

# Roll over Mick Jagger

## A roundtable discussion

Sarah E. Baker, Clare Coatman, David Floyd, Ben Little and Shiv Malik discuss generational politics.

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**David Floyd** Why generational politics?

**Clare** There's always been tensions between generations and their different views on society. They've got different deals from society as policy has changed. But recently I think there has been a crunch point between our generation and the generations before us around what we can expect, particularly in terms of access to education, university, housing and the jobs market. Our outlook is a lot gloomier than that of the baby-boomers. And this is an international trend. Youth unemployment is 50 per cent in Spain. Here it is significantly higher than for under-25s than for other demographics. The pressure that this causes highlights intergenerational politics as a frame with which to look at equality in society.

**Shiv** I'd turn the question on its head. Why not always intergenerational politics? Isn't politics built on the idea that we look into the future, and hopefully we can decide and plan what that future will be like. At the moment I'd say the economic model that we have doesn't allow us even to look into the future - let alone plan ahead. This is why a younger generation has become more vocal and asked how the system is working for us - because in many respects things seem so insecure, unattainable and delayed. All politics should be generational, looking to the future, promising something better.

**Sarah** I agree, but I also think an intergenerational frame works in a context where

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there is much less identification with class and gender. A generational politics can find the kind of language with which a wider cohort of people can engage.

**Ben** This is particularly a crisis for the left. The ways in which politics was passed down within communities, particularly socialist politics, has almost gone completely. Institutions that once enabled this to happen - working-men's clubs for example, and a working-class culture - have gone, along with industrialisation. We have lost that sense of communal patrimony, of passing down a kind of politics, and approach to politics, from one generation to the next. Something is missing from former working-class communities. How does a politics get carried from one generation to the next? Something the generational frame is doing is picking up where former ways of engaging young people in organised politics have fallen off.

**David** Labour came to power in 1997 with its theme tune, 'Things can only get better'. To what extent has generational politics emerged because of the failure of this promise?

**Shiv** There was a weird set of platitudes in 1997, with the pledge card and its five promises. They were all disjunctive from one another - one on waiting lists, one on crime, and so on. They didn't have a holistic message. There was no plan. New Labour took on the economics of the market and adopted it as its own. It had won out, and it was what they would operate on. At that point the game is lost - for the left certainly, but also for the future, because neoliberal economics has no mechanism for planning anything, no mechanism for securing more housing or more jobs. If you're not going to tackle the market you're not going to get those outcomes. That's why young people have lost out ever since, and why voting rates amongst the young have fallen off a cliff. There is nothing to offer them.

**Clare** I think there is an issue about the political representation of young people and their interests. It's not just voting rates that have fallen off a cliff, so has the membership of political parties. Young people are much less likely to be in a trade union or part of a faith group. When young people can't find representation, and can't use the levers of power within existing institutions that previous generations have been able to use to get what they needed or wanted, they have to find an alternative

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mechanism to do that. But at the minute it feels like the balance of power is weighted away from them. As long as those institutions aren't changing and are left with disproportionate numbers of older generations, it's going to create a pressure point.

**Ben** There's been a discussion around generational politics as an 'us versus them' politics - boomers versus their kids, a war on mum and dad. That's a crude characterisation. Neil Boorman has written a book from this position and I'm ambivalent about it. But I do think when you look at our institutions and the way our democracy works and how formal politics fails to respect young people around many issues - housing, jobs, education - actually a little confrontation is not a bad thing. You've got to pay your £9000 fees, we're going to take away housing benefit if you are under 25. It's important to put all these things together and to say to younger people: this is what is happening to you. You need to be represented. There is a real need to get young people to make a claim on the institutions and to make demands on them. It's not at the expense of other political groupings around class, race or gender. It's an addition to them as well as being a difference.

**Sarah** But doesn't it become more difficult to assert your claim to what you need as a group when you're socialised to such an extent to be individualistic, and not to have some of those traditional ties and affiliations?

**David** What's the difference between our generation's politics and those of the boomer generation?

**Clare** Fundamentally, it's about our expectations - or what we can realistically expect to receive - being lower than that of the generations before us. The boomer generation had reasonably high aspirations. And realistic ones. They aimed high and they also predominantly got quite a good deal. The jobs market was good. They got grants to go to university when they wanted to. It was comparatively easy to get onto the housing ladder. Our generation has a much gloomier outlook.

**Ben** Part of that is the legacy of the boomer generation, and the way their countercultures got co-opted by market forces.

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**Sarah** We need to be careful in thinking about this process of co-option. It could be easy to think of the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s as a failure, completely co-opted by capitalism. But I think there is a lot we can learn from that which can feed into generational politics. Those countercultures changed capitalism. It wasn't simply a form of co-option. For example there are some kinds of ethical issues within consumerism that have a radical potential. Rather than think about how we are different, I would hope that we can encourage inter-generational dialogue and learn from the past, including how generations can think about the future.

**Shiv** We have to figure out what the previous generation was about in order to answer that question. Ultimately they were about individualism. The cultural individualism of the boomer generation is linked to economic individualism. Maurice Glasman has this phrase - 'the counter culture became the over the counter culture'. There was rebellion against 'The Man' and hierarchy, and the idea of living out your own personal dreams, and that plays out in both the economic and cultural fields. Thatcher and Reagan played on this. It was their economic message: we don't have to be told by some big state what to do. We can make our own lives, do what we want, take our money where we want and we can do the kind of jobs we want - without those interfering unions. These are the messages they put out. And it seemed to work with the young at the time, who were the baby boomer generation. And there's a lot there that our generation has taken on as its own, so the two generations are not necessarily in conflict.

Where the conflict comes is with the question of what has gone wrong. The answer is, basically, that our generation is living in a precarious state, whether you are talking about housing or jobs. These things are fundamental to how people live their lives. Young people want something more - or perhaps something the same as the previous generation. This is the centre of the debate.

**David** To summarise, the problem is that our generation wants the same thing as the boomers but can't have it?

**Sarah** I disagree slightly with Shiv, because I don't see the boomer generation and what's happened to it totally in terms of individualism. They also started collective

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projects, and there were forms of collectivity going on, for example communes, cooperatives. The question is why these projects in collective living and working didn't succeed, and why did individualism become so pervasive.

**Shiv** Those communal projects were basically crazy. They were doing things outside of community and outside of the nation state. They didn't want to be part of a larger whole. They were rejections of all forms of hierarchy on the fringes of the mainstream. They were against their parents. To that extent all change is generational, because it's a rejection of what's come previously - someone is responsible for what's gone previously, and that's how all change is fashioned.

**Sarah** To see change as this kind of disjuncture is dangerous, because you need some kind of dialogue. I think what you are saying is that, because the past was so different there hasn't been an inter-generational dialogue with the boomer generation.

**Shiv** The result of neoliberal economics has been that a new generation growing up under that system has got a whole heap of problems which are not being noticed by those who are older, precisely because of the fact that they older, and are in a different part of their life.

**Ben** There was an incredible energy and imaginative power behind the 68-ers of the baby-boom generation. And there are still remnants of it and of its organisation around - it's not gone completely. But it couldn't be transformative. Or rather the bits that were transformative were those picked up by capitalism - which helped shape consumer capitalism as we know it. As a generation they were powerful, but not powerful enough to see it through. Nor did they have a vision about how to carry it forward.

**Shiv** We are living under the economic system bequeathed by the baby boomers. Aren't we living under their myths as well? Isn't '68 their myth, their coming of age story? At one time we were going to call *Jilted Generation* - the book I wrote with Ed Howker - 'The Rolling Stones must die'. These guys are still on stage now,

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propounding that myth and making millions from it. Isn't generational politics also about turning around and saying that these are myths? Don't we need our own stories?

**Ben** Thatcher and Reagan were not boomers. But they created a politics that said to that massive generation, 'we're going to do things in your interest and which meet your needs'. Politicians aren't doing that now. That's a change. I love Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* because it has an amazing energy about the possibilities of the 'Freak Vote', the '68 vote. This could change America. And the change does eventually come through, ten to fifteen years later. The problem was that it was of a very different character from what was expected. But the '68 generation did get represented by an earlier generation that was looking to their interests and delivering them a politics which matched their cultural predispositions.

**Shiv** There is a danger that we just talk about generational politics as being about making sure the political system represents all generations. That's certainly one strong angle on it, but isn't there something much deeper, which takes us to issues like climate change and the environmental movement. This is about long-term planning for all generations, including people who are not even born yet. It is about understanding that we do need to plan. How time works in politics is very little understood but it affects absolutely everything. There are many, many discourses on class - i.e. where people were born - but very little about when people were born. And the funny thing is that that is actually how people live their lives - they live them by carrying on, in a sense. That perhaps is the deeper issue here.

**Clare** I agree. We have to find a way of short-circuiting this terribly destructive but pragmatically understandable aspect of politics today, which is that nobody is able to look past the next electoral cycle. This doesn't help anybody - except helping politicians get re-elected. And yet it is completely imperative that each generation does not just look after their own interests - does not just fight for a fair deal for themselves. We also need a collaboration across the generations to get a sustainable settlement, and I agree that that includes those who are not yet born.

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**Ben** But when did this idea start breaking down? Thatcher and Reagan could try to speak to the baby boomer generation, to take them into account. But then you have the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of history. Suddenly everything breaks down at the beginning of the 1990s, and there is no more ideological struggle. There was this moment when the politics of the boomer generation was absolutely transcendent. But for our generation history has come back with a bang, first with climate change and then the economic crash - and I guess 9-11 is another event though it is less relevant for this discussion. There has been a massive change. The timescale has suddenly come back in. But before - if you were at the end of history it didn't matter. You didn't need to look past the next election because you were just going to keep rolling, rolling, rolling.

**Shiv** To tease it out a bit more - it's not just simply that politicians over the last thirty years were saying 'okay, we'll give you what you want at the point when you need it in your life course - so, if you need houses we will sell you a council house at half price, and when you get a bit older we'll focus on the NHS'. It's not just that. It's that their ideas were deeply imbued into our way of running the economy and economics. The idea that the individual is front and centre. That no-one should be told what to do - i.e. get rid of red tape and regulation. And that very much ties in with the interests of those at the top - that would be a Marxist perspective on it. But it also ties in with the ideas that were part of the generational cohort at that time. So there are two different things. You can play to their interests, but you can also play to their deepest ideals. And, as I said before, those are also things which our generation has taken up, and is struggling with at this point.

**Clare** But there is also a cultural short-termism which is the backdrop to all this. I recently heard Rupert Read at an event pointing out that people used to think nothing of planting an orchard and not being around to see it grow, or would see a cathedral or other large building being constructed throughout their lifetime, without seeing it being finished. And now - we want everything and we want it now. Another statistic I recently heard is that in television camera angles are shown for no more than three seconds on average, because people's attention span is so short. And that's astonishing. Those kinds of things really get under the skin of a society. And

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we need to address that, as well as the manifestation of it in politics.

**Ben** Yes, I think the cultural challenge is huge. And that's one thing they did in the 1960s and 1970s. They did have an alternative culture which was built, almost organically, through rebellion against the very hierarchical and small-c conservative culture that was in place. But we are no longer in that place. And we are slowly starting to see new elements emerging - for example the slow food movement - those sorts of things. There is now a definite need for us to think about what is possible within our cultural narratives not just in our economic ones.

**David** What sort of collective political character does generational politics have - if at all - maybe it doesn't? That is the big question.

**Sarah** Trying to link in with the last point - one reason why generational politics is really interesting is that it enables you to think of intersections - to think about class, race and gender politics at the same time. It is not a disavowal of these other kinds of politics: it enables you to think about them together. And if that then enters popular discourse it has real potential.

**Ben** But it is a really disputed area. The idea of generational politics has been grabbed by people of all political stripes and in really different ways. So Osborne will talk about generational politics to justify austerity and massive cuts - including the granny tax! But at the same time he is cutting housing benefit for the under-25s and stripping away the welfare state, which our generation also needs - if we get sick, or when we get older, or get injured at work, or even if we get depressed - the welfare reform bill is also cutting disability benefits, including for those suffering from mental health problems. You can frame generational politics as about not leaving the next generation in debt. Or you can frame it as Ed Miliband has picked up on it - I think he has actually picked up on the phrase 'jilted generation'. You've got those two ways of thinking about it. And then there is the work we have been doing, which is quite different - trying to get young people to shape a politics and write and communicate in ways that fit them. But, in terms of a collective group - I am not sure we are there yet. The student protests maybe?



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**Shiv** But doesn't that require you to step up to the plate? I first started thinking in generational terms when I went to climate camp. I found it weird that although climate change was primarily an inter-generational issue it wasn't being picked up like that. There were a lot of young people there, but no-one was saying that this was something that affected young people in particular. It was more a case of 'it affects all of us' or 'it's the rich'. Neither of these really tapped into what was going on. The fact is, if you think you're disempowered because the market rules and politics can't change anything, then you need step up to the plate as part of a group who are all suffering from the same things - in a collective call to arms to claim your future. I don't see the generation under thirty-five acting in any other capacity. That's the biggest call to them.

**David** But the potential challenge is that generational politics doesn't have a collective political character because the situation is experienced differently by different people within our generation. If your parents benefitted from the previous economic circumstances then even if you aren't earning enough to get on the housing ladder your parents can financially help you to do so by selling their house and down-sizing. If you're in a particular economic circumstance you're in a very different position to someone who hasn't benefitted from what came before.

**Shiv** You're right, but it's our generation's dirty little secret that every one of us is dependent on someone. That's the awful thing about it all. If not our parents, then we depend on the state. We were promised lives as individuals, working for our careers, working towards our aims, and the dream was that it would all be wonderful. You could go to university if you want, which would lead you to a better career, which would be well paid. But it hasn't worked out like that. Instead of being individuals we're being infantilised, we're delaying our lives and finding it hard to start families and to become responsible adults. And we all know that we're dependent on someone for the position that we've reached today, in these measly circumstances.

**Clare** Yet even though we are the generation that has been infantilised, we're also the people who are taking responsibility for the consequences of our actions and talking about what is sustainable. We're rejecting the situation. As a generation we are much

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more aware of climate change and sustainability than previous generations. We're not just saying that things are bad and we want them to be better, we're seeking a sustainable and equal settlement for everyone.

**David** In his recent BBC documentaries on the 1970s, Dominic Sandbrook seemed to be arguing that during this period working people had overreached themselves in their demands, in their conception of what they could have. They wanted to have as much wealth and as much of the good life as richer people, but economically that wasn't possible. He argues that they should have settled for less. What is our generation's response to that? Are we saying to the right-wing commentariat that they are correct and we should settle for less?

**Ben** One way of responding to that question returns to this idea of prolonged dependency. We're not clear in our culture exactly when we stop being young and become adults. Are we adults at sixteen, eighteen, or twenty-five (which is the new cap for housing benefits)? At what point do we become independent from our parents? How does adulthood exactly manifest itself culturally, and how does it manifest itself differently for different people? For example, working-class ideas of self-reliance are very different to the middle-class principle that you go to university and your parents will continue to support you during that time. Issues of dependence and independence raise questions about where the state should step in instead of the family, and what happens if your family can't give you that kind of support. It's not clear. We don't have a system similar to that in Sweden, where the state guarantees your independence from other people, and I don't think, even on the left, we want that. It isn't culturally appropriate for the UK. We can't resolve the question of what we want as a generation because we're unclear on when we become adults. There is no clear transition from school to university or work, or school to university and then work. Then internships are complicating this yet further, by making training (or the lack of it) yet more protracted. We return to the question of what constitutes an adult, and at what point we can anticipate that our aspirations will be met, even those as simple as starting a family. I don't think it's the same situation as in the 1970s. We all want to be rich but we don't know where we are in our lives, and that goes to the heart of our lack of cultural resolution.

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**Shiv** Firstly, we're already settling for less in the most basic things, such as a secure job, affordable housing, settlements for pensions - we don't even know when we'll be able to retire because it has all changed so much in the past five years. Secondly, the terms of what we should settle for have also changed, and rightly so. Do we want a society that offers us the opportunity for everything - for an iPod, for a huge flatscreen television - but that doesn't offer us any security for housing, career, and family?

That's important because those things are integral cogs to any economy. The young family attempting to have children, and planning forward into their lives, is vital to how any economy is run, but particularly to how a capitalist economy is run. Without that young family unit, people don't take risks and start their own businesses, or become entrepreneurs, for example. Also, the building of a home makes the young family essential as a consumer. When that unit suffers, many other things start to go wrong in a society. You can't build an economy exclusively on pensioners and teenage consumers.

**Sarah** I certainly agree with some of what you're describing, but I disagree with the idea that in the past everyone had those choices. Not everyone had a choice of housing, not everyone had the freedom to get any job. It's essential when we're talking in generational terms to recognise this, otherwise generational politics can be dismissed as young white middle-class men moaning because they have lost their privileges too. Rather than suggesting that inequalities didn't exist in the past and now things are terrible, it would be better to argue that the inequalities that existed previously have got worse. And there are complexities here too. For example, young people, especially girls, are both infantilised and, increasingly, sexualised. In terms of consumerism, girls are expected to be adults at a really young age. At eight or nine years old, children are seen as adults in the context of their purchasing power.

**David** Are we saying we would prefer to go back to a situation where there was much less consumer choice? Could we create a situation that offers some of the choices we have now but still has the equality and security of the past?

**Sarah** We need to think not against markets and against consumption in all their forms, but against consumerism. The problem with consumerism - and this comes

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from Jeremy Gilbert - is that the buyer-seller relationship becomes ubiquitous in everything. If there are more co-operatives and different ways of relating then we have the potential for a richer experience, but are still able to consume within that model.

**Clare** Consumption is still a problem as well as consumerism - because it comes back to short-termism and not internalising consequences. We are currently valuing a standard of life over a quality of life. We want to go out and drink Italian coffee and eat exotic fruit in December, when we should be valuing clean air and clean water. Maybe we can't have both clean air and exotic fruit in Britain, in which case it's more important to have good quality of life.

**Ben** There are some emerging ideas about how we might achieve both choice and a sustainable future. They cohere around new forms of cooperation and a new political economy, where people work with each other and not in competition with each other - though there are big obstacles to that in terms of how we conceptualise our culture.

Social media and digital technologies are crucial here. We can create a model and put it on a wiki and people then improve on it and iterate within days. I have friends who share a car and they have a Google doc, a spreadsheet which they edit all the time, and it contains all the information about the car that they need to share. It means that two couples, neither of whom could afford a car, can now have one in London. If those forms of collaboration could be scaled up to become part of how we organise our politics as well as our lives and our economics - taking that lifestyle revolution from the 68-ers - then I have a lot of hope for the future.

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