

Student Protests and the Emerging Discontent of Youth

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The “iPod generation” have long been written off as apathetic, pampered wasters; a collection of illiterate [Nathan Barleys](#) draining their parents resources. Yet, from the storming of Tory HQ to campus occupations across the country, it is those same youth now leading public resistance to the Coalition’s cuts. The tripling of tuition fees is unquestionably serious, but it represents only a small part of the problems facing Britain’s young. An increasing awareness of generational imbalances, inflamed by [Chancellor of the Exchequer] [George Osborne](#)’s austerity measures, could see student protests snowball into a wider movement of youth discontent.

Generational politics is undoubtedly on the rise. This year has already seen the publication of two books on the subject: David Willett’s *The Pinch...* and the indispensable *Jilted Generation* by Ed Howker and Shiv Malik. Though both texts are cautious in directing blame, they set out solid and well sourced arguments for a nation that has lost touch with generational obligations. From housing and [PFI](#) to pensions and education, the picture that emerges is one of rampant asset stripping from both past and future. The primary losers, throughout, are young people.



Students and police clash in the streets of London.

High Cost of Housing

Nowhere is the divide between young and old more stark than on the issue of housing. In over 60% of local authority districts, buying a [home is unaffordable](#) for those on average salary. Fuelled by the opening up of the buy-to-let market and the supply of easy credit, average house prices more than tripled between 1997 and 2009 (*Jilted Generation*). In terms of generational share, the proportion of homeowners aged 34 or under has declined from 51% in 1990 to just 29% in 2010. Young people have been effectively priced out of the market. Far from this being a cause of concern, ballooning house prices were endlessly cheered.

This leaves the majority of the young renting, predominantly in the private sector where the under 35s now make up over 50% of tenants (*ibid*). In contrast to either home ownership or renting from the social sector, private tenants not only pay considerably more for their home but also suffer the insecurity of the modern tenancy agreement. Once a twelve month contract expires, you can be moved on with a mere two months notice. From a generational perspective, whose mortgages are these tenants funding?

In the boom years, buy-to-lets could be secured with as little as an 11% deposit. Combined with a favourable tax regime, this was the ideal market for the asset rich boomers but disastrous for young people. The extensive social housing constructed in the post-war years was largely sold off under Thatcher's 'right to buy,' moving the nation's assets from public to private hands. The failure to replenish the stock of social housing is another significant contributor to the current housing shortage. What was inherited was not passed on.

"Flexible" Labour Market

The move to a "flexible" labour market has also caused particular problems for young people. The term is a generous euphemism for depressed wages and low job security, facilitated by the globalised flow of labour and industry-friendly employment reforms. Consequently, there is little incentive to train staff or offer apprenticeships; these costs are instead offloaded onto employees themselves and the taxpayer in general. The number of apprenticeships available has duly plummeted. Earlier this year, a BT scheme received [24,000 applications for just 221 positions](#).

In this "so called" recession, job losses among young people have risen faster than any other age group leaving nearly a million 16-24 year olds currently unemployed (BBC). Swelling the bottom end of a labour market is undoubtedly good for both business and the well-off, who benefit from cheaper costs and prices, but it is the young and the low-waged who are hit hardest. The generational spread of wealth has grown increasingly lopsided: the baby boom generation now own a full half of the country's property and assets; the [under 45s own less than a tenth](#).

With the tripling of tuition fees, educational costs are now being transferred from state to individual almost in their entirety. Having inherited a system which recognised higher education as a public good, and hence paid for *publicly*, what has been passed on is a system in which many students will repay nearly £40,000, and many poorer students will be dissuaded from going entirely. This 'Cabinet of millionaires' are now forcing others to pay for what they themselves received for free.

In contrast, the older generation wield substantial electoral power and are wooed accordingly. They are pursued with free bus-passes, free TV licenses and, most prized of all, a ring-fenced NHS budget – the NHS is overwhelmingly used by older people. To ice the cake of discontent, many new NHS hospitals have been built under thirty year PFi contracts; they will largely be paid for by the young, at exorbitant prices. Having run out of existing assets to sell off, the extensive programme of PFis represents a £200bn credit card with repayments stretching to the middle of the century. Add this to the looming pension crisis and the picture becomes serious indeed; the scale of liabilities being passed on is breathtaking.

The recurring theme is that of a failure of reciprocity. What was enjoyed by one generation should be protected for the next; this debt to posterity has in many areas been squandered. Generational friction is not an attractive prospect, and nor is it fair to tar a whole generation for these emerging imbalances. But regardless, there are issues here that need addressing, issues that jar against a basic sense of fairness. With widespread youth unemployment, crippling national debt and a tightly contracting state, tensions could easily heighten. What began with a march on Millbank could soon grow into something far more sweeping. •

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