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This 'revenge of the young' election is a wake-up call for the government

Alan Milburn

There are many lessons to take away from last week's general election result. But the one that all politicians should heed most is that young people increasingly feel like they are on the wrong side of a profound unfairness in British society, and they are unhappy about it. Across the country, young people confounded expectations to turn up to vote in record numbers in what has been described as the Revenge of the Young. It should have come as no surprise.

The Social Mobility Commission, which I chair, has long argued that declining social mobility has a corrosive impact on our cohesion as a nation and particularly impedes young people from making the sort of social progress that previous generations were able to take for granted. Low levels of social mobility infringe Britain's implicit social contract: that those who work hard will have a fair chance to get on.

Today, we publish a new report, The Social Mobility Barometer, which reveals a lot about the state of modern Britain's 'us and them' society. Perhaps most shockingly it uncovers a deep sense of social pessimism among young people.

The poll of nearly 5,000 people finds that nearly half of people (48 per cent) believe that where you end up in society today is mainly determined by your background and who your parents are, compared to only 32 per cent who believe everyone has a fair chance to get on regardless of their background. Four in five people (79 per cent) believe that there is a large gap between the social classes in Britain today. A large majority of people believe that poorer people are held back at nearly every stage of their lives - from childhood, through education and into their careers. But significantly, it is the young that feel this unfairness most acutely. Half (51 per cent) of 18-24 year olds agree with this statement compared with 40 per cent of those aged 65 and over. The barometer finds that half of young people think the situation is getting worse with only 30 per cent of 18-24 year olds believing it is becoming easier to move up in British society.

This stark intergenerational divide seems to be the product of pessimism about personal finances, job security and housing mobility. Just one-third (34 per cent) of 25-49 year olds say they are better off than their parents, compared to 73 per cent of those aged over 65. Only a fifth of 18-24 year olds believe they have a better level of job security compared to their parents and only 17 per cent say they have better job satisfaction. And while two-thirds of those aged over 65 think they have had a better situation where it comes to housing than their parents did, barely a quarter (24 per cent) of those aged 25-49 feel the same.

The feelings of pessimism young people are expressing are borne out by the facts they are experiencing. Those born in the 1980s are the first post-war cohort not to start their working years with higher incomes than their immediate predecessors. Home ownership, the aspiration of successive generations of ordinary people, is in sharp decline, among the young especially. In the last ten years, the number of under-25-year-old homeowners has more than halved. As wages have fallen, house prices have risen. Today's young generation is more reliant than ever on their parents

for help to buy their first home: three times as many buyers used inherited funds to do so now compared with a decade ago.

Britain's deep social mobility problem, for this generation of young people in particular, is getting worse not better. The twentieth century promise that each generation would be better off than the preceding one is being broken. There is a stark message here for educators, employers and policy-makers. Quite simply, Britain's social mobility problem cannot be ignored.

Last week's general election result should be a wake-up call to government. Cracking Britain's social mobility problem has to become its defining domestic priority. That will require deep-seated social reform. And it will require a new coalition of the willing to be formed - from businesses, communities, councils, schools and universities - to champion the level playing field of opportunity that the British public - particularly our young people - crave.