

# Individuals 1, Social class 0

## How the *Seven Up!* series scored an own-goal

Richard Allsop

**Y**ou start off making serious documentaries trying to prove that social class pre-determines life. Forty-two years later, you find yourself producing entertaining documentaries that compete at the up-market end of the reality television market. Such could be argued is the fate of Michael Apted and Co., the producers of the *Up* series, the latest instalment of which, *49 Up*, has recently been showing in Australian cinemas.

There are some strong political conclusions to be drawn from the series—although probably not the ones that may have been expected when *7 Up* was filmed in 1963 and screened in 1964.

For those who are unaware of the series, it began when Granada TV's *World in Action* programme decided to test the Jesuit maxim 'Give me the child until he is seven and I will give you the man'. The Granada team interviewed 14 English seven-year-olds, asking them about their lives and their expectations for the future. While the original programme was intended as a one-off, the producers have been back every seven years since to check on the subjects' lives.

Unfortunately, the series always

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suffered from a gender imbalance (ten boys and four girls) and from a lack of middle-class children. The choice of children from societal extremes (14 per cent of British children were *not* living in orphanages in 1963) was clearly designed to add weight to the proposition that roles in Britain's class system were pre-ordained. Too many middle-class, or even lower middle-class, children would only have blurred the message.

Having originally chosen only three broadly middle-class children, any hopes that they might make a remotely useful sociological contribution were destroyed long ago by the atypical lives of two of them.

Nick, the shy, glasses-wearing son of a Yorkshire farmer provided hopes of some balance not only by being at least

arguably middle class, but also by being the only participant from a rural background. However, he progressed from the one-room school he was attending at seven to studying science at Oxford by 21. From his mid-twenties, he has been living in the United States, where he is an academic at the University of Wisconsin.

In *42 Up*, Nick claimed that one of his goals was to become more famous for producing ground-breaking research than for being in the *Up* series! By 49, these hopes have been somewhat dimmed, as his research outcomes did not match his hopes. Between 42 and 49, he has also progressed from his first to his second marriage, a change which will have done nothing to dim the feelings of envy he must induce among less ambitious, stay-at-home Yorkshire farm boys.

While Nick's academic disappointments have come later in life, those of the *Up* series' most famous participant, Neil, came much earlier. Having to settle for the University of Aberdeen rather than Oxbridge was the trigger for sending Neil on a downward spiral that saw him living in a London squat at 21, homeless in northern Scotland at 28, and living in a council house in the Shetlands at 35. By 42, he seemed to have new purpose in his life, being active in local politics as a Liberal Democrat councillor. He is still doing this at

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49, but only after a radical geographic shift from London to north-west England.

If one of the working-class participants had ended up living Neil's destitute existence at 21, 28 and 35, all sorts of class-based conclusions could have been drawn. As it was middle-class Neil, only individual-based ones were available. To Neil's credit, these are the only ones he attempts to make. Indeed, he has always been quite perceptive about himself and others, a fact best illustrated in *49 Up* by his description of how a day at the cricket provided a suitable forum for a partial reconciliation with his father, with whom his relationship had been difficult for many years.

The final blow to any hopes of the *Up* series having anything profound to say about what happened to middle-class children of the 1960s was the decision by Neil's childhood friend, Peter, not to re-appear after his sour performance at 28.

However, the fact that there are no childhood middle-class participants living adult middle-class lives in Britain does not mean there are no middle-class participants in *49 Up*. There are. Some of the working-class children of the 1960s have become middle-class adults in the twenty-first century, working as university administrators or owning villas in Spain.

Few could have imagined how capitalism has enabled the industrious working class to gain a standard of living that would have been unimaginable in 1964. In fact, the current standards of material prosperity were probably even less imaginable in the Britain of the late 1970s, before Margaret Thatcher had retrieved the country from the path of complete economic destruction.

Even before she had become Prime Minister, Thatcher had come under attack in *21 Up*. The verbal assailant was Bruce, an upper-class boy who has always wanted to help the poor, while constantly failing to appreciate that capitalism offers the quickest route out of poverty. In partial mitigation, he did at least endeavour to act on his 'do-gooder' views, spending years working in underprivileged schools in London and the Third World.

Between 42 and 49, Bruce has been mugged by reality. In *42 Up*, he had recently married and now, having had a couple of children, he has decided that a life spent teaching at a nice private school and playing village cricket does have its advantages. Perhaps surprisingly to some, he seems a much more pleasant person when he is focused on creating a good life for those in his immediate circle, rather than when he is trying to change the world.

To underline how one cannot help but view the film as a piece of entertainment, the fact that Bruce has become less painful has resulted in the mantle of least satisfying participant passing to Andrew. This is somewhat unfair, since there is nothing at all objectionable about him, but being decent, pleasant, successful and happily married makes for somewhat dull footage. As Andrew himself comments, he has learnt to conceal many of his views. When asked about why he is guarded, he says he will be 'guarded about being guarded'.

Andrew is the only one of the three upper-class boys, filmed together at their preparatory school in 1964, who has appeared in every episode. Charles, who has not appeared since 21, is somewhat ironically (and arguably hypocritically) himself a documentary film-maker. Barrister John seems to ap-



Tony at 49: the rugged individualist

pear in every second one, with 49 being an on-again year.

John's reappearance means that Apted has 12 of the original 14, although judging by some of the comments, there may be a couple more missing at 56. Suzy says of her part in the series 'I haven't enjoyed it in any way', while Jackie complains bitterly about her treatment by Apted at 42. You can see the participants' point. The series takes all the pressures that may apply to the rest of us attending a school reunion and multiplies them onto a far more public scale.

There is also the risk that the prospect of seven-yearly reviews could actually alter how the participants conduct their lives. It is difficult to gauge whether this has happened, but what the series does demonstrate is that, while the occupations and aspirations of the participants are still clearly affected by the class in which they grew up, the degree of fulfilment and happiness in their lives is largely independent of their upbringing.

Further to this, the *Up* series also shows that political views can straddle class lines. John, the upper-class barrister has been expressing strong politi-

cal views since 14 and, at 49, still says that he is not too old to embark on a political career. His political views have always seemed very close to those of working-class Tony. They might read different newspapers, but certainly neither would read *The Guardian*.

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Tony seemed a little down on form at 42, but is back to his cracking best at 49. Regular viewers will recall how, at seven, the pint-sized East-End had dreams of becoming a jockey and at 14 seemed well on the way to achieving that feat. However, at 21 the dream was over and he was doing “the knowledge” to become a London cabbie. It was also at 21 that he came up with the memorable line about usually doing the ‘four f’s’ with a girl, but how in one case he had not been able to forget her. He is still with this girl at 49 and, having spoken with brutal honesty at 42 about some of their past marital problems, the joys of grandchildren seem to have made their relationship stronger than at any time in the past couple of decades.

Tony’s great appeal is that he has always taken responsibility for his own life. One could not help admire, at 21, his ability to accept the fact that he was not going to be a jockey and move onto something else. He admits his mistakes. He has an entrepreneurial spark. He provides for his family. He is an interesting human being.

The only sad aspect of his life is that he no longer feels any affinity with the culture of the area in which he grew up. For Tony, the traditional East End was poor, but its dominant

philosophy was that if you worked hard, you could make a better life for yourself and your family. He is clearly frustrated that, having put this philosophy into action, he feels that he has to pay too much tax to support others who wish to live lives in direct opposi-

tion to that philosophy.

There is no doubt that the removal of the need for self-reliance has imposed social damage on the working-class suburbs of Britain. While the 90 per cent plus tax rates and the industrial anarchy of the 1960s and 1970s have been confined to the scrap heap, the British welfare state had become so well entrenched by then that it has proved almost impossible to wind back. Fortunately, the prosperity that capitalism produces has been so great that it has been able to carry the burden of the welfare state.

Tony’s views of what has happened to the culture of the East End are echoed in varying degrees by at least two of the three working-class East End girls. University administrator Sue now lives in a nice home in what appears to be a nice middle-class suburb. Apter asks Sue the quite reasonable question whether she now considers herself middle class, but he cannot help doing so in a tone which suggests this may be more an accusation of class treachery, rather than giving credit for the hard-work of a single mother.

Sue’s happiness at 49 is clearly helped by being in a very happy relationship, and this lends further weight to what has become one of the key

take-out messages from the *Up* series. Forget social class; it is the personal sphere (health, marriage, family, etc.) that defines life as much as anything. It is striking how hard a number of the working-class participants have worked to keep their families together. Tony maintains that family is what really matters. This sentiment is echoed by Paul and Symon, the boys from the orphanage, living quite different lives on opposite sides of the world (Paul providing particular interest to Australian viewers since moving to Melbourne between 7 and 14). These two have had their ups and downs over the years but, considering the start they had in life, one has to say the positives have outweighed the negatives.

While Pulitzer Prize winning film critic Roger Ebert’s view that the series rates in his top ten films of all time and is ‘an inspired, almost noble use, of the film medium’ may be a little exaggerated, one must acknowledge that the *Up* series is outstanding. It has always had imperfections, but it continues to draw viewers back, not because it has any message about social class or other determinist theories, but because we are interested in the participants as individuals and we want to see how individual personalities and the choices they make affect life outcomes.

As a bonus, we get to note the vast increase in the standard of living that capitalism has been able to deliver to working-class people across the Western world.

**IPA**