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# The millennial generation and politics

Ben Little

The challenge of the ipod generation to politics.

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**J**oss Garman, one of the founders of anti-airport expansion group Plane Stupid, recently laid down the gauntlet to the secretary of state for energy and climate change: 'It's time for Ed Miliband to decide which generation he is with. Ours, or Brown's' (*Guardian*, Comment is Free, March 2009). Garman framed the challenge of climate change as the battle of the Millennial Generation against the baby boomers. His argument is that - unlike previous protest movements - climate change activism is not a phase or a fad, but the result of a genuine difference of interest between generations:

This isn't about being disaffected and rebellious without a cause. This isn't about dropping out, rejecting the norm, culture jamming and hacking the system. This isn't even about altruism. It's not just about defending the rights and lives of those who are less fortunate than us, and it certainly isn't about polar bears. This is about us. For the millennial generation the patronising clichés fall apart, because this isn't about ideals so much as hard science and the terrifying reality that what the scientists have been warning us all about for years - those sea level rises, catastrophic droughts and melting ice caps - will now happen in our lifetimes.

He is right; the priorities of those entering their thirties over the next ten years

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must be very different from those that reached the same age in the 1980s, or even the 1990s. Without a doubt climate change is the most pressing issue, but we can also add to the list of complaints of my age group the challenge of an increasingly unequal society, astronomic levels of personal and national debt and an aggressive foreign policy that destabilises the world we are inheriting.

The problem with Garman's argument, however, is his claim that as a group we are somehow up for this challenge. Citing Eric Greenberg and Karl Weber's *Generation We* (Pachatusan 2008), he suggests that behind Plane Stupid's airport protests there is a whole generation standing by to join in. There is not. Not yet at least. On the contrary, most research shows that in the UK young people are increasingly disengaged from most kinds of political or community activities and lack the means or the will to take on our parents' generation in a collective way.

Greenberg and Weber claim that the millennials are 'history's most active volunteering generation', and propose the idea that 'Generation We' is one that rejects old political allegiances and is collectively building a progressive, fair society through a paradigm shift in community participation - a wonderful vision for the future, but one firmly situated in the USA. Their argument may have resonance in North America, but it seems that the opposite is the case in the UK. The 2004 Euyoupart survey indicated that outside of sports clubs very few 15-25 year olds volunteer at all. Only 1 per cent had ever volunteered for an environmental organisation (such as Plane Stupid) - the same proportion as for animal rights groups - and the highest level of participation was with charities, at a mere 3 per cent. The idea that young people are rejecting mainstream politics in favour of volunteering and activism is simply not true, although the disconnection from formal democracy remains accurate.

A majority (76 per cent) of young people think politics are important, but only 24 per cent said they actually had an interest in it, a terrifyingly low figure, but still higher than the percentage that were volunteering. Levels of ignorance are also significant, with 41 per cent not knowing the difference between left- and right-wing politics. Ignorance leads to inaction: 68 per cent of eligible 18-25 year olds never actually use their vote, by far the lowest participation of any age group in the UK. British youth's engagement with politics and the social realm ranked among the worst in Europe, with equivalent age groups demonstrating less interest in public life only in Slovakia and Estonia.<sup>1</sup>

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These findings are in line with a 2002 report by the electoral commission, and are also supported by more recent qualitative analysis conducted by Ipsos-Mori and Reform. While the latter is more positive about the possibilities of what they call Britain's IPODs, the focus groups project a picture of a whole generation that lacks the will, the knowledge or the enthusiasm to actively take a stake in their society.<sup>2</sup> There is an argument that this disengagement is just a normal part of being young, but this may be to underestimate the problem. Alison Park argued in 2000, of the age cohort born in the late 1970s and early 1980s, that it would take a great deal of catching up to overcome the 'democratic deficit' from which that cohort suffered, and become comparable to the 30-year-olds of that time.<sup>3</sup> Nine years after this was written there is little to indicate that we have.

### **Britain's 'IPODs' and America's 'Wes': Boris and Barack**

Barack Obama's success in courting a younger vote is well documented. Even in the primaries his appeal to America's Generation We was impressive. In some states there was a 330 per cent increase in turn out among 18 to 29 year olds. Likewise, Boris Johnson's victory in the London 2008 mayoral election was built on a voting alliance of the disengaged IPOD generation and traditionally conservative older voters.

At first glance there are similarities between these two campaigns, though they come from opposite ends of the political spectrum. Much has been made of the way both used the internet and particularly Facebook. Both politicians came into office on the promise of change to the status quo. Both ran largely positive campaigns - although this was made significantly easier for Johnson by the vituperous attacks on Livingstone appearing daily in London's *Evening Standard*. It would be easy to conclude from this that the key to engaging the young is to be different, use new technologies to catch their attention and 'be nice'. However this simple position is not borne out by further analysis. While there were some similarities in the manner in which each candidate appealed to a younger demographic, the reasons for the support they received differ markedly. Although Obama represented a paradigm shift in the American political landscape, a vote for Johnson offered an opportunity to lampoon British politics. Many of the Boris voters I have met saw a vote for him as a way of giving organised politics the finger. This manifested itself in three main statements (paraphrasing):

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I'd much rather read about Boris in the papers every day.  
Anything is better than that ideologue Ken.  
Of course it'd be ridiculous if Boris won, that's why I'm voting for him.  
It's not like he can take us to war or anything.

Thus, unlike voting for Obama, which was a statement of faith in, and renewal of American politics, voting for Johnson was partly a statement of discontent. Despite a grudging respect for Livingstone's values, many resented what they saw as his inflexibility and dogmatism; Johnson, on the other hand, appeared to stand for nothing more than a parody of eccentric Englishness.

A large part of the mindset was that if we had to be subjected to the denigrated spectacle of party politics in the media, at least someone like Johnson would make it more entertaining. In the absence of any real awareness of what the mayor does (beyond the congestion charge), the thinking behind a vote for Johnson was that the most significant thing that a mayor offered London was an identity, and Johnson seemed to offer the intangible trait of 'fun'.

Nevertheless, the willingness of the 18-25 year olds to vote in the London election is significant, regardless of the rationale (or the result): participation in local elections could be one of the key ways to rebuild political consciousness. But for this to happen there needs to be a major shift both in the culture of community/social participation in the UK, and quite possibly in our electoral system. One key aspect of the youth support attracted by Obama - as was not the case for those supporting Johnson - was the willingness of young Americans to go out and campaign on behalf of their candidate. Obama did not just re-engage young people with politics: his campaign turned a generation of volunteers into a generation of political activists.

While there are definite similarities in terms of lifestyle and interest, the gap in social and political activism between Generation We in the USA and the IPOD generation in the UK appears to be consistent with this observation. Although both groups share a disaffection with party politics, the same cannot be said for their levels of community participation. One statistic claims that a staggering 83 per cent of Generation We volunteered in their last year of school. This puts into perspective the roughly 24 per cent of IPODs who did the same (and this is including participation in sports clubs). However, Americans are not intrinsically more community-minded; there are definite reasons for this discrepancy - and they

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are cultural and institutional.

The main factor is the admissions policy of most American higher education establishments, which, modelled on that of the Ivy League universities, weights academic ability alongside sporting achievement, personality and the all important 'extra-curricular' activities. This approach emerged in the first half of the twentieth century, after purely academic selection had led to what was considered - at Harvard particularly - a disproportionate number of New York Jews being admitted.<sup>4</sup> Over and above outright anti-semitism, the university saw its actions as helping to safeguard its income from the 'old money' east coast families, who have a long tradition of financial support for their alma maters. The system continues to this day. The Harvard website warns applicants in the following way:

Academic accomplishment in high school is important, but the Admissions Committee also considers many other criteria, such as community involvement, leadership and distinction in extracurricular activities, and work experience.

Similarly other, non-Ivy league universities such as UCLA (which produced the 83 per cent statistic cited by Greenberg and Weber) require their students to have: 'Extensive leadership and initiative in school and/or community organizations and activities' (see, for example, the UCLA website).

This emphasis on community participation is for the most part an American idiosyncrasy. While the importance of the personal statement cannot be downplayed in the UK, Cambridge University, for example, makes no reference to community participation in its application requirements. Elite universities in Britain instead seek further academic distinction for the selection of their students, as evidenced, for instance, in their campaign for the new A\* grade at A-Level. In contrast, in the USA community involvement is not simply a worthwhile activity; it is an assessable part of a rounded education. As such, not only must young people proactively participate in their communities, they must distinguish themselves in doing so, particularly if they want to gain admittance to the top universities. To support these endeavours, there is a whole infrastructure to facilitate volunteering, with funding for projects, and pressure from schools and parents to 'succeed' as community-minded individuals.

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In short, despite its racist origins, this requirement for community involvement is the reason that America has a larger, more integrated, third sector than the UK. The sector is better funded, has more volunteers and lacks the sneery 'do-gooder' response that characterises the typical attitude to social participation in this country. When community groups approach their elected officials they are taken seriously. And this means that when a politician like Obama emerges, the skills and experience that people have gained in the competition for a university place can be transferred to the political arena. This is also the reason that 'grass-roots' politics in the USA is an effective way of mobilising and building support, while in the UK its invocation is often simply rhetorical.

## **Promoting activism and engagement in the UK**

The implications of a generation adrift from politics have not been lost on the British government. A substantial majority of the funds allocated to volunteering in general have been diverted specifically to the young, with the strict target of creating one million more volunteers. For the past two years I have been teaching on a module for first year media students in which they have to organise and run a social campaign as part of their assessment. This year the students have been the beneficiaries of some of these government funds, administered through the charity Junction49. The results have been impressive, and have led to a vast increase in the scope and potential of the projects available for students.

That said, even with this added support the students' campaigns started tentatively; only one group began their semester of action with any clear idea of what they would do and how they would achieve it. Most struggled with the idea of how to make connections to other people, to institutions and to government. They had been taught across a variety of themes during the previous semester, but - while they could articulate why child protection or global warming were important issues - even after taught sessions on campaigning many lacked the mindset to understand how they could effect change personally.

On a hunch that more students would respond to the participatory, media-orientated sensibilities of direct-action-type groups than to more traditional campaigning, I invited two speakers from this kind of campaign to address the students - Richard, a veteran airport protestor from Plane Stupid, and Robin, a

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founding member of Space Hijackers. The central tenet of direct action, born from the very lack of faith in the parliamentary process that characterises the IPOD generation, is that you can intervene as an individual or small group to oppose or counter-act most forms of injustice. It just takes imagination, guts and a bit of planning.

Both Plane Stupid and Space Hijackers have been able not only to make activism 'fun', but also to create effective interventions. For example Robin described a protest against fashion label Box Fresh's use of Zapatista imagery in a line of clothing. In this action the activists dressed as Zapatistas and stood outside the flagship shop in Covent Garden chanting and distributing fliers. Within a few hours they had an agreement from the shop to donate profits from the clothing line to a Mexican NGO, and to provide information about the Zapatistas' struggle alongside the merchandise in the shop. The same group had also garnered media attention for the 2007 arms exhibition in the Excel Centre by driving a tank up to the front doors and pretending to auction it to the highest bidder.

The Space Hijackers intervention model is based on a politics of individual action in a globalised context. Their combination of performance and politics seems productive, even if their basic philosophy is shared by the HSBC marketing department ('Think global, act local'). At the national level, for them the state figures purely as an oppressive apparatus - the paymasters of the police whose job it is to disrupt their peaceful but ostentatious events. The government, then, is less a target and more a facilitator for other global actors, such as arms companies, banks and fashion labels, who control and propagate what the Hijackers see as an exploitative, violent, consumerist form of globalisation.

This complete lack of faith in Westminster politics then manifests itself as a huge gap in their political activities. The local is important and can be linked to global issues, but there is little in between except cynicism. Some of the best work my students did reflected these values, as did their anonymous responses towards the end of the course to the question 'What is Politics?', where comments like: 'trying to fix up what sleazebag politicians do' were common. Perhaps I should have put more emphasis on the positive role that democratic participation can have, but I think that mindset is so entrenched that to convince a majority of the students that their votes are important would have been a bit like herding cats (I'll work on it next year though).

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The emphasis on the local could be seen in the number of student campaigns that focused either on campus or, in the case of students based locally, on their immediate neighbourhoods. Examples included the Sexual Hijackers, who stormed university events dressed in multi-coloured fluorescent tutus to distribute condoms and literature on STDs, and Stand Up, a talent contest and club night that raised money for anti-gang charities and invited speakers to raise awareness of the impact of gun and knife crime. Where groups attempted to deal with more global issues, they did so in a way that was again focused on the local community. A reusable shopping bag painting session was organised on campus, and another group set up a swap shop, both campaigns aimed at countering consumerism as a driver of global warming.

A few groups stepped outside this comfort zone. Two are worth mentioning. The first, inspired by the tactics of the Space Hijackers, organised a 'clean-in' in parliament square to protest against poverty wages in the capital. The shock for them was, firstly, that it was so easy to organise and, secondly, that the police were so accommodating. In the end, while they cleaned the barriers put up for them by the government that was the target of their campaign, I spent my time in conversation with their assigned police team, trying to convince them that the Plane Stupid protest on the roof of parliament was not just a stunt, but an effective way of getting the media to take the debate on airport expansion seriously.

The second group were working at the council level to campaign for more legal graffiti walls. In complete contrast to the response to the 'clean-in' group from central government, these students' requests for information about their policies on the issue from seven different councils were met with stony silence from all but one. The seventh, Barnet, stopped responding when they found out that the students were running a campaign to encourage them to change their policy. They subsequently shifted their tactic to make contact with individual councillors, but I am yet to find out how they got on with this.

The complete contrast in the experience the two groups had of their interactions with government is indicative of the vast gulf that exists between national and local levels of bureaucracy, not in their commitment to public service, but in the amount of investment and resources that are allocated to encouraging active citizenship. If the government wants to harness the enthusiasm and energy of the generation that my students and I belong to, they have their priorities back to front. Throwing money at youth volunteering, or Gordon Brown's latest initiative that proposes 50

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hours of compulsory community service by the age of 19, will only be effective if the projects are administered at a local level, rather than through central targets that make good manifesto pledges.

If in the future political parties (and particularly the left) want to be able to rely on the mass support of my generation, they will need to make note of three things. First, that grass-roots politics is always a genuinely local affair, and that for that to happen there needs to be a genuine local democracy to participate in, one that can set its own targets and priorities. Devolution and a mayor for London has been a good start, but there needs to be more. This was the key message of the *Power to The People* report into the state of British democracy in 2005, and politicians would do well to heed it. If, in Britain, we want a figure that inspires the same level of grass-roots support as Barack Obama, local politics and community participation will first need to be reinvigorated.

Secondly, this generation does believe in abstract ideals such as fairness and social justice, but they will reject anything that has the whiff of dogma. The notion of wedding yourself overtly to an ideology died as a mainstream concept in the USA in the 1950s, and it died in the UK in the 1980s, as British and American culture became what John Dumbrell calls 'a distinct culture area'.<sup>5</sup> There is no need for the left to return to such positions, however; its aims can be achieved in other ways.

Thirdly, there is no harm in making politics fun; in fact it encourages participation and reduces the intrinsically confrontational nature of many political disagreements. The G20 protests in central London were a case in point: the carnivalesque approach taken by the two main alliances meant that what was billed as a riot was, for the most part, an event carried off with a friendly party atmosphere that stilled managed to communicate dissent. There is no reason why, in other contexts, participation in politics should not take on the same jovial air.

Finally, I would say to Joss Garman that framing the fight against global warming as a battle of the generations is counter-productive. General elections can be swung in this country by the votes of a few hundred thousand people in key marginals; if just five per cent more of our generation voted it would be enough to make us the king-makers in the next general election. It was enough for Boris Johnson. While direct action is an important part of the mix, another part is using the electoral system to reshape the priorities of government to the values, concerns and struggles that we and future generations will face. Our democracy is a conversation between

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all the people who live in our society, and if enough of us start talking through our ballot papers, other generations will have no choice but to listen.

*I would like to thank Robin Priestly and Richard George for their time and valuable contribution to the thought that went into this piece.*

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## Notes

1. Carolyn Moore and Kerry Longhurst, *Euyoupart: National Report UK*, available at [www.sora.at/images/doku/D15UKReport.pdf](http://www.sora.at/images/doku/D15UKReport.pdf) 2005; and Sora Institute, *Why Participate?*, available at: [www.sora.at/images/doku/sora\\_euyoupart\\_results.pdf](http://www.sora.at/images/doku/sora_euyoupart_results.pdf) 2005.
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3. Alison Park, 'The Generation Game', *British Social Attitudes*, Vol.17, Sage 2000.
4. See [www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/10/10/051010crat\\_atlarge?currentPage=5](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/10/10/051010crat_atlarge?currentPage=5).
5. John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations in the Cold War and After*, Macmillan 2001, p32.