

Has Britain Robbed Its Children?

by Elizabeth Davies-Kumadiro

“Your city thanks you; your country thanks you; your planet thanks you. But the deepest thanks of all is from future generations.”¹ So lingers the final line of Kurt Vonnegut’s *2BR02B*, suggesting that the elderly should partake in government-sponsored suicide to make room for the next generation. Advocates of this philosophy who survive the onslaught of Zimmer-frames and table-manners would surely be reduced to quaking knees by the outraged tweeting of indignant Britannia.

And yet, perhaps the man makes a point. At the end of *Grease*, Danny and Sandy drive off into the sky; Britain’s children would struggle to pay for the petrol, regardless of being choked to death by greenhouse gases. The future happiness painted for the youth of yesterday remains, but chipped at by the militant rise of the “Grey Vote”, drained by electoral short-termism, vandalised by the graffiti of national debt. Has Britain robbed its children?

Well, who are its children? The youth of today perhaps – the under-18s who can’t vote? Or the over-18s who don’t? Many young people feel detached from politics. Some teens will deride all politicians equally (perhaps “Nigel Führerage” more equally than others) without engaging in the electoral process. It is a sad paradox; thanks to the internet there is unparalleled access to politics, yet the voice of the youth is wheezy. Can Britain be blamed for losing a generation if the generation in question is losing its voice? It may be a good time to recall the oft-proved maxim that whilst one may lead a horse to a megaphone, one cannot make it neigh. Given that 94% of people aged 65 and over are registered to vote compared to a measly 55% of 18–24 year olds² it is unsurprising that the interests of older people reverberate through policy.

But Britain has other children: what about those zygotes of the undiscovered present? The thought-embryos preparing to hurl themselves aboard the over-flowing demographic tables of fifty years’ time. In that case, they have been robbed. The future political representation of the youth looks grim. In 1971 the proportion of over-60s in the UK was a fifth; it is set to rise to a third in

¹ Vonnegut, Kurt, 1999, *2BR02B*. Putnam Adult, ISBN-13: 978-0399145056

² Ibid.

2020.³ With the median voting age pointing its court-shoes skywards⁴, safe seats are likely to grow in number as electoral trends ossify, effectively safeguarding them from young voters.

Yet the 65+ vote is not entirely selfish; many voters have younger friends or relatives whose interests are considered. Frankly, this is lucky for the young but benevolence cannot fill the gap created by apathy. Political parties do not waste time tugging the colts: no Trojan army is poised to break forth and run to the polling station. As Nick Clegg found out to his disadvantage, the youth vote may let you down. Britain's children cannot be robbed of representative power if they insist on tossing it to the wayside. Parties must live in the short term; canvassing the "Grey Vote" is essential to re-election. Britain's current brood must accept some responsibility for the state of affairs.

But so should its parents. The progeny should be parented after all. In many countries the government has a duty to protect its children. Hungary, for example has (or at least had) an ombudsman for future generations, America a debt ceiling.⁵ In contrast, the fingers of British tax policy benefit the older, richer, section of society. They tickle asset wealth and unearned income whilst pinching the young through income tax and national insurance.⁶ Robbed indeed. The government seems to be stealing from the poor to give to the rich, muddling their fairytales in pursuit of votes. Would the tax burden fall so heavily on the youth if we drew John Rawls's veil of innocence?⁷ Perhaps not.

Yet it must be remembered that taxes, even if unfairly distributed, provide what other countries do not: the NHS, child benefit, school meals, support for transport to and from school, schemes like National Citizen Service... Furthermore, the much-maligned university fees in Britain pale beside their hulk-like Australian counter-parts⁸. It is true that social inequality still poses a problem for university applicants in the UK⁹ but if a student gets a place at university, government loans ensure that they cannot be too poor to accept it¹⁰. Libertarians like Robert Nozick¹¹ may argue that all

³ '1. Voting and Representation', Fact Sheets, New Statesman and Intergenerational Foundation. September 2013, p.1

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ '2. Politics and Short-termism', Fact Sheets, New Statesman and Intergenerational Foundation. September 2013, p. 2

⁶ '3. Economics, Wealth and Debt', Fact Sheets, New Statesman and Intergenerational Foundation. September 2013, p. 2

⁷ Rawls, John. 1971, *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, ISBN: 0 674 00078 1, p.118

⁸ "World's Most Expensive Universities Revealed", The Huffington Post UK. (2013, 14August – last update) Available: URL: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/08/14/most-expensive-universities-in-the-world_n_3755064.html (accessed: 22/09/2013)

⁹ Berg, Sanchia. (2011, July 8 – last update), "Five schools 'send more to Oxbridge than 2.000 others'", (BBC News), URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-14069516> (accessed: 22/09/2013)

¹⁰ "Student Finance", gov.uk, (2013, July 31 –last update) URL: <https://www.gov.uk/student-finance/who-qualifies> (accessed: 22/09/13)

taxation is a form of theft, that Britain's children are robbed from birth by the state, but with taxation comes benefit; benefits. The proportion of children living in relative low-income households has fallen since the mid-1990s¹² and social mobility has increased.¹³ Britain baptises its children with opportunity regardless of whether or not it shelters them later in life.

Britain's children do not get everything, it is true. Expectations are great and the Pip Pirrips¹⁴ of today find themselves in quite as much debt. In the UK, the average number of applications graduates send before they get their first job is a depressing 34.4. Yet from a world view Britain's children are ok. Spain, as expected, comes in high at 68.9, Greece at 64.0, but it is also harder for graduates to find a job in France than in the UK. The recent marches in Rome against unemployment speak for themselves. Unsurprisingly, it is easier for graduates to find jobs in Germany but only just: the applications sent there are 31.2. Moreover, compared to the other European countries mentioned, Britain's children have seen the smallest increase in applications since last year: the increase in Germany was 27 times as great.¹⁵

Outside Europe, it is far too easy to argue that children have been robbed. Where Britain faced an expenses scandal, many young people in Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries face revolution or governments which are known for their extensive corruption, institutionalised bribery¹⁶ and intolerance. These countries, many of which have a lower median age¹⁷ than the UK, are not Utopia; Britain's aging population is not the ultimate evil.

Furthermore, in an increasingly globalised society, perhaps the blessings of British citizenship matter. Few countries provide such a start. Young people in Algeria, for example, are famously illiterate in three languages: speaking an (to outsiders) unintelligible mixture of French, Arabic and

¹¹ '4. Duties and Obligations between Generations', Fact Sheets, New Statesman and Intergenerational Foundation. September 2013, p.2

¹² Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 'Sustainable Development Indicators', July 2013 p.21 available:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/223992/0_SDI_s_final__2_.pdf (accessed: 22/09/13)

¹³ Ibid. p.32

¹⁴ Dickens, Charles. 1860-1, *Great Expectations*. London: Chapman & Hall

¹⁵ Henley, J. 2013, "Young, qualified and jobless: plight of Europe's best educated generation", The Guardian, 1 July 2013 (accessed online, URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/01/jobless-europe-young-qualified>)

¹⁶ Krona, M. (13/05/13 – last update), 'The Lost Generation – Background Reflections on the Arab Spring', (michaelkrona.com), URL: <http://michaelkrona.com/the-lost-generation-background-reflections-on-the-arab-spring> (accessed: 22/09/13)

¹⁷ C.I.A. "Median Age", "The World Factbook", (cia.gov), URL: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2177.html> (accessed: 29/09/13)

Berber.¹⁸ This means that they are unable to pull punches in the global scramble for employment. British children can. They are educated in the international language of business.

This, however, a legacy of imperialism, is due to luck rather than government. Yes, today Britain's children are picked first for the school team, indeed, they have a playground of positive rights.¹⁹ But what about the children of tomorrow? What it boils down to is: how long can the status quo continue? Without improving the breadth and standard of modern foreign languages, Britain will find itself becoming isolated and impotent. Without acting to control national debt, Britain's children will find themselves submerged. Without greater attention to the environment, future generations are at risk. Britain has spent the inheritance; it must now, quite literally, save the world.

The co-chair of the IPCC stated in September 2013 that climate change “threatens our planet, our only home”. The recent IPCC report states explicitly that the changes to the climate system observed since the 1950s are “unprecedented over decades to millennia” and that scientists are 95% certain that the dominant cause is human activity.²⁰ Nonetheless Britain is sceptical – it remains common not to believe in climate change and to desire short-term, economic solutions.²¹ And, yes, it is important for the government to rescue the economy from the fiscal quicksand: national debt is equal to approximately two-thirds of GDP.²² But it may be that Britannia is still on the beach when the tsunami of environmental damage breaks over her head. Where does this leave Britain's future generations? Robbed even of their most basic planetary rights?²³

In Britain today, children have been robbed. But so have all children. The recession has had an international impact on our generation. In the UK, however, we have been more sheltered than most. But the next generations have not been protected. And Britain is providing no haven.

¹⁸ Kperogi, F. (2013, July 7 – last update), “Multilingual Illiteracy: What Nigeria can learn from Algeria's Language Crisis”, “Notes from Atlanta”, (farooqkperogi.com) available: <http://www.farooqkperogi.com/2013/07/multilingual-illiteracy-what-nigeria.html>

¹⁹ “4. Duties and Obligations between Generations”, Fact Sheets, New Statesman and Intergenerational Foundation. September 2013, p.1

²⁰ McGrath, M. (27 September 2013 – last update), “IPCC climate report: humans ‘dominant cause’ of warming”, (bbc.co.uk), URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-24292615> (accessed: 30/09/13)

²¹ Vallely, P. (2013), “It's getting hotter, but we don't care”, *The Independent on Sunday*, quoted in *The Week*, Issue 939, 28 September, 2013, p.17

²² ‘3. Economics, Wealth and Debt’, Fact Sheets, New Statesman and Intergenerational Foundation. September 2013, p.1

²³ ‘4. Duties and Obligations between Generations’, Fact Sheets, New Statesman and Intergenerational Foundation. September 2013, p.1

“It’s about a society in free fall... as it goes down it keeps telling itself: ‘so far, so good... so far, so good...’ but as Britain’s children are discovering, it is not the fall that matters: ‘it’s the landing’.”²⁴
And for future generations, the landing will count.

²⁴ *La Haine*, 1995 (film), directed by Mathieu Kassovitz. France: independent film distributed by Canal+