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Grime Launches a Revolution in Youth Politics

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Grime launches a revolution in youth politics

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It became clear on June 9 that Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May's decision to call a snap election was ill judged. This election has highlighted the disregard for the "many" that government should serve, and after an election in which the youth turnout was around [72% of those aged 18-24](#), the impact of the youth in Labour's surge of popularity is obvious.

Of particular note is the role of a series of influential grime artists, who are not traditionally known for their politics yet came out in full force, working to galvanise the youth to vote and specifically supporting Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. In a [2003 radio interview](#), then MP Kim Howells laid into the grime scene, calling its artists "macho boasting idiots". In the aftermath of the election, who are the macho boasting idiots now? Those in power should never underestimate the collective power of the masses. This is particularly true of the grimy kind.

The relationship between grime and politics has been an interesting and evolving one. Grime is a genre of music that emerged at the turn of the 21st century in London's inner boroughs. Early on, its sound was most closely likened to US hip hop and rap. But those in the know appreciate grime's deep connections to its UK predecessors, which include music from the British underground scene such as garage and jungle, in addition to Jamaican dancehall, electronic/experimental music, and British punk. The grime "sound" developed as it grew, eventually being acknowledged as its own genre at the MOBOs in 2015 and iTunes in 2016. But

grime has always been more than music. It is a culture, and this is key to its significance in this last general election.

Generation grime

Although now considered trendy in many strata of society, grime is a working-class scene. It originated from the very people and places government legislation has hit the hardest in its austerity measures over the last ten years: the bedroom tax; underfunded schools; tuition fee rises; zero-hour contracts; dwindling prospects of owning a home; and increased job insecurity. From this perspective, the relentless spread of gentrification and London's role as a global financial capital can make David Cameron's profession that "we are all in this together" simply farcical.

Grime originated as a predominantly black British musical form, yet appeals to young people irrespective of race or ethnicity. The common ground in its appeal was the focus on [class based oppression](#) and British cultural references. While racism remains pervasive and impacts young people in different ways, we live in a time of diverse multiculturalism, particularly in the inner city home of grime. There is a level of commonality in the British working class experience.

This is all the more powerful given the collective nature of the grime scene. Success achieved by individuals in the scene is viewed as success for all. Individual achievement produces collective pride. This collectivity contributes to the solid sense of identity and culture that grime promotes. The collective experience of hardship and navigating it fosters community.

And middle class youth also see their futures in less certain terms. Grime, as with the appeal of other genres of music, is also a method of identity formation, which helps them to separate themselves from "older" generations, most notably parents.

Quite possibly for the first time, this election provided what I term "generation grime" (those predominantly under 30 who have grown up with it as a soundtrack to their lives) with an opportunity to engage with a political figure whose values align more closely with their lived experience, personal values and aspirations. Corbyn's understanding of working-class issues, racial oppression and homelessness struck a chord. While the lyrical content in much grime may not be political, lived realities and hardships are a common theme to this work.

Prominent grime artists openly supported Labour and worked hard to encourage their supporters to vote: in response to their lived experience; the government's disregard of their future; and the disconnection they felt to this government. Stormzy was one of Corbyn's first grime supporters. In a [2016 interview](#), he said: "I dig what he says. I saw some sick picture of him from back in the day when he was campaigning about anti-apartheid and I thought: yeah, I like your energy."

JME, Akala, and Rag'n'Bone man, all influential artists to generation grime and all of whom admitted to not voting before or having little interest or faith in the political system, also got behind Corbyn. Recent protests about government decisions which affected the future of generation grime led to minimal change and kettling, heightening apathy. This election offered a new approach. For scene members and fans not politically minded or disengaged from political

processes, grime artist endorsement was the much needed push to look into Corbyn's track record and manifesto. Young people suddenly felt they could do something to influence British society and their futures.

What now?

This election provided the opportunity for generation grime to really see the collective power in working together for the society *they* would like to create and the things *they* want to preserve. Although Labour did not win the election, a new energy has been injected into politics and political engagement among young people. It has given them the opportunity to realise their political power, and how to use it.

Significantly, this last election has also reignited the music-politics relationship of British punk in a new, 21st-century way. Grime artists made particular use of social media in order to galvanise generation grime into political action through the use of hashtags such as [#Grime4Corbyn](#). And it doesn't stop here. After the election, artists encouraged each other and scene members to engage with their local MPs. Grime artists tweeted about the success and the importance of staying involved.

This movement could be the start of something huge. The challenge is to maintain the momentum. While grime content is largely apolitical, this shift could open a space for more political lyrical content and imagery for both new and established artists. It may also lead to more systematic civic engagement, as artists can see first-hand the power of their influence on generation grime to push for social change.

For more than a decade, the government undervalued and strategically implemented policies to decimate the life chances of generation grime under the banner "we are all in this together". We are not. Government must govern [#ForTheManyNotTheFew](#), and now generation grime realise the potential of their political power they can push for it strategically.

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