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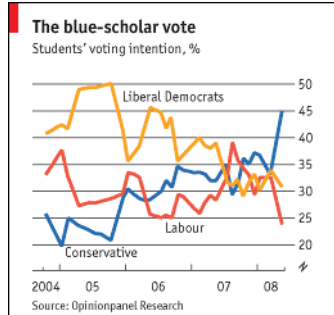
Britain

Student politics
Old heads on young shoulders

Jul 3rd 2008
 From *The Economist* print edition

What do we want? Fiscal prudence, property rights and lower taxes

THE oft-quoted maxim that a man who is not a socialist at 20 has no heart, whereas one who is still a socialist at 40 has no head, has been variously attributed to George Bernard Shaw, Winston Churchill, Woodrow Wilson and Otto von Bismarck, among others. Whatever its origins, the path that leads from the student view of property as theft to an appreciation of low taxes is well-trodden, often suspiciously soon after employment sets in.



Now, it appears, many students are starting adulthood differently. A report published on June 26th by Opinionpanel, a research outfit that specialises in polling students, documents a big shift in political allegiances on campus since 2004 (see chart). In those days the Liberal Democrats were the students' favourite; support for the Tories hovered between a fifth and a quarter, and a third supported Labour. Now fewer than a quarter support Labour, and the Conservatives have soared to 45%.

with free love and a new world order. Another is Labour's decade of electoral domination. For today's young rebels in search of a cause, the Left is the establishment: an 18-year-old starting university this autumn will have been just seven when Labour came to power. Then there is the advent of university fees, and the resulting debt: students who will have to pay back perhaps £20,000 towards their studies are more interested in getting a good degree and a decent job afterwards. And they know that accountancy and law firms would rather youngsters spent their time on essay-writing and internships than on marches and sit-ins.

This is surely excellent news for the Tories, particularly their youngish, newish leader, David Cameron. A big jump in the number of students saying they would vote for his party straight after his barnstorming leadership bid at his party's conference in October 2005 suggests that he personally is attracting new young voters. The fall in support for the Liberal Democrats will be welcomed too: Britain's third party has had a nasty tendency to split the vote in Tory target seats and has long been particularly popular with students, perhaps because of its status as a plucky political outsider, or its line on student fees (against) and legalising cannabis (for).

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As well as changing today's political landscape, this shift will have consequences in future years—albeit ones that are hard to predict. If these hard-headed youngsters shift rightward as they age, the nursing homes of the future could be filled with wild-eyed disciples of Ayn Rand and Milton Friedman. Or perhaps the pattern will be reversed, and three decades from now, middle-aged actuaries will belatedly come to appreciate Trotsky and the labour theory of value.

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