

# **‘The Democratic Demographic Time Bomb’: young people and politics**

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**[check against delivery]**

The main challenge I want us to address this afternoon is how do we connect young people with our democratic politics?

Let’s start with why it matters. ‘Democracy’ said Churchill ‘is the worst of all systems, apart from all the others.’

The idea that we can govern ourselves through democratic institutions and representatives is as old as the ancient Greek city states, but is only as recent in Britain as the extension of the vote to women in the early part of the last century.

It matters because without democracy, there is only tyranny or dictatorship, be it the tyranny of small elites or the dictatorship of powerful cartels.

You can’t have democracy without vibrant, representative political parties.

Nowhere in the world has managed it. In eastern Europe, after the walls were brought down by broad-based citizen movements, the people soon formed political parties to make sense of democracy.

Even in countries like Switzerland, with highly developed culture of direct democracy through referenda, parties exist.

Democracy in Britain, still only in its comparative infancy, is already in trouble.

At the 2005 General Election, turnout was just over 60%, slightly up on 2001, but well down on 1997 when 70% voted, or 1992 when 77% voted. Never mind 1950, when 84% voted.

The Government was elected on 35.2% of the vote. Only one third of MPs were elected with a majority of the votes in their constituencies, down from half in 2001.

And what about young people?

In 2001 MORI estimates that only 39% of young people 18-24 voted, compared to 70% of over 70s.

In 2005, it fell to 37%.

And while over 90% of 65+ year olds see voting as a civic duty, only 56% of 18-24 year olds do.

And the British Elections Survey suggests that non-voting in the young can become a lifelong habit: 'habits of non-voting acquired in youth have tended to be carried forward into middle age'.

In other words a demographic democratic timebomb!

Life can be good for our young people:

More young people than ever are attending universities.

Unemployment is at an all-time low, with youth unemployment banished.

Britain's creative industries are booming

There are more vocational courses available to encourage young people to stay on in education

The Government's new V charity will involve thousands of young people in volunteering.

Citizenship is on the curriculum for the first time.

But on the flip side, there are still significant barriers for young people today:

- 60% of young people leave school without basic maths or English
- The UK has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in the EU
- Nearly half of 12-16 year old boys who play truant will go on to commit criminal offences
- Only a quarter of pupils who receive free school meals go on to get five good GCSEs

It is clear that young people have opportunities that none of us baby boomers could imagine. It is also clear that many are still denied opportunities because of class, family income and where they live.

And lifestyles distinct from our own.

Take a typical 15 year old, one of 16 million young people in Britain today.

Let's call him Tony.

- He watches an average of four hours television a day
- He gives more to charity than previous generations

- He spends over £400 a year on his mobile phone
- His main form of communication with his peers is texting
- He's tried drugs
- The internet is a fact of life, like electricity, not a novel new form of media
- He's very attuned to environmental issues, but has no interest or sympathy for mainstream politics
- He's used to a multi-cultural society and living in a global village
- And he's more than likely had sex.

Imagine how Tony would feel if were enticed into a polling station on election day, to see people voting using pencils attached with string, and paper ballots going into a rusty tin box,

Or if he attended a local party branch meeting in a community centre, to listen to the minutes being read out by the secretary, before a discussion on who is going to organise the jumble sale.

Tony belongs to a generation for whom voting and participation in political parties is an entirely alien experience.

So whose job is it to make sure that Tony becomes a full citizen? His? Mine? Ours?

So the key questions for us are:

- Does it matter if young people don't vote? Should it be left to the 'grown-ups'?
- Should young people be educated into understanding the political system, or should the political system be moulded to fit young people's lifestyles?
- Is it the sole responsibility of government, or can other organisations take on the role of promoting democracy to young people?

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