



# The sins of the father



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**O**f all the hare-brained suggestions that have made it into political manifestos for the upcoming general election in the UK, Rishi Sunak's plan to reintroduce national service for 18-year-olds probably takes the cake. Young adults have not been forced by the government to line up against their will in this manner since Tottenham Hotspur last won the league in 1961. To think that today's TikTok generation will take to the idea is laughable.

According to the prime minister, the proposed scheme will promote a "shared sense of purpose among our

young people and a renewed sense of pride" in the UK. Which raises the question: if it really is such a great idea, why did the Tories only think about it after they've been in government for an unbroken period of 14 years?

Be that as it may, it will be somewhat ironic if my teenage daughter ends up being the first person in our household to be liable for national service. How does that work, I hear you ask – did yours truly not grow up in the old South Africa, where military duty was forced upon young men from the white population throughout the last days of apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s?

Time for a confession: no, I never did national service. In fact, I daresay that I'm very possibly the oldest male from my generation to avoid national service (except for school-leavers who may have had a medical exemption or those who joined the End Conscription Campaign and either went to jail or overseas as a result).

Back in the day, it was easy enough to defer your active duty by signing up for tertiary education first. And, as long as you were able to demonstrate continued academic success, additional deferment usually followed. If not, a train ticket would arrive in the post, compelling you to be at Joburg's Park Station by 7am on the first Monday of the following year, to start your exciting journey to exotic locations such as Upington, Kimberley or Oudtshoorn. Once there, you would enjoy a full two years of free food, dress, lodging, companionship and personal training.

I was originally forced to sign up for military service when a friendly officer rocked up at our school in 1980, the year I turned 16. Just like that, I also had a force number. I finished school a

couple of years later and went on to university for five years of idyllic full-time study.

After this, I had accounting articles to complete – this also qualified as grounds for postponing the inevitable.

## Still at college in Blighty

And then, there was one final complication. By hook or by crook, I managed to arrange a year of postgraduate study in the UK straight after my articles. As the date of my flight to London preceded that of my free train ticket to Upington, I never made the latter, sadly.

But there was admin to do. So, once I'd settled down in my new college at university, I typed up a letter explaining my new reality, and asked the South African Defence Force for one final bit of leeway. I also informed them of my updated forwarding address, affixed a postage stamp featuring the Queen on the envelope, and posted off the notification. Three months later I received their reply via snail mail, confirming that my request was approved. But they also requested politely that I should please be in touch as soon as I returned to the motherland.

I eventually landed back in Joburg towards the end of 1991. By then, the political transition to the new South Africa was well under way and military service as it used to be was fast fizzling out. Somehow, I forgot to inform the defence force that I was back.

If any record of my existence is hidden somewhere deep within the database at the old Voortrekkerhoogte, it will no doubt still show my address as that university college in Blighty. But I'm trying to keep that a secret, so please don't tell anyone.

I can only hope that the sins of her father are not visited upon my daughter when she turns 18 next year and ends up being forced to sign up for national service in the UK. But first, the Tories have an election to win before they can implement the scheme. I won't be holding my breath. ✘

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