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# Baby Boomers versus Millennials: rhetorical conflicts and interest- construction in the new politics of intergenerational fairness

Kate Alexander Shaw

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## About the Author



Kate Alexander Shaw is a consultant researcher leading a new project on the Political Economy of Young People in Europe, on behalf of FEPS and SPERI.

This research, which has been developed by SPERI in collaboration with the Foundation for European Progressive Studies, investigates the challenges facing young people in Europe's post-crisis economies, and the emergent politics of intergenerational fairness.

Kate is also a PhD Candidate in the Department of Government at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where her research has focused on the role of ideas and narrative in economic policymaking, particularly in respect of the New Labour government of the UK. In 2013 she was a visiting Research Fellow at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University. She has previously worked as a policy analyst for HM Treasury and the Greater London Authority.

The Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) is the European progressive political foundation. The only progressive think tank at European level. FEPS establishes an intellectual crossroad between social democracy and the European project, putting fresh thinking at the core of its action. As a platform for ideas and dialogue, FEPS works in close collaboration with social democratic organisations, and in particular national foundations and think tanks across Europe, to tackle the challenges that Europe faces today. Close to the Party of European Socialists (PES), the S&D Group in the European Parliament, the PES Group in the Committee of the Regions, Young European Socialists and PES women, but nevertheless independent. FEPS embodies a new way of thinking on the social democratic, socialist and labour scene in Europe.

The Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute (SPERI) at the University of Sheffield brings together leading international researchers, policy-makers, journalists and opinion formers to develop new ways of thinking about the economic and political challenges by the current combination of financial crisis, shifting economic power and environmental threat. SPERI's goal is to shape and lead the debate on how to build a sustainable recovery and a sustainable political economy for the long-term.

## Introduction: the sudden rise of intergenerational fairness

Times are tough for young people coming of age in the period since the global economic crisis. In 2015 youth unemployment in the EU was over 20 per cent, compared with 8 per cent for workers over 25. For those young people who do find work, earnings growth has stalled, overturning the expectation that successive generations will be more prosperous than their parents. Work is ever more casualised and insecure (European Commission 2017), while the costs of equipping oneself to compete in the new gig economy are increasingly borne by individuals via privately-funded training and unpaid internships (Howker & Malik 2010). Today's young adults find themselves emerging into what sociologist Alan France (2016) has called a neoliberal political ecology: an economic context structured around the primacy of market forces, which demands that young people sink or swim as individual economic units. In such a context, many find that traditional markers of adulthood such as purchasing a home or starting a family are delayed or out of reach altogether. A recent report on Millennials by Ipsos Mori painted a bleak picture:

*The economic context in which Western Millennials have matured is characterised by uncertainty and stagnation. The financial strain and employment struggle has created a blockage in the millennial life cycle, an adult purgatory, where key choices associated with moving onto the next phase of adulthood are made later than previous generations. (Duffy et al, 2016: 8-9)*

Young adults are not only struggling in economic terms; it seems their very claim to adulthood is threatened by their inability to match their parents' and grandparents' economic trajectories.

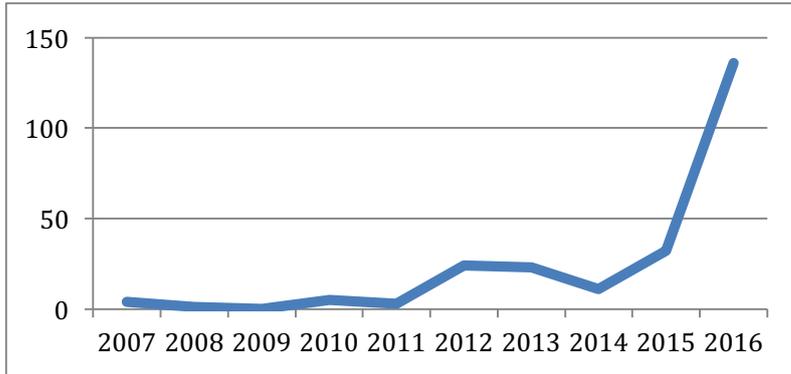
Apparently in response to these challenges, the last several years have seen an upswell of interest in the notion of intergenerational fairness. This umbrella concept pulls together a variety of economic questions into a singular problematic, centred on the idea that today's young people cannot hope to achieve the same prosperity as older generations. Both in policy discourse and in media representations, it is becoming commonplace to assert that today's young people are at an historic disadvantage compared with their elders, and that policy should be seeking to mitigate that disadvantage in the interests of equity and for the sake of the social contract between generations. For example, the 2017 edition of the European Commission's Annual Review of Employment and Social Developments in Europe makes intergenerational fairness its primary focus, on the basis that 'there are increasing concerns that today's young people and their children may end up worse off than their parents' (European Commission, 2017: 12). This generational disadvantage has, it is claimed, been sharpened though not created by the impact of the financial crisis, resulting in a 'generation gap' in European labour markets that, 'if not addressed... may undermine social cohesion, support for reforms and trust in the system and institutions' (European Commission, 2017: 9). The questions raised by the intergenerational fairness agenda could hardly be more significant, opening up lines of inquiry about the consequences of demographic and technological change, the distributive consequences of new labour market trends and 'the potential need for.... changes in the welfare state which facilitates intergenerational solidarity' (European Commission, 2017: 9). Intergenerational fairness is, it seems, the great new frontier in economic and social policymaking, in which age-group cleavages are perceived as having new and perhaps primary significance in the European political economy.

This SPERI paper focuses in-depth on the emergence of the intergenerational fairness agenda in a particular case, the United Kingdom. The UK represents a particularly useful case study because it typifies the growing pessimism about young people's prospects (Shrimpton et al, 2017) and because the policy debate around these issues in Britain is now relatively well advanced, allowing for some conclusions to be drawn about both the origins of the intergenerational fairness agenda and its likely future directions. Survey evidence shows that nearly half of British adults believe that millennials and subsequent generations will have a worse life than their parents, and a third of UK millennials say they would prefer to have been born in their parents' time (Shrimpton et al 2017: 4). Reflecting this negative outlook, there is a growing perception that policy change is called for, particularly in respect of the 'social contract' in which generations pool resources to meet citizens' needs over the life cycle. In Britain, this point of view is typified by the British thinktank Intergenerational Foundation, founded in 2011, whose website argues that 'it's only fair that younger generations should have the same standard of living as generations who have gone before. That means creating a new, fairer contract between the generations that provides for tomorrow as well as today' (Intergenerational Foundation, 2017).

The political debate on intergenerational fairness has quickly adapted a new rhetorical vocabulary, which turns particularly on a contrast between early-retiring, asset-rich Baby Boomers and debt-laden, precariously housed and insecurely employed Millennials. Indeed, one of the most striking things about the discourse of intergenerational fairness, and the 'Millennials versus Baby Boomers' framing in which it is mobilised, is the speed with which it has emerged in the post-crisis decade. Figure 1 shows a sharp increase in the number of newspaper articles containing the phrase 'intergenerational fairness' after 2014, illustrating the sudden emergence of a descriptor that barely registered in the print media five years ago. Figure 2 charts newspaper articles in which 'millennials' and 'baby boomers' appear in the same paragraph, showing that while coverage of the baby boomer generation is hardly new (see Figure 3), such articles have, in the last three years, increasingly been making use of a juxtaposition with a millennial generation who provide the boomers with their rhetorical and political counterpoint.

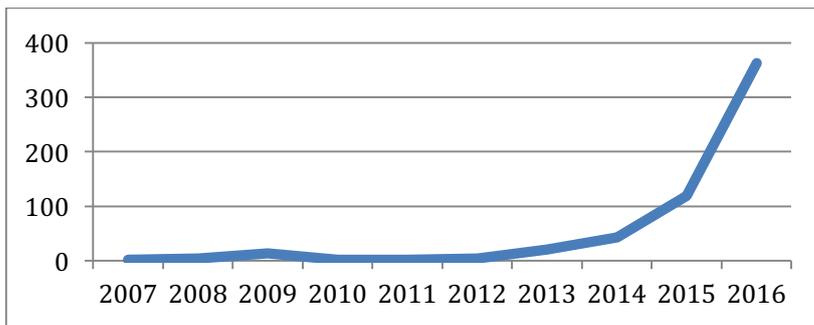
Moreover, while 'intergenerational fairness' is a relatively arcane piece of language used mostly by thinktanks and policy elites, there is growing evidence that the rhetoric of contrasted generations is penetrating the public consciousness more broadly. Figure 4 presents data from Google Trends, showing that the word 'millennials' has emerged as an online search term only since 2012, rapidly attracting interest toward a peak in late-2016 (note that the chart is an index of that peak moment, not a frequency count). Interest in millennials spikes twice, in early 2016 and in November 2016, the latter possibly in response to the US Presidential election. Significantly, the prevalence of searches for 'baby boomers', which had been relatively stable over the last decade, also began to rise in 2016, with a spike in the month of Britain's referendum on EU membership, hinting at the extent to which 'boomers versus millennials' was providing an interpretive framework by which the Brexit vote could be understood. It appears that in the last two years the idea of the millennial, particularly invoked in opposition to the baby boomer, has become an increasingly important part of Britain's political lexicon.

**Figure 1: Intergenerational fairness in UK national newspapers, 2007-16**



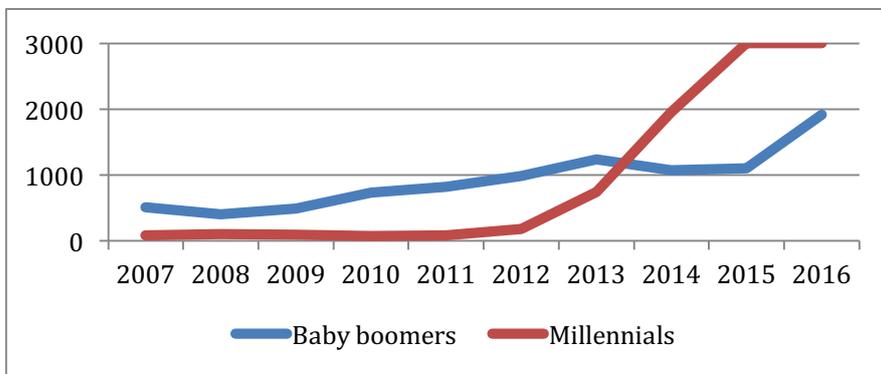
Source: Nexis

**Figure 2: Baby boomers and Millennials in same paragraph, UK national newspapers, 2007-16**



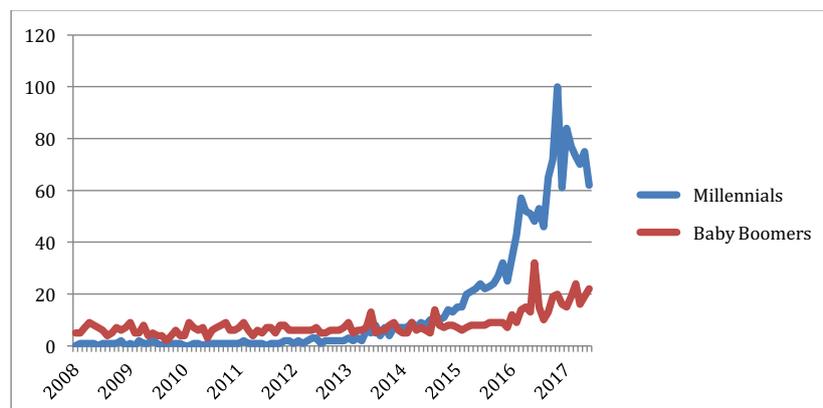
Source: Nexis

**Figure 3: Articles on Baby Boomers or Millennials, UK national newspapers 2007-16**



Source: Nexis. Count for “Millennials” in 2015 and 2016 is >3000 (Nexis search cap)

**Figure 4: Google searches for “millennials” and “baby boomers”, indexed against peak interest**



Source: Google Trends, UK data

At first glance, the emergence of this new rhetoric might seem epiphenomenal to the economics, merely describing a set of underlying problems that are now serious enough to provoke a political response. The emergence of age-cohort as a political cleavage might be read as the Polanyian pushback against neoliberalism that political science has been waiting for since the crash of 2008 (see for example Crouch, 2011; Schmidt and Thatcher, 2013); evidence that the public is finally dissatisfied enough with a political economy that has delivered a decade of crisis and stagnation to call on their governments to mitigate their exposure to global markets (Hopkin, 2017). Since young people have been most sharply affected by the aftermath of the crisis, they are presumably the group most likely to mobilise for protection. Where the economic conditions lead, the politics will follow, allowing for the appropriate time-lag.

However, such a reading underestimates the importance of rhetoric in this picture, and perhaps overstates the progressiveness of that rhetoric in regards to welfare states. This paper will show that in fact new discourses of intergenerational (un)fairness should be understood as constitutive, rather than simply descriptive, of the phenomena they address. That is, the language of intergenerational fairness is a new frontier in the construction of economic interests in the post-crisis period, acting both to redescribe familiar problems in terms of age, and to incorporate new economic and political events under a single discursive umbrella. As such, this new discourse opens up possibilities for political mobilization that are still inchoate, and whose policy implications are still up for grabs. The emergence of new identifiers based on age clearly creates new possibilities for collective action, but it remains to be seen whether those possibilities will be realised and what direction any such action might take. Crucially, the next few years will determine whether the increasing political salience of age-based interpretive frameworks is supportive, or obstructive, of attempts to renew welfare states as the embodiment of the social compact between generations.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section briefly recaps constructivist theories of interest-construction as a framework for understanding what is happening in the new discourse of intergenerational fairness. The second maps the emerging discourse of intergenerational fairness in the UK case, as articulated by a range of actors including thinktanks, politicians and the print media. The third section considers the political

implications of this discourse, which may be alternately conflictual or solidaristic, and which cuts across left-right politics. It shows that the intergenerational fairness agenda incorporates elements rooted in familiar fiscal austerity, as well as new and potentially progressive dimensions rooted in a critique of neoliberalism and its consequences. The differential treatment of debt in the debate on intergenerational fairness is shown to be illustrative of this conceptual and political flexibility. Finally, the paper considers whether the recent increase in political participation by young people in Britain indicates the increasing political salience of cohort-based conceptions of fairness, before concluding with some reflections on future research directions in this area.

## Theory: the social construction of economic interests

Constructivist political economists have long been aware that people's economic interests do not simply fall out of the material context in which actors are placed, but must be 'constituted by social processes' (McNamara, 2002: 61). There is now an established subfield in international political economy that rejects rational-materialist assumptions, insisting that economic interests are not exogenous sources of compulsion, but endogenous to the ideas that actors hold about their economic context (Abdelal et al, 2010; Beland and Cox 2011). This is an essentially constructivist view of economics that insists material interests can never be truly separated from the ideas people hold about them. An economic interest that provoked no political reaction would be the proverbial tree falling unheard in a forest; it might as well not exist. To be made manifest, economic interests must be constructed via processes of sense-making to produce the interest-perceptions that can then drive political action. In Colin Hay's pithy phrase: 'interests do not exist, but constructions of interests do' (2011: 79). In such a framework therefore, the politics of economic policy are assumed to originate not in the economy as observable landscape, but in the ideational construction of the economy by political agents because 'it is the ideas that actors hold about the context in which they find themselves rather than the context itself which informs the way in which actors behave' (Hay and Rosamond 2002: 148).

Language is clearly fundamental to the processes by which interest construction goes ahead. This is not to say, however, that interest-constructions are merely poetic: they have material consequences. When we evolve a new language for talking about the economic conditions, we effectively advance a new causal story about how policy should intervene in those conditions, discursively linking a particular problem to a particular kind of responsive action (or inaction). Deborah Stone's (1989) classic work on causal stories shows how interpretive processes set the parameters of policy action by defining problems, determining their origins, assigning blame or credit for the present situation and prescribing policy to change the future. Discourses of the economy are therefore not simply descriptive, sitting to one side of the economics; they operate within the perpetual feedback loop between politics and economics. Comparative political economy tells us that one set of economic conditions may give rise to many kinds of politics; the mechanism of that variance is, in very large part, what anthropologist Douglas Holmes (2009) has called 'the economy of words': the language by which we both comprehend and conjure the economy as political terrain.

However, while the theoretical case for economic interests-as-constructions is well established, until recently the empirical literature deploying that theory was relatively underdeveloped. Colin Hay has argued that 'the future of constructivist institutionalist

analysis surely lies in detailed ethnographic research that maps and charts the development and redevelopment of interest perceptions' (2011: 81). This paper is intended to contribute to just such a research agenda, arising out of new research on the political economy of young people in post-crisis Europe that approaches the burgeoning rhetoric of intergenerational fairness as an important new frontier in interest-construction (see SPERI, 2017). Mapping the emerging discourse of intergenerational fairness in the UK and, especially, exposing its political and policy implications, brings to bear the theoretical insights of constructivist IPE on a real-world case that continues to evolve in front of us.

The rhetoric of intergenerational fairness is a particularly good candidate for the examination of interest-construction because it both defines a set of new problems, and re-describes some old ones along unfamiliar lines. Concerns about ageing populations and the cost of pension entitlements, for example, have been politically salient since at least the early 1980s but are now wrapped into a political discourse that frames them as primarily the imposition of a problem on the young by the old, and specifically by a baby boomer generation constructed as generally problematic. Concerns about youth unemployment predate the 2008 financial crisis but, in the post-crisis period, are perhaps attracting a sharper focus based on a sense that the fortunes of the young may not improve as they move up the age scale (Howker & Malik, 2010; Little, 2010). Age is also providing a new frame by which to grasp macro changes in the political economy. For example, trends in income and wealth inequality have more commonly been considered in terms of either social class or income distributions than in terms of age cohorts. The decline in the living standards of the middle classes have been much discussed, particularly in a political science literature focused on the changing shape of the income distribution in liberalised economies, where top earners have captured most of the proceeds of productivity growth over the last three decades (Hopkin and Alexander Shaw, 2016; Hacker and Pierson, 2010). One might plausibly argue that the challenges facing young people, such as job insecurity in liberalised labour markets, increased personal debt and low savings rates, unaffordable housing and weak income growth, are not specific to youth but are in fact symptoms of an increasingly skewed political economy in which young people simply have the misfortune to be new entrants. The new rhetoric of intergenerational fairness, however, reframes these phenomena as being principally a problem for the young. Winner-take-all income trends are at least thirty years old, and indeed they have been impacting more negatively on younger than older people since the 1980s (OECD, 2008), but a political discourse that describes and responds to the impact of these phenomena *primarily in terms of age* is almost entirely a post-crisis development.

This brief discussion is not intended to show that the new focus on generational effects is incorrect, or somehow misguided by comparison with more orthodox analytical frameworks. Rather, the aim is to show that the same economic phenomena can be dissected along different lines, depending on the variables one chooses to prioritise. That age is, increasingly, becoming the analytical keystone for representations of post-crisis economics is noteworthy, and deserves further scrutiny; theories of interest construction give us the tools to attempt the task. The rest of the paper proceeds to map the content of the new framings, before considering their policy implications, and especially their potential to either support, or frustrate, efforts to remake welfare states as the embodiment of a social compact between generations.

## New rhetorics of intergenerational (un)fairness: mapping the discursive terrain

In the UK, the new discourse of intergenerational fairness is taking place on two distinct but related fronts. The first is primarily a conversation driven by thinktanks and the political class, for whom age-based conceptions of fairness have proved a fruitful new agenda. The second is a more colourful discourse in the media which picks up many of the same issues, but tends to be shallower and more reliant on negative stereotypes of millennials and baby boomers.

We have seen that the language of intergenerational fairness entered the British media lexicon around 2010-11, having been barely used before that point. This rhetorical beginning can be traced to two key texts, both published in 2010, rooted in opposing political traditions but expressing markedly similar concerns about the deleterious position of young people compared with their elders. The first was 'The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took their Children's Future – and Why They Should Give it Back', by then-Conservative minister David Willetts, in which he argued:

*we are not attaching sufficient value to the claims of future generations. This is partly because a big, disruptive generation of baby boomers has weakened many of the ties between the generations. But it is also an intellectual failure: we have not got a clear way of thinking about the rights of future generations.* (Willetts, 2010: 260)

The book itself was a somewhat eccentric tour of the social policy landscape, but its novel contribution was to privilege generations as the unit of analysis and to insist on the disadvantageous position of the young compared with those in middle age and above. It also adopted a somewhat iconoclastic tone, exhorting older generations of Britons to reflect on their good fortune in being part of a large and electorally powerful cohort, and to consider sacrificing some of that good fortune in favour of the young. Given Willetts' status as a Baby Boomer himself, and his position as the representative for a constituency with a higher than average share of pensioners, this was a non-obvious stance to take. Willetts' position in the debate can perhaps best be understood as that of the norm entrepreneur (Sunstein, 1996), taking proactive steps to tap into existing sites of public dissatisfaction with the status quo, while giving that dissatisfaction a new name and locating it within an overarching narrative based on new interest-constructions.

Also in 2010, Ed Howker and Shiv Malik's 'Jilted Generation' outlined a somewhat similar problematic from the point of view of the young people on the receiving end of intergenerational unfairness. Like Willetts, they sought to reframe questions of social justice as having an important generational dimension, arguing that 'what few recognise is that inequality is not just a measure of rich and poor but, increasingly, a measure of the gap between young and old' (Howker and Malik 2010: 97). Informally polemical in tone, the book took aim at thirty years of policy that had apparently locked the young out of what prosperity was available in Britain, and indeed locked them out of adulthood as it had been traditionally understood. Unlike Willetts, Howker and Malik's thinking had its groundings in a broader critique of neoliberalism (e.g. Little, 2010), out of which they developed the argument that unfettered markets and the politics of individualism had enriched (part of) one lucky generation and impoverished those that followed. Like Willetts, however, the authors made powerful use of a rhetorical contrast with the lucky Baby Boomers:

*Consider for a second the outlook of our two generations: the baby boomers – richer and better-educated than any before them, with good jobs within reach and family homes waiting around the corner; and the jilted – unstable in work, unstable at home, highly educated but unable to make that education pay, stifled by debt, a generation shackled at birth, in which only those born to parents wealthy enough are likely to prosper. (Howker and Malik, 2010: 145)*

Howker and Malik did not adopt the term ‘intergenerational fairness’ in their vocabulary, nor did they agree with Willetts on many of the essentials, seeing the economic generation gap as less a passive by-product of the size of the boomer cohort than the active outcome of neoliberal policy failures (Malik and Howker, 2010). Nonetheless their focus on generational disadvantage, and their recasting of familiar economic and political currents as being particularly a problem for the young, was critical in opening up the intergenerational fairness agenda in Britain.

Since 2010, that agenda has been embraced and propagated by a number of mostly non-partisan thinktanks, whose work aims at reframing policymakers’ conceptions of fairness around age as the critical variable. Prominent in this effort are the Intergenerational Foundation (IF), founded in 2011 by David Willetts to ‘question [a] status quo’ that places ‘increasingly heavy burdens on younger and future generations’ (Intergenerational Foundation, 2016: 2) and to create some institutional capacity to begin correcting the intellectual failure *The Pinch* claimed to have identified. Social policy thinktank the Resolution Foundation has also launched an Intergenerational Commission as a dedicated subsidiary, to develop the evidence base on intergenerational fairness and ‘devise a means of repairing the social contract between generations’ (Intergenerational Commission, 2017). The IC has so far produced important contributions on age-based trends in income and wealth, housing, pensions, and public attitudes (Gardiner 2016; D’Arcy and Gardiner, 2017; Corlett and Judge, 2017; Shrimpton et al 2017). Besides these dedicated research programmes, generational perspectives are also starting to emerge in the work of Britain’s thinktanks and pollsters more generally. For example, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has turned its considerable resources in data analysis to unpacking generational differences in wealth and income (Cribb et al, 2016), while Ipsos Mori launched a new workstream on generations to interrogate polling data by age, asking particularly ‘how values and opinions vary’ across age groups (Ipsos Mori Social Research Institute 2013: 15; see also Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust 2013). Ad hoc contributions have also been made by a private sector researchers (Britain Thinks, 2016) and partisan thinktanks (Pirie, 2017), creating an unusually broad cast of characters with apparently common interests. This heterogeneity suggests two things: that there is now a common vocabulary in which a rather broad cross-section of players in Britain’s knowledge regime are talking to each other about intergenerational fairness, and that so far the conversation is not closely tied to any particular political party or movement.

Given the sudden wealth of thinktank activity in this area, it is perhaps not surprising that the concept of intergenerational fairness has begun to make inroads into Britain’s policy establishment. For example, the recently-retired Permanent Secretary of the Treasury responded to high youth turnout at the 2017 general election by calling for a ‘proper debate about intergenerational inequality’ (Macpherson, 2017), giving an indication of how far the concept has now been embraced by the British establishment. The Parliamentary Select Committee for Work and Pensions has chosen to shine a new spotlight on the intergenerational fairness agenda with a dedicated inquiry in 2016. The committee’s report

bluntly described 'an economy skewed towards baby boomers and against millennials', and suggested that the social contract was being placed 'under strain' by the fact that 'the millennial generation, born between 1981 and 2000, faces being the first in modern times to be financially worse off than its predecessors' (House of Commons, 2016: 3).

Across both thinktanks and policymakers, this notion of a social contract coming under strain is a commonly occurring theme. That is, the rhetoric does not only sketch a new problem, but asserts that the problem is becoming urgent, and that without action a breaking point will soon be reached:

*[the] social contract... feels increasingly under threat as the question of fairness across generations rises up the agenda. (Intergenerational Commission, 2016)*

*The welfare state has long been underpinned by an implicit social contract between generations... The skewing of the welfare state [in favour of older people] has placed the intergenerational contract under strain. (House of Commons, 2016: 3)*

*Policy-makers need to take account of intergenerational fairness, as growing unfairness between the generations runs the risk that the young will no longer feel inclined to support a social contract that seems to benefit older people at their expense. (Intergenerational Foundation, 2016: 7)*

The claim of impending rupture is often related to the economic context, linking the declining prospects of young people to both the 2008 financial crisis and the years of austerity politics that followed. In such arguments, it is this combination of catastrophes that makes today's youth uniquely disadvantaged:

*What distinguishes the current crisis from its predecessors is both its scale and the anticipation that it will visit on the young generation a worse set of life-course prospects than was experienced by the previous generation. (Williamson 2014: 15)*

This language of strain and crisis is particularly significant because it contributes to the political force of intergenerational discourses, converting them from descriptive accounts to causal stories. Colin Hay has suggested that the construction of crises is not simply about describing bad times, but that a true crisis is a transformative breaking point: the moment at which things are forced to change (Hay, 2012: 47:50). The language of intergenerational fairness appears to be warning that such a moment is moving closer, constructing not just a static problem but a sense of building pressure, which must somehow be released. It constructs not just jeopardy but urgency, and so provides a potential basis for policy action.

The British media adds yet another dimension to the intergenerational fairness debate, turning similar rhetoric to slightly different purposes. As shown in Figures 2 and 3 above, articles about Baby Boomers have been common for many years, but they are increasingly making use of a contrast with millennials, suggesting growing interest in generational questions. This interest is not neutral however; the Boomer generation is increasingly being presented by the media as problematic. Sociologist Jennie Bristow has found that since 2006, the print media in Britain has increasingly used 'Baby Boomers' as a pejorative term, depicting a whole generation as problematic both economically,

in respect of the burden of an ageing population, and culturally, using tropes around the self-indulgent children of the 1960s (Bristow 2016; see also Phillipson et al 2008). Strikingly, however, she finds that ‘concerns about inter-generational conflict seem today to be incited primarily, not by younger generations themselves, but by opinion-formers within the political and cultural elites’; that is, the conflictual framing of ‘baby boomers versus millennials’ may be being propagated by newspaper editors who are themselves members of the boomer generation (Alexander Shaw, 2017a).

Millennials do not necessarily fare much better in media representations. A report by Ipsos Mori argued that the millennial generation are ‘the most carelessly described group we’ve ever looked at’ (Duffy et al, 2016: 8), alternately stereotyped as demanding dreamers and materialistic consumers, umbilically attached to their smartphones. Just as baby boomers remain saddled with a media imaginary of ageing hippies and beatniks, millennials look set to be caricatured as a generation of sheltered social media complainers with unrealistic expectations of the world. Mori present data to show this is unfair, but the image remains one with some popular currency. If the dominant tone in the thinktank and policy debate is one of earnest but professionally detached concern for young people, the media discourse is more lurid, prone to representing the problem as rooted in the character flaws of one or other generation. This conflictual, personalised rhetoric has rather different policy implications, which the next section will explore.

## Generational conflict or shared concerns? Competing rhetorical frames and their policy implications

While the increasing prominence of the intergenerational fairness agenda is now unarguable, its political and policy implications are by no means straightforward. It is not yet clear where the new politics of intergenerational fairness might be leading and, in particular, whether alternative framings that make use of the notion of generational conflict or solidarity are likely to underpin, or undermine, efforts to renew the social compact between generations.

Both outcomes are conceivable. On the one hand, the construction of a common identifier based on age could provide a spur to political mobilization by young people, and a framework for reexamining the proper allocation of social entitlements through the welfare state. If new rhetorics act to reconstruct economic interest-conceptions, then it is clear that the new discourse of intergenerational fairness has the potential to radically alter the space in which policy is being conceived. It does so by proffering new definitions of social justice based on age, and by establishing new identifiers around which citizens might mobilise for a perceived common interest. The new category of ‘millennials’ does not only exist in the minds of marketers and opinion pollsters, but has the potential to be claimed by young people themselves as a fulcrum for their political awareness; at least in theory it could ‘lead to recognition amongst the young of a common plight and a realization of the potential for creative political responses’ (Bradford & Cullen 2014: 2). On the other hand, the politics of intergenerational fairness has the potential to be divisive and zero-sum. Specifically, the intergenerational fairness debate has the potential to devolve into a new variant of Britain’s austerity politics, in which fairness is understood as a question of rationing out scarce resources to competing groups of the more-or-less deserving. The politics of generational inequality also has the potential to cut across other kinds of inequality, notably that based on social class, with potentially regressive consequences for policy.

As we have seen, advocacy for intergenerational fairness in the UK has been mostly non-partisan, attracting interest from across the political spectrum. If anything, the rhetoric of intergenerational fairness appears loosely progressive, appealing as it does to notions of fairness and to the preservation of the social contract as embodied in welfare states. However, it is worth noting it bears striking similarities to a discourse of ‘intergenerational equity’ that emerged in the United States in the 1980s in the context of Reagan-era attempts to trim back social security programmes. In that period, intergenerational equity was a vocabulary conceived and advanced by business-funded lobbyists arguing that over-generous programmes were privileging ‘greedy elders’ (Quadagno, 1989, Minkler, 1986; Walker, 1993; Bengtson, 1993). This was framed as a generational fairness problem by the suggestion that an over-generous social safety net for the old was diverting resources from younger age groups, so indirectly contributing to child poverty and raising the spectre of generational conflict. This earlier generational equity debate reveals two things for the purposes of our analysis. First, that the newness of the intergenerational fairness agenda can be overstated: while it is a relatively recent phenomenon in Britain and Europe, the existence of similar rhetorics in the United States twenty five years ago at least raises the possibility of discursive spillover, or perhaps the reactivation of an old discourse once the economic crisis had provided favourable conditions for it. And, second, it shows that the claims made by some proponents of intergenerational fairness may be a less neutral response to the realities of post-crisis economies than they suggest, given the historic connection between rhetorics that divide the generations, and broader attempts to pare back state pension entitlements. Intergenerational fairness sounds superficially progressive but it may be part of a rhetorical lineage that is decidedly not.

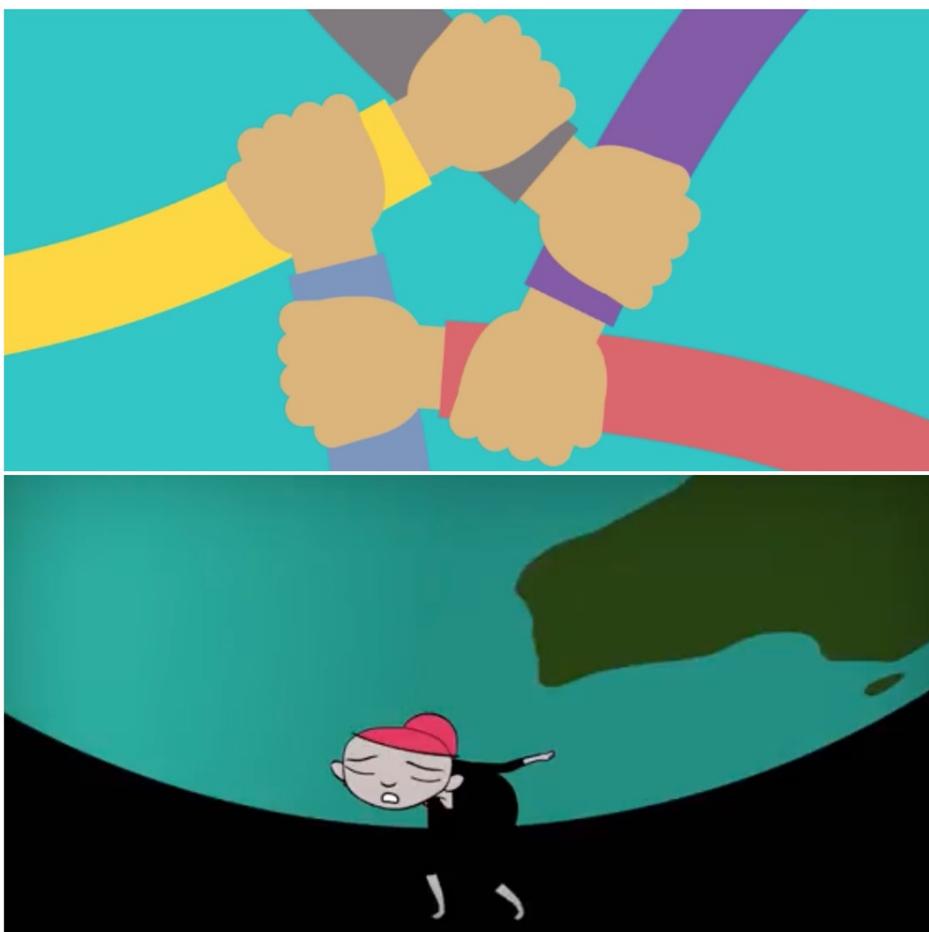
Compared with US discourse in the 1980s, the intergenerational fairness debate in Britain today is more fragmented and more politically ambiguous. The contemporary British debate about intergenerational fairness is differentiated on at least two dimensions: firstly, in the extent to which it emphasises either generational conflict, or generational solidarity based on shared concerns. And, secondly, there is considerable variance in the set of policy problems that are identified as relevant. On both of these fronts, headline consistency in the language of intergenerational fairness is revealed, on closer inspection, to belie important divergences in actors’ understandings of its meaning.

In 2016, two thinktanks with an interest in intergenerational fairness released short video clips breaking down the concept in terms intended to be accessible to a general audience. The differences between the two videos are illustrative of the ways in which the same headline concept may be subject to different framings. The first clip (Intergenerational Commission 2016) emphasises family bonds between generations and explicitly rejects conflictual framings of intergenerational fairness, arguing that while young people face highly challenging economic circumstances, ‘too often [these issues] are mistakenly seen through the lens of a generational war that has nothing to do with how people live their lives together as families’. Instead, the problems facing young people are framed as a matter of concern for citizens of all ages, who share a common interest in repairing the social contract and ensuring the post-crisis hit on this generation’s prospects does not become lifelong economic disadvantage. This solidaristic framing is visually represented by images of different generations joining hands (Figure 5).

The second video, by contrast, not only highlights that young people are experiencing economic distress but points out that ‘it didn’t used to be this way. Previous generations got a free higher education, could buy a home in their 20s, had decent jobs and now

have generous pensions, and universal benefits.’ (Intergenerational TV, 2017). The visuals reinforce the sense of injustice by depicting a young person as Atlas holding up the weight of the world, and eventually buckling beneath it. In this presentation, the Boomer generation is treated as a uniformly prosperous monolith – there is no recognition that not all over-60s went to university or are homeowners – while the young are encouraged to feel a sense of injustice at now being asked to pay for their pensions and other entitlements. The notion of generational conflict is implicit throughout.

**Figure 5: Intergenerational fairness in graphics: generational solidarity versus unfair burdens**



Sources: Intergenerational Commission via Vimeo; Intergenerational Foundation TV via Youtube

Such conflictual framings are not only pursued by organisations to the right of centre; some on the left have also chosen to pursue the idea of generational conflict in order to galvanise young voters. In July 2017, a video by Labour-affiliated campaign group Momentum enthusiastically embraced the notion of generational conflict, depicting a conversation between a group of ostentatiously affluent baby boomers (People’s Momentum, 2017). The middle-aged characters in the clip are shown deriding young leftwingers as credulous and entitled, given to believing the government should give them something for nothing. The Boomers’ belief in their own self-made success is then contrasted with the benefits they have apparently enjoyed: free higher education, inherited wealth and

substantial property gains. The clip effectively makes use of an amalgam of the baby boomer stereotype (prosperous, but oblivious to their own good fortune) and the most negative leftwing stereotypes of the Conservative voter (rich, smug and sneering), and it made a considerable impact: at the time of writing it had attracted more than 1.2 million views and had been shared more than 25,000 times.

Yet despite the apparent political utility of the 'generation war' trope, there is evidence that it may not be in tune with public opinion. Focus group evidence suggests many people are uncomfortable with conflictual framings that pit old against young, preferring to see the economic generation gap as problematic for young and old alike. A recent focus group for the Resolution Foundation found 'high levels of intergenerational solidarity, with sympathy from older generations regarding the challenges young people face and little resentment among the young towards older people's more favourable circumstances' (Shrimpton et al, 2017: 6). Similarly, a 'citizen jury' convened by Price Waterhouse Cooper in 2016 reported that participants of all ages saw intergenerational fairness as 'a complicated picture with no generation being outright "winners"' (Britain Thinks, 2016: 5). As a result participants were skeptical of policies they saw as punitive of any particular age group, preferring to find mutually beneficial solutions. Choosing between conflictual and solidaristic framings of intergenerational fairness is therefore more than a descriptive exercise: these are alternative causal stories that open up (or close off) different policy options.

Once again, different actors in the debate make somewhat different determinations about which policies are most relevant to questions of generational justice. The full breadth of this variance is beyond the scope of this paper, but here again the contrast between the IC and IF videos is illustrative. Both organisations highlight, in the same order, low wages for young workers in the post crisis period, insecure employment and unaffordable housing. However, the Intergenerational Commission go on to discuss pressure on living standards, which they say risks 'undermining the crucial idea that each generation will do better than the last' (Intergenerational Commission, 2016). Living standards had been a flagship issue in Labour's unsuccessful 2015 election campaign, so by reframing this problem in terms of generations the Intergenerational Commission are using language most commonly associated with the British left. The Intergenerational foundation, on the other hand, expand their list of policy problems to include student debt and high taxation, hinting at a fiscally conservative vision of the fair society that is quite different from the IC's presentation of the issues.

A degree of fiscal hawkishness is also evident in IF's preoccupation with public debt, which manifests particularly in the construction of their 'intergenerational fairness index': a basket of indicators tracked over time that intends to quantify whether the pressure on young people is getting worse or better (Intergenerational Foundation, 2016). A rising index is taken to demonstrate growing unfairness that 'puts the social contract between the generations at risk' (Intergenerational Foundation, 2016: 5). Indicators range from unemployment rates to youth voter turnout to air quality, but significantly they also include an index of per capita government debt, which is assumed to be illustrative of rising unfairness on the basis that public debt must be serviced and/or repaid by later generations. This is an important judgment, and a controversial one, since it takes no account of the purposes for public debt was incurred, the generational distribution of the spending it financed, or the generational consequences of the budget measures that would be necessary for its rapid repayment. Debt rolled over is simply assumed to

represent a gross disbenefit to the young, and thus a threat to the social contract. By the Foundation's own reckoning, debt has been 'the worst indicator', having 'more than doubled in size since [the base year] 2000, particularly since the 2008 financial crisis' (2016: 8). This increase is in fact an outlier within the model, distinct from the behavior of all other indicators, making debt an important determining factor in the final result. That is, the IF's rising index of unfairness is effectively framing the bailout of Britain's financial sector, and operation of the automatic stabilisers after 2008, as the imposition of an avoidable fiscal burden on future generations.

So should we conclude that today's intergenerational fairness debate is, like its US antecedent, simply the rhetorical repackaging of a familiar kind of fiscal conservatism? Is this new rhetoric in fact a vehicle for a new frontier in austerity that now turns its sights on older generations? I would suggest it is not that simple: while there is a strain of thought in the intergenerational debate that is closely connected to austerity politics, the intellectual coalition now gathering around this rhetoric is too broad to be driven solely in that direction. And while parts of the debate may be tilting to the austere, other parts are markedly progressive, opening up previously untouchable questions about the distribution of wealth, and particularly housing wealth in Britain, or using intergenerational frames to bring political urgency to the question of climate change. On housing, recent work by the Resolution Foundation laid bare the age-effects of the housing boom of the 1990s and early-2000s, estimating that 'those born in the 1950s benefited from an average real-terms property wealth windfall of £80,000 in the two decades to 2012-14' (Resolution Foundation 2016: 7). David Willetts had himself pointed up the inequities of a housing boom that disproportionately benefited older people with assets, drawing on research that showed between 1987 and 2006, the growth in housing wealth had outstripped earnings growth by a total of £1.3 trillion, representing 'approximately 100 per cent of GDP transferred to current homeowners from future homeowners' (Willetts 2010: chapter 4). This reconceptualization of housing wealth as an unearned windfall for those lucky enough to ride the property boom is a significant departure in British discourse, and one which, if it gained traction, would allow policymakers to contemplate previously untouchable questions around property and inheritance taxation.

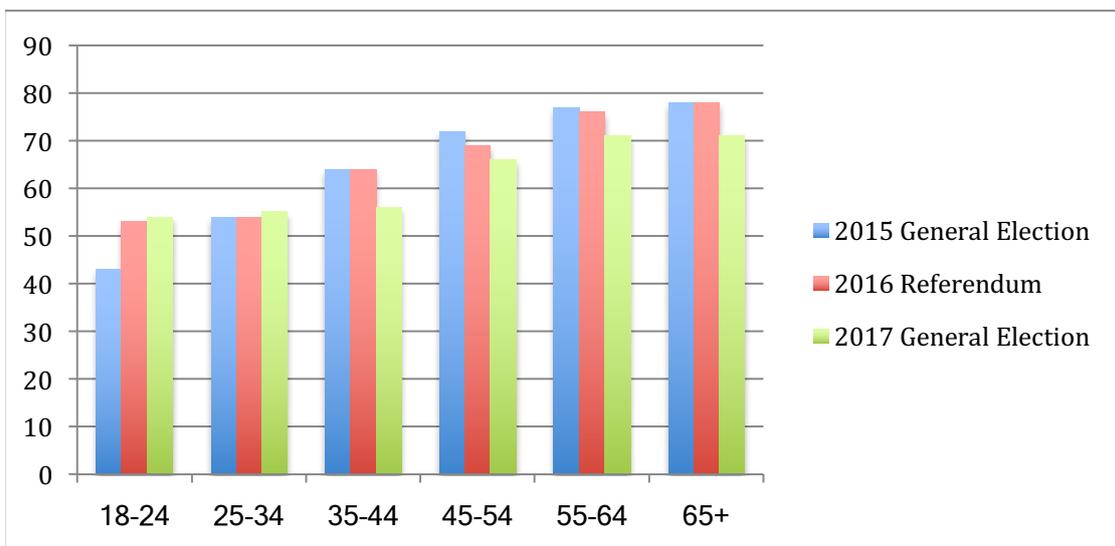
Much of the discourse on intergenerational fairness focuses primarily on economic questions, but it increasingly overlaps with a more established debate in environmental policy, where questions of 'climate justice' and generational equity have long been acknowledged (Page, 1999; Stern Review, 2006; Stone & Lofts 2009; Lumer, 2009). In respect of climate change mitigation, much attention has focused on how to discount the possibility of future harm against the costs of adjustment action now (Caney, 2014, IFoA, 2017) in which the concept of intergenerational fairness opens up both technical and normative questions about how to balance the interests of present and future generations. Environmental questions are generally not well explored in the British discourse around intergenerational fairness, though a few actors have attempted to draw a connection between economic and social dimensions of intergenerational fairness (see Bennett, 2012), suggesting there is scope for new rhetorics of intergenerational justice to spawn leftwing or progressive political activity that insists on a longer term conception of social justice than has hitherto been possible.

## The rise of youth: progressive mobilisation around intergenerational fairness?

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the progressive potential of the intergenerational fairness agenda is the fact that the rise of this new discourse coincides with a sharp rise in political engagement by Britain's young people, particularly in support of leftwing parties. Britain's increased youth turnout is itself a very new phenomenon (Figure 6). As recently as the 2015 general election, youth turnout had been consistent with an established trend towards 'gerontocracy', in which higher participation rates among older voters were believed to be skewing politics towards the interests of the old (Berry & Hunt 2016; see also Berry 2012). In Britain, in common with most western nations, there had long been evidence that young people were increasingly disinclined to participate in both formal and informal political activity (Grasso 2014), disillusioned with political parties and, perhaps reflecting the neoliberal paradigm under which they had come of age, skeptical of the potential for government to push back against market forces or otherwise make a positive difference in their lives (Grasso et al, forthcoming). The usual position was that young people simply did not vote, and that rational politicians would therefore be disincentivised to target their preferences.

However, this conventional wisdom has been sharply disrupted by the UK's last two national votes. The referendum on EU Membership in 2016 saw 53% of adults under 25 exercise their franchise, compared with 42% at the general election a year earlier. Some of this increase may be accounted for by the fact that the EU referendum energised many more voters to register across all age groups (Table 1), but it was under-25s in particular that increased their turnout as a result. Age was also a very strong predictor of voting intention in the referendum: young people were overwhelmingly more likely to vote for Britain to stay within the EU than older age groups, with voters over the age of 45 breaking for Leave, and under-45s being majority Remainers.

**Figure 6: Turnout by age group at UK national elections, 2015-17**



Source: Ipsos Mori 'How Britain Voted' analyses. Turnout is % of all adults, not % of registered voters. Original data for the 2016 referendum includes a separate 75+ age group, not shown here; "65+" figure for 2016 captures voters aged 65-74.

**Figure 7: Millennials vs Baby Boomers in EU Referendum coverage**

*Baby boomers, you have already robbed your children of their future. Don't make it worse by voting for Brexit*

**EU Referendum Results: Young 'Screwed By Older Generations' As Polls Suggest 75% Backed Remain**

**Millennials' 'fury' over baby boomers' vote for Brexit**

If you're young and angry about the EU referendum, you're right to be

Sources: Huffington Post UK, The Independent, the Daily Telegraph, The Guardian

**Table 1: Voter registration by age group, 2015-17**

Total registrations by age in the seven days to registration deadline							
	<25	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	>75
2015	316,662	330,438	184,294	122,999	61,391	26,988	14,295
2016	407,447	500,504	284,745	193,002	88,270	33,350	12,226
2017	538,301	442,119	183,869	100,850	49,505	21,121	10,050
Registrations as proportion of 2015 baseline							
	<25	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	>75
2016	1.29	1.51	1.55	1.57	1.44	1.24	0.86
2017	1.70	1.34	1.00	0.82	0.81	0.78	0.70

Source: [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) registration dashboard

How much of this was about intergenerational fairness? The Brexit referendum had provided a point of convergence for a huge variety of political discontents, and as such the outcome does not easily lend itself to a single factor explanations, (Hopkin, 2017; Thompson, 2017). Age was one key dimension but not the only one; social class was also implicated (Johnston et al, 2016), as were education (Rosenbaum, 2017) and social values (Kaufmann, 2016). However, media coverage is often geared to uni-dimensional stories, and will make use of pre-existing discursive frames in order to arrive at a coherent, if selective and reductive, account of what happened.

In that context it is noteworthy that the new rhetoric of intergenerational fairness was, by 2016, sufficiently established to provide commentators on the referendum with just such an interpretive toolkit, facilitating not just a technical discussion of age-based voting patterns, but a normative critique of the unfairness they were presumed to reflect. Post-referendum commentary swiftly developed a narrative in which Brexit represented the defeat of the young by the old, making use of by-now familiar tropes. The narrow victory for Leave was interpreted as a victory for the Eurosceptic old over the young or, more controversially, as a vote by older citizens to withdraw from EU membership after having enjoyed its benefits throughout their working lives, thereby imposing consequences on the young that they would have to live with for decades (Figure 7). The 2016 referendum thus marked the point at which a discourse of generational conflict that had, until that time, mostly operated in the realm of thinktanks and policy analysis fully emerged in Britain's broader political narrative.

The snap general election in 2017 also saw high youth turnout of 54% (Figure 6), with a further surge in voter registration by the under-25 age group in the run-up to the vote, including almost 250,000 young people in the single day before the registration deadline. Young people remained less likely to vote than older generations but their participation rates had undergone a step-change since 2015, even as turnout fell in every age group from 35 and up. The key beneficiary of the newly energised youth vote was the Labour Party under its new leader, Jeremy Corbyn, which gained 32 seats and won an impressive 40 per cent of the popular vote (see Alexander Shaw, 2017b). Labour's 2017 electoral strategy had combined a recognisably leftwing platform with specific measures to court the youth vote, notably a pledge to abolish university tuition fees, backed up by ground-level campaigning to encourage young people first to register and then to turn out. It remains to be seen whether either the increased turnout or the leftward tilt in the youth vote are lasting changes, or whether they reflect a particular set of conditions in 2017. However, the fact that young British voters appear to have been energised by an unashamedly leftwing prospectus suggests that generational politics may be a fruitful new avenue for left parties. If the burgeoning discourse of intergenerational fairness can be coupled with increased political participation by young people, it undoubtedly has the potential to reshape politics in progressive directions, refocusing attention on a new social contract that seeks to correct the most divisive consequences of the neoliberal era.

**Table 2: Voting by class, 18-34 year olds, 2017 UK General Election**

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	UKIP	Other	Turnout
AB	31	52	10	1	6	61%
C1	27	58	7	1	7	64%
C2	27	62	6	0	5	49%
DE	18	70	4	4	4	35%

Source: Ipsos Mori. Turnout as a % of all adults.

However, once again there are reasons for caution; trends that appear superficially progressive might, in fact, be obscuring the tensions between the politics of age cohorts and the more familiar politics of socio-economic class, with potentially regressive implications for policy. Where once Labour had relied on class politics to deliver its mass support, in 2017 age was a far stronger predictor of partisanship, with six out of ten under-25 year olds voting Labour and the same proportion of over-65s supporting the Conservatives. Some of the patterns observable in the 2017 vote were in direct contradiction with traditional class politics: for example, Labour made record gains among degree-educated and ABC1 voters. To the extent that the Conservatives made gains outside Scotland, they did so by attracting UKIP voters, boosting their support in the C2DE social groups that might have been expected to be Labour voters in the past. *Within* age groups familiar class dynamics do persist: among 18-34 year olds, the strongest support for Labour (but by far the weakest turnout) was from young people in the DE social group, who were 70% for Labour compared with 52% of young ABs (Table 2). But these data raise important questions about the extent to which age should now be considered to trump class as a political cleavage in Britain, and what this implies for the future politics of intergenerational fairness.

Of the two main parties, it was the Conservatives who had most explicitly engaged with intergenerational fairness in their pre-election arguments. Theresa May's attempt to make a fairness case for meeting older people's social care costs out of housing equity was swiftly abandoned in the face of negative press coverage (Conservative Party, 2017), and it may have contributed to the fall in participation by older voters who, dismayed by the Conservative manifesto but unwilling to defect to Corbyn's Labour, simply stayed at home. It seems unlikely that the Conservatives will be willing to revisit intergenerational fairness or the merits of reducing pensioner entitlements in the near future. However, there is also little sign that the Labour party wishes to grasp the question of redistribution from old to young, perhaps because it would also imply significant redistribution away from middle class homeowners. Labour's campaign was quick to capitalise on the opportunity presented by May's social care u-turn, dubbing the manifesto proposals a 'dementia tax' and pledging to protect the pensions triple lock. While Labour were happy to be proactive in courting the youth vote it seems they were unwilling to take on pensioner interests, instead promising significant benefits for both groups. Much of the progressive potential of the intergenerational fairness agenda lies in its ability to open up difficult conversations about the distribution of wealth, particularly housing wealth, in Britain, but in 2017 it did not appear that this was a line of argument the Labour party had any interest in pursuing.

The risk for the left is that failure to confront intergenerational trade-offs also implies a refusal to grapple with intragenerational inequalities, and that a shift to new, age-based conceptions of fairness becomes a means of downplaying the significance of other inequalities. Labour's unwillingness to pit young against old might be seen as a rejection of the politics of austerity, and a repudiation of zero-sum logics in which benefits for one group must imply hardships for another. A more solidaristic view of public spending is possible, in which new measures in favour of the young need not be paid for by austerity for the old. However, as Alan Walker argued in the 1990s that 'the concept of intergenerational equity... diverts attention from the extent of inequalities within age groups and hence the case for *intragenerational* equity' (Walker 1990: 389). The 'dementia tax' episode displays just these tendencies, and to the extent that age-based conceptions of fairness come to obscure class dynamics, a focus on intergenerational fairness might ultimately work against progressivism in public policy. An exclusive focus on positive-sum policies for youth would squander the opportunity to argue for deeper structural changes in Britain's political economy, in which middle class young people are now experiencing some of the same economic challenges (housing insecurity, wage stagnation) that have long existed for poorer Britons of all ages.

## Conclusions

A key advantage of approaching intergenerational fairness as a discursive phenomenon is that it allows us to interrogate, rather than uncritically accepting, the object of analysis. We have seen that 'intergenerational fairness' is not only a descriptor for new economic conditions; rather it represents a novel discursive construction of the post-crisis political economy. As such it is the site of evolving conceptions of interests and their relationship to policy, most particularly to welfare states and the so-called social contract. Moreover, by mapping the development of this new rhetoric we are able to distinguish between the headline concept of intergenerational fairness, which is relatively coherent, and the discursive battles that are taking place beneath that umbrella, which are many and various. Interest-based theories of political economy would take concerns about intergenerational fairness as a stable condition and seek to explain them by reference to the material context; in doing so there is a tendency to reify generations as groups with monolithic interests, and to present economic trends as unambiguous in their implications for young people (a tendency also evident in much of the political discourse on the topic). A rhetorically-oriented analysis shows that in fact this is unstable terrain, and that the future direction of this new politics is still under negotiation. Of particular importance will be the extent to which actors choose to pursue either conflictual or solidaristic framings of intergenerational questions, and the extent to which age-based conceptions of fairness are coupled to, or in tension with, more conventional class-based metrics.

It is surely not a coincidence that the rapid rise of this new politics has coincided with a period of economic strain in the advanced economies. There appears to be a broad consensus that the problems facing young people are not solely products of the financial crisis; demographic shifts have been long foretold as placing strain on the social contract, while the technological and policy-driven changes in labour markets now contributing to wage stagnation and job insecurity were in train long before 2008. What is new, post-crisis, is the amplification of these processes and, especially, the extent to which these trends have assumed political meaning and momentum via discursive framings that take

the millennial generation and its prospects as a political lodestar. There is no doubt that the post crisis period has sharpened the impact of changing labour markets on working age generations, and particularly those entering into the labour force for the first time in the midst of recession. Retired citizens are, by definition, less susceptible to the movements of the economy and the labour market, and pensioners' incomes have consequently been relatively insulated through the post-crisis decade. As noted by the European Commission (2017), this relative disadvantage may now begin to reverse as labour markets recover, but even if so, there is little reason to suppose that in that case the politics of intergenerational fairness will lose its traction. Political discourses are path-dependent; they do not simply track economic cycles but, having been set in motion, are likely to continue driving change and shaping perceptions of interests through the upturn if it comes.

In respect of the academic literature there is now scope for intergenerational fairness to be much more systematically addressed than has hitherto been the case. This paper has sought to show the value of a broadly constructivist interrogation of intergenerational fairness, looking particularly at the British case. There is however scope for a much better understanding of the comparative dimension, and especially the extent to which discursive variations between countries reflect differences in their material conditions, or something else. While the post-crisis period has generated similar challenges for young people across the advanced economies, the intergenerational fairness discourse takes somewhat different shape in different national contexts. The EU variant speaks of solidarity and preserving support for institutions; the U.S. strain references economic decline, the erosion of the American dream and the iniquities of student debt (Allison, 2017: 4). The UK debate is especially preoccupied with the housing market. A broader set of case studies that attempts to systematically probe this discursive variation would be one way to generate valuable new insights.

It is also noticeable that in the great majority of the material now being produced around intergenerational fairness, the voices of young people themselves are largely absent. To the extent that the discourse is operating mostly in the realm of thinktanks and the media it tends to be a conversation about, but not with, young people. This is problematic on two fronts: it leaves an important lacuna in the evidence base on what (and whether) millennials actually think about all this, and it increases the likelihood that policy is responsive to young people only at a remove. Further research could address this by providing more direct evidence of young people's involvement in the intergenerational fairness debate, asking whether and how it may provide a basis for new forms of political engagement. If the politics of intergenerational fairness is now at a crossroads, it will not remain so for long. If young people are to capture the possibilities offered by the intergenerational fairness agenda they must be involved in shaping the causal stories that it generates, before they solidify into orthodoxy. If the speed with which this new discourse has emerged is any indication, the window of opportunity may not be open for very long.

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FONDATION EUROPÉENNE  
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



## FEPS

Foundation for European Progressive Studies  
Rue Montoyer 40, 4th floor  
1000 - Brussels, Belgium

T: +32 2 234 69 00  
info@feps-europe.eu  
<http://www.feps-europe.eu/en/>  
@FEPS\_Europe

speri. Sheffield Political Economy  
Research Institute.

## Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute

Interdisciplinary Centre of the  
Social Sciences  
219 Portobello  
Sheffield  
United Kingdom, S1 4DP

T: +44 114 222 6292  
speri@sheffield.ac.uk  
<http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/speri>  
@SPERIshefuni



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