Francis Beckett recycles with a different signatory every two or three years because he knows they get up my nose. There's been the one where the writer they would give a shilling for everyone they have met who has never heard of the and why don't we change the name. I'd settle for a shilling for everyone who has been in the U3A since it started in 1982. I did some preliminary research on that in 2004 and my best guess now is that the figure would be in the region of 1.5m, netting me in shillings a very tasty £75,000. 400,000 members at the moment; and when I did the original research back in 1981 only 200,000 of pensionable age were involved in any kind of adult education at all, so doubling that in one institution must be a success story.

Another letter reads 'I admit I had never heard of the U3A until someone mentioned it'. Is there something profound and subtle about this statement which has escaped me, hinting at some paranormal phenomenon whereby you hear something before it has been spoken?

I would invite these Doubting Thomases to read the thriller Tainted Ground by Margaret Duffy. On page 73 it says 'I already knew that the members of the walking group who found the body were not from the immediate vicinity but from Bath U3A' — just like that without further explanation, because most people do know what a U3A is. Commercial companies would pay millions to gain that degree of popular identification and penetration — and yet there are some. After all the hard work to make the brand so well-known, who would like to change the name — and spend the next 34 years telling one another no one had heard of it. Make no mistake - you and I proudly represent what might be described as the most successful example of social cooperation in the UK since the Second World War. We have every right to be proud of our achievement.

We can also boast being the answer on a University Challenge programme to the question posed by Jeremy Paxman of 'which educational institution was introduced to this country in 1982 by Peter Laslett, Michael Young and Eric Midwinter?' - but as the boneheaded students didn't get it right, perhaps we shouldn't brag about that too much — although according to the latest edition of 'Third Age Matters' Jeremy Paxman loves the U3A.

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More seriously, had wondered, in preparing this talk, whether it was misguided to go over yet again the origins and reasons why U3A was started, but what I can only describe as the shallow understanding of some of our letter-writing colleagues does alarm me, and prompts me to re-visit and delineate the past once more.

And in recalling the two major U3A principles, you will forgive me if I identify each in the name of one of my two fellow-founders. Peter Laslett and Michael Young, although hasten to add that, for all our very robust debate, all three of us were steadfast in our joint resolution to observe faithfully these two formative doctrines.

NO to an Ageing Society

Peter Laslett's lasting contribution to the U3A movement was not only his inspired compilation of its objects and guiding principles, its sacrosanct equivalent of ten commandments. but his compelling analysis of the phenomenon of older age in modern society, the very bedrock of the U3A ideal.

It is often said that people are living longer, but Peter Laslett claimed that this was at best a half-truth. He demonstrated that some people had always lived longer. From the battle of Hastings in 1066 to the battle of the Somme in 1916, between 5 and 10% of the British population had always been over 60, with a few edging towards the human maximum of about 115. There is, as yet, no signs that there is a general longevity in terms of that natural limit of 115 being overtaken. Actuarial estimates of life expectancy have always been misleading, persistently weighed down the enormous cull in the past of infant mortality. Expectation or life at birth in 1800 was 37; but few people keeled over at that age; many who had managed to inch past the first five years of life were destined to live quite long lives. In 1900 156,000 people died before the age of one; in 2000 a lesser number albeit a much larger population, 128,000 died before the age of ...65. Now only about one in seven deaths occur before 65; as Peter Laslett announced, in his combative manner, 'the old have monopolised death' —and it is, of course, the best place for it

Peter Laslett asserted that the major factor was Survival; not Longevity — but he then had the wit and the moral sensibility to understand the difference this should make to our outlook on older age. It makes for a crucial difference in terms of social policy- It knocks on the head the constant wail that old age is a burden, for people survive because they are healthier and then undergo much the same phase of ill-health but later. Apropos the average personal NHS budget. 90% of the expenditure is in the last 6 months of life when ever that is. More specifically. between 1981 and 2006. a remarkably brief phase, life expectancy at 65 for women increased by 3 years from 17 to 20 years; at the same time the 'not good' health phase increased by only 20 weeks. from 5 to 5.4 years — an extra three years against 20 weeks extra 'not so good' health seems to be a decent bargain. Of course, older people thereby accumulate. In 1951 there were about 250 centenarians. Now there are possibly 15,000. It is estimated that in the 2031 census there may be as many as 200,000 centenarians, and a few weeks later on 11 February 2032, I hope to make it 200,001.

Join with me daily in refuting the notion that we live in an Ageing Society. as if it were some awful abnormal disaster. What could be more normal, more natural and more heartening than a society in which the great majority of people live a normal life span? Join we me in urging that what we have done is to emerge, thankfully, triumphantly. from a Premature Death Society ad into a Normal Society.

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Peter introduced Britain to the notion of the Third Age, insisting that the older person should be treated as an active citizen, not a passive social casualty. Hence the upbeat, mature title of the University of the Third Age, for he argued that. in its congregational format, it was truer to the originating concept of a fellowship of learners as opposed to what he disdainfully viewed in the modern university version as mere venues for rat-racing. Even more positively, he wished to promote a counter to the patronising Darby and Joan model of services for older people in the 1980s. Peter Laslett was acidly reluctant to have any connection with, say, Help the Aged, regarding that title as defeatist, demeaning and degrading.

Back to those letters Francis Beckett concocts to annoy me. Another name-changing letter said 'we are not a university. we are a social group for a certain age'quiet, everyone...yes, you can just hear that faint whirring...it is Peter Laslett revolving in his grave.

No too Meritocratic Society

In speaking of Michael Young, I find that, reluctantly, must voice a criticism of the prime minister Theresa Mays who, in a recent speech on education, used the word 'Meritocracy twenty times in the wrong connotation. Quickly, before you rise up and assail me with accusations of political bias, let me enter the ecumenical note that in so doing she followed guilelessly in the footsteps of the former Labour prime minister Tony Blair who was the most prominent incorrect user of the word, so much so that, shortly before Michael's death, and in some despair, he published an article reasserting that Meritocracy, the word he had coined, was a bad thing.

In his classic book 'the Rise of the Meritocracy', published in 1958 but set in 2030, Michael Young wrote of a dystopia in which, in part through selective education, new oligarchy of Meritocrats had emerged to rule over a clearly stratified society, and they ensured that their children would inherit their place the ruling class, treating the non-meritocratic majority with scant respect and sparse services. Some critics say Michael's only error was to suggest it would be 2030 before it happened. Whatever, it is surprising that, at some point government advisers have not whispered to the many senior politicians on all sides who use the term imprecisely that Michael's little masterpiece won the Italian Silver Casse Prize for best satire.

Michael Young preached conversely a gospel of respect for ALL people, a recognition of the worth of ALL people and a resolute belief in the value of ALL people to contribute to society, And, rather than just say this airily, he had a practical instrument to this end, based on organising affairs on a human scale. He was the arch foe of what he called Giantism, whether in the public sector or the private sector whether it be a large trade union, a large commercial company or a large state body.

The motivating principle of his work was a resilient confidence in the potential of ordinary folk, co-operating together to run their own affairs. He was no fool. When he packed us off to do his bidding, he advised us that, if it was a Labour local authority, we should call it 'mutual aid', and if it was a Conservative one. then 'self-help' was the motif

This was very shrewd, for his commutarian dream of what his own mentor, R. H. Tawney, called decentralised public ownership, appealed across the political divide to both those who felt oppressed by the large anonymous official organs of the bureaucratic State and those who felt defeated by the large anonymous elements of the overmighty global market. He struggled to find ways in which people could thread the services they required into the interstices of their local communities. the

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U3A interest-group meeting in someone's house, with a convenor rather than a tutor, is a poignant emblem of this hope.

My attention was drawn a year or so ago to copy of Freedom, the anarchist newspaper, from which I quote; 'asked to give examples of how anarchist ideas work in practice most anarchists would probably suggest the collectivisation of industry during the Spanish revolution. Yet there is one successful organisation that few people would think of and that is the U3A — a massive unsung but very anarchistic educational network spanning the UK, based on the assemblage of skills which is the automatic gift of older age. Peter Kropotkin defined anarchism in the Encyclopaedia Britannica as 'social harmony achieved by free agreements concluded between various groups, freely constituted'. The U3A provides a living example of how people can organise effectively to bypass and replace the state, demonstrating a method that can be adopted to other forms of social activity: The members of the U3A's have quietly established one of the largest movements for libertarian education in Europe.

This, of course, represents an intellectual definition of anarchy rather than a popular one, so I do not advise you, when chatting to your neighbours, to opine that it's absolute anarchy down at your local U3A, but, to be fair, 'social harmony, achieved by free agreements' is not far from the truth of the matter,

The notion of the glorious older age made manifest in the notion of a glorious outburst of humane cooperation. Two genuinely revolutionary ideals; these were the origins and these are the legacies of the U3A movement. U3A in the UK is not some cheapo, some second-best, some make-do-and-mend solution. It is not some second-rate dodge to keep a few ancients of the streets; it is not afternoon instead of evening classes for elderly folk.

For its founders, U3A was the first-class way, the superior way, the heaven-sent way of providing education. Moreover as many of you have heard me say before, the three of us believed that the U3A principles were, firstly, how all services for older people should be run, secondly, how all education services, for children and adults, should be run, and, thirdly, yes, the way that the whole of society should be organised.

From a more straightforwardly educational vantage point, I commend to you the writing of the American John Dewey, reputed by many to be the most significant educationalist of the 20th century. He reckoned that social progress and individual freedom are, 'best understood as the growth of social intelligence that is developed when individuals participate intelligently and cooperatively together in search of solutions to the problems created by social change.' Elsewhere he was even more succinct — 'Education is about participation in, not preparation for' — that insightful view of education has a happening in itself for the NOW I like to think he would delight to watch us putting his tenets into everyday practice the length and breadth of the nation.

LOOKING FORWARD -THE PRACTICE

So much for the heritage. As for the future, it is, I think, right that the principles should be preserved and urged — and it is right that the implementation of the principles should be adapted to the rising tide of the movement's evolution

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One aspect we did get right on day one, and, as General Secretary at the time, I'm going to give myself modest pat on the back, was that as well as local U3A initiatives, we determined to have a pioneer national construct. There are legends, as in all great religions and heroic sagas, about U3A's origins. such as the inaugural committee meeting in Michael Young's shaky jalopy of a car or how our first executive secretary Dianne Norton regally rode roughshod over the U3A, its headquarters her spare bedroom. The American dream is enshrined in the title 'From Log Cabin to White House': our equivalent is 'Spare Room in

Wimbledon to the Kremlin in Bromley.' 30 years on with the assistance of inspirational national organisers and a series of chairmen who have all individually been exactly the right person in the right place at the right time (present company very definitely not excepted) an outcome due not to luck but to the unfailing wisdom of the electorate, our national structure has achieved much.

Within weeks of starting with some dozen potential U3As, a simple newsletter was sent to every individual member, forerunner of the magnificent Third Age Matters of today which never fails to make me catch my breath as it regularly reveals the comprehensive variety Of U3A-ery. (And I shall set aside for the moment yet another letter this time that left me spluttering; the one that wanted the name changed because we had two levels, 'academic' and 'less academic' — all I see is people learning joyfully together in social companionship.) We received a grant of £9000 from the Nuffield Foundation to launch U3A, one of the most profitable investments in the history of community development — and we very carefully split the money two ways, local and national. It is my firm belief that, had we not done so, there would only be maybe a hundred U3As today.

For, over the last 30 years I have visited perhaps a score or more of Third Age projects of one kind and another and their eager organisers have said to me this is a wonderful idea — it should be taken up all over the country' and time after time I have told them that good ideas do not, as the old saying, goes have legs — you have provide them with some form or locomotion. None of them ever did and none of those ideas have been spread, nor have many of these single initiatives survived.

From Dianne Norton to Sam Mauger, whom we welcome as the latest sitter in the hot seat, confident as we are that no one could be better equipped than her for this critical role, the national reins has been in efficacious hands, never more so than the last twenty or so years with Lin Jonas riding shotgun. Lin has sought a quiet release from her responsibilities and I shall respect that, albeit Lin knows full well my admiration not only for her high proficiency but for her profound appreciation the U3A ethic, together with her unstinting fervour for the currently unprepossessing endeavours of Manchester United. So I will say just one thing: and that is the relevant fact that, such as been Lin's vital contribution to our cause, without her we would not even be meeting here today because we would be nowhere near having a thousand U3As.

We have certainly found the flair for starting U3As and I am sure we shall sustain that progress in the future. In looking ahead, I feel it would be appropriate to pursue some observations about this national construct that has been so vital. U3As vary much in size and shape each one endorses the guiding as each one did 30 years ago. NO necessity for alteration in that regard. The real change is in the prospect of how to sustain and refresh a national alliance which has grown astronomically from a dozen or so to a thousand of these wonderful organisms — and it is pleasing that the movement is examining this question, Indeed, the important aspect is being aware there IS a question, even if nothing requires to be done; the truth that there should be a continuing querying and never a taking for granted is much the better option.

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For my part I would like to light three torches to illuminate the future, each of them concerned with the national aspect of the movement and each of them inherent in my previous remarks.

Yes to a National/Member Connection

Firstly, the peculiar nature of a self-help movement such as ours is that it should, where possible, avoid a wedding cake structure of tiers by way of governance. It should conceive of a spiral of rings from the base of its huge membership to the cutting edge of its peak, what Peter Kropotkin, whom I cited earlier, termed 'a league of leagues'. Of course the intersecting networks and regional grids are to be valued and encouraged — but no member should forget or be allowed to forget that he or she is a national member of a vast army of Third Age pioneers. Thus apart from any valuable communication that may flow upwards and downwards through the networks, I believe there should be some direct national/member contact.

The obvious candidate is Third Age Matters. I have always been unhappy since that one cord that linked the Third Age Trust with every member was snapped. Every member pays an affiliation fee; that was an early and controversial rule that replaced the earlier group subscription and led to some rupture in the ranks. But it was, in my view the correct decision, not just financially but small 'p' politically, ensuring that ours is a local-cum-national commitment made by every member, I do understand the financial issue but I believe it should be considered the other way round; that is, how much money might reasonably be expended and then calculating the package which will deliver a magazine of x pages y times a year to every single member.

If not that, then something, even if it is only a Christmas card. The national core must communicate directly to everyone as part of the spiral that keeps us all part of the whole.

Yes to National Membership Drive

Secondly, the tasty repast of U3A's gargantuan feast of a thousand dishes has gorged me and yet at the same time whetted my appetite. There an American edition of 'Oliver Twist' which tried to heighten its selling power by a very colourful front cover. It showed Bill Sikes girl-friend Nancy, life in the London stews having left her scantily clad but counterfactually well-endowed physically, while the bill matter read in dripping scarlet letters — 'Oliver Twist; he asked for more'. Well, albeit in respect of a very different appetite, I am asking for more. I am asking for more members,

We know now what in the beginning was uncertain, that U3A is able to prosper just about anywhere. We have a thousand U3As and there seems to be no shortage of new U3As being established. We must also be close to the founders original design, based both American and British research about the Older person's perception of regular accessibility, that there should be a within five miles or twenty minutes travel time of every Third Ager. With that in mind, it would be appropriate to devote more energy in the immediate future to recruitment..

Many of you will have heard me express my mantra that 'the U3A is very good for those for Whom the U3A is very good', I am as yet unconvinced that there is a need for specific as opposed to a general recruitment campaigns. There are 13m Third Agers in the UK so there is plenty of scope for comprehensive approaches to the crusade. We also know that in the most propitious areas of U3A membership something like one in ten of the available Third Agers are members. It could be argued

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that there are external social or other factors in some of those districts of high membership. However, studied and written about this issue at length and for years and having visited or had contact with something like 250 or 300 U3As over the last 34 years, I feel able to affirm that the chief factor in flourishing success has been where imaginative and enthusiastic individuals — many of them present here today — have doughtily decided to grab the challenge by the scruff of the neck and make a triumph out of it. In the U3A story Thomas Carlyle had it half-right when he argued that history was made by Great Men; he would need for accuracy to add of course Great Women. For Great Men and Women have seized the initiative in township after township and designed great U3A agencies for hundreds of Third Agers.

If it can be one in ten in one place, it can be close to that ratio in many environs. I think it not unreasonable to propose a four-year plan, hatched nationally, regionally and locally, to have one million members by the end of the decade. Call it, if you will, my 20-20 Vision.

Yes to a National Promotion of Our Values

Thirdly, would wonder aloud whether or not it is time the U3A spread its wings a little more widely in terms of the public discourse of its essential values. Of course, both nationally and in some cases locally its voice has been accordingly heard but, with now a longish history and a sound basis of outlets and adherents, may be the volume should be raised. The U3A daily demonstrates in action several viewpoints of social value and importance, the two principal ones of positive old age and mutual aid I tried earlier to describe and now take as two examples.

For instance, the nation at large, from the general public to its opinion-formers and decision-makers, has completely misunderstood the character of older age in its modern setting, with parlous consequences for the way social policy is determined not only in health and social care respects but across the administrative board. This misunderstanding impinges culturally, still with a negative quotient in regard of older age in all walks of life, including the press and television. One bedrock of U3A is the belief that a normal ageing society is a wholesome one.

A significant aspect of this is the theme of ageism or age discrimination, The U3A is one of very few organisations that refuses to use birthdays as gateways to access to activities or services, believing that such practices are arbitrary in the same way as are judgements based on ethnic, religious, gender, sexual orientation or disability grounds. One of my most vivid U3A memories is of an early national conference. I was sitting next to Peter Laslett on the platform when some blameless innocent proposed we should have a minimum age limit of 55, Peter was close to apoplectic and his pyrotechnic attack was riveting as he, the man who had introduced the three stage division to Britain, fierily asserted that the whole point of using the First, Second, Third Age device was to avoid the pernicious usage of birthdays as signifiers that were often unsound, discretionary and negative.

Michael Young rightly saw that ageism was not just applicable to older people. About the turn of the century at the British Association national conference in Swansea he argued that one's birthday should be private and subject to the data protection legislation. Think how often you are asked capriciously to state your date of birth. He listed dozens of whimsical uses of birthdays for official and allied reasons. Starting school at five is just as capricious as stopping work at 65.

Should we be promoting the justice of anti-ageism abroad rather than merely practising it privately among ourselves?

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Next, it is intriguing that the nation that comes nearest to operating its education system on U3A lines is the one that has been for many years the highest ranked in Europe for reading, maths and science. The Finnish National Board of Education states unashamedly that at the heart what it does is — and I translate for those Whose Finnish is bit rusty - 'the joy of learning'; the play way and discovery method are extensively deployed and there are no formal tests or examinations until students are eighteen. Streaming, competition, choice, selection, privatisation and league tables are outlawed.

Having hit upon a more satisfactory strategy of educating people, should we keep it to ourselves and let further generations of children as well as adults be abandoned to outmoded and ineffective and, worst of all, boring methods?

Perhaps the time has come when we should preach as well as practise.

I return to our foundations. Faced with what we felt to be the challenges and misunderstandings of the time, your founders sought a working model of activity which would demonstrate to the broader community that older people could invent their own destiny and that co-operative involvement was a valid social answer. I offer these roads ahead in a genuine spirit of admiration and delight that this has been achieved and in the hope of sparking debate about how we might extend these concepts more readily. We are in the happy position of having effectively put our beliefs to the test and our creed into everyday action.

How frequently are, in public life, the promises, statements and Claims lofty and the results parlous. That chasm between the pretentious theory and negligible outcome has not been for us. We took a good theory and made it work in organic practice. Friends, we are a thousand U3As strong —that is reality —and that is a most wholesome and nourishing upshot.