
Class is the thing, insists Diane Abbott in debate over generational divide

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Diane Abbott has dismissed the idea of a conflict between the young and old, arguing against redistribution of wealth from the elderly to the millennials.

Speaking at the How The Light Gets In festival in Hay-on-Wye, the shadow home secretary cautioned against blaming society's problems on a generational divide.

"Some of the issues raised as matters of intergenerational conflict are consequences of series of political decisions that people voted for," she said. "We shouldn't be framing the problem of class and class politics as a problem of the old versus the young."

The housing crisis, Ms Abbott said, was not a question of intergenerational divide but "a consequence of market neoliberalism, and moving away from the idea of providing housing for the public good". But she admitted that young people were suffering as a consequence.

"Housing was once seen as a collective good, which society had some responsibility to provide," she said. "We turned in the Thatcher and New Labour years ... to seeing it as something primarily provided by the market. If you move away from collective responsibility to ensure that everyone has decent housing and turn to market-based solutions, you find yourself in the situation we are today, where young people in London and other high-price cities cannot actually contemplate buying a house at all."

"We need to bring in rent controls," she said. "We need to invest more in social housing and look at serious measures to stop people buying 'gold bricks' – empty flats – as investments. We need to stop property being an investment rather than somewhere to live."

In the debate, entitled Generation Wars II, Reuters journalist and economist Anatole Kaletsky pointed to the "endless amount of economic data" showing how much more is spent on the old compared with the

young.

The clearest possible distinction in society, he argued, is those who work and those who do not work, but live off the resources of those who work. “And the problem is that the non-workers who matter the most now are the old, the retired,” he said. “We’re moving towards a parasitical society, and the old are even more parasitical than the class situation.”

Momentum’s Joe Todd argued that there is a war – but not between two generations. “The whole framing of this debate doesn’t work. We can’t look at society through the lens of generations. Generation as a sociological category individualises what are essentially systemic problems.

“My brothers’ struggle to get a job is not my grandmother’s fault. The idea I should revile my grandparents because they had a better life than me, rather than the super rich, is completely wrong and isn’t productive for a fairer society.”

Lord Victor Adebowale supported Ms Abbott, saying: “There’s never been a war – the odd riot isn’t the same as Nigeria or Yemen. Young people have always had and absolutely should have the right to be sceptical of anything that anyone over the age of 50 does, because they’re going to be the future.”

However, he admitted that “it’s the government’s job to resolve equality and distribution – but they’re not doing a very good job of it. The young are the victims of that.”

He also supported Ms Abbott’s argument that the division should be framed in terms of inequality, class and socioeconomic factors, rather than as an old versus young.

“It all depends on what kind of young person you are,” he said. “Black men like me are at least six times more likely to be stopped and searched, 13 times more likely to be met with violence and more likely to end up in a Section 136 unit, or even die.

“The problem is the young are inheriting a world created by a bunch of people who think there’s a war. And it is an irrefutable fact that my son is likely to be poorer than me.

“We need rent controls, the reintroduction of social housing, and actually affordable housing. So-called affordable housing at 80 per cent of market value is outrageous. We need more cooperative housing, and we should tax people for leaving properties empty. They should pay 300 per cent tax on it.”

Mr Kaletsky said the disproportionate political power of the ageing electorate, as a consequence of the demographic change in the population. “The impact of this very rapid shift towards the ageing society is an ageing electorate,” he said.

But Lord Adebawale said: “Don’t confuse democracy with voting, and don’t confuse change with the ballot box. Look at Brexit – non-democratic processes influenced opinion there.”

Mr Kaletsky summarised, saying: “It’s up to society to take those resources away from the old through taxes, and abolishing things like the pensioner bus pass, and redirect income that way.”

To which Ms Abbott added: “I have an old person bus pass, and you can take it from my cold, dead hands.”



The housing crisis was not due to an intergenerational divide but a consequence of market neoliberalism, the shadow home secretary said