

Without young voters, the Tories are sunk

The party needs economic policies that chime with under-40s, with an emphasis on opportunity and aspiration

by William Hague

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The most common question I am asked by anyone of my age or older is “What year was it when you gave that speech as a teenager at the Tory conference?”. The answer is 1977, fully 48 years ago this very week. I still have the cartoons that were part of the media frenzy in which I was engulfed. “Patience, patience,” the chair of the conference is shouting in one of them, “the next speaker is just having his nappies changed.” Another one depicts Eton boys complaining: “It’s ridiculous: to get on in the Tory party these days you have to be at a comprehensive”. David Cameron and Boris Johnson had other ideas.

While I have often been embarrassed in later life by my precocious start, that speech made an impact not only because a 16-year-old delivered it but because it had a clear point to it. I’ve since spent half a century listening to many speeches in which the merits of having a clear point are sadly overlooked.

My point was that the Conservatives should think of themselves as a party for young people, even though at that stage, early in the Thatcher leadership, they had little youthful support. At a time that seemed devoid of hope, with joblessness growing, unions doing as they liked, the country deep in debt and tax rates too high for any aspiring young person to dream of starting a business, my teenage incarnation urged the Tories to get a grip on the nation’s finances and liberate the talents of a new generation.

Today’s situation is similar. A report last week, *Becoming Blue*, published by the think tank Onward, showed that most young people believe it was easier for their parents’ generation to succeed in life than it is for their own. Only 13 per cent of people under 40 – taking an elastic definition of young – said they intended to vote Tory. The obstacles to them doing so were that they couldn’t differentiate the Tories from other parties, they didn’t think the party shared their priorities and didn’t believe it was competent enough to implement any good ideas it had. Given the post-Brexit chaos that overtook the party, these views are unsurprising.

Interestingly, however, many of those voters under 40 align with what are normally Tory values. Asked what the government should do for them, far more chose lower inflation (29%) and cutting taxes (28%) than reducing wealth inequality (17%). Far more agreed that “government should cut taxes and redistribute less income” than “government should increase taxes and redistribute more income”. If the Tories can make themselves distinct and look competent, there is a lot of potential support far below their voters’ normal age span, currently in the sixties to eighties.

The Conservative Party obviously needs younger people, otherwise it will literally die out. But the case for adopting policies that will help those voters goes far beyond the partisan need to win their votes, and it would be naive to think that they will immediately return in droves, any more than in the 1970s.

There is a wider argument for a party to adopt the mindset of the younger part of the electorate and stand for their opportunities, which is that this requires thinking for the long term, not

mortgaging the future, telling the truth about the country, focusing on expanding entrepreneurship and reflecting carefully before acting. These are attributes people associated with the Tories on each of the postwar occasions they came in from opposition for a long period in office – 1951, 1979 and 2010. They are essential to any hope of doing so again.

Monday's speech by Sir Mel Stride, the shadow chancellor, offered hope that the Conservatives will go in this direction. The idea of a £5,000 tax rebate for young people towards their first home when they have a full-time job is a good one, as is his cut in business rates. His overall message of "no more pretending we can keep spending money we simply do not have" is right, although alongside serious reform of sickness benefits the party will need to find the courage to explain that the state pension cannot be allowed to go up way faster than inflation for ever into the future. In emphasising "opportunity, aspiration, optimism", he is getting the Tories back on to the right themes.

Kemi Badenoch's statement that "There is a gap for the responsible, optimistic, competent Conservative approach" also shows a strong sense of what the Tories will need to be again to come through the middle of a Labour-Reform battle. But to aim squarely for that gap she will need to offer many more ideas that appeal to a younger electorate, as well as to older voters who are crying out for a country that backs success. Announce plans for stamp duty that remove punishing levels of tax on buying a home. Reduce capital gains tax for businesses owned by young people. Review employment laws to empower individuals in the age of AI, not unions. Widen the teaching of financial literacy to help saving and investment. Come up with an apprenticeship policy that actually works for a small business. Put more government support behind science and new technologies. Take that sense of aspiration and optimism and bring it to life.

Aiming for that gap also means, however, making sure that hardline policies are consistent with competence. The analysis that no one can win a future election without a tough approach to illegal immigration is correct. But the policy of leaving the ECHR needs to be accompanied by better answers to the questions it begs – such as the impact on Northern Ireland – if it is not to remind people of what happened after Brexit. Repeal of the Climate Change Act must go with a good alternative plan that reduces emissions through innovation, for the "climate denial" that has spread on the right of politics will soon seem like the greatest incompetence of all. And a further big cut in overseas aid might well turn out to be inconsistent with the security of this country against instability, migration or disease.

For Badenoch to emerge through the gap, her party needs to be different from Reform as well as from Labour. The Tories can easily argue, as the number of jobs for young people steadily falls under the weight of taxes, that Labour is not the future. But they also need to be clear that Reform isn't either.

The future is not conspiracy theories about vaccines and hero worship of Trump. It could yet belong, just, to a party that tells the truth about the country's finances and aligns itself with the needs of younger people. That might sound an unlikely hope for the Conservative Party. But it seemed just that in 1977. It should at least be of some encouragement that it has been done before.