

An ageing population

Written by Debating Ideas

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Attitudes towards an ageing population

by Jane Turner

This week we heard from yet another irate group trying to stop Brexit. ***Our Future Our Choice*** (OFOC) say that because they are young,

and not old

, they will have to live with the consequences of leaving the European Union (which they presume will be terrible). Should their votes matter more than those of older voters? They blame elderly voters for jeopardising *their*

future and argue that the young matter more than the old, because us old fossils won't be around to experience a post-Brexit society - in their view apocalyptic.

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Next in the elderly bashing queue was Andrew Cooper of the **Global Future Advisory Board**, who in a discussion on Radio 4 said that the dividing line in British politics between left and right has been replaced. His new dividing line is between those who are

open

and those who are

closed

to immigration, multi-culturalism, diversity, and internationalism. He said those with

open

attitudes and values were aged 45 and under, while those whose values were seemingly immovable and

closed

were old, i.e. over 45. He said people born in the internet era were 'more positive about the world'.

How times have changed. When I was growing up, if ever I was a bit cheeky to anyone a fair bit older than me, I was always rebuked with the comment that I should 'respect my elders', and it became part of the moral code I was raised by and still refer to in the presence of anyone older than me, although I am now more likely to be the elder in the room and reel off that old saying as a way of attempting to assert some authority.

When I was young we mixed more freely with our elders, our interactions were spontaneous, unsupervised, not regulated by police and criminal records checks or fraught with suspicion. We might well have annoyed our elderly neighbours by playing noisily in the streets, but unlike today, fearful of the implications, they were not afraid to give us a ticking off, and we learnt how to co-exist by listening to and cooperating with each other through what used to be normal daily interactions. Today, the regulatory and ageist culture prevents people of all ages from just getting along together, resulting in a climate of suspicion that makes the young and old wary and mistrustful of each other.

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Instead of a complex discussion about the future, the young blame the old, and the media and value-lite political parties whip this up, and offer votes to 16 year olds giving credence to the already high self-importance of the young, in an effort to increase their party's share of the vote. The elderly and 'closed' are publicly disrespected based on flimsy polling, and blamed for society's ills. This is all made worse by the regular media pronouncements of a generational war that hints at euthanasia for those it blames for being a 'burden' and living too long, owning a house, taking a young person's job, hogging hospital beds, having a pension, voting for Brexit, ruining the environment and scuppering the future of the young by saddling them with debt and uncertainty – oh and for taking cruises (!? – not environmentally friendly it seems).

The young are depicted as narcissistic, selfie and identity obsessed entitled snowflakes, a product of risk-averse parenting and teaching, with mobile phones attached to them like umbilical cords. And while there have always been inter-generational conflicts, previously they were resolved by normal everyday social contact that took place in workplaces, pubs, churches, community and trade organisations, where the young and old mixed freely, and would maybe challenge a grumpy old (or young) racist, or take the mickey out of each other while benefitting from each other's company and experiences. These places have mostly disappeared and instead we have social media platforms and safe spaces where critical thinking, rational discussion, tolerance and understanding is often absent and where there is no real human interaction.

Instead of optimism about increasing longevity, there is a definite lack of the respect for the elderly that was instilled in me. Instead of welcoming the increase in life expectancy and the growing elderly population, and celebrating it as an important human development and achievement, this growing group of elderly people are seen as a problem – they are old, their minds are 'closed' and they are a burden on the young. There is no appreciation shown for their contribution to society and no admiration for the improvements in living standards or the progress made in technology and medical science which have contributed to longevity across the globe. It is implied that because of their 'closed' attitudes they are not open to persuasion from the young and more 'open' minded, who seem to assume from the use of such labels that they are also right. Old versus young and open versus closed – labels that do not inform or help in discussions about the future.

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In the last 100 years, global life expectancy has increased from an average age of 31 to 70, and diseases associated with old age now occur around 10 years later than previously. People can now retire later if they choose to, or leave work earlier and have time to live a bit before dying, whereas in the past they would work until they were fit for nothing but the knackers yard - and then die shortly afterwards. The total number of elderly people in the UK and across the globe is increasing, a cause for celebration and a good reason for engagement not ridicule and disenfranchisement. Their opinions are just as, if not more, valid as any young persons because if longevity predictions are right, they are going to be here well after Brexit and for a good while longer (well, that is if Brexit ever happens).

Many young people and those in the organisations mentioned earlier see the elderly in terms of poor economic and old fashioned values, referring to them as if they were just liabilities on a balance sheet in a company with scarce resources that need to move with the times or go bust. But instead of jealously sniping at their grey and wizened fellow human beings they should get together and realise their common interests, because by making social and economic problems a fight between the generations they avoid the real issues, let the real culprits off the hook, and make social and political solidarity more difficult.