

YOUNG PEOPLE

Passage 1. *Andrew O'Hagen laments about a youth-oriented culture.*

- 1 Ah, the youth of today. Are they not horrible? Every day we are bombarded with young people who want only to consume and waste, opine and abuse, as if the world was made only for them and as if nothing was worth contemplating or pausing over. Is there no one in Britain under 30 – not even one – who genuinely wants to work and listen and think and grow?

- 2 I grew up in the era when young people were certainly obnoxious, but were also busy trying to change the world, and they had ideas about how to live and what to do that went far beyond adopting corporate logos and scanning the latest gear on the rails at Topshop. Yet, the more shallow the experience of youth becomes, the more insistently does it seem to dominate the culture and the general life of the nation. “That is no country for old men,” wrote Yeats in one of his poems, and he might have been speaking of Britain now. Many elderly people in this country are being starved in their nursing homes – mistreated, exposed to neglect and poor nutrition. While all the pointless whistles and bells of youth are sounded every day, we discover we are living in a country that increasingly forgets how to honour and serve the dignity of age. 5 10

- 3 It is pensioners who are losing ground, and a great deal of this neglect is caused by a general over-emphasis on the issues of youth. How did a culture of deep experience and long inquiry come to be hijacked by the venal instincts of a generation of greedy teenagers? We watch their cinema (because that is the only one that the film industry will fund); we listen to their music (because it dominates our environment); we watch their television (because most of the channels are devoted to it); and we spend most of our lives meeting their needs and their “rights”. But some people work for decades to stake a claim on their rights: where does this horrific new sense of entitlement come from? 15 20

- 4 The elderly are suffering for all this. There is so little air for them to breathe in this culture, and nothing like the time or the funding being devoted to their requirements. You think I am exaggerating? Look at the BBC, that somewhat excellent beacon, which was accused yesterday of “disenfranchising” elderly licence payers by following a tacit new rule that their voices should be kept off the air. Old age hurts their ears and offends their sense of relevance. Can we really be happy to watch old age become a sort of pariah status in this country, a pitiable grey condition instead of a colourful, valued one? 25

- 5 It is not just a matter of governments and funding – it is a matter of you and me. France and Germany do not follow our example that respected old people should always – even in care homes – be expected to wait for a meal from the authorities. Families will do the odd meal, and will see it as part of their ongoing lives to give care to relatives whom they love. What is wrong with us that we do not find that to be an utterly natural thing to do – occasionally to take a half-decent meal and a cake round to an old one? Perhaps we are so intoxicated with the subjects and opportunities of our own youth that we find, in the end, that people, too, are disposable once they are past their best. How shameful. 30 35

- 6 Last winter, 31,250 people over the age of 65 died from cold-related illnesses during the season in England and Wales. Many of them did not have the ability to put on an extra jumper or were worried about the cost of putting on an extra heater. Meanwhile, down at Topshop, the girls are swapping big opinions down by the lip-gloss counter, and the boys hatch schemes over the “must-have” trainers. I wonder how many of these self-intoxicated little horrors will have taken their granny a cup of tea by the end of the week. 40

Passage 2. *Zanny Minton Beddoes writes about how the young are being held back.*

- 1 In the world of “The Hunger Games”, youngsters are forced to fight to the death for the amusement of their white-haired rulers. Today’s teenage fiction is relentlessly dystopian, but the gap between fantasy and reality is often narrower than you might think. The older generation may not resort to outright murder, but they hold their juniors down in important ways.

- 2 Roughly a quarter of the world’s people have turned 15 but not yet reached 30. In many ways, they are the luckiest group of young adults ever to have existed. They are richer than any previous generation, and live in a world without smallpox or Mao Zedong. They are the best-educated generation ever. If they are female or gay, they enjoy greater freedom in more countries than their predecessors would have thought possible. They can look forward to improvements in technology that will enable many of them to live well past 100. So what, exactly, are they complaining about? Plenty. Just as, for the first time in history, the world’s youngsters form a common culture, so they also share the same youthful grievances. Around the world, young people gripe that it is too hard to find a job and a place to live, and that the path to adulthood has grown longer and more complicated.

- 3 Many of their woes can be blamed on policies favouring the old over the young. In many countries, labour laws require firms to offer copious benefits and make it hard to lay workers off. That suits those with jobs, who tend to be older, but it makes firms reluctant to hire new staff. The losers are the young. In most regions they are at least twice as likely as their elders to be unemployed. Housing, too, is often rigged against the young. Homeowners dominate the bodies that decide whether new houses may be built. They often say no, so as not to spoil the view and reduce the value of their own property. Over-regulation has doubled the cost of a typical home in Britain. Its effects are even worse in many of the big cities around the world where young people most want to live. Rents and home prices in such places have far outpaced incomes.

- 4 Young people are often footloose. This makes them more productive, especially if they migrate from a poor country to a rich one. However, it is striking that so many governments discourage not only cross-border migration, but also the domestic sort. A UN study found that 80% of countries had policies to reduce rural-urban migration, although much of human progress has come from people putting down their hoes and finding better jobs in the big smoke. All these barriers to free movement especially harm the young, because they most want to move.

- 5 The old have always subsidised their juniors. Within families, they still do. But many governments favour the old: an ever greater share of public spending goes on pensions and health care for them. This is partly the natural result of societies ageing, but it is also because the elderly ensure that policies work in their favour. The young could do more to stand up for themselves. It is not enough for the young to sign online petitions. If they want governments to listen, they should vote. However, the old have a part to play, too. The young are an oppressed minority – albeit an unusual one – in the straightforward sense that governments are systematically preventing them from reaching their potential.

- 6 That is a cruel waste of talent. If the skills of the young are not developed, they will be less productive than they could be. What is more, oppressing them is dangerous. Countries with lots of jobless, disaffected young men tend to be more violent and unstable, as millions of refugees from the Middle East and Africa can attest. The remedy is easy to prescribe – and hard to enact. Governments should unleash the young by cutting the red tape that keeps them out of jobs, and curbing the power of property owners to stop homes from being built. They should scrap restrictions on domestic migration and allow more cross-border movement. They should make education a priority. Every parent and grandparent has a stake in this, too. If they put their shoulders to the wheel, who knows what they might accomplish.