

Bagehot

Time for a novice

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How the country is secretly run by the young



Illustration by Steve O'Brien

THE greybeards are back, some in rumour but others in fact. The Conservatives deny reports that Michael Heseltine, aka Tarzan, is set to return to government in a putative Tory administration; but other veterans are likely to serve alongside Ken Clarke, now the shadow business secretary, who will be 70 soon after the general election expected next year. The infatuation with youth, which helped to secure the Tory leadership for David Cameron and that of the Liberal Democrats for Nick Clegg, seems to have waned—on the surface of politics, at least.

For Bagehot, perhaps the most intriguing overall lesson of the party-conference season was the extreme youth of many of those in important positions in the party hierarchies, making policy and conducting high-level negotiations. This is one of the hidden features of the political machine: the callow age of many of its cogs, including some big ones.



The office of George Osborne, the shadow chancellor, generates many of the Tories' best ideas, and some less good ones. Mr Osborne himself is 38, stunningly young for a would-be chancellor. But he seems venerable beside his advisers. His fecund brains trust comprises Rohan Silva (28) and Rupert Harrison (30). Matthew Hancock, his chief of staff, has just turned 31.

It isn't only the Osborne nursery. News footage of Mr Cameron on the night before his conference speech showed the leader conversing with his wife, Mr Osborne, William Hague (the shadow foreign secretary)—and Ameet Gill. Mr Gill is Mr Cameron's main speechwriter. He is 27. The head of the party's policy unit is 33. Interview a shadow minister and you will often find him accompanied by a scowling young press officer; it can be hard to decipher who is managing whom. Many of these rising Tory stars were inducted into politics when it was dominated by Tony Blair. They acquired a Blairite grasp of presentation and a focus on electability, as well as a reverence for new technologies.

Something similar is true of Labour. Gordon Brown once bragged to George Bush that he had ministers in his cabinet who were under 40. Some less conspicuous but quietly influential players in government are younger still. Torsten Henricson-Bell is a former Treasury civil servant and now a political adviser to Alistair Darling, the chancellor. Mr Henricson-Bell is highly regarded in Whitehall; he is said, in the parlance, to be able to "deliver" (ie, speak for) his boss. He is 27 too. Mr Brown's own speechwriter is said to be 29. There are some boyish members of his policy unit, an outfit that deserves more credit than it tends to get: its output is mangled by the politicians.

Of course, politics is not the only sphere in which people assume awesome responsibilities at a tender age (the army is another), or in which careers now tend to peak earlier than they did. And thrusting young researchers and special advisers are a long-established feature of it. An even fresher-faced Mr Cameron worked for assorted members of the previous Tory government, as, somewhat forlornly, Mr Brown often points out. Under Mr Blair, twenty-somethings proliferated: Ed Miliband, Ed Balls and others advised ministers before becoming ministers.

The triumph of youth

But the decisions taken in politics are unique in their reach and repercussion. And the phenomenon is especially striking now because the challenges—war, recession, the restructuring of the economy and the disgrace of Westminster—are so grave. Does it matter that so many of those in the business are so green?

One reason for the preponderance of young apparatchiks is common to other high-pressure professions—management consultancy, say, or parts of the civil service. It is a form of institutionalised exploitation that, like bullying in public schools, is handed down between generations. Contrary to popular belief, politics is gruellingly hard work, especially in the epoch of

24-hour media and instant rebuttal. Most of the young advisers stress how privileged they feel to be involved, etc; but they are, in essence, sweated labour, unencumbered and energetic enough to work inhumane hours for less money than they could earn elsewhere.

Old(er) politicians bring political know-how and thick skins: a less weathered person might not have endured the opprobrium that Mr Brown has withstood. The young, at least by their own account, offer ideas and intellectual vitality, unconstrained by ingrained consensus and past failures. And in a world dominated by the icons and references of popular culture, which politicians are expected to recognise, they can provide tactical insights into it. (The “zeitgeist tape” that a middle-aged minister is forced to watch in “The Thick of It”, a satirical television series, is only a mild exaggeration of reality.)

The kids have drawbacks, however. Damian McBride was 34 when his puerile antics led to his sacking as Mr Brown’s political spokesman, and some years younger when he started spinning (his successor Michael Dugher, also 34, is much soberer). Experience, rather than wisdom, may be the main deficiency. Much of the substance of politics—pensions, child-rearing and so on—is grimly adult: too much of it, arguably, an imbalance that may reflect older people’s greater propensity to vote. To many of those devising solutions, these problems are distant and hypothetical.

Still, lack of personal experience does not disqualify someone from holding valid opinions, if curiosity and hard work compensate. And the young plainly have no monopoly on gross misjudgment. Probably the triumph of youth is less a worry than a startling and contradictory oddity. The thrust of political discourse is that serious times call for mature statesmen. Superannuation, rather than sprightliness, is ostensibly in vogue. But, contrary to Mr Brown’s famous dictum, beneath the rhetoric and behind the scenes, it is indeed time for a novice.