

Burnham can learn from India's 'cockroaches'

Narendra Modi was humiliated by a youth uprising but our own Generation Z are rightly frustrated and deserve help

William Hague



Something very unusual happened over the weekend. In India the normally omnipotent government of Narendra Modi was humbled and forced to capitulate to pressure. Millions of young people making up the “cockroach” movement — so-called because they were originally dismissed as cockroaches by the authorities — pushed a ridiculed Modi into a humiliating climbdown. He was forced to sack his education minister and surrender to many other demands.

The protests originated in the leaking of exam papers that forced two million students to resit their exams. But they have illuminated the intensifying anger of Generation Z at arrogant and complacent ministers as their expectations are not met — 60 per cent of unemployed people in India are university graduates. They are part of a global trend, seen in youth-led protests in Nepal, Indonesia, Kenya and Serbia and the ousting of the prime minister of Bangladesh.

Such movements are most likely to take shape in countries with large, youthful populations and ineffective or corrupt ruling parties. They will be at their most dramatic if they ever manage to break through the repression of governments in Iran or China. Yet here in Britain and the rest of Europe, major issues are developing about unfairness between generations that political leaders would be wise to address.

Earlier this year I argued in an interview that late baby boomers such

as me, born in the 1960s, have been the luckiest generation ever. We received free university education, chose among plentiful careers, bought houses that shot up in value and enrolled in defined benefit pensions (that we then closed to new entrants). Talk to recent graduates and you will find very different prospects. The number of entry-level jobs is plummeting. The proportion of twentysomethings living with their parents has been soaring — nearly half a million more among 25 to 29-year-olds on the latest estimates. Some of those are wrestling with student loan repayments that are changed on the whim of each passing government.

The BBC analysed my claim about the lucky generation in an interesting piece by Evan Davis. He came up with a redefinition: that it was a great generation in which to be lucky, since many born in the Sixties never went to university or got into such a

A ‘youth triple lock’ could help with travel, savings and homes

pension scheme. That is a very fair point that I completely accept.

Yet our good fortune as late baby boomers hasn’t just been financial. We have lived through a long period of peace and rising prosperity; no pandemic tore a hole in our formative years; no addictive screens took over our minds; we played freely in childhood before anxiety swept through society; and we were not fed the junk food and highly processed items that are now substituted for actual nutrition. Compared to today’s Gen Z, we are a lucky bunch.

We are also managing to load the costs of our decisions on to later

generations. In Britain, the national debt is reaching the limits of what markets can tolerate. The triple lock on pensions, in its current form, will take the state pension up from 5 per cent to 9 per cent of GDP, to be financed by younger taxpayers. Globally, the immense costs of adapting to climate change and to geopolitical conflict will fall heavily on the next generation. And while they will benefit from the medical and scientific breakthroughs that AI will bring, they will also be in the front line of the mass disruption of jobs and careers that will come with it.

Of course, young people benefit from many things we did not have in the 1960s — foreign holidays, hugely expanded universities and the expectation of future, though very uneven, inherited wealth. But there is no doubting they face more challenges, higher costs and greater insecurity, often combined with less independence and poorer health.

This calls for something more than piecemeal changes, careless indifference or hoping for the best, as Modi can ruefully testify. Recent governments in Britain all have a mixed record on improving the prospects of young people. The last Conservative government chalked up a major success with its insistence on a knowledge-rich curriculum in English schools, with impressive results in reading and maths that are somehow still lost on ministers in Scotland and Wales. Labour ministers should take note. But the Tories slipped up badly in leaving a welfare system that is putting tens of thousands of young people on disability benefits without the need or incentive to find work.

Labour has so far gone in the wrong direction with well-intentioned but counterproductive



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politics. Higher minimum wage rates and increased employers’ national insurance are hitting young people’s job prospects at the worst possible time. New rules on rental properties will reduce the supply of them. Andy Burnham will soon be saying more about new council houses but in the meantime the construction of new homes in London has fallen to the lowest since records began and lower than any major city in the developed world.

As the prime minister considers his ten-year plan and opposition parties reassess their policies, they should focus on fairness between generations and on helping young people prepare for the more turbulent world we be passing on to them. There are signs of that. Reforms of the apprenticeship system are under way. The Labour MP Luke Charters has

recently proposed a “youth triple lock” consisting of universal travel discounts for apprentices and school leavers as well as students, tax incentives for under-25s to save and a rent-to-own pathway for the over-25s. One of the best new policies announced by the Tory front bench is to redirect the first £5,000 of NI contributions paid by a young person into a nominated savings account.

A patchwork of good ideas, however, will not be enough. The parties could develop policies based on intergenerational fairness, from keeping the pensions system affordable to taxpayers to making it easier to build homes where young workers will need them. They could improve the resilience of a new generation by ending the catastrophe of so many being forgotten and left on benefits, now highlighted by the work of Alan Milburn. Above all, they could help to mobilise the brilliance of so many young people by creating a more dynamic economy, with more education on entrepreneurship and tax relief for those who start their own business. Governments have no way of predicting what skills will be needed in the age of AI, but they can help a new generation prepare. The ability to reinvent oneself, to fail and then succeed, to start a new venture, to have ideas not just a job, will be more important than ever.

Across the world, millions of young people are becoming angry and frustrated. They are often right. More political leaders will soon be caught out unless they understand that and act on it.

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