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## Millennial Mythology

A headmaster has denounced today's youth with a little too much vigour

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**T**he caricature of the millennial is so odious that, if it were true, it would be a wonder so few baby-boomer parents had disowned their children. The millennials of folklore are convinced of their superior wisdom on all matters whatever the opinions of their elders. They are capricious in their choice of employer to the point of rank disloyalty, more interested in the screens on their palms than the world around them and intoxicated by a sense of entitlement imbibed through years of being told that, if they dreamed big enough and reached hard enough for the stars, they could achieve anything and become anyone.

The grain of truth in that stereotype is why the remarks of Douglas Robb, head of the £34,000-a-year Gresham's School in rural Norfolk, struck a chord this week. Infuriated by an aspiring teacher who used his job interview not to ask what he could do for Gresham's but what Gresham's could do for him, Mr Robb penned a testy blog railing against an "overly mollycoddled" generation, each of them expecting a "one-in-a-million" job and demanding a lot better than that of their parents and grandparents.

Young people these days, he explained, are not happy harvesting crops, packaging produce or parking cars. In an interview with *The Times* today, Mr Robb explains that his pupils can be just as hard as the job applicant. Last year's sixth-form, he says, had three or four pupils "who cruised along and thought that the world owed them a living". He "hammered" them all year.

Many young adults, including present and former pupils at Mr Robb's school, are understandably aggrieved. Though in many ways they enjoy a much richer world than did their forebears, unprecedentedly tolerant and full of technological wonder, the gulf between their expectations and their opportunities is not all their own doing. The increased social mobility of the past two decades has broadened the horizons of many, but has also made competition for top university places and jobs vastly more intense. Thanks to globalisation, entrants to the job market now find themselves battling not just their peers from the other end of the country, but from the other end of the world. In such an environment, self-confidence and ambition become more important.

The war of words between generations is often so belligerent because it is also a fight for resources. It is not uncommon to hear baby boomers like Mr Robb accused of diminishing the hardships of twenty-somethings in order to protect their own accumulated wealth from a generation armed with stridently left-wing politics.

Both camps resent the implication that their views on society and culture are purely motivated by economic self-interest. Yet the facts speak for themselves. Eighties babies make up the first generation in half a century to be paid less than the cohort before them. Only 33 per cent of those in their late twenties own a home, compared with almost 60 per cent of baby boomers at the same age.

Every youngster in Mr Robb's care has to find a balance between trying to get what they want and trying to want what they have got — between striving and settling. His analysis of the millennial malaise is sharpest where it is, in essence, an attack on laziness among those who claim to strive. If it is an injunction to settle, the critique is weaker. Mr Robb's pupils can expect a lot of the world and the workplace if they expect a lot of themselves, too.