Chapter 1

The Myth of a Problem Generation

The reluctant role model – Franklyn Addo, 21, London

I met Franklyn Addo at a café down the road from the LSE. Fresh from the library, towing a backpack, laptop and several books about injustice, there was little to distinguish him from the hundreds of other students thronging the streets of Holborn on a Friday afternoon. But he is not just another student. Brought up on one of the toughest estates in the country, an estate in Hackney known more for its prison population than its university students, he has become a poster boy for social mobility, the power of hard work and personal responsibility. He is the archetypal 'striver'. But he's uncomfortable with the label. He says that while his family didn't have much money he considers himself deeply privileged because he grew up with security, with parents who encouraged his education and an older sister who gave him a roadmap by being the first member of their family to go to university. He doesn't want his story rammed down the throats of school children growing up on his estate, for them to be told 'work hard, dream big and you can get to LSE or Cambridge'. He says that for too many of them this would be a

lie: the barriers they face are too big to be overcome by hard work alone, and putting the responsibility in the hands of the child sets them up to fail.

He thinks society needs to look more closely at how young people end up in criminal activity rather than just branding them as thugs: 'Take a young person born on an estate where criminality is rife, the only jobs available are telecommunications or retail that are hard to get anyway. He does all right at school initially but his mum doesn't really know how to support him. He still tries his best but he goes to secondary school and gets discouraged, he's got some behavioural issues and ends up getting permanently excluded. He's left with a lot of free time, ends up hanging out on the streets. He chooses to sell drugs, eventually ends up in prison or on probation. His name is already tainted, making it even harder to get into employment. Of course, the decision to sell drugs is a choice that is wrong but it takes place in a context well beyond his control.' Franklyn is keen to point out that despite these challenges the majority don't follow this route; his point is that society should have more to offer young people than criminality or unemployment.

Franklyn is calling for a change of public discourse from one that is quick to condemn to one that has some empathy for the challenges of disadvantage.

'No one rationally chooses a life of misery when there is an alternative. It's a mixture of structural factors and individual responsibility but I come down on the side of structure. Some people don't stand a chance from the outset; if they were born in Kensington they wouldn't have these issues. Some get through but these are the anomalies, the majority won't have the opportunity. Even those who escape the system are disadvantaged.'

Franklyn wasn't always hailed as a positive role model. His story first attracted attention when he turned down a place at Cambridge, deciding that he would study straight sociology and save money in London rather than take up the joint course on

offer at Cambridge. 'I don't even understand why it was newsworthy,' he says. So deeply ingrained are cultural stereotypes about young black disadvantaged men wearing hoodies and producing music that any challenge to this stereotype is news. And the reporting of this told its own story. 'Gangster rapper turns down Cambridge' read the *Sun*.[1] The *Daily Mail* likewise led with the negative and the comments made disturbing reading: 'No wonder they never achieve anything in life. I am sure we will be reading about his demise soon. And then moaning about how he wasn't given opportunities in life.'[2]

No one had listened to his songs – a mixture of poetry, storytelling and politics, with not so much as a swear word. His reality was ignored. He fitted neatly into a stereotype and that was enough. It was at this point he began to take matters into his own hands, starting a blog called 'thisis2020' to give voice to his frustration.

Whatever his background, Franklyn would be worth writing about. He is a modern-day Renaissance man – poet, musician, academic, writer and philosopher, all while holding down a part-time job in John Lewis. He has set up a collective called 'anomaly', of artists, producers and photographers he met over social media. They come together to produce music, videos and artwork. He has just completed a new set of songs based on real-life news stories and is researching a book about young people and crime.

At the heart of everything he does is a powerful sense of purpose. He is an evangelist for his community and the young people he grew up with. He says that while there isn't a strong sense of community in his estate – in fact, there isn't a whole lot of communication at all – there is a common experience of poverty and disadvantage.

And giving voice to those young people drives everything he does. 'I feel like my life is genuinely not my own. I live for these young people. If I don't have a platform to give them a voice I've

failed them. I could go for a Goldman Sachs internship, get a decent graduate role, live normally, but so many people are not going to get that opportunity I feel like I need to try to do something.' He says this isn't about charity, he is fed up of young people being seen as helpless or in need of saving. It is about working alongside them to campaign for social justice.

He is determined to challenge the structural reasons for poverty and to change the discourse from blame to empathy and a shared sense of responsibility.

He says there are days where the challenges seem too big, but if he can change the course of one person's life then he will be a success.

Franklyn's story shows how distorted our view of young people becomes when we accept the myth of a problem generation. If we continue to blame them for the problems they are facing rather than asking how to support them we are in danger of turning these myths into a reality.

'Young people these days'

There is nothing new about a moral panic about the nation's youth. Young people have always been used as a proxy for society's fears about social change.

Part of this cyclical story is the reality of adolescent behaviour and development. We now know that the brain continues to be incredibly malleable during teenage years. While our cognitive processes expand in early adolescence, it takes much longer for the prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain that regulates risk and helps with planning, reasoning and judgement – to fully develop. And for those wondering why twenty-somethings sometimes behave like teenagers, this is a process that scientists now think only ends in the mid-twenties and thirties.[3]

Teenagers, therefore, have a developing brain that encourages risk taking and impulsiveness and can make it harder for them to

read social cues.[4] At the same time, they are trying to work out their identity and test their boundaries. This is before we have even accounted for the impact of hormones. Teenagers may start to look and sound like adults but in fact the care they receive is as important now as early in childhood.

Marcel Proust's reflections on adolescence in the nineteenth century still ring true today: 'One lives among monsters and gods, a stranger to peace of mind. There is scarcely a single one of our acts from that time which we would not prefer to abolish later on. But all we should lament is the loss of the spontaneity that urged them upon us. In later life, we see things with a more practical eye, one we share with the rest of society; but adolescence was the only time when we ever learnt anything.'[5]

This process of brain development doesn't happen in isolation from the environment but is deeply linked to it. Emerging research shows that the stresses associated with poverty can hinder the development of a healthy brain.[6] In the right circumstances adolescence can be a time of great flourishing, growth, learning and healthy experimentation. In the wrong circumstances it can be a time of chaos, violence and lack of control.

At the same time as sharing some universal features of youth, each generation is a product of a social moment. These are the economic and social forces that shape a particular generation's worldview.

The history of the teenager

The 'teenager' as a consumer with unique drivers and spending habits is very much a modern social construct. In *Never Had It So Good* the social historian Dominic Sandbrook shows that unlike their parents and grandparents, young people reaching adolescence in the 1950s were living in a time of relative prosperity. The post-war austerity was loosening, Britain was at peace, unemployment was low and the welfare state provided

security. This was a generation with money in their pockets, time on their hands and opportunity at their doorstep.

At the same time the development of mass media and growing urbanisation gave new opportunities for trends to capture young imaginations. The term 'teenager' came from the US, as did many of the new products appealing to the 1950s adolescent. Young people were creating their own markets in records, bikes and fashion.[7]

For older generations that had endured the hardships of rationing and the self-sacrifice of wartime Britain, this new aspirational consumerism seemed distasteful and sometimes threatening. Accompanying this was the first 'folk devil'[8] of the post-war period. The Teddy boys were working-class boys associated in the public consciousness with a distinctive Edwardian dress, flick knives and a proclivity for violence. They made headline news in 1954 when forty young men were held overnight after a fight at St Mary Cray train station in south-east London. In their carefully put-together Edwardian outfits they represented both the evils of consumerism and the fears of social breakdown. One letter to the local paper after the St Mary Cray fight read, 'It is about time drastic action was taken to put a stop to these scenes of violence caused by irresponsible youths called "Edwardians". The only remedy now is imprisonment and the birch.'[9]

As Sandbrook put it, 'For many people, the teenager was simply the personification of all these concerns: a figure who represented modernity, energy, sexuality and ambition. Rather than teenage subcultures representing a genuine attempt to challenge the values of mainstream culture, what had happened was that people had projected on to the teenager their own fears about the modern world.'[10]

The Teddy boys were swiftly followed by the new youth problem of the early 1960s, the Mods and Rockers. These two groups represented the class divides that still cut deeply among Britain's

young: the Mods tended to be middle class, modelling themselves on the Continent, and the Rockers tended to be long-haired, leather-jacket-clad bikers taking their inspiration from the American Hell's Angels.[11] In *White Heat* Dominic Sandbrook shows how small-scale clashes, this time in Margate, were once again blown out of proportion by the press. The *Telegraph* declared them, 'grubby hordes of louts and sluts', the *Express*, 'ill-conditioned, odious louts', and from the magistrate who presided over the resulting court case, the most damning criticism of all: 'These long-haired mentally unstable, petty little hoodlums, these sawdust Caesars who can only find courage like rats, in hunting in packs, came to Margate with the avowed intent of interfering with the life and property of inhabitants.'[12]

It was during the 1960s that the tension between young people and older generations really exploded. A post-war baby bulge suddenly hit adolescence, so they represented a bigger section of the population. Growing numbers were going on to university, so 'students' became a tribe of young people with their own values and worldview. The trends of the late 1950s of growing affluence and consumerism among the young accelerated and saw the birth of 'Swinging London' and the 'Alternative Society'.

My dad was born in the 1950s to two teachers in a typical suburban family. He failed his eleven-plus and spent his teenage years bristling against an education system seeking to cane him into a life of metalwork. He left home at sixteen looking for an escape. He protested, he grew his hair long, he was at the edges of the big moments – the Vietnam protest, the festivals – always half observer, half participant. He took that anti-authority spirit to Sussex University, where he organised sit-ins against examinations and helped his friend run a pirate radio station. His radicalism only went so far, as he was always grounded by the everyday aspirations of his suburban upbringing.

My mum was also breaking out of the suffocation of her 1950s childhood, a social life that didn't go beyond the synagogue and

her parents' well-meaning attempts to find her a nice Jewish husband. She didn't know what she wanted to do but she knew it was more than the route society had mapped out for her. My mum found her political home in the women's liberation movement and she spent the early 1970s consciousness-raising in feminist book clubs. In their different ways my parents represented the search for self-expression that accompanied rising prosperity. They were breaking free from the roles society had handed down to them and creating their own identity. My mum and women like her wanted more than their mothers' generation.

Young people like my parents were challenging the status quo across Britain; it was a generation straining against pre-war hierarchies. There was a moment in the late 1960s when this young generation seemed to be provoking a crisis in democracy. As their contemporaries in the US and France led campaigns against the Vietnam War, the calm consensus of the post-war period seemed to be shaking under the demands of a new angry generation.

Again for critics it felt like the end of the world. When in 1964, seventy-three coachloads of mainly middle-aged women gathered in a town hall to rally against declining moral media standards and the permissiveness of the young at the first public meeting of Mary Whitehouse's 'Clean Up TV' , they represented an older generation afraid of a changing world. [13]

There was a degree of truth to the concerns – drug taking increased throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In 1960 there were 235 cannabis convictions; by 1970 there were 7520.[14] Crime had been gradually rising since the 1950s.[15] While the majority of young people in the 1960s were not campaigning against Vietnam, living in communes or high on drugs, young people were becoming more liberal about sex and marriage.[16] Young women were starting to demand greater rights. It was also a generation taking consumerism to new heights. While small numbers were leading collectivist actions, the majority were embracing individualism well before Thatcher came along. The new shopping

centres were packed with young people wanting some of the action.

In the 1970s the playful experimentation took a harder edge as economic problems began to bite. Half of all sixteen-year-olds left school, but declining manufacturing meant that it was no longer easy to walk into a job.[17] By the end of the 1970s, four out of ten under-twenty-fives were out of work.[18] This hit certain areas hard as deprivation and unemployment spiralled. At the same time the post-war consensus was beginning to crack under the pressure of economic crisis.

For white working-class young men who weren't taking up new opportunities in the service industries, these were unsettling times. They had been brought up with the expectations of a male breadwinner society but were struggling to find the jobs to realise these aspirations. Unlike the generations before who were leading the consumer boom, they had become dole-queue spectators. Out of this growing sense of dislocation came a lot of anger and many people looked for a scapegoat.

There were communities where poverty, unemployment and immigration were colliding. Young people from ethnic-minority backgrounds were facing similar problems with the added barrier of racism. Young black male school-leavers were four times less likely to find jobs than their white counterparts.[19]

Immigration emerged as a convenient explanation for unemployment, housing shortages and the high demand on public services like the National Health Service. The 1970s saw the rise of the National Front, embraced by sections of the skinhead youth movement. This provoked an equally violent counter-movement from left-wing anti-fascist groups and the period was marked by clashes.

Rising youth unemployment was also the backdrop to the growth of Punk, dubbed dole-queue rock 'n' roll by journalist Tony Parsons.[20] These were musicians on a mission to attack everything middle England held dear – queen, country and calm.

Their style was angry and loud, their message anarchic and nihilistic.[21]

For all the talk of the punk movement as an expression of working-class anger, many middle-class young people embraced it in an attempt to express an identity that was different from their parents'. One woman I interviewed for this book described to me her memories of being a teenager in the 1970s: 'I left the country and all my friends were smoking dope and wearing flowing skirts. I came back a year later and they had Mohicans and safety pins in their ears.'

The fears about the punk movement were far more hysterical than the reality. Most young people were busy living their lives as they had been lived in the 1960s and 50s before them. The biggest singles of the 1970s were disco hits, not 'God Save the Queen' by the Sex Pistols.[22] However, for an older generation scared by a changing world, the punk movement – characterised in the public consciousness by swastikas, mindless rage and violence – seemed to represent everything that had gone wrong. For others worried about immigration, groups of young black men clashing with police at the Notting Hill Carnival were emblematic of social breakdown.

Margaret Thatcher not only presented a cure for the winter of discontent and the growing power of trade unions, she was the answer to an out-of-control generation. She represented a return to law and order, family values, patriotism and respect. Like Mary Whitehouse and the coachloads of middle-aged women before her, she placed the blame for social ills on the sexual revolution and liberalism of the 1960s.

At the same time as she attacked social change, she was propelled by it. The aspirational teenagers of the 1950s and 60s now wanted to own their own homes. The young consumers didn't want to be part of austerity Britain, the drabness and conformity of the post-war period.

The aspirations of ordinary people were always Thatcher's powerbase. Right to Buy, where the government subsidised the

sale of social housing, was incredibly popular as it talked to people's hopes for their families. The privatisation of nationalised industries like BT weren't marked by public outrage but by a rush to buy shares.[23] People wanted a stake in the new consumer economy.

At the same time many young people were growing richer. The so-called 'yuppies' were making the most of a booming London economy. Suddenly wealth was something to celebrate. And there was plenty of celebrating; the drug of choice for the 1980s teenager was ecstasy, intimately connected with the rise of house music.[24]

However, those at the bottom of society could only watch this growing prosperity from the sidelines. The problems of youth unemployment that had grown in the 1970s worsened in the 80s, bringing with them an increase in social disorder and crime.

In Brixton, half of sixteen- to nineteen-year-olds were unemployed,[25] poverty and poor housing were endemic and crime was spiralling, up by 138 per cent between 1976 and 1980.[26] Toxic relationships existed between the community and the police. This was partially fuelled by the use of so-called 'sus' laws,[27] which allowed police officers to make arrests where they suspected someone might commit a crime. There is no doubt that these powers were disproportionally used to target the black community;[28] they were administered by an almost entirely white police force (286 black and Asian officers out of a force of over a hundred thousand).[29] In April 1981 tensions were heightened by 'Operation Swamp 81' randomly stopping and searching hundreds of people, most of whom turned out to be innocent.[30]

On Monday 6 April 1981 the situation descended into out-and-out chaos when police were thought to have prevented the treatment of a black man suffering stab wounds. Three days of riots commenced: petrol bombs rained, hundreds of buildings and vehicles were destroyed and hundreds injured. Disorder spread across London and to pockets of deprivation around the country, most notably Toxteth in Liverpool but also Manchester, Birmingham, Derby, Cardiff and many other towns and cities.

Although the Brixton riots involved black and white young people, some commentators used the disorder to attack immigration. Others pointed to the rise of youth employment and the rise of consumerism. In *Bang! A History of Britain in the 1980s*, Graham Stewart quotes a report where 'one youth was observed breaking into a sports shop and unhurriedly trying on a succession of trainers until he found a pair that suited him'.[31]

Tensions cooled with the changing seasons and the publication of the Scarman Report. This had been commissioned after the riots in Brixton, and acknowledged that deprivation and discrimination were significant contributing factors to the events. It also called for urgent reform within law-enforcement agencies. However, the wounds were far from healed, and in 1985 further riots erupted.

At the same time football hooliganism, the so-called 'English disease', was on the rise, with police struggling to control the violence. For those looking for an escape, the sudden availability of cheap heroin offered a route out, and by 1984 fifty thousand Britons were estimated to be using the drug.[32]

For Thatcher these events together confirmed her view that personal responsibility had been abandoned during the 1960s: 'The fashionable theories and permissive claptrap set the scene for a society in which the old virtues of discipline and self-restraint were denigrated.'[33] The majority agreed with her.

Globalisation was happening regardless of Thatcherism, and manufacturing was declining before 1979. Coal was a dying industry. It wasn't Thatcher but James Callaghan who announced the death of the post-war consensus when he told the 1976 Labour Party Conference, 'We used to think that you could spend your way out of a recession, and increase employment by cutting taxes and boosting Government spending. I tell you in all candour that that option no longer exists.'[34]

People wanted to see trade union power challenged. In 1979 80 per cent of all adults and 69 per cent of trade union members

agreed that 'trade unions have too much power in Britain today'.[35] They were fed up with poorly managed state-run industries that seemed uninterested in offering value to the taxpayer or service to the customer.

The problem was the post-war consensus fell apart and rather than build a new one, what followed was a free-for-all. There was no coherent central vision of what the state owed to its citizens and what citizens owed to each other. Labour offered nothing that spoke to ordinary people and working-class and young voters abandoned them in large numbers.

The fundamental issue was not that coal mining declined but that communities weren't helped to take up other opportunities. The state stepped out in the hope that the market would step in, but it many places it didn't. No breaks were put on rising inequality.

Thatcher may not have actively endorsed greed or uttered the words 'no such thing as society' but her time in office symbolised a put-yourself-first, sink-or-swim brand of individualism that took deep root in our national consciousness. Young people were expected to take up responsibilities but with little support.

Trade unionism wasn't just beaten back; it was kicked a few times just to make sure it was dead. It limped on but has never regained its collective power. The fundamental way unions were diminished contributes to stagnating wages today. The baby went out with the bath water in so many areas of British life.

The problem with the sink-or-swim approach is that it didn't work. In fact, public spending increased: the state spent nearly 13 per cent more at the end of the 1980s than it did at the end of the 70s.[36] A large part of this was the burden of unemployment and the social security budget grew by a third.[37] Ironically, more people became dependent on the state than ever before. Whole communities were abandoned to unemployment and the cost is still being felt today, as I explore in Chapter 5.

Right to Buy was a popular policy but there was little replenishment of the council house stock, meaning that today waiting lists spiral out of control and the government ends up subsidising landlords through housing benefits.

Tony Blair came to power trying to forge a third way between Thatcher's individualism and Labour's social justice. Tax credits and the implementation of the minimum wage helped protect people from blunt market forces. Efforts were made to support communities that had been left behind by Thatcherism through regeneration projects and family support programmes like Sure Start. The success of this approach can be seen in the declining number of young people engaging in crime, as we will see later in the chapter, and the increase in educational attainment.[38]

However, the New Labour government was tackling embedded social issues and global forces. They did a lot more than they are often given credit for to tackle inequality, but it was a struggle just to stop things getting worse.

For many teenagers, the late 1990s and 2000s were an optimistic time, at least in their personal lives. Education rates and university enrolment increased; up to the mid-2000s youth unemployment was reducing. The choice of entertainment and communication tools grew exponentially and kept growing. Hotmail began in 1996, Google in 1998, MySpace in 2003, Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005, Twitter in 2006, and the first iPhone was released in 2007. The internet brought with it new opportunities for connection and self-expression. It also brought new fears.

Despite a period of relative optimism, some of today's issues were already evident. The lack of investment in house building meant that young adults were struggling to get on the property ladder and floundering in the private rented sector. The problem of the lack of affordable private housing was put off by a housing benefits policy that saw the state subsidise private landlords.

Traditional employment routes for young men have continued

to decline. For 'working-class' young men without work this identity crisis can alienate them from mainstream society. The 2000s saw race-related riots in Oldham, Bradford, Leeds and Burnley. Nothing could be more symbolic of the changes of the last fifty years than the cities that had once been beacons of an industrial power attracting workers from around the world burning under the frustration of unemployed and hopeless young people.

Antisocial behaviour orders introduced in 1998 protected communities from crime but contributed towards the criminalisation of young people. Despite the number of young people involved in crime decreasing during the Blair years according to government statistics, the media continued to bemoan the yobs, louts, chavs and hooligans.

The 1990s saw the hoodie replace the Edwardian frock coats and leather biker jackets as the symbol of teenage delinquency.

The recession brought things to a head as the overexposure of the economy to the financial industries and service sector became suddenly very clear. As consumer demand reduced so did jobs. Youth unemployment, already increasing, spiked.

A Conservative–Liberal Democrat government came in, applying austerity policies that severely constrained public spending. Young people lost out in the national budgets and in the vast cuts to local councils.

The state of the nation's youth once again swept headlines in August 2011 when rioting broke out in Tottenham and then in town centres across Britain, sparked by the shooting of Mark Duggan.

In an echo of the riots of 1981, these took place in a context of rising youth unemployment, concentrated poverty, anger over 'stop and search' and cuts in youth spending. The debate that followed mirrored the one back in 1981. Some blamed the culture of materialism, some the rise of youth unemployment, but once again many clamoured against the decline in personal responsibility.

Max Hastings of the *Daily Mail* summed up many on the right's response: 'Years of liberal dogma have spawned a generation of amoral, uneducated, welfare-dependent, brutalised youngsters.'[39] He went on, 'They are essentially wild beasts. I use that phrase advisedly, because it seems appropriate to young people bereft of the discipline that might make them employable; of the conscience that distinguishes between right and wrong. They respond only to instinctive animal impulses – to eat and drink, have sex, seize or destroy the accessible property of others.'

The riots were seen as deeply symbolic of a problem with the British young, not a group of young people but a generation. Never mind that it was a tiny minority of young people, that only 27 per cent of the rioters were under the age of seventeen and that the worst criminality came from older organised criminals.[40] The reporting once again focused on consumerism. In a strange echo of the 1981 story, the *Telegraph* picked up on a twenty-two-year-old brazenly trying on training shoes taken from a sports shop in Tottenham, north London, as an illustration of blatant greed.[41]

Research from NatCen, Britain's largest independent social research agency, who conducted interviews across five areas of the country affected by rioting, found that the degree that young people felt they had a stake in their local community and their assessment of their own life chances were key determinants of whether young people took part: 'Hope of a better future through current education and employment or an aspiration to work was seen as the main constituent of having something to lose. Alternatively, some young people felt that their prospects were so bleak that they had little to lose by their involvement.'[42]

A joint study from the *Guardian* and the LSE found that of the rioters not in education, 59 per cent were unemployed. Further analysis by the *Guardian* suggests 59 per cent of rioters came from the most deprived 20 per cent of areas in the UK.[43]

There were some young people who were there out of

genuine anger at the police, who saw the destruction as an act of politics. There were others who saw it as an opportunity.

The reality is that a society that allows young people to grow up in extreme poverty, alienated from their communities and without hope of a better future will see this kind of periodic violence. Many young people I spoke to used the riots as a reference point to sum up their sense of anger; even if they didn't take part it made perfect sense to them that people would lash out.

The challenges facing young people

The obsession with the state of youth over the last sixty years has much more to do with social change than it does with the characteristics of young people.

Globalisation and technological change have driven profound changes in our economy. The backdrop of the welfare state gave the young people of the 1960s new opportunities that they embraced wholeheartedly. The traditional working class has declined and with it a sense of class identity.

Rising prosperity has meant that the politics of empowerment and identity have become increasingly important. The broad collectivism of the 1950s gave way to increasing individualism, which I will explore in Chapter 3.

Through all of this change, young people's aspirations have remained remarkably consistent. In the past the quiet majority have got on with the process of living out these aspirations. Today the quiet majority are hitting a brick wall.

In *Jilted Generation: How Britain has Bankrupted its Youth*, Ed Howker and Shiv Malik showed how young people are doing less well than previous generations in relation to housing, jobs and inheritance, while the Conservative MP David Willetts, in *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took Their Children's Future – And Why They Should Give It Back*, made the case that there had been a breakdown in the social contract between generations. They

were both in different ways pointing to the challenges young people face in reaching the same standard of living as their parents.

Home ownership seems a distant dream for most young people. Between 1991 and 2009/10, owner-occupation levels in the sixteen to twenty-four age group fell 61 per cent[44] and the proportion of young people under thirty with a mortgage has reduced from 43 per cent in 1997 to 29 per cent in 2009.[45]

This means the private rented sector is becoming a long-term solution for young people: 51 per cent of eighteen- to thirty-year-olds 'currently renting thought that they would not be able to own in the next ten years'.[46] Yet the British private rented sector is relatively unregulated, offers little security and is beset by rising prices. The move from owning to sustained renting also matters for community formation. An Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) report found that 'owning a home increases a person's sense of belonging to a neighbourhood as much as simply living there without owning for fourteen years'.[47]

This also impedes social mobility, as more young people than ever are reliant on their parents. In 2009 it was reported that 80 per cent of first-time buyers under thirty needed help from their parents.[48] The Resolution Foundation, a non-partisan think tank focusing research on low to middle earners, found that 'In 2010, it would have taken the average low- to middle-income household thirty-one years to accumulate a deposit for the average first home if they saved 5 per cent of their income each year and had no access to the "bank of Mum and Dad".'[49] Furthermore, the IPPR found that 'there are now half a million more young people (aged 20–30) living with their parents than in 1997, and three million in total'.[50] This means where your parents live becomes even more important in determining your life chances. A disjointed economy means much of the employment growth, especially in the professions, is in London, yet prices are increasingly unaffordable for those who can't stay with family. Council housing is increasingly not an option as waiting lists spiral. For the

many young people who don't have family support to fall back on their options are limited, with Citizens Advice reporting a 57 per cent increase in the number of homeless seventeen- to twenty-four-year-old clients they met between 2008/9 and 2012/13.[51]

Looking forward these problems look set to escalate: at current rates housing demand will outstrip supply by 750,000 by 2025.[52] This is disastrous for young people, as housing represents stability; it gives young people a stake in society and a base to pursue their dreams of career and family.[53]

At the same time as facing a housing crisis, many young people are increasingly facing an employment one.[54] Young people were hit hardest by the recession, with youth unemployment rates hitting a peak of over one million in 2011. In 2014 more than seven hundred thousand young people were still unemployed, with two hundred thousand unemployed for more than a year.[55] Underpinning this is a long-term structural problem with youth unemployment. Even when the economy was booming, 7 to 9 per cent of young people were headed for long-term worklessness at the age of sixteen.[56]

While youth unemployment has been higher in other parts of Europe, in Britain it is young people who have been disproportionately affected. According to research published by Demos in 2011, 'one in three unemployed people were aged fifteen to twenty-four in the UK, compared with one in four in France and the USA, and one in six in Germany.'[57] In the first quarter of 2014 young people were still three and a half times more likely to be unemployed than older adults.[58]

Things don't necessarily look much better for those going into work. The UK's 'work first' approach to tackling youth unemployment means that those entering work are most likely to be going in to low-skilled jobs without the support or qualifications to build a sustainable career.[59] Research into the characteristics of low-skilled young workers show many drift in

and out of employment. Young people are more likely to be working part-time or on temporary contracts out of necessity rather than choice than older generations.[60] In 2013 the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that those employed on zero-hour contracts are twice as likely to be under twenty-five or over fifty-five as other age groups.[61]

Wages have been stagnating from a combination of flexible and open labour markets and the decline in trade unionism. This has disproportionately hit younger workers: a joint report by the Resolution Foundation and the IPPR found that, 'Younger workers face a severe risk of low pay with 76 per cent of under-twenties paid below the living wage.'[62] Young people are more likely to be working for low pay than at any time in the last thirty years. At the same time many young people are struggling to find full-time hours, compounding the issue of low pay.

Things aren't going to improve, as this is a generation with some big bills to pay in the future. They are reaching maturity in a time of declining public spending, yet they are also looking at a large, ageing population set for a long retirement. They will have to work longer to support the kind of pensions they will never see.

It is possible today for young people to work hard, do the right thing, fulfil their obligations as good citizens and still be struggling. This makes a mockery of the social contract and helps explain why many young people feel deeply frustrated.

It is time to end the myth of a problem generation

The starting point for understanding the contemporary debate about young people is to understand what our fears are as a society.

There are fears that individualism has gone too far, that the market influences every element of our lives and that we are starting to treat people like commodities. A 2012 YouGov poll commissioned by the Mental Health Foundation found that

76 per cent of people feel that others in society are more selfish and materialistic than they were ten years ago.[63] Many are worried that Britain can no longer compete in a global world.[64] People fear the impact the internet is having on how we relate to each other, how we work and how we live. Some are concerned about the opening up of Britain to other cultures.[65] Many have a sense that our traditional notions of community are under threat and that 'moral values' have been forgotten. A 2007 Comres poll for the BBC found that 83 per cent of people believed that Britain was in 'moral decline'.[66] Mostly we are afraid of losing control, of things descending into chaos.

These fears find a tangible manifestation in our young, as they have for the last fifty years. Today's commentators hark back to the 'grit' of the 1950s youth – the same young people that back in the 1950s another generation of commentators were busy labelling 'louts'.

There are real debates to be had on some of these issues but young people should be active partners in these discussions rather than scapegoats.

Why does it matter? As we have seen, young people have always been deemed the problem until they grow up and start seeing the next generation as the problem.

It matters more today for three reasons. These stereotypes are pervasive and the media climate is all-consuming. They leave young people, especially those that resemble media stereotypes, feeling increasingly alienated.[67] Firstly, the decline of forums where the generations meet means that outside of the family and the workplace, media fears become the lens through which people view younger generations.

Research commissioned by the organisation Women in Journalism in 2009 found that out of over eight thousand articles written about young men, half were about crime and the most commonly used words were 'yobs', 'thugs', 'sick' and 'feral'.[68]

It has got to the point that young people feel that they can't

walk in to a shop and talk to their friends without arousing suspicion. A fourteen-year-old from Glasgow told me how it feels to be constantly viewed as a problem: 'It's bad classing anyone as a NED. NED actually stands for Non-educated Delinquent. It isn't true. You'll be sitting at shops, talking to friends, or going on a walk, or going to do something fun or going to a youth club even and you are tagged as a NED.' He looked bemused for a second. 'I don't really understand it; everyone has to go to school.'

Young people like Franklyn carry the weight of people's prejudices for doing nothing but looking like the media's portrayal of a criminal. It isn't just boys; different stereotypes abound about working-class girls. Vicky Pollard appears to be a harmless caricature until you read that a 2006 YouGov poll found that 70 per cent of TV industry professionals think this is an accurate reflection of white working-class girls.[69]

Secondly, young people are increasingly disengaged from traditional communities, institutions and politics. There is a lot to value in our institutions and the pre-war generation and baby boomers are the engine that drives them. They need to have someone to hand over to. We can't be complacent that young people will buy into institutions that do nothing for them.

Thirdly, we need young people more than ever. The technological revolution is bringing about change at a pace unknown to previous generations. It is enabling completely different ways of living, working and doing business. It is sweeping through and transforming whole industries. Yet many of those in power across business and especially across politics and social institutions are suspicious, ambivalent or uninformed. Gen Y and especially Gen Z have grown up in an age of technological dynamism; they are comfortable with the flux and creative destruction the internet brings with it. Their voices cannot be ignored as society seeks to mobilise the power of the internet for social transformation. The world of the 1950s, where children were there to listen and adults to teach, is turned on its head when a six-year-old is more

technologically proficient than their parents.[70] Young people have the most experience in the most vital engine of change in the modern world, so continuing to cast them as a problem is not just counterproductive, it is suicidal.

The 'youth as a problem' narrative has never been a successful platform on which to build a cohesive society. We can't build a common agenda if we continue to harbour negative myths about younger generations. As I show in Chapter 3, the decline of mass-membership political and religious organisations means that generations are less likely to come into contact with each other, allowing these myths to proliferate.

Myth 1: young people are apathetic

The debate about engaging young people in politics is too often about binding them into existing institutions. I have met young people who are angry, cynical, frustrated, hopeful and idealistic but I have yet to meet one that is apathetic. The vast majority of young people are highly opinionated about political issues and want to have more of a say over political decision-making. However, they are equally disdainful about formal politics from parties to parliament. They are often less enthusiastic about trade unions and religious institutions. They have given up on the traditional levers of power, but this is an active choice not passive apathy. To rebuild our political institutions we need to break down the apathy myth and start taking seriously young people's critique, which I lay out in Chapter 2.

Myth 2: young people have no values

> 'It seems everywhere I turn, I see evidence of the monstrous "me" generation, 20-something despots like Sam, who care only about themselves, and blame everyone else when things don't go their way.'[71]

Today's youth are seen as 'the spoilt generation', 'the Big Brother generation', 'the get-rich-quick generation', valuing fame, looks and money before hard work and moral fibre. In fact, most young people don't want to be footballers or Page 3 models. The 'Nothing in Common' report from the Education and Employers Taskforce found that seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds' top-five preferred career options were teacher, psychologist, accountant, police officer and lawyer.[72] CelebYouth, an empirical study of fourteen- to nineteen-year-olds, found that far from uncritically following celebrity culture, young people use celebrities as a means of testing and developing moral ideas. They distinguish between good and bad role models and they are critical of excessive wealth.[73] Youth attitudes to work and consumption actually tend to be more concerned with ethics than previous generations, as I show in Chapter 9.

Myth 3: young people are lazy and entitled

Businessman Luke Johnson summed up the prevailing viewpoint in the *Daily Mail*: 'In the hospitality trade, which I know well, there is a high proportion of foreign-born workers because of their greater diligence, skills and enterprise compared to many British workers. This negative outlook, or lack of "grit" to use Hurd's phrase, has been created by a number of factors. One is the unfortunate sense of entitlement too many young people possess, fuelled by the belief that some jobs are beneath them, particularly if they involve manual labour. A lot of teens and twenty-somethings I meet have very high expectations in terms of salary and holidays, but a limited appetite to put in the hours or carry out unpleasant, boring tasks. That mentality was epitomised by the recent case of Cait Reilly, an unemployed university geology graduate, who successfully sued the Government because she was asked to work in discount store Poundland as part of a work experience scheme. Her rarefied dignity seemed to be offended. But

I could tell her that any kind of work can be beneficial. When I was growing up, I worked during vacations and weekends in factories, as a postman, in a hospital and in a hotel. All those experiences taught me a great deal about the realities of life.'[74]

The problem with these hard-work tales is that they existed in a very different economic climate. If Mr Johnson tried doing the same thing today, he would probably be handing out his own CV rather than delivering other people's mail. More young people work for free and for lower wages than in previous generations.

The view of an entitled generation doesn't reflect the young people I have met: the eighteen-year-old boy who had been putting on a suit every day for months to walk round Birmingham City Centre handing out his CV; or the twenty-one-year-old girl I spoke to in Glasgow who has applied for three hundred jobs and never heard back from any of them so volunteers every day at a youth centre; the thousands of young people who are desperate to get any job at all or are working for free in unpaid internships to get a foothold on their chosen career ladder. In 2011 26 per cent of UK graduates aged between twenty-four and twenty-nine were in jobs that didn't require a degree.[75] Cait Reilly, who garnered media attention for refusing to take up unpaid work, wasn't sitting at home doing nothing when she was asked to stack shelves in Poundland for no money. She was volunteering at a museum, gaining valuable work experience in the career she wanted to pursue.[76]

If young people want to do work they love, explore new opportunities or start their own businesses, why are we telling them to lower their expectations? If they are demanding a better future shouldn't we be trying to support their demands rather than belittling them?

If there is a problem with skills it is because we have allowed inequality to become entrenched in our education system and have failed to invest in the 50 per cent of school leavers who don't go to university. A quarter of young people born in 1958 acquired

an apprenticeship; in 2009 only 6 per cent of employers recruited any sixteen-year-olds and 11 per cent any eighteen-year-olds.[77] Young people can't even get work-ready with a paper round because such jobs just aren't available to them any more.

If young people's aspirations are not matching the reality of the labour market that is because they have been let down by poor advice and inadequate support. A report conducted by the CBI revealed that only 5 per cent of employers in the UK think our careers advice is good enough.[78] If some young people do not want to accept certain jobs it is because far too many are poorly paid with low progression routes. A sixteen-year-old who has watched his parent work long hours in a job for little reward won't want to take on a job with similar prospects. We are feeling the consequences of allowing wages to stagnate for low-paid workers. We talk about how previous generations worked their way up from the bottom and ignore the fact that social mobility has halted.

This is not only a British issue: the same trends are evident in the US and across Europe. Studies show that 'routinisation' – the notion that human capital is replaced by technology for routine tasks – is driving polarisation across Europe.[79] Rising youth unemployment throughout the Continent should put paid to claims from those who think that young people in the UK are particularly lazy, entitled or deficient.

Myth 5: young people are selfish

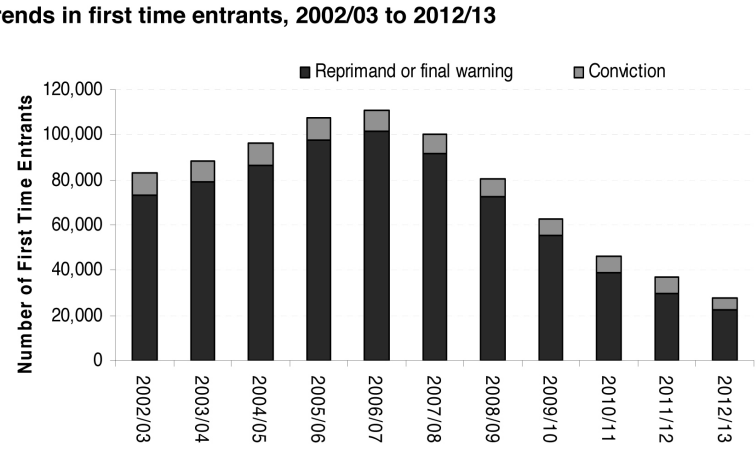
> 'With their blithely recalcitrant, "the world owes me a living" attitude and lack of a hard work ethos, they have imbibed and been corroded by the materialistic hedonism of short-term bling culture and its penchant for easy money and fast living, heedless of the consequences. Often, they are neither industrious nor motivated.'[80]

I will show in Chapter 4 that while young people have lost touch with traditional notions of community this does not make them selfish. They are just as likely to volunteer as older generations and more likely to informally volunteer.[81] They are using the internet to find new ways to share, collaborate and connect. It is young people pioneering the sharing economy, creating new community groups built on empathy and experimenting with collective structures at work.

Myth 6: young people are out of control and large numbers are criminals

> 'The nation is in the grip of an epidemic of deadly youth violence. Teenagers are having lives that are full of potential snuffed out by mindless stabbings, shootings and mob beatings. The toll is mounting almost daily.'[82]

There are, of course, some young people who commit crimes; however, this is a small and decreasing minority of young people. In 2012/13, there were 27,854 first-time entrants (FTEs) to the Youth Justice System. The number of FTEs fell by 67 per cent from 2002/03 to 2012/13 and has fallen by 25 per cent in the last year.[83] However, youth crime is vastly over-reported and sensationalised in the media so adults end up overestimating the amount of crime committed by young people by a factor of 100 per cent.[84] As many as 75 per cent of adults assume youth crime is rising, when the actual rate has been falling year on year.[85] This perception of the breakdown of public order is so deep in the public consciousness that the idea of 'youth' is synonymous with 'delinquency'. It divides communities, stigmatises young people and prevents intergenerational dialogue.



Source: 'Youth Justice Statistics 2012/13', Youth Justice Board/Ministry of Justice Statistics bulletin (2014)

Myth 7: young people are irresponsible

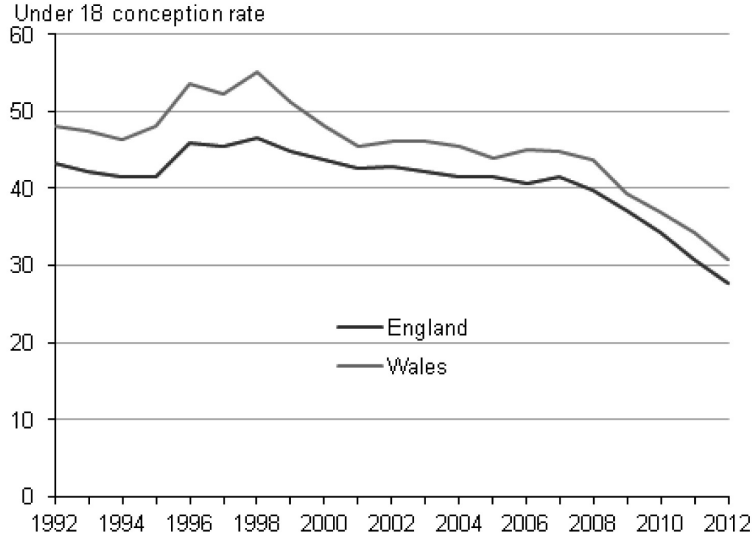
> 'The furious cop said: "We have gangs of young people hanging around on street corners being abusive, swearing, intimidating and causing trouble. They are feral, have no parental control or respect for anybody and are often fuelled by alcohol. They don't give a damn about the police or the criminal justice system.
>
> "Intimidation is a part of life for these people and the criminal justice system holds no fear for them."'[86]

The general view that we are bringing up a generation without a sense of personal responsibility is deeply entrenched. This is supported by endless headlines about 'binge drinking', 'drunken louts' and 'feral youths', and further corroborated by the trend in television broadcasting that brings together young people and large quantities of alcohol in various settings and films the results (*Geordie Shore*, *The Valleys*, *What Happens in Kavos*). Despite being colourfully displayed to us at every opportunity, drug taking and alcohol consumption among

young people are both going down. The number of sixteen- to twenty-four-year-old men drinking more than eight units on at least one day reduced from 39 per cent to 22 per cent between 1998 and 2011.[87] In fact, a survey in 2012 found that 49 per cent of sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds had drunk nothing the week before, the least likely of all age groups.[88] 15 per cent of sixteen- to nineteen-year-olds smoked in 2012 compared to 31 per cent in 1998.[89] Teenage pregnancy rates are going down (see graph below), though Ipsos MORI polling shows that in the UK we think teenage pregnancy is twenty-five times higher than official estimates. As we saw above, youth crime is going down. The hysterical headlines bear little relation to the reality. Young people are taking more responsibility for themselves and their behaviour.

Under 18 conception rates 1992–2012

England and Wales



Source: 'Conception in England and Wales, 2012', Office for National Statistics Statistical bulletin (2014)

Myth 8: young people are all the same

There are so many diverse tribes of young people that to even divide them into subcultures would take for ever. Our increasingly diverse and global society allows young people to choose their identity, their style and their music tastes from an ever-widening range of options. Throughout this book we will see how different young people are responding to the modern world in very different ways. We will see huge differences based on socio-economic status, with some young people embracing a global world and others feeling left behind by it.

The problem with these stereotypes is that they influence how young people view themselves. Young people who are treated as apathetic become more turned off from political decision-making that seems to forget them. The teenagers who hear themselves condemned in the media and watched by fearful eyes in their communities become increasingly angry and alienated from mainstream values.

There was a moment where it seemed that David Cameron was opening up a different debate about young people. His 'hug a hoodie' speech in 2006 spoke about the circumstances that blight young lives. It was a speech that acknowledged personal responsibility but also the context underlying many of the choices made by young offenders. It was a speech that called for compassion, understanding and even love.[90]

In government the narrative of personal responsibility has stayed loud and clear – earn or learn, automatic sentencing for young people carrying knives and proposed cuts to housing benefits for under-twenty-fives.[91] The compassion has all but disappeared. When the London riots happened there was little nuance or understanding, it was tougher policing, tougher sentences and back to the language of personal responsibility. Commenting on the riots, David Cameron said, 'Do we have the determination to confront the slow-motion moral collapse that

has taken place in parts of our country these past few generations? Irresponsibility. Selfishness. Behaving as if your choices have no consequences. Children without fathers. Schools without discipline. Reward without effort. Crime without punishment. Rights without responsibilities. Communities without control.'[92]

A narrative of responsibility can get us so far. But this is a generation that is showing itself prepared to take responsibility, to work hard and to do the right thing. However, we have to ask: What is our responsibility to this generation?

Our institutions are no longer providing young people with answers to the challenges that face them. For many young people such institutions seem set up against them or at best simply irrelevant. None more so than political institutions that should be helping to solve the challenges young people face but in fact end up alienating them further.

Chapter 2

The Problem with Politics

Searching for a voice – Natalie Robinson, 19, Nottingham

Like most of her generation, Natalie grew up feeling disconnected from national politics. Westminster felt a long way from her estate in Nottingham. 'I was seeing all of my friends going through struggles. And these guys who are sitting in parliament are just having a nice time and sorting out problems for people who are just complaining about stuff that's not life-endangering.'

After witnessing one too many instances of youth violence, Natalie decided to try to do something about it and at twelve she became a youth councillor, and at fourteen she ran to be the Youth MP for Nottingham. She has been championing young people in her community ever since. She spends every spare hour outside of her job and education representing young people. No one pays her; she does it because she feels compelled to give a voice to the people she grew up with. The fact that she is such a strong representative is all the more remarkable because she never really had anyone to champion her. 'When I was growing up I didn't know sometimes when I was going to eat

next. Like many other young people I've experienced sitting in the cold for days with no electricity.' When we met she was experiencing first-hand the challenges of homelessness. 'I can feel the pressure that is on a young person when they have nowhere to go, you just feel, Oh my God, what am I going to do?' She says that living the problems faced by young people gives her a fresh perspective.

Yet she has hit institutional barriers when she has tried to get that perspective heard. 'I went to a homelessness strategy drafting the other day at Nottingham council on behalf of the many young people I know who are facing homelessness. All they had to say was mediation: we'll mediate young people back into their families. They just don't understand that some young people don't have a choice, it isn't always as easy as going home and giving your mum a hug. All they had to say was, "But mediation is really good." I know it is good. It is good for young people who can mediate back to their families – they have run away or there is a communication barrier – but for some older young people they've gone past that.'

Despite the struggle to get her voice heard, Natalie has kept going, trying to be the bridge between the young people she grew up with and the political institutions that are meant to serve them.

She tells me, 'I feel like I'm an eagle that carries all of these views on my back. Like they are quite heavy but I'll still deliver them to the right leaders. I'm not looking to change the world but if I can maybe influence a decision with a tangible outcome that was from someone else's perspective then I'd be happy.'

Too often she delivers the message but finds it doesn't get heard. 'I go to meetings about local budgets and ask, "What about young people? Will there still be activities to keep them off the street?" They look at me as if I was a kid asking, "Are we still going to have our toys?" Too often they follow the minimal responsibility on the statute.'

She wants more from politics: 'We should have a duty of care. We should have a sense of responsibility as people and institutions.'

Yet she tells me she feels like a ghost whisperer, her head full of voices that only she seems to hear.

Natalie is exceptional in many ways, and one is that she is channelling her frustration into an attempt to influence formal political institutions. The majority of young people I meet have given up. It isn't that they don't care – they are in fact deeply political, as we will see later on in the chapter – but it is difficult to engage with a process that makes them feel invisible.[1]

Young and ignored

The dictionary definition of apathy is: 'showing or feeling no interest, enthusiasm or concern'. This is a far better description of our collective attitude to youth disengagement than it is of young people themselves. Why a generation is rejecting politics should be the driving political question of our times and a rallying call for reform. It is not young people's apathy but our failure to listen to them that is the real threat to our democratic future.

Engagement in politics has been slowly declining across every generation and today young people have all but given up on formal political institutions. It is a fundamental mismatch between political leadership and the demands and outlook of the citizens it seeks to serve, creating a dangerous democratic deficit. Young people are trapped in a downward spiral – they don't vote because they feel alienated from politics, politicians don't take their concerns seriously, thus entrenching their alienation.

The numbers speak for themselves. In 1964 76.4 per cent of those under twenty-five are reported to have voted, the same number as those aged over sixty-four.[2] By 2005 only 38.2 per cent of young people under the age of twenty-five voted, compared with 74.3 per cent of over-sixty-fours.[3] Even in 2010, which was

an incredibly competitive election (and historically more likely to engage young people), an Ipsos MORI poll showed that only 44 per cent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds voted, compared with 76 per cent of those aged sixty-five and over.[4] This marks a profound change in the nature of our democracy, where the voices of one section of society dwarf those of another.

Turnout has declined for all voters but the declines were unprecedented for younger voters, falling by 29.1 per cent and 29.6 per cent for eighteen- to twenty-four- and twenty-five- to thirty-four-year-olds respectively.[5] All other indicators of engagement show the same pattern. Likewise, the decline in party affiliation is most stark for the young. In 1991, 29 per cent of fifteen- to twenty-four-year-olds supported a political party; in 2011 it was 15.8 per cent compared with 57.8 per cent of over-seventy-fives.[6]

This is a long-term trend and nothing from historic experience or academic research suggests that they are going to grow out of it. While life-cycle explanations (where we become more interested in politics as we get older and settle down) explain modest differences in turnout during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, they cannot explain the huge gaps that have opened up between generations in the 1990s and 2000s. Research shows that voting patterns in early adulthood determine lifetime attitudes. As one study of the trends put it, these declines are unprecedented at this magnitude.[7]

Almost half young people aren't even registered to vote,[8] and the introduction of individual voter registration will likely only exacerbate this. In 2014 only 24 per cent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds said they were definitely planning to vote at the next election.[9]

While some young people are engaging in political activity, it is only a minority who do so in a way that directly reaches representatives, such as turning up to a public meeting or going to the ballot box. There is little evidence that the young voters who are abstaining from voting are engaging in other forms of

traditional civic participation. While there has been an increase in political protest like petition signing, this is predominately among voters.[10]

This is not a blip or an anomaly; it is the end of a long-term trend that threatens the future of our democratic institutions. We cannot have effective, fair government when so many voices are outside the democratic process.

Young people end up as the discussion point of political debate, important only in how they affect older voters on issues from antisocial behaviour to the tax bill. There is little incentive to spend time tracking down students or visiting schools, and when they do young people like Natalie who do take part feel that they are consulted but not listened to. Youth engagement is too often an end in itself, a box ticked.

Politicians are increasingly dealing with depleted resources and facing tough decisions about how to distribute those resources throughout society. The interests and values of young people are not just different, they can be in direct conflict with those of older voters.[11] Take the planning system where the dominant voices tend to be home-owning middle-aged residents protesting against new housing that will threaten the value of their homes and the amenity of their neighbourhoods. Meanwhile young people struggle to get on the housing ladder. When forced to choose, political leaders are more likely to go with their most powerful stakeholders, with the voices they hear at their surgeries, at their public meetings,[12] in their media and most importantly at the ballots.[13] In the 2010 spending review, the IPPR calculated that sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds faced cuts to services worth 28 per cent of their annual household income, compared with just 10 per cent for those aged fifty-five to seventy-four.[14] The cuts have fallen disproportionately on the young, from tuition fees through to youth services.[15] Or, as it looks through the eyes of Reuben, who is a seventeen-year-old college student in Birmingham, 'Youth are the future but they've just

stopped everything. No explanation. No support, no financial support, no support of any kind, it is all slowly disappearing into the darkness.' He is reflecting wider attitudes among his generation: only 15 per cent of young people believe the government generally treats young people fairly.[16]

At the same time there is also a growing gap between rich and poor, in turnout and consequently in political decision-making. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, living in insecure housing or private rented accommodation,[17] are the least likely to vote out of a generation already staying away from the polls.[18] As a result, focus groups too often ignore them and party strategists, who pore over the results of such discussions, are left in the dark about what young people from poorer backgrounds really think. Their concerns get lost under the clamour of the voices of those who determine elections. They have become politically invisible. As Camila Batmanghelidjh, founder and director of Kids Company, a charity supporting vulnerable children in London and Bristol, put it to me, 'The journalists ask [politicians] about the economy, the NHS, they never ask them about vulnerable children. It's not there in the national debate, no one prioritises these children.' It is the pressure of these forces that pushed Cameron away from compassionate conservatism and 'hug a hoodie' to dispassionate conservatism and 'jail a hoodie'.

This entrenches youth disengagement as young people legitimately ask, What do politicians ever do for me?

As a society we blame the 'troublesome' young. As political sociologist Rys Farthing puts it, 'Older people define what a good citizen is, and young people, unsurprisingly, emerge as troubled and troublesome yet again. Proponents of this paradigm view young people's rejection of traditional political forms (such as elections and the media) as a "fault"' of young people, blind to the possibility that this may be a legitimate response to faulty institutions themselves.'[19]

Or, in the words of eighteen-year-old Jake from Birmingham,

'They portray the youth as the problem for what has happened to the UK but it is not us that are the problem it is them, it is the people in control.'

The misdiagnosis of apathy means politicians prescribe the wrong cures. We put forward policies to teach young people to be good citizens without recognising how much they can teach us. Natalie Robinson doesn't need a role model. She is a role model.

The debate about youth disengagement so far predominately focused on citizenship education, votes at sixteen and online voting. Of course, anything that can make it easier to engage in democratic processes is a no-brainer. Votes at sixteen will force politicians into schools where there is a captive youth audience with a lot to contribute. It will also put some faith in young people. The experience of the Scottish referendum shows that sixteen-year-olds are more than capable of taking on the responsibility. However, we can't expect it to solve everything. Many young people don't even support votes at sixteen[20] – why would they be passionate about extending a process that they have no faith in? We need to recognise that they are often staying away from the ballots as an act of protest, not apathy.

We could ignore this protest and watch our political institutions slowly fade into irrelevance or suddenly collapse. Nobody would be able to say the signs hadn't been there. Or we could listen to what young people like Natalie have to say and make the broader institutional changes they are looking for. In the process we would improve politics for everyone.

How did we get here?

Voter turnout has been reducing across all age groups. Between 1992 and 2001 levels fell by more than 16.3 per cent among all voters.[21]

It is not just young people that are frustrated with politics and politicians. The whole of society has become less likely to engage

in formal politics. It is just that young people are the most visible in their rejection.

This is a long-term trend and first became a topic of political debate in the 1960s and 70s when the baby boomers came of age, shook off deference and began to challenge the status quo through mass protests and political mobilisation, leading many theorists to point to a 'crisis of democracy'.[22] Despite the predictions of some academics at the time, democracy did not flounder and continued on but with ever-decreasing active participants.

The decline in democratic involvement is often put down to declining trust. Commentators point to the expenses scandal as destroying faith in our public representatives. The scandal that rocked Westminster actually had relatively little effect on the public trust in politicians. This is not because the public were in any way forgiving, rather that their trust levels didn't have much further to fall. It confirmed what they already believed: politicians are out for themselves, not the public. This is nothing new – politicians have never been trusted.[23] It also isn't a particular feature of youth;[24] research shows trust in politicians actually declines with age.[25]

If trust levels have remained statically low, we have to look elsewhere to explain patterns of disengagement. What has declined across the board is satisfaction with political institutions, belief in their relevance and people's belief that they can influence them.[26]

The world has changed and political institutions have stayed static. Change is fast-paced. The news cycle supports short-termism when many challenges require long-term thinking. Citizens and their leaders are suffering from an information overload. People are more demanding, with higher expectations just when the capacity of governments is reducing.

In the West we are dealing with depleted resources and a changing global power balance, with much of the economic

dynamism and growth coming from the developing world. As the global middle class grows, the pressure on resources will only increase and the energy we consume will have to radically change or reduce. Many challenges – terrorism, tax evasion, climate change – can only be solved by global institutions and governance. National leaders are left with the façade of power but limited room for manoeuvre. Populations look to political leaders for answers and they exaggerate how far they can influence the course of events.

In Britain we have specific challenges – particularly low levels of party affiliation,[27] an often cynical media, highly centralised political institutions and an adversarial political debate.

First, the decline in party affiliation and trade union membership means politics feels ever more disconnected from people's lives. As parties shrink in size they become harder to access and more remote from people's lives. This is particularly true for the working class who traditionally found routes into politics through Labour politics and trade unions based on the collective power of class solidarity.

As these bridging institutions fade away, politics increasingly becomes something people view on television rather than act on in their communities. If the only politics you ever see is snatches of Prime Minister's Question Time then it is not surprising that it feels alien, remote and highly unattractive.

The British media can be a toxic environment in which to conduct political debates. The media appointed themselves as the official opposition during the Blair years as the Conservatives floundered in internal hand-wringing. Of course, fair media scrutiny of politics is important. It prevents corruption, encourages debate and exposes genuine hypocrisy. Problems arise when cynicism becomes the lens through which all news is filtered, when the default assumption built into coverage is that all politicians must be lying. Online media often perpetuates rather than challenges this culture.

The constrained language of many politicians is partly the product of an environment where any comment can be taken out of context. Chloe Smith's *Newsnight* interview where she was publicly mocked (*Daily Mail*: Is this the most humiliating political interview ever?) for being unable to offer a straight answer to Jeremy Paxman's questions is just an extreme example of this move towards conformity.[28] The tolerance given to 'mavericks' like Boris Johnson is not extended to the majority. Politicians are given neither the freedom to experiment nor the liberty to make mistakes. One off-the-cuff comment can mean the end of a career. An ill-thought-through video can be played back to you in a thousand internet parodies. Media outlets pour scorn over these terrible 'gaffes' but in the same breath accuse politicians of being robots.

One of my oldest friends is a journalist and while he was studying journalism and I was studying politics we would have a circular debate about who was at fault for the terrible representation of politicians in the media. His argument was that the media only reflects the mess they are presented with. I would say too many journalists go out of their way to run down Britain and put a negative spin on every political act. The truth is we were both right.

As the BBC's Nick Robinson put it in a similar debate with Rachel Reeves, a member of Labour's Shadow Cabinet, 'I've seen a crisis in trust, first in politics and then in the media. It's a vicious circle where everyone involved thinks if they do down the other they'll be better off. So the media have a go at politicians, politicians have a go at the media – just try to make the other person look more corrupt than you are.'[29]

The culture they are both attacking is the third issue, the nature of our adversarial politics. While the battle for headlines is being so passionately fought in the halls of Westminster and both sides are keeping a close watch on who is up and who is down, the public is long gone and young people, who are facing

so many challenges, only have to see glimpses of it to be convinced that none of the answers they seek can be found in our political institutions.

Even our politicians feel uncomfortable with modern politics. In 2009 David Cameron described what he called our broken politics: 'Politicians who can't bring themselves to recognise any good in their opponents and refuse to work together to get things done. Politicians who never admit they're wrong and never acknowledge that they've made a mistake . . . These are some of the reasons that politics is broken.'[30]

He is not a million miles away from the unemployed young person who told me, 'They just bicker . . . you just hear them taking the piss out of each other. All they try and do is get publicity off each other's failings.'

Yet somehow David Cameron never got round to trying to change politics; his good intentions got lost in the day-to-day battle for headlines and one-upmanship. The immediacy and the clamour of Westminster is a powerful force. The echoes are all the louder because they are being heard in a bubble.

Local politics has some of the same problems. Every month I go to council meetings and I sit in a room with a group of people who I know are there because they care deeply about Camden and at a community level are intimately involved with local issues. Yet too often we engage in a debate that is just a parody of the national one. There is an element of theatre but it is not really clear who we are performing for because the public galleries are generally empty. The emphasis ends up being on rallying the troops, nailing your party colours to the mast, because the people listening are your colleagues.The format of formal political decision-making at a local and national level doesn't give enough opportunities for the public to initiate or lead discussions and so they stop tuning in. As the most visible political forums, our parliamentary and council debates have to reflect a more open and collaborative kind of politics.

Too often in politics the most fiercely fought elections are the internal ones. Much of the most passionate political debate ends up happening within closed party-political forums. The problem today is that most of the public never see these political discussions because the majority of them have never been near a party meeting. They assume that the dull dance of party-political lines is all there is.

They would rather see some give-and-take between parties or a passionate debate. Division without debate is unwatchable.

A big part of the problem is the highly centralised nature of Westminster politics. Devolution has to happen not to centralised mini-Whitehalls but empowering local structures, as I describe in Chapter 11.

The institutions as they are make it hard for individuals to find a new way of engaging with young people. I am as guilty as anyone of making boring speeches, sticking to a bland party line and giving too much time to archaic process rather than engagement. It is easy to do, whether you are an MP, a councillor or secretary of a local party branch. You can spend a lot of time trying to win over the ten people in the room rather than asking why no one has turned up. You are so preoccupied with the processes of how things have always been that you never get round to asking how they could be different.

Young people, like the rest of the population, find all of this really unattractive. We have to work harder to show young people that political institutions can give them the power they are looking for.

Youth disengagement is not an inevitable factor of modern politics. While youth turnout has declined in some countries, it stayed steady over time in parts of Europe (Sweden, Italy, Netherlands and Germany).[31] There is evidence to show that sustained focus on youth engagement in political decision-making has made a difference in these countries. While these are global trends it is important to remember that the scale of

youth disengagement from formal politics we face in the UK is not a forgone conclusion.

The cost of youth disengagement

There have been some who asked me, does it matter? Youth disengagement shows things are stable, it was ever thus, the system works, why rock the boat?

It is my view that we can no longer take for granted the sustainability of our democratic institutions. There is a burning anger among many young people that has to be addressed. There is also a wealth of energy and reforming zeal that can form part of the solution. Ignoring the problem means we end up losing the contribution of a huge section of our population, which in turn leads to disjointed decision-making and narrows the pool of political candidates. It should matter to all political persuasions because as we saw in Chapter 1, there are some serious challenges facing this generation, challenges they want to help solve. In 2008 75 per cent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds said it was important to influence decisions in their local area, enthusiasm that could be harnessed.[32]

As political parties become dominated by fewer people from older generations it promotes factionalism and inward-looking debates. If young people are only engaging in politics outside of formal processes it will create a vacuum between citizens and their representatives. The end result is that young people feel as though they are shouting but no one is listening. Politicians feel exactly the same way. There are few places where the two meet, and even when they do they struggle to find the language to communicate.

This leaves young people feeling powerless. It pushes them to seek alternative outlets – from angry protest through to conspiracy – and pulls us deeper into a vortex of democratic decline.

There are some who are actively encouraged by youth disengagement from democratic institutions, seeing it as the start of a new revolutionary politics. In 2013 Russell Brand struck a chord when he called for those disengaged from politics to stop voting altogether. While the attention on voter disengagement is welcome, any narrative that calls on young people to further reject politics rather than try to reform it in my view only ends up entrenching their powerlessness.

Our democratic institutions are creaking but they are by no means impotent. At its best democratic politics can be a forum where trade-offs are negotiated, diversity is represented, brave decisions are made and society is improved. It was a political movement of trade unions and Labour politicians that created the NHS and the post-war consensus. It was Tony Blair's political vision that introduced the minimum wage, a campaign with a hundred-year history. It was David Cameron's political courage that means one day my cousin will be able to marry her female partner in the synagogue she grew up in. It is only in a democracy that it is possible to hand down the power that young people are looking for.

The gradual evolution of our democratic institutions created entrenched democratic norms that no hastily drafted constitution could ever emulate. Their greatest strength is also a weakness, as they have not proved flexible in a changing world, nor responded to a new generation.

While the majority of young people still support democracy, this is not unconditional. We can't take it for granted that young people will continue to put their faith in a system that isn't delivering for them. They are already less inclined than older generations to support parliamentary institutions. 50 per cent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds see Parliament as essential for democracy, as compared to 67 per cent on average.[33] The longer this continues the stronger the calls for alternatives will become. Anger and alienation are always going to be breeding grounds for system overthrow. This is especially true of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds

feeling the full force of the democratic deficit.[34] Reforming our democratic institutions is the only way to save them, as I show in Chapter 8. We have a collective obligation to the next generation to create a politics they can believe in. We need a political revolution, not the politics of revolution.

We have to take account of their critique of our institutions and recognise the myriad ways they are actively participating in politics.

The youth revolution

If you approach a group of young people and open with the statement 'I want to talk to you about politics', the general response is likely to be a mix of horror, disgust and boredom. For many it's like a light switches off. A young person who two minutes before has been passionately advocating what the government should do on youth employment will tell you that they don't know anything about politics. Or that politics is boring. Or that politicians are all the same. Or we're better off without them. Or nothing ever changes.

Politicians, teachers and party members can be forgiven for feeling that they are embarking on a thankless task or that young people just don't care, because many will tell you exactly that. They just don't do politics. Politics as a brand is toxic. However, if you rephrase your opening gambit – what would you like to see change in your local area? What are the issues that affect your life? – you will get a very different response.

We are asking young people the wrong questions and then making the wrong assumptions. In different ways the examples we see here and in the next chapter show how young people are increasingly concerned with the politics of self-expression, and political issues that impact their daily lives and the lifestyle choices they make. It doesn't sound political because it is so personal.

The German sociologist Ulrich Beck puts forward the view that

'freedom's children' have internalised democracy to such an extent that what we are witnessing is a 'highly political disavowal of politicians'.[35] Rys Farthing characterises this as young people living their politics, 'they do not vote for change; they do change.' He says, 'For young people, a politics that requires the delegation of power to nation-state experts simply will not tackle their agenda; rather, they need to actualize their politics.'[36] They express their politics 'as "micro-political" actions or as "cause-oriented" actions'.[37] For example the act of story-telling, choosing a job on the basis of the impact it makes, setting up an online campaign or volunteering are how they express the change they want to make in the world.

Those who are often seen as most apathetic and unpolitical are young people from working-class backgrounds. However, I found some of the greatest passion, anger and desire for change in focus groups with young people from DE backgrounds (semi- or unskilled manual workers, casual workers and unemployed). This demographic group is most neglected in public discourse because it is furthest away from mainstream political institutions.

Self-expression as activism

Research by the Youth Citizenship Commission categorised 15 per cent of young people as 'willing but disconnected', who were most likely to be older (nineteen to twenty-five), unemployed, BME and from C2DE social grade.[38] These are young people who are feeling under attack, stereotyped and alienated. Talking to young people from this background they often use the 2011 riots as a reference point, not to justify the criminality but as an indication of the level of dissatisfaction and anger at the status quo.

Steve Anderson produced both *Question Time* and its youth version *BBC Free Speech*. He told me how different the two shows were during the week of the riots. 'The BBC1 programme ... it was very much middle England feeling threatened ... The BBC 3 show was very much ... well, this has been coming for a long

time, there's a lot of trouble out there, you don't realise how much tension there is. We get treated badly by the police, we've got no jobs . . . they were very, very different.'

Many are using music and spoken-word poetry as a means of expressing rage or pain, a cry of distress at a society that seems to be leaving young people behind. Subjects include violence, racism, capitalism, abuse, poverty. Too often, however, the audience is other young people. So they are creating works of political expression that give others a sense of solidarity but this doesn't translate into concrete action.

United Northern Development is a Bradford-based music collective of sixteen young men in their late teens and early twenties ranging from artists to graphic designers, from camera men to directors. They all have a common experience of disadvantage and frustration at the stereotypes people throw at them. They try to give a voice to the kind of frustrations they feel. 'We address everything that goes on in our personal lives. If it affects us we address it. If you're just speaking about something you've read it's not got the ownership . . . we just try to speak from what we've experienced personally. The more authentic [it is], the more you're going to have a unique selling point, and that's really what we're trying to own up north. We're all just people from similar backgrounds, with similar views about where we want to go.'

Their music, their politics and their self-expression are all tied up together. Authenticity is more than a goal; it is at the heart of how they approach their work. They address politics in how it relates to their lives. They act politically in how they live.

This can coincide with a rejection of formal politics and structures. Zaneta, a writer and spoken-word poet, tells me, 'A lot of spoken-word poets don't want to play the game . . . actually form a party and do things in a formal manner. I think it is more revolutionary, "let's rise up", change everything rather than reformist.'

But this doesn't mean these young people are unreachable. *I Am Hip-Hop* magazine is a youth publication that 'seeks to go back to the fundamental roots of hip-hop music, exposing the powerful discourse of the genre'. It was from reading *I Am Hip-Hop* that I found myself at Whitechapel one Tuesday evening watching a debate about whether or not hash was destroying our communities. What ensued was informal, and slightly disorganised, but it was also one of the most passionate political exchanges I've ever seen. There was a full range of perspectives: the medical marijuana lobby, the Rastafarian who felt it was linked to the criminalisation of young black men and a young Somali woman who felt that tolerance of khat (a now-banned drug popular among some Somalian communities) was oppressing women – 'If it was white middle-class kids taking it, they would pay attention.' As the organisers called time there were heckles from young people who hadn't had a chance to speak, demonstrating that young people from all backgrounds will engage on issues that lace the fabric of their daily lives.

Straight to the issue

There is one generalisation that holds true for the majority of younger generations: they are much more comfortable engaging with politics as issue debates than through the prism of party politics or ideology.[39] Over 94 per cent of young people said they were concerned about at least one political issue.[40] Most in-depth studies of young people's political attitudes find a great deal of openness towards the idea of engaging over specific issues, as one qualitative study concluded, 'non-activists had strong convictions over a number of issues (whether they defined them as political or not) and appeared surprisingly open to the prospect of political mobilisation'.[41]

These tend to be issues that affect their lives, whether it is drug policy, racism, homophobia, mental health, youth unemployment, education, youth provision or housing. Sometimes these

issue-based campaigns translate into large-scale demonstrations like the Iraq war or the student fees protests.[42]

The high turnout and passionate debate exercised by young people during the Scotland referendum shows that an issue that has meaning to them can mobilise them in large numbers. There was no 'youth view': polling showed a mixed picture, with Ipsos MORI putting the 'yes' of sixteen/seventeen-year-old voters at between 55 and 60 per cent, and YouGov having 51 per cent of sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds as 'no' voters.[43] This split shows how live the debate was for young people. A 2014 Economic and Social Research Council poll of 1006 fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds conducted by the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science department showed that more than 70 per cent had discussed the referendum with their classmates, parents and friends and 64 per cent had followed the debate on social media.[44] There were many reasons for this high level of engagement – the stakes were high and school-age pupils were enfranchised – but the debate gave voice to some of the underlying frustration they felt with politics in general and allowed them to engage in an issue that was wrapped up in their identity.

While young people are engaging with issues, relatively few convert this interest into a political platform or make connections with specific issues and broader power imbalances. Young women are far more comfortable talking about sexual exploitation and tweeting about everyday sexism than they are defining themselves as feminists or discussing gendered power dynamics. Equally, a young person might be angry about their perception that the police base stop and search on racial profiling, however they may not see the connection with the Greater London Authority elections or local safer neighbourhood panels where police are held to account. Much of young people's political energy remains un-channelled into political decision-making, as the institutional mechanisms to engage in specific debates outside of parties are limited.

While an approach that only views politics in terms of disjointed issues is not sustainable, opening with relevant political issues rather than with party politics or ideology can help unlock young people's latent political passion. This is what Michael Sani found as a twenty-seven-year-old business studies teacher at a comprehensive school in Dartford. Like the sixth-formers he was teaching, Michael had never voted and was disillusioned with politics, but having witnessed the gap between his students' enthusiasm for debate and their profound disillusionment with politics he began to question both himself and them. He set his students a challenge: go out and speak to other young people about politics. 'It became clear that young people are passionate about issues but politics puts them off.' He helped found Bite the Ballot, a not-for-profit organisation modelled on Rock the Vote in the US, which seeks to register and mobilise young voters. He has toured the country with a band of young volunteers and he never fails to engage his young audience in lively debates. They have created a youth manifesto combining insights from thousands of young people around the country and have persuaded party leaders to engage directly with young people through live-streamed question-and-answer sessions. Their methods are not revolutionary, they just start with a question: What do you care about?

Online petition sites like Change.org are also providing opportunities for young people to engage directly over political issues. Brie Rogers Lowery, UK Director at Change.org, believes that this is helping to challenge apathy myths, especially among young people. 'People are taking action on a huge number of issues; it's just on those issues rather than political ideologies.'

The success of Rock the Vote in the US is proof of the power of an umbrella organisation to mobilise millennials by engaging with them on their terms. It emerged out of similar levels of youth disengagement and has become a powerful political force, registering six million young Americans and literally earning young people a seat at the table – they meet a representative from

the Obama administration regularly. Rock the Vote's Chairwoman Heather Smith tells me they try to take young people on a path to political engagement, starting quite literally where they are, by turning up at music festivals and concerts to register young people and ask them what they care about. As an organisation they embody young people's desire for openness and empowerment. They are there to provide an umbrella and training but then hand over the reins to young people. Heather tells me that being 'open with their brand' and letting young people take the lead is essential to their success.

Online activism

Young people are beginning to reformulate politics online. However, this is not mirroring back to traditional politics. When you consider that only 7 per cent of sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds have ever contacted an MP or councillor online,[45] while the majority of politicians do have websites and social media accounts, these aren't necessarily reaching young people.

However, between 10 and 20 per cent of young people have signed an online petition[46] and 36 per cent have looked at a political campaign or an issue website online.[47] These efforts have often been belittled as 'clicktivism'. Author and prominent internet critic Evgeny Morozov refers to it as 'slacktivism'. He sees it 'as the ideal type of activism for a lazy generation: why bother with sit-ins and the risk of arrest, police brutality or torture if one can be as loud campaigning in the virtual space?'[48]

It's an unfair characterisation of how campaigns are evolving online. It isn't that online petitions replace physical protests; they can provide a gateway into offline action for young people who wouldn't necessarily know how to start. The debate about the trade-off between offline and online activity is a red herring; young people intrinsically understand that the two reinforce each other. Take the Facebook page Ben Lyons created highlighting

the issue of unpaid internships. He started it sitting in his bedroom after a conversation with a friend at Bristol University – a classic example of slacktivism, a lazy generation's activism. Except it wasn't. Within a week he had thousands of people signing up and two years later they have paid staff, office space, they've got companies like Harrods and Sony to make pay-outs to unpaid interns and the leaders of all political parties have come out in support of their campaign. In another example, seventeen-year-old Yas Necati and two school friends were so worried about the effect of online pornography on their generation that they set up 'Campaign 4 Consent', demanding better sex education. The topic was later taken up by the *Telegraph* and together they ran a successful campaign to change the way sex education is taught to deal with the effect of online pornography.

For young people like Yas, the internet is changing the power balance in favour of citizens: 'It's a place where grassroots activists can have their voices heard. It's not just about big organisations; anyone can start a petition or set up an account in relation to a certain issue. It's a great way for people to get their voices heard and for people to come together.' Brie from Change.org tells me that the site records eight victories per week.

In many ways the format of politics online is not yet fixed and young people are experimenting on different platforms. There is still a disjuncture between how networked they are and their capacity to channel this into political change. Young people like Yas and Ben are the exception not the rule (only 2 per cent of sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds have helped organise a petition)[49] and both would qualify as activists (see below). However, as they continue to succeed in setting the debate and winning arguments, they open up online campaigning to more and more young people. The point is not to deride young people signing petitions but to encourage them to start their own and take online politics into their communities.

Mainstream politics in the UK is trying to catch up with

young people, but Brie from Change.org told me she thinks the UK is at least one election cycle behind America and Australia in terms of the way politicians are using online tools. Petition-based campaigns do not match the geographical remit of MPs and councillors. May Gabriel, 17, who blogs and campaigns about mental health issues, told me that she thinks this will start to change when younger people take on more powerful positions. 'Our generation is completely involved in the internet,' she says. 'We see things on the internet and then we make changes. I think when we are all older and there are a few people from my generation in power making those changes then the internet will have more of an influence.'

Jamal Edwards, at twenty-three years old, is one young person who has already taken up a powerful leadership position in the media. He was fifteen when he founded SBTV, now the UK's biggest youth media platform with over 250 million hits on YouTube. He believes there is a huge amount of untapped potential for youth political engagement, pointing to the political nature of a lot of the music on SBTV.

For Jamal it's not that young people don't care about politics, and he points to the political nature of a lot of the music on SBTV as proof of that. As he says, it's 'because I don't think it's put out to them in the right way . . . they look at the language and they think, This looks proper long. I think if it was put out in a cool way a lot more young people would get involved.' He thinks young people also need to believe that their intervention can change things. 'They don't know they can shape their future as well. They're like: They won't listen to me so what's the point? They just have to overcome that aspect of it.'

He is taking up his own challenge to help reformat the language of politics for his generation. 'I think I can add a certain kind of spice,' he tells me, laughing. I asked him if politicians should be scared. 'Yes, definitely,' he replies.

In 'The Future of Democracy', a TEDx talk Jamal gave at the

Houses of Parliament, he imagined where this could lead: 'YouTubers could be political, political with massive followings, followings of millions of young people who know, like and trust their brand. That brand could be famous for what they stand for. That YouTuber could become a global political figure. They could use the YouTube arena to engage people in social issues, political actions, campaigns and causes. They could influence change. Imagine that YouTuber on a mission to Number 10, the self-made YouTuber with global links, transparent and open beliefs, a connection with their audience interacting with them daily.'

While some young people are using the internet as a tool for mass mobilisation, others are engaging in politics at the personal, grassroots and community level.

Community politics and direct action

Some young people are taking direct action. There is no set format to this. In the Welsh Valleys, Donna and her sister Gemma were studying media at Merthyr Tydfil College, living in a community where unemployment and poverty blights the lives of the majority. Listening to the Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith tell Merthyr's unemployed to get on a bus to Cardiff to find work, they decided to take him up on his challenge. They created a film showing the human face of benefit claimants and the relentless rejection they face. On their journey to Cardiff they found the bus from Merthyr didn't get them to Cardiff for a 9 a.m. start and employer after employer told them that they were unlikely to find work as they were competing against large numbers of job seekers in Cardiff who could offer greater reliability and flexibility. The video was featured on BBC Wales and received a huge amount of attention. These two sisters weren't political activists, but they were able to have a political influence through sharing their story.

Other young people are engaging within youth structures as youth MPs and mayors. There are six hundred young MPs across Britain and 620 youth councils, and in 2014 865,000 eleven- to eighteen-year-olds voted in 'Make Your Mark', the British Youth Parliament's annual ballot on the issues most important to young people.[50] These roles appeal to them because they are independent and about direct representation of young people. While there is a huge variety in the effort local councils put in to supporting these structures and reaching out to diverse groups, where it is done well it has provided a platform for young people to politicise and explore different models of engaging with young people. Jacob Sakil was sixteen when he became Youth Mayor of Lewisham in 2009 in an election where over 50 per cent of young people voted, a higher youth turnout than at the general election. He put his success down to the fact that he had a similar background to the young people who voted for him. 'Outside of politics, I knew young people who were involved in gangs . . . I'm in the same boat as many of these young people . . . So it wasn't hard to get those young people interested because they had a connection with me as an individual.'

It can also be easier to engage young people at a local level because young people have 'higher levels of trust for those groups and institutions they engage with daily in their near environment'.[51]

Throughout this book we will meet young people who are creating community-based campaigns and movements totally outside of any formal structures.

There is a common thread that links these young people: they are actively engaged in politics, but it is a non-partisan politics that is strongly rooted in transforming their communities or solving specific problems. They are generally willing to engage in formal institutions but find them remote and hard to access.

Outsider and insider activism

A small number of young people are consciously seeking to work within or transform political institutions. These young people are overtly and consciously political, often highly educated, knowledgeable and committed. The complexity of power structures, the professionalisation of politics and advocacy means trying to influence political change has become a minority pursuit. There is an all-or-nothing approach, either it consumes you or you stay well clear of it. Young activists connect online, by forming their own networks, language and norms. They are their own tribe.

One qualitative study conducted by Dr James Sloam, senior lecturer in Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway, found that in relation to young people 'young activists were not just far more politically active, but were totally different social animals'.[52] Other academics have pointed to 'a new breed of "super-activists"', as the number of people of all ages 'who say they have undertaken three or more [protest] actions has doubled since 1986'.[53] While most people are showing declining political participation, this group is becoming more active. I distinguish between outsider activists who are working or campaigning through NGOs, coalitions, grassroots organisations or loose coalitions often supported by the internet, and insider activists who are working through existing political institutions. The former tend to be campaigning on issues around social justice and environmental change, often with a broad international focus; the latter on party platforms.

There is strong evidence that activists tend to be highly educated.[54] In fact, much youth activism actually begins on university campuses. Analysis by a New York college of the US Occupy Wall Street protest found that 76 per cent of protesters had a college education, over two-thirds were employed professionals and one-third lived in households earning more than a hundred thousand dollars per year.[55]

Many of these outsider activists are not ideological in the traditional sense but are trying to carve out new ideologies that fit their perspective on the modern world, combining elements of environmentalism, anarchism, socialism and international justice. They are distinct from the majority of their generation because they see politics not as isolated issues but as interconnected power structures. As one young activist, Guppi Bola, put it to me, 'Now I look at things through understanding where power is held in society and where it is not. Who makes the decisions, why and where . . . ? It's something systematic and procedural. They transcend issues.' While there are shades of grey across political activists – some wanting to influence existing structures and some to replace them – they are aligned in seeing change as coming from beyond party structures. As Guppi says, party politics is 'just setting yourself up for disappointment because you know those same power structures are upheld within them'.

The issues they are raising are about inequality globally and nationally, but they are also about taking power more directly. I visited Sussex soon after hundreds of students had finished their month-long occupation of the university. Maybe because I'd been brought up on my parents' stories of Sussex in the 1970s – mass walk-outs, pirate radio and an air of rebellion – I felt as though I was stepping back in time. There was a carnival atmosphere in the student common room and I quickly found myself with my face painted and on my way to an LGBT choir to learn the Occupy Sussex protest song. Speaking to two of the organisers later on, they said that while the issue they were protesting was outsourcing of staff, they felt they had been pushed to occupy by the university leadership's refusal to take them seriously: 'We're just dismissed as lefty students, that's not fair; we want a seat at the table.'

Youth-led campaigns from Occupy through to the climate-change campaign 10:10 have had a huge influence in setting the debate and in some cases even changing policy. However, they have not sparked a generational mass movement.

Many young people are focused on getting through their day-to-day lives, and don't have the time or the energy to devote to broader issues, whether that be finding a job or looking for somewhere to live. As one twenty-three-year-old from a white working-class background put it, 'it is the desperation of now'. While many activists are increasingly feeling a sense of global solidarity, young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be concerned about cutting international aid – 'we need the money here' – and stopping immigration, feeling they are competing for limited jobs and services.

These new movements are also based on a sense of collective endeavour. This runs counter to the individualistic political upbringing of this generation. While they face common problems, they do not feel a common sense of identity around class or as a generation to rally around.

Finally, the diversity of campaigns and causes is a barrier to the establishment of a mass movement. By their nature these campaigns are fluid and often limited in time and loose in focus. This makes such activity hard to embed in long-term institutional structures.

Young activists are aware of these challenges and constantly seeking new ways to organise. Twenty-eight-year-old Daniel Vockins, co-founder of environmental campaign 10:10, now leads NEON, a New Organisers Network that seeks to bring together young campaigners tackling structural issues around a shared agenda. He also co-founded Campaign Bootcamp, a non-party-political campaign training camp for young campaigners, and Campaign Lab, a six-month training programme for 'economic justice campaigners'.

While outsider activists are engaging in a variety of campaigns parallel to parties, there is a small group of young people seeking to achieve change from within party structures. The pull factor to get involved in party politics varies. For some I spoke to it is

their parents, for others a passionate politics or history teacher, or just a connection with a set of ideas.

The young people I know and work with who are involved in party politics are deeply committed to political change, however many feel just as frustrated with political institutions as those watching from the outside.

One twenty-six-year-old councillor told me how she had joined the Labour Party when she was sixteen because she was fed up by how her single mother was treated by society. Her mum was a Liberal Democrat and her dad switched between the Conservatives and the BNP, but she felt Labour was the right way to achieve the change she wanted to see. However, she had to fight hard to get involved as she found her local branch 'unwelcoming to young people. The culture was if you are grey and old that's fantastic, because you know everything. Age was seen as equivalent to experience and competence.' She wanted to stand as a councillor but was discouraged, then eventually put into an unwinnable ward. Moving to London she found people who supported her, but it was still hard to be taken seriously.

Now she is an elected councillor but struggling to change the things she didn't like about local politics: 'We ourselves become insiders at some point – having fought so hard to get in and learnt how to work the system, I feel like I end up reinforcing it.' It is easy to do: you make friends, find a strong sense of camaraderie and forget.

A green activist told me there were lots of moments when he thought about giving up because he was looking for open discussions about ideas, but he found too many of the young people attracted to politics overly competitive and tribal. Another young councillor agreed: 'They become all about their career, it all becomes about progression within the party, meeting MPs, walking around the place talking on BlackBerrys pretending to be on an episode of *The West Wing*. It just doesn't speak to ordinary young people.'

A parliamentary researcher aged twenty-three, tells me he is frustrated by the daily briefs laying out a 'party line' and prescribing language, which constrains individuality. He understands that is what is required to win, but he feels he is perpetuating something that ultimately turns the public off politics. Another researcher said she constantly considered leaving because she felt like she was pushing against a system that was never going to change. It can be hard to convert ideals into practical political change even for those engaged in trying on a daily basis.

Once you are involved in any political network, whether it is the Young Conservatives or the 'No More Page 3' campaign, then the ties of friendship and shared purpose deepen engagement. Many young people described how activism changed their social circle, introducing them to some of their best friends. Ultimately relationships entrench these networks. However the force that gives them so much power and shared cause can prevent them reaching out in the way they want, so we have an increasing divergence between the super-activists and everyone else.

What do young people want?

Youth activism is a diverse and messy picture. There is no 'youth view'; there are huge differences in the way some of these groups think society should be organised. However there are some common themes that come up in the way young people critique our political institutions.

Youth representation

Young people look at politics and they don't see people that look like them, they don't see people that understand them and they don't see people that put them first. They see an abstract, alien political class. They often don't distinguish between Labour and

the Conservatives. Politicians 'are all the same', cut off and distant from their lives, in what they say, how they behave and the decisions they make. As one seventeen-year-old put it, 'You often associate politics with older men ... they've been to Eton or they've been to Oxford ... you don't really see working-class people or people from ethnic backgrounds.'

Politics is too often still a middle-class, older white male pursuit.[56] As trade unions have diminished, some of the pathways to political life have closed off. The same forces that hold back working-class young people from entering the professions hold them back from political life.

While representation of women is improving,[57] the House of Commons does not reflect back to young people a mirror of their generation in age or diversity. Likewise, local councils are not providing enough opportunities for young people to take on leadership positions. The average age of a councillor in 2013 was sixty; 88 per cent are over forty-five.[58]

For Jacob Sakil, Lewisham's former Youth Mayor, lack of youth representation – especially working-class youth representation – influences the issues on the political agenda. 'I think the people who are our main figures in the political system don't come from the same background ... The interests that those politicians have are not the same as those that the young people have ... When they do talk about the real issues that need to be addressed it's always tokenism.'

It is crucial that we create pathways through to political leadership for young people. It isn't easy to do. Even highly political young people are nervous about taking the next step. Despite the leadership roles they've taken on, party structures are still a shadowy world and they have little idea about how to navigate them. More importantly they are reluctant to sign up to a party in the first place, feeling they will be sacrificing their independence and even their credibility. Natalie Robinson told me she would like to be a councillor, 'to show them a brown working-class girl can

become councillor. I can actually represent people; I know where they're coming from.' Even though she leans towards Labour she is reluctant to join the party because as she says: 'People don't want to badge themselves to a political party. There is a stigma attached when you label yourself. I don't want people from my area thinking, Just another Labour person. You lose quite a lot of interest, people who you would have got interest from before.'

Party politics has become a dirty word for many young people. It is associated with bickering, point scoring, putting personal and party interest before representation. They are nervous about subsuming their political identity under a party banner, toeing a party line. They feel they will inevitably have to sacrifice their integrity.

There are opportunities for enterprising independent candidates to reach out to young voters. If political parties are to remain relevant, and attract the next generation of young people, they will have to open up, become more fluid, dissolve some of the hierarchy.

Young people are also nervous about coming up against a hostile media, and this is by no means an irrational fear. I remember interviewing a brilliant young man about his work as a social entrepreneur and encouraging him to stand as a councillor. I later looked at his Twitter feed and immediately saw so much there that would get him into trouble. If an ordinary young person has been documenting their life in public, viewing Twitter as a channel to communicate among friends, then they are incredibly vulnerable to press intrusion. In 2011 the *Daily Mail* ran a story with the headline: 'And the Tory councillor for the wild party is . . . 23-year-old Tory politician slammed for her boozy photos on Facebook'. The accompanying photos were a typical set of university pictures, but they became a political issue with a disapproving comment from her Labour opposition.[59] Young people who have grown up documenting their lives online are an easy target. If we don't have some leniency as a society we will exclude some of the creative leadership our politics needs.

It goes without saying that diversity makes for more informed decision-making. Any debate that includes Natalie or Jacob will be enriched by what they have to contribute.

Authentic and inspirational leaders

'Honesty, sheer honesty,' a group in Glasgow tell me when I ask them what they are looking for from politicians. 'Even if it was "we tried this and it didn't work", at least then you know they are being honest.'

When young people were asked what quality they most admire in politicians, the majority (61 per cent) chose honesty and trustworthiness.[60]

I heard it time and time again in different guises from the young people I spoke to: 'to be truthful', 'no lies', 'the ability to go through with what they actually say'.

It is a quality they think is lacking: 71 per cent of young people believe politicians lie to the public and the media.[61]

They talk about honesty in a direct sense, as an approach to electioneering that doesn't promise the undeliverable. Doing what you say you will. It is why for young people Nick Clegg's turn-around on tuition fees was so problematic, as evidenced by the decline in youth support for the Liberal Democrats.

There is honesty in admitting mistakes. As Jacob puts it, 'If we're really going to have a solution to the problems in our community, that means people who are in power need to actually own up that they've done things wrong, and it's not a lot of times that we actually see public apologies from officials unless they've been caught red-handed.'

But there is also a more intangible quality of 'authenticity'. It is living your values. It is no longer possible to say one thing and do another. Authenticity in politics is linked to conviction, it is about passion. Young people listen to politicians evade questions or repeat a scripted line and they get the sense that

they are watching a carefully constructed mirage, not a real person.

This further explains the 'Boris Effect'. People as far from London as the Welsh valleys were more likely to talk warmly about Boris Johnson than about many other politicians. He breaks out of the conventional mould of politician and as a result gets an easier ride in the press. His humour works for a generation that according to MTV sees 'smart and funny' as the new rock 'n' roll. However, there is also an institutional reason for his ability to transcend. It's easier for Boris to be a maverick because he is in a position of some independence. As a city mayor he is able to talk pragmatically about London's interests and sometimes to speak out against his own party. To some extent he transcends left and right to focus on London, at least in public perception.

It is hard for politicians to be honest because they will more than likely be forced to say things people don't want to hear. On almost every issue there are contradictory viewpoints where the public want to have it all. It's not an easy task to convince people to accept the tough trade-offs we face. People would much prefer to blame politicians for not being hard-working enough or not caring enough to find a solution that helps everybody. Some of the dissatisfaction with politics is dissatisfaction at the dilemmas we face as a country. There are no easy answers. Taking a position ultimately loses favour. Politicians struggle to find the language to explain the problems, let alone the solutions.

People are more willing to accept hard truths if they are presented as part of a vision about how things could be. The thin line between honesty about challenges and optimism about overcoming them is hard to find.

Young people's frustration is all the more powerful because they have high expectations. They are looking for vision, hope, inspiration and mission.

Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, writes

about the need for 'normative leadership' for the modern world, combining a focus on 'substantive mission not procedural means, a willingness to accept the risk of public failure, leadership through exemplary action not mere exhortation'.[62] He gives the example of the Mayor of Oklahoma who, seeing statistics on his city's obesity crisis, didn't start an obesity policy unit: he got up and announced he was going on a diet and invited the town to join him and lose a million pounds together. I'm fat, you're fat, we're all fat. They did it and policy supported the objective but the leadership came first.

Conviction doesn't have to be divisive. Young people want to see more consensus and less ideology. As one young man put it, 'I think it should be a case of them all coming together and deciding what is best rather than coming up with something new all the time.' Another fifteen-year-old youth MP said, 'I wish parliament could be more like youth parliament, working together to focus on issues rather than bickering.'

Finally, they want to feel that politicians are passionate about the issues they face. Language is very important to young people. The language of blame and sanction may appease older voters but it further alienates younger ones.

Power to the people

I was in Bradford speaking to a group of white working-class unemployed eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds who had never voted and never planned to. They are the invisible voters, all on benefits, on the edge of society. The government would call them NEETs – Not in Education, Employment or Training. When I ask them about politics, they immediately start: 'Why do we need politicians? We have Facebook, why can't we all make decisions together?'; 'The people need to take control like in Egypt'; 'We want to be more involved in decision-making. Because then we'd actually know what's happening in our country'.

Young people's activism is diverse and covers much ideological ground, from environmentalism through to free-market capitalism. However, one thread that connects all of it is the desire to 'have a voice'. Sometimes, when I would push this while conducting interviews for the book, young people weren't clear what they wanted to say. It was an end in itself, to be heard, to be recognised and valued.

According to research by Matt Henn and Nick Foard, the number-one response when asked what would make them trust politicians more was simply 'listen to us'.[63] 61 per cent of young people think there aren't enough opportunities for people like us to influence political parties.[64]

Whether young people are talking about honesty, representation or conviction, it all comes down to this. They don't feel that they are valued or listened to. They can't see access points to influence decision-making.

This can't just be for the sake of young people. It has to be because we recognise the value of those voices, that our institutions will work better if we include them.

As Marc Kidson, the twenty-four-year-old Chair of Trustees for the British Youth Council, which tries to encourage and support youth participation, put it to me, 'You have to see [young people] as both having an interest in what you are trying to achieve and also having the capacity to improve it because they are experts in their own experience, and for so much youth policy it doesn't work because it is not based very fundamentally on the lived experiences of being a young person.'

The scale of participation demands varies – from a group in Woking who wanted youth-focused meetings with politicians at their local community centre through to a group of young Somali men in Camden who told me that they thought politicians should have to go to people with a direct vote before they implemented legislation affecting them.

For many young people who are cut out of decision-making,

they are calling for direct power. As an eighteen-year-old in Birmingham who had been chucked out of school put it to me, 'Change is through the people not through politics. Change is through protest and other forms of people making their voices heard. Politicians can't make a change; only the people can make a change.'

Path to change

Finding that their problems went unsolved and their protests ignored, many of the young people I met could only conclude that their political leaders either didn't care or were actively corrupt. While my experience is that the vast majority of politicians of all ages want to make a difference,[65] the fact that most young people believe the opposite[66] indicates that something has gone seriously wrong.

Politicians are trapped in institutions that aren't fit for purpose. They are making decisions at the wrong level in forums that highlight divisions rather than enable compromise. Much of the problem comes with the culture of political debate and the centralised nature of institutions. Where politicians have to take responsibility is for not doing more to challenge and reform these institutions. Young people are also dissatisfied with the outcomes of political decision-making, and in Chapter 10 I look at how to address some of these demands.

However, there are no easy answers to these questions for elected representatives. Reforming the political system demands that every person involved in modern political debate think about their responsibility to the next generation. Politicians need to remember that they ultimately lose when they go to score an easy point against their opposition. The media also needs to think about the consequences of creating a storyline where politicians are always the villains. Older voters who care about our institutions, who do turn out and vote, have to consider the

needs of young people. The demographics are in their favour and in many ways the future of our institutions falls on their relationship with younger voters.

Young leaders have to challenge their peers to put the energy and enthusiasm into changing politics rather than simply rejecting it. Politicians have to stop trying to engage young people in the institutions as they are, and instead work with them to improve them. The starting point is understanding how young people view the world.