

National Youth Service: Has its time come?

By Christopher Witt

There once was a time when most 18-year-old young men could expect to be drafted into the military for some duration. This policy applied to rich and poor alike, country and city youth; even celebrity and royalty served their tour of duty.

One of the hidden benefits of this egalitarian approach was that young people were taken outside of their natural domain and exposed to other people, other situations of global importance, and gained a life-long awareness of the differences among men. In fact, it was a great equaliser for our society.

The recent performance of our fighting men & women in the Persian Gulf is testament to the capabilities of an all-volunteer military, so it may be that the draft is unnecessary today, and the military establishment may be opposed to the resumption of the draft for purposes other than those designated for the nation's military agenda.

However, let me suggest that our times might have another need for such a "draft" or "national service" effort for our youth.

Few would doubt that today we have a much broader awareness of our world, and many finely balanced issues such as sustainable environmental use, ethnic & religious frictions which tear nations apart, economic migration from poorer nations to wealthier ones, terrorism & extremism, chronic unemployment, and a rapidly aging world where the balance of workers-to-dependents is shifting unfavourably.

Perhaps it is time for us to consider a formal program which offered youth the opportunity to serve their nation in one of the following capacities: environmental restoration; religious-sponsored service activities; overseas peace-keeping; homeland security; serving poor & troubled families; or serving an aging population with assistance in food & home visitation.

Why would youth participate in such a volunteer effort? Looking over and above the noble objectives of duty and making a difference in our world, our youth could also be offered the incentives of education assistance for attending university, or a financial reward such as a block grant for use as a down-payment on a home. A further bonus from NYS can be the value of work experience for young people in subsequent careers such as police work, teaching, nursing, or environmental sciences.

One aspect of modern life which I fear is being lost in the mad pursuit of singular goals is just how much we all have in common, how much we all depend on one another. We are a community, whether we recognise this or not – for better or for worse, we are bound together in this street, in this city, and on this earth. There can be a higher purpose to our lives that might involve consciously passing this world to our children in better shape than we found it.

And we can begin this journey by laying foundation stones with our youth of this indelible truth. Can there be a stronger anti-drug message than that of assisting a young family ravaged by the excesses of alcohol? How can we create a greater sensitivity to the hardships of aging or poverty than by exposing our youth to these circumstances?

And is there a better means to reinforce the inter-generational contract we have than by rewarding our youth with the lasting endowment of a better world, and an educational scholarship or home purchase grant as the personal legacy for their contribution?