

“To tackle the challenges of tomorrow, young people need political capital today...”

AN ANATOMY OF YOUTH

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Celia Hannon, Charlie Tims
March 2010

Foreword

I welcome this publication which looks at the younger generation from a fresh perspective. We hear the voice of young people themselves. The polling undertaken by v brings interesting and worthwhile evidence to the discussion.

The report also brings out an important paradox — the generation gap in the sense of the cultural gap between different generations appears if anything to have reduced. But the economic gap between them has widened — with younger people finding it harder to make the transition through to adulthood.

Young people are often demonised in the media. This publication shows that there is nothing new in that. But that does not make it any more justified. Their hopes and aspirations are as deeply felt and legitimate as anyone else's and I hope this excellent publication helps make sure that they are heard.

David Willetts, MP
March 2010

Introduction

*I want us to be a young country again, young... a new age
but in an old country.*

Tony Blair, Labour Party Conference 1995¹

Politics, at its most inspirational, offers people a new vision of the future. Some of the most pioneering political leaders allied themselves with youth — Obama, Kennedy, Blair — and drew upon the association to project a sense of dynamism. Politicians today readily reach for symbols of youth culture to demonstrate their mainstream appeal — David Cameron lets it be known that he wears converse trainers and Gordon Brown that he watches *Britain's Got Talent*.² So why, on any indicator that matters, is there such a gulf between political culture and young people?

When it comes to the pressing questions that young people face, British politics is failing to offer young people a vision of their future. This gap between political rhetoric and political reality is far from new, but it has become less acceptable than ever before. Young people in 2010 are in a particularly unstable position: there are real inequalities within their generation as well as between them and older cohorts. They are also poised to inherit a set of chronic social, economic and political challenges that their national governments will be unable to solve without their energetic engagement. Not least amongst these is the largest budget deficit as a proportion of GDP of all OECD member nations.³

Working in tandem with their government, young people will need real ingenuity to devise solutions to these problems over the next decades. This report presents an analysis of some of the trends they have lived through and the challenges posed

by these trends. It outlines their attitudes and values to show how politics could become responsive to their needs on the issues that will matter over the long term.

If politicians and the media send any message to young people it is *'I know who you are'* rather than *'I know what you are facing'*. Considerable energy is invested by the media and by the political and voluntary sectors in attempting to define what or who young people are. We outline the familiar set of stories circulating about young people, which are effectively alienating young people from a public sphere desperately in need of their participation. Looked at from a historical perspective, these attempts to establish youth as a different, aberrant group seem particularly bizarre.⁴ Culturally speaking, the generations alive today have more in common than ever.

The category of 'youth', as we now know it, emerged in the post-war period. This transitional interval brought with it disposable income, more leisure time, an extended period of education and greater freedom from National Service and the Church. People aged 16–25 today are the third generation to experience 'youth' in this post-war way; they share this experience with their parents and their grandparents.

While the UK may do poorly on inter-generational mixing, the generation gap, in a cultural sense, has become less and less discernible. Youth culture has become synonymous with popular culture. The generations have certainly not declared war—if anything they have more shared experiences than ever before.

But if contemporary generations are brought together by a shared experience of 'youth', they are divided by economics. Take a closer look at the data and it becomes apparent that young people in the UK are a generation lacking in both political and economic clout. This fact has provoked much debate about whether we are neglecting our responsibility to younger or future generations. And the idea that the short-termism of the political cycle impacts negatively on the young and unborn generations is gaining momentum internationally, as the German Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations asserts:

*People belonging to future generations cannot vote today. The principle of democracy can, in its traditional and narrow form, conflict with the maxim of intergenerational justice. The need to appease the electorate every four or five years means that politicians direct their actions towards satisfying the needs and desires of present citizens — their electorate. The interests, therefore, of future generations are all too often neglected.*⁵

The government should certainly pay closer attention to the emergence of inequalities in the labour and housing market, but perhaps the most important redistribution of all should take place in the political sphere. A transfer of political capital to young people is required, so that they can enter into a broader set of policy debates about issues such as care, localism, climate change and the decline of our political institutions. Politicians need to devise sustainable policies to inspire the next generation of voters and they should take their cue from the attitudes and values of young people today.

An anatomy of youth

Good government values the future, bad government takes from it.
David Willetts, *The Pinch*⁶

This book maps young people's attitudes against the trends that are set to shape their lives in families and communities, in a changing climate, online and in their democracies. It should be used as a resource on young people in 2010, an 'anatomy' of their lives and the trends they will live through. We will identify some of the key influences on them and on their attitudes — since if anything defines the character of a generation, it is shared experiences.

The evolution of the most written about of recent generations, the baby boomers, illustrates why understanding the trends and social shifts that a generation lives through can be the most revealing way of understanding them. The baby boomers are widely viewed as a confident, trend-setting,

prosperous and liberal generation. But these ‘innate’ characteristics were a product of the social change they lived through: the introduction of the welfare state, the expansion of higher education and the arrival of the contraceptive pill. Their attitudes were shaped by these trends, and in turn they are leaving their own imprint on society.

The chapters that follow isolate some of the social, economic, environmental and technological shifts shaping the values of young people in 2010. These thematic areas have been chosen because they have had an impact on young people already, or because they will present young people with significant challenges in the future.

Adapting to climate change

There is a slow shift towards more environmentally sustainable patterns of living. Over their lifetimes young people will face the greatest challenge to adapt—but without obvious tools to use or purely rational reasons to change their everyday behaviour. Governments have to be clearer about how the move to a low-carbon economy will change their lives for better or for worse.

Living and caring in fluid families

Families are assuming new hybrid forms and young people are at the forefront of this shift. Over the decades ahead, their families will face acute pressures to provide more care, support and security with fewer resources. Governments have to find ways to build resilience in these new families and make fair decisions on paying for care.

Owning a digital identity

There is now no opting out from sharing personal information or having a presence online. But young people are unsure how to assess and limit the risks of an identity scattered across the digital environment. Governments need to consider how they protect people's digital rights and guide the choices of a generation who are exposed to an unprecedented degree.

Belonging to changing communities

There are more ways for young people to belong to groups, networks and communities than ever before – belonging is no longer only tied to geographical location. This has brought obvious benefits, but young people are inheriting local communities under strain and low on trust. Local and central governments will need to invest in spaces that can foster inter-cultural and inter-generational exchange between people.

Being an effective citizen

Young people are inheriting a democratic system where there are more ways for them to make a difference as citizens. Disillusioned with traditional politics, they are drawn to these alternative spaces for social action. But many of their cohort will be left behind by this shift. Governments will struggle to find ways of collaborating with a generation who exhibit such differing levels of engagement.

We curate evidence on young people's views on these trends and challenges in order to outline 'political blind spots', where policy currently fails to address their concerns. This report contains results from v's 'Voicebox' survey of young people's views and attitudes. *An Anatomy of Youth* draws on this poll of a representative sample of 1,000 British 16–25-year-olds.⁷ A much larger, but unrepresentative, group of 8,273 young people have also participated in the Voicebox project overall, the results of which can be found at the Voicebox website. There were six thematic areas in Voicebox:

‘Labels and stereotypes’; ‘Time’; ‘What do you care about?’; ‘Places’; ‘Values’; and ‘Community’.

Alongside this, we have conducted a wide-ranging review of other surveys on British youth attitudes published within the last few years. In some cases we have included data on young people of slightly different ages, as long as the profile includes a significant portion of the cohort we focus on. These surveys were conducted by a range of organisations including government departments, youth charities, think tanks and youth brands.

We have also invited six public figures or thinkers to respond to the themes outlined in each chapter. Katherine Rake offers her perspective on young people living and caring in changing families, danah boyd on digital identities, Peter Madden on living low-carbon lives, Zygmunt Bauman on community and Stuart White on citizenship in a troubled democracy. All of them give their take on the challenges specific to this generation and how they might rise to meet them. We conclude by drawing on their essays to pose six questions to politicians about young people’s future.– in the interests of inter-generational justice, politicians should be debating these now.

Finally, young people are not simply the passive subjects of social and political change. They are also actively shaping and responding to issues that concern them. During the course of this research we profiled 15 young people, all motivated by different issues, who were finding distinctive ways to bring about change in society or in their own lives. Their models of citizenship and perspectives on society have much to offer political culture. Their voices give life to the dilemmas that confront their generation, sometimes lost in the mechanical policy-making process. Five of these portraits can be found in Part 1. While they cannot be representative of *all* British youth they showcase the ingenuity and energy of a generation that, while tested on many fronts, is far from ‘lost’.

