

MUST LABOUR LOSE?

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BY

Mark Abrams · Richard Rose

WITH A COMMENTARY BY

Rita Hinden

PENGUIN BOOKS

CHAPTER 4

YOUNG VOTERS

THERE are today in Great Britain 4,500,000 young people who have reached their eighteenth birthday, but are not yet twenty-five years of age. In 1964, the approximate time of the next general election, they will all be entitled to vote and they will constitute 13 per cent of the total electorate – more than enough to upset past trends in adult voting and thus to settle decisively the outcome of the election. They will differ from the rest of the adult population in various obvious but important respects: more than half of them will be without any previous experience of voting at a parliamentary election; their first-hand experience of the 1930s is almost nil; their childhood was passed in the war years, and as adolescents they grew up in the full-employment, prosperous climate of a solidly established welfare state.

But, in spite of their youth, it would be erroneous and unwise to treat them as teenagers. Today, 45 per cent of girls aged eighteen to twenty-four are married and so too are 25 per cent of boys in the same age group. As new housewives and husbands they are heavily preoccupied with finding a dwelling, financing its equipment, and starting a family. They are likely to be looking keenly for security and prosperity, and with these in the forefront of their minds they will hardly attach their support to a party which insists that before anything else they be offered youth clubs, dance bands, and playing fields.

At least until the 1959 general election new recruits to the voting registers could be expected to vote Labour solidly; there was, however, no such uniformity about their behaviour last October. It was, therefore, decided when planning this survey that the number of respondents aged eighteen to twenty-four in the total sample should amount to treble their true proportion in the whole population so that their attitudes and values could be assessed with a fair degree of reliability.

On the basis of two questions (which party do you support or lean towards?) it would seem that among these young people potential Conservative voters now outnumber potential Labour voters. If we ignore the 10 per cent whose political views were so unformed that they could not be described even as 'leaning'

towards any party, then it appears that 52 per cent of young people today are Conservatives, 43 per cent are Labour supporters, and 5 per cent Liberals. This Conservative lead has two sources: 35 per cent of all working-class young people are ready to identify themselves with the Conservative Party, and only 10 per cent of middle-class young people support the Labour Party. In the light of the voting behaviour of young people over the past twenty-five years it is this latter finding which is perhaps the more striking, i.e. the almost complete failure of the Labour Party to attract the interest and sympathy of young middle-class people. Indeed, it seems to be losing them: among middle-class people aged twenty-five and over in our sample less than 15 per cent were prepared to describe themselves as Labour supporters. This, then, is the first significant finding about today's young people – they are further to the right than their elders were ten and fifteen years ago, and this move to the right is almost complete among the middle-class young.

Because of this shift, on many of the issues put to them young people gave very much the same answers as the rest of the sample. For example, when they were shown the card listing sixteen attributes of a political party and asked to name which four of them they considered most important, both young and old concentrated on the prevention of war and raising the prosperity of the country; and both groups said they attached very little value to altruism, to respect for British traditions, and to a party which stands mainly for the middle class. However, in the middle of the priority scale they placed more importance than did their elders on a policy aimed at abolishing class differences. (See Table 30.)

When asked to go over the list and indicate which of the attributes applied more to one party rather than the other, young people were much more emphatic than their elders in seeing Labour as overwhelmingly the party which stands mainly for the working class, as out to help the underdog and to abolish class differences. None of these traits seemed of much significance to young people when they indicated the most important features of a good political party. On the item they put at the top ('would really work to prevent nuclear war'), over half saw no difference between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party, and on their second and third priorities ('would do most for world peace', and 'would make the country more prosperous'), they were as ready as their elders to recognize the Conservatives as being much more likely to be effective. In short, young voters see the Labour Party even more sharply than do their elders in

TABLE 30. *Attributes of a good party considered most important*

	<i>By people 18 to 24</i>	<i>By people 25 & over</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
Would really work to prevent nuclear war	51	45
Would do most for world peace	49	49
Would make the country more prosperous	43	43
Out to raise standard of living of ordinary people	42	36
Believes in fair treatment for all races	33	34
Has united team of top leaders	24	27
Has a clear-cut policy	22	25
Out for nation as a whole	22	22
Would give more chances to better one's self	18	18
Would try to abolish class differences	17	12
Would extend the welfare services	14	17
Stands mainly for working class	14	14
Is out to help the underdog	8	6
Really respects British traditions	6	14
Most satisfying for man with ideals	5	6
Stands mainly for middle class	3	3

the very terms which have apparently made that Party generally unattractive to many voters in recent years. (See Table 31.)

When asked to indicate from a list of fifteen traits the four which they regarded as most important for a good party leader, the younger respondents in their selection matched the views of their elders. Both groups called, before everything else, for a strong leader, for a man strong enough to make unwelcome decisions. Then followed a marked preference for someone well-educated, honest, in touch with ordinary people, forward-looking, and straightforward. Between the two age groups perhaps the only significant difference was the greater importance attached by younger people to 'well-educated'. This presumably reflects, in part, their own more recent contact with education, and, in part, the general appreciation of the social value of education by the post-war generation. (See Table 32.)

When the respondents turned to a comparative judgement of Mr Gaitskell and Mr Macmillan and were asked to say of each statement whether it applied more to the one than the other, the earlier behaviour was repeated. In broad outline, the young people of today have, in political matters, very much the same attitudes, assessments, and values as their elders. There emerged very little evidence of anything like the traditional cleavage between the young and the middle-aged. What this meant on this question was that on almost all attributes a majority of respondents, both young and old, said there was nothing to judge

TABLE 31. *Application of statements to each Party*

	<i>Replies of 18 to 24s</i>				<i>Replies of 25s and over</i>			
	<i>To Lab.</i>	<i>To Cons.</i>	<i>To both, neither, etc.</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>To Lab.</i>	<i>To Cons.</i>	<i>To both, neither, etc.</i>	<i>Total</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
Stands mainly for working class	80	5	15	=100	69	11	20	=100
Out to help underdog	63	9	28		49	13	38	
Would abolish class differences	53	16	31		44	13	43	
Would extend welfare services	48	18	34		47	14	39	
Would raise standards of ordinary people	41	28	31		33	32	35	
Stands mainly for middle class	32	36	32		22	47	31	
More chances for ambitious	31	44	25		21	47	32	
Would work to prevent nuclear war	26	18	56		23	13	64	
Believes in fair treatment for all races	23	17	60		22	17	61	
Would do most for world peace	19	36	45		19	30	51	
Would make country more prosperous	19	53	28		14	57	29	
Most satisfying for man with ideals	17	50	33		16	47	37	
Out for nation as a whole	16	38	46		14	36	50	
Really respects British tradition	13	48	39		9	49	42	
Has a clear-cut policy	11	39	50		12	46	42	
Has united team of top leaders	10	56	34		7	60	33	

TABLE 32. *Attributes most important for good party leader*

	<i>By people 18 to 24</i>	<i>By people 25 & over</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
A strong leader	58	56
Strong enough to make unwelcome decisions	48	47
Well-educated	33	27
Really honest, sincere	33	38
In touch with ordinary people	32	32
Progressive, forward-looking	31	28
Straightforward, frank	30	28
Practical, down to earth	23	17
Best man in party for job	19	26
A smart politician	18	11
Friendly personality	16	12
A clever man	13	18
Has sense of humour	10	8
Has some qualities of greatness	8	12
Humane, kindly	6	12

between the two men. And when the minority contrasted the two leaders they usually gave most of their votes to Mr Macmillan.

The few instances where a majority of the respondents recognized a real difference between the two men are worth noting. Most people, young and old, felt able to discriminate between them on four of the statements: a strong leader, a man strong enough to make unwelcome decisions, forward-looking, and in touch with ordinary people. On the first three of these, the discriminators in both age groups had little doubt that Mr Macmillan led the way. And it should be remembered that these four 'discriminators' are among the six most important attributes of a good party leader.

Within the general agreement between young and old there were some marginal differences, and most of these were clearly in Mr Gaitskell's favour. Compared with their elders, young voters showed a greater readiness to recognize him as a leader in touch with ordinary people, practical and down-to-earth, straightforward and frank, and humane and kindly. And all of these traits, except the last, they considered were fairly important in the make-up of the ideal party leader.

Images of Supporters

When asked to describe from a list of twenty types those most likely to support each party, young people saw Labour as

TABLE 33. *Application of attributes to each leader*

	<i>Replies of 18 to 24s</i>				<i>Replies of 25s and over</i>			
	<i>To Mr Gaitskell</i>	<i>To Mr Macmillan</i>	<i>To both etc.</i>	<i>Total %</i>	<i>To Mr Gaitskell</i>	<i>To Mr Macmillan</i>	<i>To both etc.</i>	<i>Total %</i>
In touch with ordinary people	46	14	40	=100	37	17	46	=100
Practical, down to earth	27	22	51		21	31	48	
Straightforward, frank	20	28	52		16	34	50	
Progressive, forward-looking	16	41	43		17	36	47	
Friendly personality	15	29	56		20	27	53	
Humane, kindly	15	13	72		10	21	69	
Strong leader	14	51	35		11	50	39	
Best man in party for job	11	38	51		13	43	44	
Has sense of humour	11	25	64		14	28	58	
Strong enough to make unwelcome decisions	9	43	48		13	44	43	
Really honest, sincere	9	27	64		14	25	61	
A smart politician	8	32	60		9	37	54	
Has some qualities of greatness	6	33	61		7	40	53	
A clever man	6	23	71		6	35	59	
Well-educated	2	23	75		4	21	75	

outstandingly the Party sustained by poor people, factory workers, old age pensioners, and people interested in helping the underdog. Older respondents gave similar attributions, but with consistently less emphasis. In other words, the voter of tomorrow is outdistancing today's voter in perceiving Labour as essentially the party of the labouring working class and of the minority living in poverty. As typical Conservative supporters, young respondents named skilled craftsmen, middle-class people, forward-looking people, ambitious people, office workers, and scientists. And in almost every instance they saw these types as typical Conservatives to a greater extent than did their elders.

The full significance of these replies can only be appreciated when it is realized that tomorrow's voters identify themselves mainly with middle-class people, forward-looking people, office workers, and ambitious people. They do this to a much greater extent than do their elders, and at the same time they are much less willing than their elders to say that they have a good deal in common with people deeply interested in justice and fair play.

Two or three other questions provided additional evidence that young voters are much likelier than their elders to see themselves as middle-class and as 'progressive' optimists. For example, when they were asked to describe the social class to which they thought they belonged, almost two-thirds (60 per cent) put themselves in one or another of the middle-class groups; among their elders little more than half saw themselves this far up the social ladder. Moreover, this upgrading was most marked among young people who were either themselves in white-collar jobs or were the children of white-collar workers; nearly three-quarters of these young respondents (72 per cent) rated themselves above the lower middle class and above the working class; among their elders less than half (48 per cent) did this, and indeed one in seven of these older white-collar workers said they still regarded themselves as members of the working class.

Again, when they were asked to forecast their circumstances over the next two or three years they showed a great deal more optimism than did their elders. Clearly some of this confidence is a realistic reflection of age differences; it is true enough that for many middle-aged workers the near future is unlikely to contain much change in their circumstances, but what must be impressive to those who remember the 1930s is that so many of today's young adults apparently take for granted rapid and automatic material progress; over two-thirds of them are convinced that in two or three years' time they will be better off than they

are today; less than one-third of their elders are equally optimistic.

Satisfaction with Jobs

Each respondent in a job (80 per cent of young people and 60 per cent of those aged 25 and over) was given a card on which were listed six possible attractive working conditions and then asked to indicate from the list which three he (or she) considered most important for a satisfying job. The sample as a whole voted solidly for three desiderata – opportunities to get on, opportunities to employ one's intelligence and initiative, and pleasant people to work with; at the bottom of the voting came 'opportunity to learn new skills'; there was apparently little appreciation of any causal relation between learning and getting on, or even between learning and using one's intelligence. The two age groups gave broadly similar patterns of replies, but there was one striking difference between them. Two-thirds of the older workers considered that opportunities to employ one's intelligence and initiative are an important part of a satisfying job; less than half the younger workers gave one of their three votes to this.

In the light of this definition of a satisfying job provided by the respondent it is perhaps surprising that practically everyone questioned finds his job satisfying. Every working respondent was asked to judge his job 'from the point of view of your own talents and abilities'. Only 10 per cent, with this in mind, said that their work was unsatisfying; among young and old alike there was the same picture of solid contentment with their job.

Views on Political Issues

In another attempt to establish the values and interests of the electorate we put to the respondents a question on public spending. A list of seven possible beneficiaries was shown and each person was told:

It has been suggested that more government and local council money should be spent on these items. Which four of these would you most like to see more money spent on?

Almost everyone wanted to see more public money spent on

new hospitals, and not far behind came support for new houses and new roads. Very few people wanted to see any more public money devoted to the arts or to community centres. Again, young and old gave very similar replies; the former attached more importance to new houses and new schools, but were even less interested than their elders in subsidizing concerts, operas, and theatres. Less than half the young respondents were ready to give one of their four votes to the suggestion that more money be spent on youth clubs.

When asked to assess the performances of the publicly owned industries, young people gave very much the same pattern of replies as did their elders; they approved solidly of the achievements of electricity, gas, airlines, and atomic energy, and condemned emphatically the shortcomings of railways and coal. Only 10 per cent thought that any other industries should be publicly owned, and again this was almost identical with the 11 per cent of older people who favoured this policy.

When they were asked the related question ('Apart from complete ownership, how much Government regulation of industry would you say is necessary for the good of the country as a whole?') both age groups were, on balance, in favour of regulation, and this feeling was slightly stronger among younger respondents.

In the light of the political loyalties of the respondents, the replies to the question on inequalities of income were not surprising. Less than 40 per cent favoured greater equality and over 50 per cent were against it; moreover, the majority in opposition held their views with considerable intensity. Again the two age groups were broadly in agreement, but there was slightly more support among younger people for a policy of greater equality of incomes.

On a wider issue related to equality – help for poorer countries – most respondents, both young and old, expressed generous attitudes. They were told:

Since the war there has been a lot of talk about underdeveloped or poorer countries. Do you think Britain should contribute money or other help to these less well-off countries?

The total sample voted five to three in favour of aid, and among younger people support was even higher at six to three.

When those who wanted Britain to help were asked for their reasons, one-third voiced general charitable sentiments ('it's good to help poor people'), one-quarter pointed to a concern

with equality between nations, and one-sixth offered self-interest as sufficient justification (e.g. 'we will get it back in trade' or 'if we don't the Russians will get in first'). There was very little to choose between the age groups in these replies.

The sizeable minority firmly against aid were similarly asked for their reasons. Over two-thirds of them, both young and old, said in one way or another that the British people's first responsibility is to themselves and that we need for ourselves everything that is available. Both age groups gave this answer, but it was voiced slightly more frequently by middle-class respondents; working-class objectors to aid were more prone to draw justification for their views from a general dislike of foreigners.

Since help for backward countries is a policy strongly supported by young people and since the Labour Party has included this in its programme, one might expect this support to be of help to the Labour Party. In fact, when respondents were asked which political party they thought would be most likely to give aid to the poorer countries less than a quarter of all young people singled out the Labour Party; more of them specifically named the Conservatives and many thought that both parties would follow such a programme.

In trying to pin down the political views of respondents we asked them:

If Labour had won the general election what are the various things in their programme that would have pleased you most?

Nearly one-third of the sample could not think of anything specific in the Party's programme or else said bluntly that they didn't know what was in Labour's programme. The biggest single block of mentions referred to possible help for old people as something that would have pleased them. Young people were particularly prone to answer that they could think of nothing in particular in the Labour Party's programme that would have pleased them, and this ignorance of Labour policy was the most striking aspect of their replies. Compared with their elders, they showed less enthusiasm for helping old people and for Labour's education policies.

When they were asked to say what would have pleased them least about a Labour victory at the general election, over one-third of the whole sample could not think of anything, but, on the other hand, another third spontaneously mentioned nationalization. Both age groups gave this general pattern of replies; a higher proportion of the younger respondents gave non-com-

mittal answers, but, among those who were specific, half referred to nationalization; this was the same proportion as among older people who gave specific replies to this question. The only other topic which drew any measurable degree of dislike from young people was what they described as Labour's policies to promote equality; this aroused practically no protest from their elders.

As one means of crystallizing people's views about politics and young people we asked:

Which political party do you think has policies which will actually benefit young people most?

One-third of the total sample did not name either of the two main parties as being especially concerned with the needs and interests of young people, but among those who discriminated the voting was two to one in favour of the Conservatives. Young people themselves were not quite so positive in recognizing the greater concern of the Conservative Party, but even so little more than a quarter of them said that Labour was the party with policies most likely to benefit young people.

Those respondents who named the Conservatives as the party with policies most likely to help young people were asked to say what precisely they had in mind. Nearly one-third of them mentioned economic benefits which would help the young (e.g. a rising standard of living, full employment, plenty of opportunities). One-quarter elaborated by saying that the Conservatives were genuinely interested in young people; and another quarter said that the Conservatives were more likely than Labour to provide better schools, more teachers, raise the school leaving age, and generally create better educational conditions.

Among young people who had said that the Conservatives' policies were more likely to help young people, the explanations concentrated even more heavily on the economic benefits for the young, and on the general conviction that the Conservative Party is genuinely interested in young people.

The 22 per cent of the total sample which thought that Labour policies were more likely to benefit young people were similarly asked to expand their views. Slightly over one-third of them pointed to economic advantages that would accrue to young people (e.g. give them a better start, higher wages, etc.); one-fifth said that Labour would provide better educational facilities; one in ten felt that Labour policies would help the young by reducing class distinctions; and only 10 per cent (of the 22 per cent) said that Labour is genuinely interested in young people.

Young respondents themselves were less prone than their elders to welcome Labour policies because of their economic and educational benefits to the young, and were more likely to justify their choice of Labour as the party with policies which would help young people by reducing class distinctions.

What emerges from this section of the survey can be summarized as follows:

Today's young people, i.e. those aged eighteen to twenty-four, are more likely to be Conservative than Labour. Among the middle-class young only 10 per cent can be considered Labour Party supporters, and this level of middle-class support for Labour is probably lower than at any other time in the past fifteen years. Even in the working class 35 per cent of young people support the Conservatives, and only 50 per cent are Labour.

On most questions young people gave replies very similar to those of their elders; they are equally preoccupied with the maintenance of economic prosperity and equally disposed to see the Conservatives as more likely to provide this. To an even greater extent than their elders they see the Conservative Party as one supported by middle-class people, and they are more ready than their elders to identify with this class. They are highly optimistic about the future, and very satisfied with their jobs.

At the same time they are more inclined than other people to favour a reduction in class differences at home and more generous policies towards poorer countries.

They know very little about the Labour Party's programme, and where their own interests are concerned they are convinced – by an almost two to one majority – that Conservative policies would suit them best.

In short, there is among young people today a complex of barely conscious Conservative sympathies which have still not yet fully expressed themselves in overt party affiliations.