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United or divided?

Towards a 'cradle to grave' contract
between generations



United or divided?

Every generation tends to feel hard done by – believing they are getting a worse deal than their predecessors and/or successors – and every generation wants someone else to blame for our common ills. That seems to be part of the human condition, at least in Britain. But it seems to be under even more strain, particularly in these tough economic times.

The baby boomer generation is often singled out as having had it good - too good many people feel. It's hardly surprising that the boomers have accumulated more wealth than their successor generations; they have had more time to do so. How society deals with wealth is the big question. Booming house prices and pensions mean that many people in their 50s and 60s are living the lives of their dreams while their children and grandchildren (and often their parents) struggle. But rather than obsess with the boomers, this paper looks at what unites different generations.

The defining factors in 2011 that affect all generations are insecurity and growing polarisation. Yes, some are doing very well but for many people of all ages life is tough. Students are protesting about their raw deal but many others have put up with it – so far. Insecurity affects people of all ages; so do the growing pressures on time and money and the lack of good childcare and eldercare; and our whole society is straining with the 24/7 pace of life, new technology and pressures on family life. Polarisation is about wealth and experience – money matters, but loneliness and isolation also diminish many lives. Polls regularly confirm public concerns about growing inequalities.

United or divided? summarises some of the key evidence facing every generation in Britain today; it highlights key characteristics of each generation and the common threads that bind all generations; and it recommends ways in which Britain can become a society that values and supports people of all ages to create a stronger country.

As recession and spending cuts threaten many of the public services we take for granted, it is time for a re-evaluation of how we make the best use of resources for all ages and how we pay for these services. Closing one-third of children's centres in the next four years is not acceptable; instead we need new ways to make those centres sustainable. Rationing care so that most older people can't get the help they need is not acceptable; we need a fairer way to pay for care and to explore how to support family carers better. Local communities are battling with many similar dilemmas.

There are cross-generational solutions to these issues which will benefit all ages and our whole society as part of a new contract between the generations. Promoting intergenerational conflict, particularly when most of us are feeling the pinch, and stigmatising the most disadvantaged are not the answers to tackling the profound problems and inequalities in Britain today. We are much stronger as a society and in our communities if we are united, not divided.

*Stephen Burke and Denise Burke
Directors, United for All Ages*

Generation by generation – seven ages in Britain 2011

Without wishing to stereotype anyone of any age (and knowing that this analysis will irritate some), *United or divided?* focuses on characteristics of seven different generations in Britain 2011:

- Over 85** The forgotten elders
- 70-85** The will it get betters
- 50-70** The where's it all goners
- 35-50** The squeezed midlifers
- 21-35** The despairing adultweeners
- Under 21** The new radicals
- Under 11** The sure starters

The forgotten elders



Aged over 85, many are isolated and lonely. Increasingly living alone, in specialist housing or residential care, they are the 'invisible' generation, often out of sight and out of mind. The majority are women, many living on very low incomes. Many struggle to get the help they need, from their council or from their family. They are often seen as a burden on our society, needing care, and have not really benefited from new technology. Their numbers will double in the next 20 years.

The will it get betters



Typically 70-85, they have worked hard all their lives, experienced post-war hardship and huge changes since then. Many live in fear of later life, ill health and inadequate care. They fear for their own future, but also for that of their children, grandchildren and often great grandchildren. Many are expected to support these children, either financially or through childcare. Some are pioneering a new approach to later life, enjoying travel, new media, social lives – and working well beyond 65.

The where's it all goners



Aka the baby boomers, aged 50-70 with some younger. Characterised as having had it good for their whole lives, the baby boomers have seen good health and education as well as financial prosperity. Much of this has been based on rising house prices over the last 30 years, borrowing against their assets and then spending it all. The worldwide

recession has led many to question where this 'wealth' has gone and whether it can be realised again. For many others, it has always been a case of wishful thinking.

The squeezed midlifers

Life is tough for these 35-50 year olds. Work is more demanding than ever and job security is vanishing. Many are saddled with large mortgages from the housing boom. But the squeeze also comes from family responsibilities – caring for young children, paying for students and caring (and sometimes paying) for elderly relatives. The squeeze is on their time as much as money with the midlifers feeling that they have no time for anyone except their employers, if they still have a job.



The despairing adultweeners

Supposedly at the peak of their lives, these 21-35 year olds are in limbo between exciting adult lives and dependency. Saddled by growing student debts and unable to get on the housing ladder in many parts of the country, the adultweeners are faced with working hard for a couple of decades before they become financially independent. On the other hand, they are increasingly restless and expect instant rewards today, fuelled by the advance of technology and different lifestyles.



The new radicals

Student fees protests are just the beginning for these young people. This generation wants a better life and won't accept what they are handed. Their values are environmental and global and driven by a sense of justice not evident to them in much of today's world. And they can move quickly – social media provide the perfect vehicle for the new radicals to organise and mobilise. It remains to be seen whether Twitter, Facebook groups et al can change the world beyond single campaigns.



The surestarters

Under 11, they are the first generation to benefit from universal early education and childcare through Sure Start. It will take some time to establish the real difference this and children's centres have made but many families will have experienced greater confidence and ability for both children and parents. Can better communication and learning skills counteract the known impact of social background on these children's life chances and will they be blighted by the spending cuts?



The common threads

Across the seven ages, there are of course some big differences - after all, there is a century between the birth dates of the youngest and oldest. But the common threads are clear – fears about the future and insecurity dominate; experiences are becoming increasingly polarised; and these common threads are likely to be exacerbated by recession and cuts in 2011. The big issues are explored further below. As common threads and interests, they require common solutions, not conflict between generations.

Britain 2011 – a society under pressure

Spending cuts

With local authorities planning spending cuts of 30% over the next four years, the consequences are potentially disastrous for children and older people, the two biggest groups supported by councils. The cuts could close over a thousand children's centres as well as play services and youth facilities and axe care for hundreds of thousands of older people.

Rather than knee-jerk cuts and mothballing of community assets, councils should look at doing things differently. Making the most of community resources such as children's centres by sharing sites for all ages would sustain these facilities by bringing in other funding streams and supporting the extended family and different generations. The proposed Localism legislation to enable local residents and charities to run community services and take over buildings could help take this forward if properly resourced and coordinated.

5,000 centres for all ages could be created by 2016, with a centre in every neighbourhood. These could build on existing children's centres, schools, libraries, leisure and sports facilities, and housing schemes. Exemplars are featured

on the United for All Ages website – from the first intergenerational centre in Merton to the Norman Centre in Norwich offering activities for all ages.

Care crunch

The council spending cuts will intensify the care crunch facing families. Childcare and eldercare in Britain today are squeezing all generations, not least the 'squeezed midlifers'. Care is prohibitively expensive for many or simply not available when and where it is needed – leaving many families to shoulder the burden of childcare and eldercare while continuing to work, support other relatives and live life.

The government's commission on the funding of long-term care should revisit the proposal for a 'care duty' – a levy on estates – to pay for better care from housing wealth in a way that is collectively fair. To gain cross-generational support, the care duty could also fund better childcare and shared sites as a collective contribution to the future. Family carers should be better recognised and given a carer's credit to reflect their contributions.

Some facts, some interpretations

- **Following the recent spending review**, one-third of children's centres could close in the next four years. Benefits and credits for children and families have been cut and youth services axed. Meanwhile universal benefits for older people have been protected.
- **People aged 45 to 65 – the baby boomers – own more than half of the £6.7tn national wealth** in liquid assets, housing, other physical assets and pensions. The over-65s own £2.3tn. That leaves the under-45s owning £0.9tn.
- **Baby boomers have done particularly well from the welfare state**, benefiting from well-funded health, education and financial support – now all being cut back.
- **Parents are spending more time looking after their young children**. But parents are not particularly close to their teenage children. Children learn more if their parents spend more time with them.
- **The relatively small families in Britain** seem to rely on support from civil society more than many of their European counterparts.

Ageing society

While an ageing society will inevitably increase the number of older people needing care and support, it will also help sustain the economy and wider society through hard times. The fastest growing section of the workforce is aged over 65; these older workers will increase tax revenues, reduce pensions spend, and maintain growth despite a declining 'working age' population.

Many other older people live isolated lives as the 'forgotten elders'. Tackling loneliness will reduce future demands on health and social care services as well as improve mental health and happiness. Older people as the bedrock of volunteering in this country can do much to support their peers, as well as involve younger people in community action in making the big society a reality.

Councils and housing associations should think innovatively when planning social housing, learning from our European neighbours by designing properties that accommodate several generations. Tenancy for the young could include providing support for practical activities for older tenants such as shopping, cleaning and gardening, while younger people could benefit

from the social contact and experience of their neighbours. Developing homeshare schemes could have similar mutual benefits. Sharing the caring in this way would also support the 'squeezed midlifers'.

Generational tensions

At a time of spending cuts as we all feel the pinch, it is easy to pit one generation against another and create winners and losers. As the student fees debate demonstrates, many feel that the future, their future, is being sacrificed while believing that their parents and grandparents have had it all. Yet many older people do a huge amount to support their children and grandchildren – although often at a loss to social mobility. The vast majority of the British public is concerned at this growing gap between rich and poor.

Strengthening the common threads that bind us all together has to be a better approach than simply pointing fingers at the baby boomers. Sharing sites, sharing caring and the costs of caring, and sharing interests like sport, IT, cooking and eating together, will help build a society for all ages.

Some facts, some interpretations

- **Our ageing society** means that the number of people aged 85 plus will double in the next twenty years. People are working longer and many older people have mortgages and other debts in later life.
- **Over the next 20 years**, grown up children are expected to spend 13 per cent more time caring for relatives, while demand for such care will soar by 55 per cent.
- **Age-related expenditure like education** aimed at younger people will account for 27.1% of GDP by 2050, compared with 22.5% now – equivalent to an extra £70bn a year at today's prices. Spending on older age groups – pensions, long-term care and health – is projected to rise nearly 30 per cent by 2050 to more than a fifth of GDP.
- **Social mobility appears to have gone into reverse**, with Britain becoming more polarised as wealth begets wealth from generation to generation as parents pass on assets and opportunities to their children.
- **Inheritance tax is only paid** on 6% of estates.

Britain 2016 – a society for all ages

This paper argues that, for all the differences between generations, we are more united than divided. The common threads between different generations provide a valuable starting point for developing ways to bring older and younger people together – focusing on time, care and resources. If we make the most of sharing resources, if we ease the time pressures of caring and we enable a fairer sharing of the cost of care, then we could create a new ‘cradle to grave’ contract between generations.

Imagine how Britain could look in five years time. Two scenarios are possible:

A shrivelling society

- Spending cuts lead to mothballing of community assets like children’s centres, libraries, health and housing schemes
- Families can’t afford to pay for childcare or eldercare and face extra pressures caring for their loved ones of all ages
- Our ageing population experiences increasing isolation while alienation between young and old leads to more crime and fear of crime
- Ageism is rife, and our lives are increasingly polarised

A flourishing society

- Citizens rise to the challenge of the big society and get involved with all ages helping each other
- Centres for all ages are commonplace throughout the country
- Sharing the costs of caring – childcare and eldercare – through a new care duty on estates, with extra support for family carers
- The 2012 Olympics fosters a huge growth in volunteering and participation in sports
- Stronger communities, respect and mutual understanding across generations

Making a flourishing society for all ages happen in the next five years will require more than a bit of nudge and appealing to people’s better nature, important though that is. It will need national and local leadership, determination and creativity. Tough times mean doing things differently. Leaving it to the market or waiting for wealth to trickle down generations is not going to make it happen. A radical review of inheritance taxation (and avoidance) must be part of the solution.

Five ways forward – recommendations

A national debate about a new ‘cradle to grave’ contract between generations should lead to a national strategy on creating a society for all ages.

Action should be taken to achieve the following by 2016:

- 1 Shared sites** – making the most of community resources/facilities for all ages, rationalising services: 5000 centres for all ages by 2016
- 2 Sharing society** – tackling loneliness and isolation through neighbourhood action by young people and support for families: big society by 2016
- 3 Shared caring** - supporting caring across generations within families and communities: care credits by 2016
- 4 Sharing the cost of caring** – making the most of individuals’ own assets to pay for better care: care duty by 2016
- 5 Shared interests** – maximising the opportunities of Olympics 2012 to promote sport and volunteering: sport for all ages by 2016

Future papers from United for All Ages will focus on taking these recommendations forward to create a stronger Britain bringing older and younger people together. United, not divided.

What do you think?
Share your views about *United
or divided?* by emailing:
info@unitedforallages.com

United for All Ages is a social enterprise that aims to create a stronger Britain by bringing older and younger people together. We are working with local authorities, health trusts, housing associations and third sector organisations to create communities for all ages through shared sites, shared caring and shared interests.

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