

Grey power or youth- quake?

Stephen Lambert *considers whether the old lost the election for Corbyn or the young for May*

For decades it has been believed that social class was the key determinant behind the outcome of a general election. The shock result of the centre-right Conservative Party failing to achieve an outright majority with Jeremy Corbyn's left-wing Labour Party hard on its heels has demolished this notion.

On June 8 2017, with a turn-out of 69 per cent, Theresa May's Conservative Party got 42 per cent of the popular vote with Labour getting 40 per cent. Sociologically, the Conservative Party has managed to get the support of a huge section of the professional and white-collar middle classes with Labour getting the support of the blue-collar and blue-blouse working-class. Class de-alignment finally came of age on June 8. For the political scientist Robert Ford, age has overtaken class, to become one of the key cleavages in British politics.

Labour, the party of working people and their families, with an emphasis on wealth redistribution

from the well-to-do to those on modest incomes, gained increased support in 2017 in seats with huge concentrations of middle-class professionals. The Tories, the party of big business and 'Middle-England', made significant gains in the poorest seats. The richest constituency, Kensington, went Labour for the first time, while the former working-class mining seat of Mansfield went Conservative on a staggering 18 per cent swing! Even Bishop Auckland in Co. Durham narrowly escaped becoming a Conservative gain by a tiny 500 votes.

Age Apartheid with a generational divide in voting habits and political attitudes has become a feature of Brexit Britain. For Stephen Burke, director of the think tank United for All Ages, 'Britain is increasingly divided by age and generation'.

The UK has an ageing population. In 2016 the over-65s numbered 12 million, exceeding the number of those under 18. There's a dominant view that

Britain's elderly carry significant political weight, the so-called 'grey power'. It's also broadly the case that the older a person gets, the more likely they are to vote. Turn-out amongst the over-55s was 75 per cent in the 2015 election compared to a 43 per cent turn-out amongst the 18 to 24 age group - though turn-out amongst the young soared to 64 per cent in 2017.

Landslide

There's a tendency for younger people to vote Labour and older people to vote Conservative. In Labour's 1997 landslide under Tony Blair it did better in all age groups except the over 65s, who stuck with the Tories. Four years later, in 2001, 47 per cent of the 18-24 year old voters supported Labour compared to 29 per cent who backed the Conservatives.

By 2017, according to Professor John Curtis's massive exit poll, two-thirds of the 18 to 24 year group backed Labour.

Amongst older workers aged 55 to 64 only 33 per cent backed Labour, with almost half (47 per cent) backing the Tories. Six out of ten pensioners voted Conservative, with less than a quarter backing Labour. In 1974 David Butler (now aged 92), the top elections guru, talked of 'senescent Conservatism', the idea that the more senile you become, the more likely you are to become a Conservative!

Amongst sociologists there remains a debate as to why this is. Some researchers argue that older people are more conservative with a small 'c' - more committed to traditional norms and values. Amongst older people there's more support for the Conservative Party, perhaps reflecting a more restrained view on issues of personal morality, drugs, membership of the EU, immigration and sexual orientation. This may be related to a political upbringing formed by age-generational experiences during their formative years.

Others have suggested that as people get older they become more cynical about social change at home and abroad. Most have mortgages to pay off plus other costs to do with family responsibilities. Survey evidence indicates that many are alarmed by high taxation to fund public services. Once their finances are more secure in their sixties they may resent having to pay more for social welfare for other age groups.

Radical

At the other end of the age spectrum, young people are more radical, and more open to change and new policy ideas. As shown in the 2017 election, they tended to see Labour as closer to their world view. In the last half decade economic opportunities for young adults have shrunk. Dubbed

'generation rent', many find it hard to get onto the housing ladder with huge student debts hanging over them. Their wages have been hit hard by austerity. High quality well-paid apprenticeships are too few in number. Housing benefits have been cut as pensioner allowances have increased. As the educationalist Patrick Ainley notes, many young graduates end up in non-graduate jobs.

Labour's radical social democratic manifesto promises, spearheaded by the left-wing social movement Momentum via social media, to abolish university fees, restore student grants for further education students, the living wage of £10, more affordable social housing and tackling under-resourced mental health services, resonated with millions of young people. Little wonder they came out for Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party in their droves, who arguably has helped to restore both trust and faith in the democratic process.

Until June 2017 millions didn't vote. In 2015 58 per cent of young adults under 25 didn't cast a ballot despite the best efforts of democracy campaign groups like Education4Democracy, Bite the Ballot and the NUS. Some cynics saw them as apathetic. Others took a more nuanced perspective. For the sociologist Geoff Evans many young people were alienated - cut off - from electoral politics, because of some corrupt MPs, spin-doctors, fake news and some Conservative and New Labour politicians' focus on the negative aspects of youth fostering moral panics with little basis in reality.

Corbyn's perceived authenticity and integrity helped to re-connect the country's youth to active civic participation whilst dramatically boosting Labour's vote share at the same time.

Parliamentary seats with large student populations swung to Labour by 6 per cent. In Brighton,

Hove, Canterbury, Plymouth and Portsmouth, Labour's share of the vote soared by between 16 and 21 percentage points. There was little difference in constituencies with big elderly populations, which stayed Conservative.

When it comes to voting the generation gap has got wider than ever before. For the key players in an English and Welsh two-party electoral landscape, the future challenges are great. For the Tories to achieve a working majority without DUP support, they need to woo the sizable youth vote. For Labour, despite promises to retain pensioner benefits, they need to win over the hearts and minds of the nation's older voters in order to achieve overall success at the ballot box.

Challenge

On a broader societal level, more needs to be done by our 'political class' to challenge intergenerational inequality, with bold public policies to promote greater integration between older and younger citizens. As Stephen Burke concludes: 'Ending age apartheid and promoting social integration between generations can help build communities and a country for all ages, where we're united not divided'.

In Brexit Britain surely that's an aspiration worth pursuing by any future Westminster government in the next decade or so.