A manifesto for youth:
Your share in the future

By Lauren Sutcliffe

Introduction

The "Baby Boomers" were the pioneers of modern day equality. They conferred an inestimable benefit to the younger generations in their painstaking creation of a society where race, gender, sexuality and background were no longer barriers to success. However, flailing economic growth and over-spending has threatened to eclipse the efforts made by such a generation to create equality of opportunity. Young people no longer suffer the same attitudinal barriers but in their place material impediments threaten their futures.

The government's spending cuts have undermined the progress of the post-war generation. Worse still, austerity is hitting young people the hardest. The trend has arisen in part due to steeply declining voting figures amongst 18–25 year olds, from over 60% in 1992 to 44% in 2010. Latest polling suggests that only 24% will vote in 2015.[1] This factor is creating almost a gerontocracy, as politicians chase the "Grey Vote", ignoring the voices of younger people. From raising tuition fees to scrapping the Education Maintenance Allowance, the politicians of today are able to deny an obligation to the younger generations. If this continues we risk having an entire demographic unrepresented and consequently worse off.

However, this can be changed. The increase in the size of the older generation in the UK cannot be reversed, but voting figures amongst young people can. Raising the involvement of this age group will create an impetus for politicians to chase their votes by producing policies of benefit to them. This will rebalance representation in favour of the younger generation, whose needs are distinctly different to those of their parents, and grandparents, and must be equally

[1] "How to get young people to vote", Rick Edwards, TEDx Houses of Parliament, YouTube. [ONLINE] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlYpMGI6iNQ.

heard. Publicising policies of particular importance to younger people, through channels such as the Youth Parliament, Youth Manifestos and in the media, will work in a positive circle to increase voting figures, and therefore increase the backing of such policies by politicians.

Undercutting these two goals is the need for politicians to acknowledge intergenerational responsibility. Britain requires guarantees to be put in place for politicians to honour their responsibility to future generations as well as the voters of today. This would alleviate our current situation by remedying the mistakes of the "Baby Boomers" who spent without foreseeing the repercussions of their actions for the next generation.

With this in mind this manifesto has three aims: to set out plans to increase youth voting figures, to highlight policies to target issues which affect young people, and to outline suggestions to ensure politicians act both for the elections of today and the generations of tomorrow.

Voting figures

Young people hold considerable voting power. There are approximately 5 million voters between 18 and 25[2] – enough to swing the 2010 General Election and enough to exert considerable influence in 2015. As a generation, young people are more active in volunteering and online campaigning than ever before. This dispels the myth that young people do not vote because they do not care. Rather, the figures represent a loss of faith in political leaders and this has to be urgently addressed as voting remains the essential method of allowing young people's voices to be heard.

To increase youth voting a series of policies needs to be implemented. Firstly the voting age should be lowered to 16. This has already been trialled in the referendum in Scotland, where 16 and 17 year olds were enthused by the responsibility to make a decision for their country. This politicised the younger generation, garnering political engagement and leading to great

[2] "How to get young people to vote", Rick Edwards, TEDx Houses of Parliament, YouTube. [ONLINE] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlYpMGI6iNQ.

participation, with turnout for 16–24 year olds estimated to be at 86%.[3] The blanket exclusion of younger voters can no longer be justified, it relies on outdated and patronising beliefs about the capabilities of Britain's youngest. Further, a voting age set at 18 means young adults can be 23 before they get the chance to have a say in how the country is run. Young people deserve this opportunity, not only because the 1.5 million young people[4] will help to rebalance power towards the younger generation, but also because it will create an impetus for political education in schools and colleges.

This leads to the second policy of compulsory, and comprehensive, citizenship education. The political education this would include is essential; it would remove the lack of knowledge that can often prevent young people voting. The stream of information stemming from the media and the vague statements found in verbose election manifestos do not provide concise, accessible information. This would be accounted for by citizenship education and extended in the use of Voter Advice Applications. These online questionnaires assimilate respondents with a political party due to their ability to provide concrete positions from parties on key issues. These applications are utilised (40% of the Dutch electorate used the equivalent in the 2012 election), and results are shared online (70% of users of the app in Germany compare their results[5]). This encourages politics to become popular through using the internet alongside formal education to increase engagement.

This increasing use of technology to inform young people post formal education links to the final policy to increase youth voting: voting online. Our generation have grown up with the

[3] "Scottish referendum results: Huge turnout bolsters case for voting at 16,The Independent. [ONLINE] Available at: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/scottish-independence/scottish-referendum-results-huge-turnout-bolsters-case-for-voting-at-16-9745081.html.
[4] "How to get young people to vote", Rick Edwards, TEDx Houses of Parliament, YouTube. [ONLINE] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlYpMGI6iNQ.
[5] "How to get young people to vote",Rick Edwards, TEDx Houses of Parliament, YouTube. [ONLINE] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlYpMGI6iNQ.

internet: 93% of young adults aged 18–29 use it at least twice a week.[6] Thus online voting would be hugely advantageous. Further, at a time when bank transactions are processed online, voting can easily be made to be robust against fraud, even more so than the current postal vote. It is imperative that politics adapts, otherwise it risks excluding young people's voices altogether.

These three policies, when implemented, will serve to revamp participation in our democracy, legitimising the form of government and reversing the trend which has seen politicians ignore the new engine drivers of economic, social and political life.

Policy awareness

Secondly, raising awareness of important issues to young people. If policies specifically to their benefit are publicised, young people could identify with politics, recognising its ubiquitous impact of their everyday lives and realising they are in a position to make a difference. This will, in turn, lead to the engagement of politicians. This initiative has a symbiotic relationship with the increase in voting figures. Increasing awareness of political issues will lead to more young people voting, and more young people voting will lead to greater response to these issues. Further, a discussion of the issues will garner support from people of all ages. It is a naive judgement to think that older generations vote purely in self-interest. In fact, as the majority are themselves parents and grandparents, they are likely to consider the situation of younger people in their election decision. Therefore increased awareness of the problems facing young people serves as yet another channel to ensure young people are equally, and fairly, represented.

The following policies are those which ideally would be given publicity and supported by politicians and British citizens, young and old.

[6] Teen Internet Use Graphic, Pew Research Center. [ONLINE] Available at: http://www.pewresearch.org/millennials/teen-internet-use-graphic/.

Education

The purpose of education is to put the needs and aspirations of young people first, by allowing them to discover their own talents and interests, as well as preparing them to enter the adult world. Therefore policies should be adopted which facilitate both these objectives. To aid the transition from formal education, citizenship education should endeavour to provide young people with vital life skills, from understanding finance to professional sex and relationship advice. The inclusion of "professional" here identifies the current low standard of sex education present in schools. The new initiative would require specifically trained staff and regular retraining. Furthermore every young person should be guaranteed education or training until the age of 18. For those pursuing an academic route, university tuition fees would be abolished in favour of a progressive graduate tax to be paid for a time period once in regular employment. The choice of a vocational route would be reorganised to have as clear a pathway, and the same footing, as the academic alternative. The achievement of this is integral to an economic policy which assists young people.

Economy

The priority for young people is achieving full employment. The figure of 17.8% means 700,000 young people have never had a job.[7] An approach focused on better vocational training, such as that favoured in Germany and the Netherlands, would decrease this figure. This policy requires employers to be involved in the process of training a new workforce. Currently there is a distinct mismatch between the number of jobs available and the number of people training for these jobs. For example, in 2013 94,000 people were trained in hair and beauty for just 18,000 jobs, whereas there were 275,000 jobs available in construction and engineering with only 123,000 trainees.[8]

[7] "Full economic recovery 'will not solve youth unemployment'". BBC News [ONLINE] Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-28765465.
[8] "Full economic recovery 'will not solve youth unemployment'". BBC News [ONLINE] Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-28765465.

Better provisions, facilitated by better organisation and contributions from employers, will serve to dramatically increase opportunities for young people and therefore the growth of the economy, thus also strengthening the welfare state.

Welfare

Governments face a challenge between funding Britain's ageing population and providing for the next generation. Whilst older generations rely more heavily on services such as the NHS, young people often require more assistance in education and training, and living sustainably on low-income jobs. Aforementioned policies target education and training, and so welfare similarly should focus on addressing, and removing, barriers to employment. The introduction of a living wage for every young person currently in employment would confirm it as the principal route out of poverty. Those in reach of the job market should be assisted: a young person completing an internship should receive weekly funding for three months and the number of apprenticeships should be significantly increased. These moves aim to provide young people with the opportunities they deserve to succeed, and should be complemented by moves to reduce the gender pay gap, and by introducing equal paternity and maternity leave as well as affordable childcare. These benefits aim to alleviate poverty through employment, but the policy acknowledges that this is a gradual process, and so anticipates continued reliance on benefits such as the Jobseeker's Allowance. This benefit should be available for a six month period, beyond which the claimant should be guaranteed a job or training. The inability to rapidly remove poverty creates the need for a fair law and order system for young people, to rehabilitate them into mainstream society and reduce reoffending.

Law and order

Young people must be give great consideration in policies aimed to tackle crime. In light of recent events, such as the London Riots of 2011, it is essential that government policy regards the previously disregarded. Firstly, as part of citizenship education, young people should be given

knowledge of the law in Britain and their rights within in. Broadly, a two-fold response to crime is favoured. Firstly, the social factors which lead to crime must be combated. Universal access to high-quality youth centres is just one policy which would help to alleviate the pressures which engender first, and repeat, offences. Secondly, responding to crime would focus on supporting young offenders who are often vulnerable in the prison system. The government should team up with organisations to provide high-quality support, such as drug rehabilitation and mentoring. This aims to reduce reoffending, a policy furthered by a preference for restorative justice.

Responsible government

In conclusion, increasing voting figures amongst young people and raising awareness of political issues are measures which, unless accompanied by guarantees of responsible government, will only benefit today's young generation. To ensure the long-term protection of the interests of young people, mechanisms need to be permanently put in place. One suggestion is a sovereign investment fund, modelled on the example of Norway, to be filled in times of prosperity, and then used in times of recession for initiatives such as the Future Jobs Fund. Such a policy attempts to force politicians to see beyond winning the next election to the prosperity of future generations. We are well within our capabilities to achieve this, and once we do, the young generations of today, and tomorrow, will have the opportunity to take their share in the future.