

‘There are children dying because of health and safety, It’s just wrong’

Lord Young of Graffham appears at first like a politician from another century, with his bow tie, wood-panelled office and invigorating, no-nonsense candour. But Baroness Thatcher’s favourite guru is also a techno fan, skimming his iPad over his English Breakfast tea every morning.

One moment he is discussing walking to school during the Blitz, the next he is demonstrating exactly what went wrong with the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig. The architect of privatisation is a man who likes to get things done, the one who brought Margaret Thatcher solutions, not problems.

Now the former Trade and Industry Secretary has been appointed by David Cameron to reform health and safety laws. “Czars are Russian, so I’m not going to be a czar, I’m an adviser to the Prime Minister on health and safety and the compensation culture — it’s the longest title I’ve ever had.” The more he examined the subject, the more convinced he became that something had seriously gone wrong. “Perception is more important than reality. Because you think you can’t do something, you can’t. There is nothing in this world to stop boys or girls playing conkers without safety glasses but one headmistress banned it.

“A friend e-mailed me to say she had been stopped from going to an exhibition with her son. They said, ‘Under health and safety we can’t have young children running around’ — but her son was five weeks old and in a sling. People do all those stupidities. It’s very pervasive.”

A huge industry had built up, with fat salaries for personal injury lawyers and health and safety consultants. “You get these unreal stories — for example, there was a restaurant that banned toothpicks. You think, how could it possibly ban toothpicks? But some consultant who didn’t know what he was doing was being paid a few hundred pounds to do a report and stuck ‘ban toothpicks’ at the end of it.

“The restaurateur then feels obliged to take that stupid advice because it’s a litigious age and people are worried that if they don’t follow every word of the consultant’s report then their insurance policy might be void.”

It was costing the NHS a fortune. “There are referral agencies who advertise on television saying, ‘Have you been to hospital? Do you think you have a claim?’ They sell the claim to solicitors at an auction. Of the money that is paid out by the health service, two thirds of it goes to the lawyers and only a third to the claimant. We’ve got to ban the ambulance-chasing.”

Surely thousands of lives have been saved by health and safety rules in dangerous workplaces? “Yes, but they have taken rules which are very sensible in the manufacturing industry, the chemical industry or oil and gas — dangerous areas — then applied it to the whole of life. Do you know anything dangerous in offices? Yet every piece of electrical equipment in an office has to be checked every five years. There are risk-assessment officers all over the place. It’s nonsense.”

Examples were flooding in from all over the country. “There was a place where they had a pancake race every Shrove Tuesday and the local jobsworths from the council said, ‘It’s been raining, you must only walk’. How absurd. Once you give a petty official petty authority, he becomes petty.”

“Elf and safety” stories were no laughing matter. “It’s not a joke, it’s malevolent. There have been three instances of police officers standing by watching children drown and not doing anything because of health and safety concerns. We’ve got children dying because of health and safety when it should be the other way round. Well, I’m sorry, that is just wrong, and we are going to change it.”

His plan is to amend the law so that health and safety rules no longer apply to the emergency services. “If you are a policeman then you get paid for doing a job which involves risk. Health and safety is being used as an excuse for inaction. It would have been unthinkable 30 years ago for a policeman to stand by while somebody died. They would have become pariahs, no one would have spoken to them in the force or the community.”

Ambulance workers and paramedics should be able to take more risks. “There was a case of a paramedic woman who wouldn’t go into a pub where somebody was dying from a heart attack, because it was a threatening environment. I want to exclude all the emergency services from health and safety. Technically speaking, the firemen could say they wouldn’t go to a fire because it was too dangerous. We’ve just got to get sense back into the system.”

Lord Young believes that children are suffering because schools are so risk averse. “Health and safety is a great excuse for teachers to say no. There were some children who went on one of these adventure activities and a couple of boys died and we now have the Adventure Activities Licensing Authority, which is part of health and safety. Can you imagine anything worse? People occasionally get killed, it’s unfortunate but it’s part of life. Children benefit hugely from school trips and adventure holidays, it widens their horizons, it helps them grow up.”

Wrapping the young in cotton wool could damage their development. “I got beaten at school and it didn’t do me any harm. Frankly, if a teacher clips a boy around the ear he doesn’t get upset. He understands it. And if parents smack children, so what? One of the reasons why we are getting feral children is because they’ve had no discipline.”

He grew up during the Second World War. “When the doodlebugs were coming over we used to carry on with our lesson unless we heard one stop and then everybody would get under the desks. Today that would be unthinkable. I was told of a school where the head teacher said that no boy could walk under the big horse chestnut tree without wearing a helmet. It wasn’t a joke — they’ll be banning rugby soon.”

The paranoia about paedophiles was out of control. “There’s all the sexual nonsense that goes on, the idea that everybody is a paedophile, You can’t cuddle children or take a picture of your child at a sports day, that’s appalling. I got beaten at school for being seen out not wearing my cap, can you imagine that happening today? The teacher would be in court and classified as a paedophile.”

Lord Young wants to slash the number of health and safety officials. Membership of the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health has risen from 6,000 ten years ago to 37,000, he says. He is also planning a qualification for consultants. “Any of us could be a health and safety consultant tomorrow, it requires absolutely no qualification. We shouldn’t allow people to charge for advice unless they’re properly trained.”

The public had to develop a more sensible attitude. “If you go into hospital to have a leg removed and they take off the wrong one, then obviously there is something to complain about, but too many people have the view ‘If something happens to me, I should be compensated’. Something has gone wrong when a secretary at the MoD can be paid more for a sexual discrimination case than a soldier injured in Afghanistan.”

He would like to exempt professionals such as teachers and doctors from legal action except in the most extreme cases. “At the moment you are blamed if anything goes wrong and what’s more you are open to all sorts of wild allegations and you have to prove your innocence.”

Small companies were spending a day a month on health and safety — “it is clogging up our whole system”. But, we say, look what happens when companies do take shortcuts — they could end up like BP, with oil all over their faces. The former Industry Secretary resolutely takes BP’s side. “There is a strong argument that the American coastguards are in fact responsible, because when the gas bubble came off the bottom and the fire started they rushed out fireships and put so much water on the rig that it sank. Once it sank, the pipe broke.”

He is furious with President Obama. “His behaviour has been appalling. He sounds petulant and I do think he’s anti-British. It was symbolic that he sent back the bust of Winston Churchill that used to be in the White House. He let BP be the lightning conductor, not him.”

The key test of leadership, he says, is determination. “The single most important attribute in politics is follow-through. Blair thought that when he made a decision, that was it. Margaret knew when she made a decision that was just the start.” It is a quality that he intends to apply to his health and safety mission. “I’m a great nagger,” he says.

Curriculum vitae

Born February 27, 1932

Educated Christ’s College Finchley, University College London

Career David Young trained as a solicitor and had a successful business career before moving into politics. He was director of the Centre for Policy Studies and then appointed an adviser by Sir Keith Joseph in 1979, becoming a key architect of privatisation.

In 1984 he was awarded a peerage and joined the Cabinet as Minister without Portfolio. The following year he became Employment Secretary. In 1987 he was

appointed Trade and Industry Secretary. In 1989 he resigned from the Cabinet but remained deputy chairman of the Tory party.

He went back to business as director of Salomon and executive chairman of Cable & Wireless, standing down in 1996 to set up his own investment company, Young Associates

Family Married with two daughters and five grandchildren