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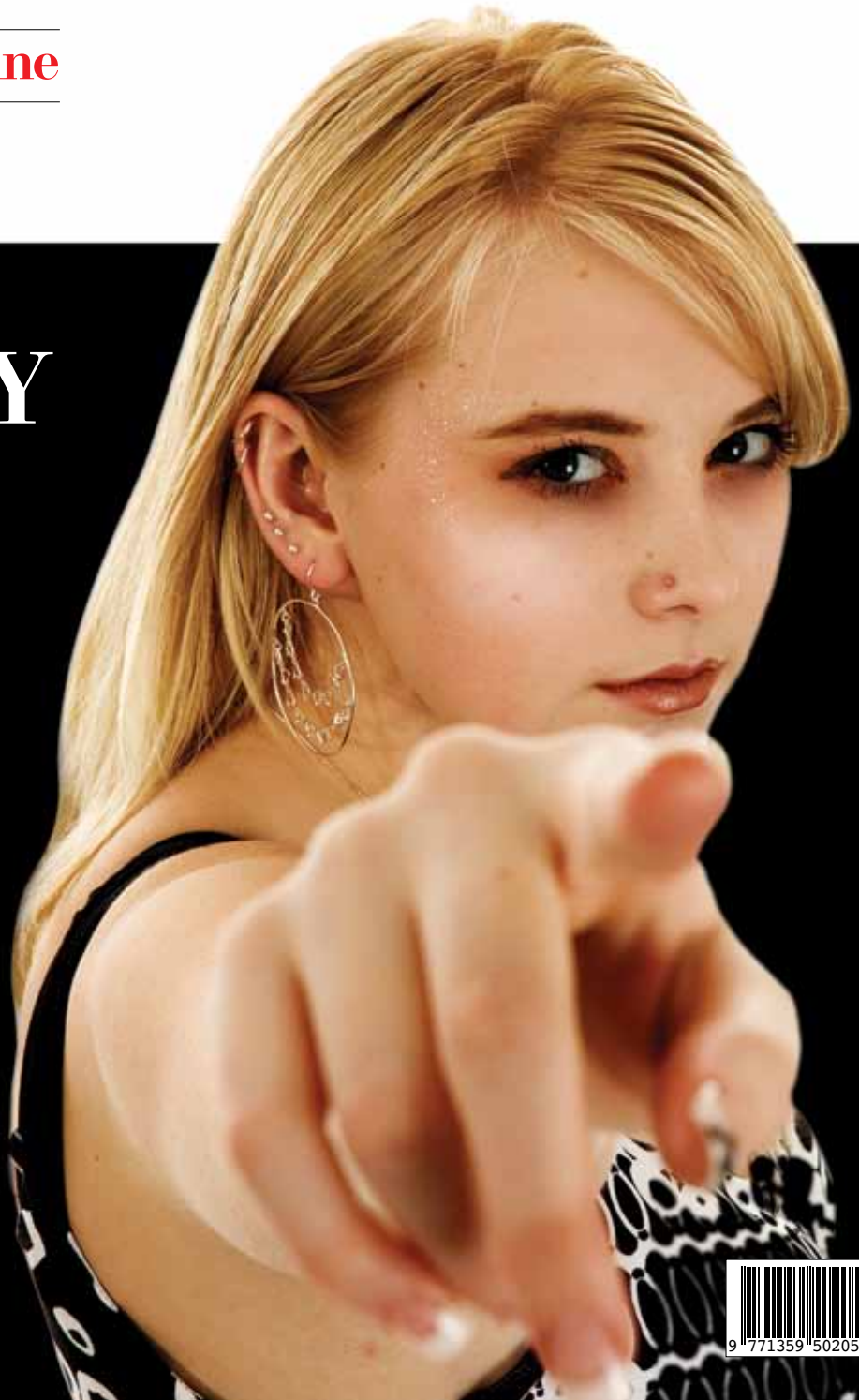
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YOU**

**Why Britain's  
young people  
need compulsory  
civic service**



# CITIZENSHIP FIRST: THE CASE FOR COMPULSORY CIVIC SERVICE

Most people think that young people should be asked to give something back. Politicians agree. Yet a compulsory scheme has seemed too ambitious—until now. A civic service scheme could be the legacy of this recession

JAMES CRABTREE & FRANK FIELD

**D**espite its impressive name, the London Boxing Academy isn't much more than a shabby warehouse, set back from Tottenham High Road in one of the poorest areas of north London. Inside, a few young black men hit punch bags around a faded blue boxing ring. On the wall is a poster, frayed at the edges, warning: "get a life, ditch the knife." At the ringside David Lammy, the local MP, listens intently to Chris Hall, the academy's stocky, shaven-headed founder. Hall explains how he takes 30 young people a year—all too tough for regular school—and gives them an intensive mix of boxing, sports and regular classes. He tells of how, the week before, a young man had been thrown out for threatening another with a knife. Classes take place in scruffy rooms next to the boxing ring. But, he says, his mix of discipline and encouragement helps aggressive, troubled young men improve both their behaviour and grades. More than anything the academy tries to broaden horizons. "We took them to a west end musical last year," Hall explains, because "none of them had been to the theatre." Lammy thinks experiences like this can become part of a larger "encounter culture," in which Britain's young people—richer and poorer, urban and rural, black and white—

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mix with those from different backgrounds. "It isn't that kids from Tottenham don't know much about life in Britain. It's that they've never even met anyone from Surrey or Kent. And many of them never will."

Britain faces the worst recession since the 1930s, bringing with it the prospect of mass unemployment, even urban unrest. About 1.3m young people are already out of work, with more to come. But even this grim news hides deeper problems in the socialisation of our young people. The *Good Childhood Inquiry*, published by the Children's Society in February, detailed how today's teenagers leap ever earlier into an adult world of stress, consumerism and sexuality, without the traditional social structures or rites of passage that once helped them to cope. Just as our nation's bankers seem to have choked on their freedom, so a new generation of young people—especially those from poorer backgrounds—struggles to grow older, younger. Many emerge with a thin conception of citizenship, sceptical about whether there is such a thing as society—and, even if there is, what it's got to do with them.

For years, hovering behind these debates, the outline of an institutional response has been visible; one that has broad support from the political class and public alike. And yet circumstances have never seemed sufficiently pressing to turn this consensus into practical policy. They are now.

We are proposing the introduction of a mandatory ▶



national citizenship service programme. Every British young person, aged 16 to 25, should be paid a modest amount—perhaps around the minimum wage—to spend at least six months, and preferably a full year, working on projects supporting Britain’s children, the sick and elderly, the environment, and international development. Properly designed, such a scheme could help to reduce youth unemployment, answer many social needs that are not met by either the market or existing public services, and provide young people with structure, rites of passage, the opportunity to serve and the chance to move beyond the limited horizons in which they were born.

Of course, civic service isn’t a silver bullet. It would be expensive and controversial, requiring a huge national effort, part-funded by the state and run by the voluntary and private sectors. Critics will attack it as unaffordable, inefficient, illiberal and a destroyer of jobs. But the measure is highly popular with the public (see *Prospect’s* poll results, p37), and would help to roll back a range of worrying trends, including Britain’s gradual loss of a sense of itself.

**O**ur nation’s civic identity was built not on bloodlines or ethnicity, but human ingenuity. Beginning in the mid-19th century the Victorians reshaped British national culture by salvaging the basis of Christian morality while transcending Christian dogma itself. Thinkers like TH Green secularised Christianity, swapping a tradition of religious worship for one that promoted service to one another. Such attempts were enhanced further by the reaction of the English “idealist” movement—of which Green was the leader—against the individualism of thinkers such as Herbert Spencer and JS Mill. From the late Victorian era until shortly after the second world war the idealist creed—that each person owed a duty of improvement, both to himself and his fellow citizens—became Britain’s public ideology.

Running in parallel came what social anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer called the civilising of the British character. The industrial revolution, with its wrenching transition from rural to urban life, literally drove many to drink. Child labour and child sexual abuse were rife. But from the late Victorian years onwards the era of the gin palace gave way to a time of improved public behaviour and dramatically better child-rearing. In particular Gorer describes how the labour movement’s stress on respectability brought a new focus on child welfare. This was helped, in turn, by the routine, the rites of passage and the codes of discipline that accompanied a huge manufacturing base. Today, many of these civilising trends have come undone by changes to capitalism and family structure. Some are, of course, to be welcomed: no one yearns for a return to backbreaking work, paternalism, deference or war. But we must also recognise change for the worse where we see it, and take steps to respond.

The benefits of civic service would be felt mainly through the positive effect on each year group of young people. But there would be immediate benefits to the wider society, too. Daily visits to help with shopping and gardening could keep thousands of elderly citizens out of care homes. A youthful army of mentors, reading coaches, classroom assistants, school sports aides and after-school carers could bring new

life to schoolchildren. Innovative environmental projects could help to prevent and protect us from the effects of a changing climate. And Britain’s young people could gain a reputation for building schools and digging wells abroad, instead of drinking and fighting at home.

Take the example of health. Britain’s fast-ageing population is putting strain on the NHS and social care funding. Meeting this challenge means investing in well-qualified professionals, not replacing them with teenagers. But the Commission for Social Care Inspection recently reported record rises in care vacancies: more than 100,000 posts are now unfilled. Research from Warwick Business School shows that older citizens, more than anything, want help with day-to-day tasks, like a trip to the shops—tasks that council-provided carers are often not allowed to perform. Add to this that four in ten older people report sometimes feeling socially isolated, and you begin to build a picture of how civic service could improve, rather than replace, existing state services and jobs. Indeed, with such help, many old people could avoid moving into taxpayer-funded care, while young people learned about vital institutions of social support.

But the main purpose of civic service is what sounds like a quaintly old-fashioned notion: producing better citizens. Many young people today enjoy extraordinary opportunities to grow, learn and travel—emerging into adulthood more confident, tolerant and worldly-wise than their parents were at the same age. But many are less lucky. It isn’t just that they are aware of sex and shopping at ever earlier ages, although this is true. More importantly, their transition to adulthood is increasingly individualised and unsettling. Routes into the labour market are less obvious, while traditional structures, like early marriage or clear gender roles, are less binding. The decline of manufacturing, and the move to a service economy, has increased the importance of social skills—famously, the ability to look an employer in the eye, but also self-discipline, empathy and the ability to communicate. (One US study claims that self-discipline is twice as important as IQ in predicting exam results.) Yet it is precisely in instilling those skills, along with habits of altruism and civic engagement, that many parents and schools are failing. The result is a generation some call “Thatcher’s children,” but which the think tank IPPR has dubbed “freedom’s orphans.”

Thankfully, there is a consensus about how to respond. Put bluntly, and uncomfortably for many on the left, it turns out that the social conservatives were right all along. Character building really *is* all about team sports, and group activities like those engaged in by the Girl Guides, cadets or the Boys’ Brigade. Academics and government ministers now call such things “positive structured activities.” Middle-class parents instinctively understand their benefits, which is why they spend so much time and money at weekends shuttling their kids from orchestra practice to sports clubs. But poorer children, too, can gain confidence and a sense of self-control from such activi-

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ties, as long they take place over an extended period, are focused on a goal in a group setting, and are under competent adult supervision.

Civic service would provide just such an experience to every young person in Britain, helping them gain new confidence and the type of soft skills valued by employers. But just as important would be the chance to mix with others from different backgrounds. In support of his vision of an “encounter culture,” David Lammy cites psychologist Gordon Allport’s “contact hypothesis” that, under the right conditions, “increasing the level of contact between different groups is enough to generate more favourable relationships between them.” (“Close Encounters,” *Prospect*, March 2006.) It can also have practical benefits: social network theory shows that knowing people outside your community makes it easier to find a job. Research by sociologist Miles Hewstone, meanwhile, shows that “intergroup contact” can increase tolerance and promote social cohesion.

Such theories could go some way to solving a dilemma first identified by Robert Putnam, a renowned American academic. Putnam, an advocate of “bridging” between different groups, found that America’s most cosmopolitan communities tended also to have the lowest levels of social capi-

tal. Supposedly tolerant, mixed areas—like Brooklyn, or Tottenham—were more balkanised than places where everyone was white, or everyone was black. His research threatened to undermine decades of thinking about liberal tolerance. (Putnam was embarrassed by his own findings and kept them under wraps for years, darkly hinting at his results in private seminars.) But, in truth, his work merely suggests that social mixing often doesn’t happen by accident. Sometimes, it needs a helping hand.

Civic service could provide just such a nudge. All young people could emerge into adulthood with some knowledge of the institutions that make their country tick, having rubbed up against different races and classes in so doing. In the Facebook era, in which young people can keep in contact with peers more easily than ever before, it wouldn’t just be the experience which stayed with you for life: friends from your service year would stay with you too. Most importantly, the children of the poorest family in Tottenham would have worked alongside the offspring of royalty, graduating in the same ceremony, to become citizens together. Such civic service would be a central part of the new era of responsibility, matching the remoralisation of our economy with a push to reunite our society. ▶

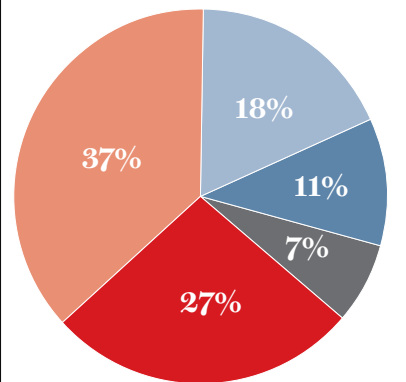
## NATIONAL CIVIC SERVICE

# How it would work

Young people could participate in the programme any time between the ages of 16-25. Starting at 16 would help those who might leave school early, or who might already have gone off the rails by 18. For others, the opportunity to serve later might be attractive—for instance after a few years of work, or as a university graduate—helping to create a small corps of NCOs. However, most would be expected to serve in the year after leaving full-time schooling—replacing the traditional gap year for some—and helping them to prepare for further education, an apprenticeship, university or the workplace. As they approach school-leaving age, an individual would choose one of three broad paths for his or her core service option: working with children, as classroom assistants, children’s centre support staff or in school sports; helping the sick and elderly in care homes, hospitals or community facilities; or working on an environmental project, building new national parks or refitting social housing. As far as possible people would be given a choice about their specific service opportunity.

A full year’s civic service could be divided into stages. Each young person would be assigned to his or her own corps, say, of 50 young people. Stage one would be a month of group activity—perhaps an outward-bound mission or a construction

**Would you support or oppose a compulsory civic service programme for 16-25 year olds?**



■ Strongly support    ■ Strongly oppose  
 ■ Tend to support    ■ Tend to oppose  
 ■ Don't know

Prospect’s poll reveals that 64 per cent of adults support a compulsory national programme. Support is especially strong among the old, but a majority of those aged 18-34 also back the measure.

Total sample: 2,270 GB adults  
 Source: YouGov plc 2009

project—taking place away from home. Stage two would be six months of core service close to home. Stage three would be an optional international service period, in which wealthier parents could support their children to travel or perform voluntary work, while those with fewer resources could be subsidised to work abroad. Others could use this flexible period to seek paid work, spend time job hunting for after their service, or preparing for university. As the year ended, each corps would come together again—and undertake another month-long group activity, before graduating together in a public citizenship ceremony.

Each element of the service year would involve group activities for each corps of young people, supervised by adults. Other techniques could be tried to ensure that the programme was responsive—for instance providing “service budgets” that encouraged providers to bid for young people’s time, perhaps combined with a system of credits that could be cashed in for university bursaries later. At the end of this everyone would have experienced two periods of mixed-group activity, served in the community, had the opportunity to volunteer abroad, and been brought together in a public ceremony recognising their achievement.

Politicians of all parties tend to support schemes to help young people “give something back.” When they were in opposition both Gordon Brown and David Blunkett argued for voluntary national service, as did the influential 1994 Commission on Social Justice. The Conservatives have now gone a step farther, publishing detailed plans for six weeks of voluntary service for every teenager. David Cameron, egged on by his strategist Steve Hilton, says he wants to see all young people “training with the army in Dartmoor or doing the Three Peaks Challenge or working with social services in Hackney.” The idea is popular in America too: during the recent presidential campaign Hillary Clinton backed “two years of national service” where young people “could earn up to \$10,000 a year” while Barack Obama supported expanding existing voluntary schemes.

Unfortunately, such ideas have a habit of not materialising. Geoff Mulgan, a former top Labour adviser, says he knows of “at least three occasions since 1997” in which the government has costed a national voluntary scheme. But each time critics beat the proposals back, arguing that money should be spent just on the poor, that young people—and, perhaps, their parents—would reject the idea, or that the voluntary sector would fail to deliver. Instead, the 2005 Russell Commission was set up, which spawned a new public body—bafflingly called “V”—armed with £50m and a target to “create” 1m new young volunteers by 2012.

Underlying philosophical differences explain the wary response to the more wholehearted approach to civic service that we propose. Labour politicians want to argue that investment in public services is the route to social justice, but worry that the state shouldn’t reach too far into communities and homes. Better, in their view, to give money to Sure Start than to promote marriage or parenting lessons. On the right, civic service chimes with the “Cameron” push for more responsibility, but comes up against “liberal conservative” suspicion of state action. Ultimately politicians of left and right support the ends of civic service, but refuse to will the means.

Voluntary approaches are, of course, better than nothing. In America, President Kennedy’s Peace Corps pays for young people to volunteer abroad, while President Clinton’s Americorps funds them to serve in schools, hospitals or local communities. In education, organisations like Teach for America, CityYear or Britain’s Teach First help talented teenagers to teach and mentor inner-city schoolchildren, with impressive results. But the voluntary approach has clear limitations. The biggest of these schemes are still small in scale—Teach First offered only 373 places in 2008—and tend to be dominated by the already relatively rich or clever. And even large-scale programmes see those who might benefit most from social mixing—young people at the very bottom and very top of society—opt out. In truth a patchwork of voluntary schemes will never deliver on a scale close to that which might fend off youth unemployment in the short term, or make a difference to young people’s transition to adulthood in the long term.

A British programme of civic service can, nevertheless, learn from the best British voluntary projects and from countries like Germany, where national civic service is offered as an alternative to military service. The latter is a lesson in what not to do: the German programme, although

popular with the public, is often criticised for not challenging or exciting the young people made to participate. A new British system must be different—with a modern, bottom-up approach that combines meaningful group activities, a decent choice of service options, and a final citizenship ceremony. The details could be worked out by a cross-party commission—jointly chaired, perhaps, by people of the experience of David Blunkett and Iain Duncan Smith—but the basic elements seem clear (see box).

The key to success would be offering young people an experience that is rewarding, challenging and fun. Of course a small minority would have behavioural problems and would need special help to participate. But the experience of programmes like the London Boxing Academy shows that even troubled young people can take advantage of opportunities for development.

Any programme would also need to take account of those with special talents. Take the example of computer coding, where programming skill is often highly developed among teenagers. Rather than helping out in the classrooms, they could build websites for local schools. Equally, the programme should be flexible enough to contribute to national events—from the Olympics to the digital television switch over to various forms of emergency relief.

What we are proposing would, of course, require an unprecedented effort from the voluntary and private sectors. It would also need a new coordinating institution—call it Service UK—to provide a framework (and funds) for suitable facilities and staff, with jobs for thousands of mentors and youth workers. (The military could be exempt—it isn’t keen on such things—as could those who sign up for the armed forces. But ways could be found to encourage their involvement, perhaps by recruiting ex-servicemen.)

Across Britain, we can already see examples of the types of voluntary activity that could be included—and significantly increased—under a national system. Take the example of Raleigh International, a charity that runs volunteering schemes in the developing world. It charges

middle-class children £3,000, while providing scholarships to poorer participants. A recent independent assessment showed that more than eight in ten who took part thought the programme had “transformed their lives,” while three-quarters cited the experience of working in a mixed group—of better off and less well off—as a vital part of the experience. The same is true of the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme, which provides activities for roughly a quarter of a million young people at any one time. The environmental component of our scheme could learn from the example of YouthBuild, a charity that takes young men from challenging backgrounds and teaches them skills, such as traffic marshalling and scaffolding, before placing them in the

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construction industry. The same could be said of Network Rail's apprenticeship scheme, which converted an ex-military base near Portsmouth to house 200 trainees on a year-long residential course.

Britain's third sector would need to grow—perhaps even double in size—to provide the opportunities needed. But engagement with the private sector would also be crucial. In the US, Americorps provides a template for business involvement, having raised more than \$1bn in private sector donations since its inception in the mid-1990s. In Britain private companies already promote volunteering—for instance the Orange RockCorps scheme, in which a mobile phone company provides young people with free concert tickets in exchange for volunteering.

Critics will argue that such a programme would be expensive and ineffectual: a tax on the young, or a way of funding state services on the cheap. Certainly, it would be expensive. With an annual intake of half a million children, a compulsory programme would cost many billions, perhaps tens of billions. In addition to the direct cost, the programme would come with a significant opportunity cost, as many young people who would have gone straight to work instead perform their service. Economist Gary Becker claims that such systems have “many of the characteristics of a very bad tax... on the time of young persons, rather than a tax on income, wealth, or spending.” And even a carefully designed scheme might end up displacing voluntary activity, or employment, elsewhere.

But not all this need be true. Some of the money could come out of education budgets—perhaps by postponing the plan to raise the school leaving age. Even a programme costing billions could be paid for, at least for a decade, by scaling back on some of the government's big capital-intensive programmes. And far from being a drain on volunteering, Service UK could focus today's fragmented efforts. All parents would have an incentive to help; this would not be something that just happened to other peoples' children.



“Today is Friday, so I will name you Friday!”

The philosophical objections cannot be so easily dismissed. Such service is, on the face of it, illiberal and in many ways runs counter to the spirit of the age. But there is actually a strong liberal case for such measures—built on a vision of a good society in which reciprocal relationships are acknowledged and acted on, with help from government. A free society often makes claims on its people, from compulsory schooling to paying taxes and defending the nation in a time of peril. Civic service can be just such a legitimate demand. In particular, like schooling, it is a legitimate claim on the young. Philosopher Michael Walzer, in *Spheres of Justice*, argues that equal citizenship requires all to play a part in the gruelling work that makes society function. If not, such tasks will become marginalised—as is self-evidently true, for instance, in much of Britain's social care system. Michael Sandel, another liberal thinker—and recently announced 2009 Reith lecturer—agrees with Walzer, claiming that “liberty depends on self-government,” which in turn requires “a sense of belonging, a concern for the whole, a moral bond with the community whose fate is at stake.” Underpinning such a vision is the need to understand the people, institutions and predicaments of your community. But such an understanding is clearly missing in Britain today. Moreover, the January 2009 British Social Attitudes Survey showed that two thirds of adults view young people as inconsiderate and disrespectful. A period of public service would help to disprove this, binding together generations now viewing each other with barely disguised hostility.

Any move to compulsory service will, however, need political will. In this, both Gordon Brown and David Cameron can seek inspiration first from history, and second from fiction. Only weeks after taking office, and facing a depression similar to Britain's today, President Franklin Roosevelt launched his Civilian Conservation Corps. Within six months, a quarter of a million young men were working in America's forests. The corps employed more than 3m people, planted billions of trees, and built close to a thousand parks and fifty thousand bridges. There is no reason why such an ambitious programme could not become part of the solution to the economic crisis facing Britain.

But if such high-minded idealism isn't enough, perhaps Brown and Cameron might consider the fictional example of Francis Urquhart, the scheming prime minister of Michael Dobbs's 1990s television drama, *House of Cards*. Facing electoral defeat, Urquhart—known simply as “FU”—wins an unlikely electoral victory by announcing a bold plan to reintroduce national military service. Brown and Cameron need do nothing quite so drastic. But, ultimately, it is this mix of civic idealism and raw political self-interest—the joining of FDR and FU—that should convince both to take the course we propose. If the role of the 1945 Labour government was, in the words of historian Peter Hennessy, to “cauterise, finally, the wounds of the industrial revolution,” the task facing Britain's leaders today is nothing less than beginning to bind the wounds of the post-industrial revolution. National service helped to bring a previous generation together. Civic service can do the same for young people today. ■

#### FROM THE PROSPECT ARCHIVE

August 2008 Andrew Adonis celebrates the Teach First scheme