

Brexit and “Generation Snowflake”

By Chris McGovern

The “Brexit” vote confirmed a stark generational difference between the views of the older and the younger generations. A pre-referendum *YouGov* poll indicated that 72% of 18 to 24 year-olds wished to stay in the EU with only 19% wanting an exit. In contrast, amongst pensioners, 59% wanted to leave.

The subsequent post-referendum petition and the mass protest event in London, attracted widespread support amongst young people. Democracy had produced the ‘wrong’ result and a second referendum was, and is, being demanded. There have been tears, tantrums, even. Why?

If you are a “Brexit” supporter you might be perplexed. If, however, you have some knowledge of what goes on in our classrooms these days you will be much less surprised. Sadly, our schools have achieved a brilliant success in terms of convincing many young people that a knowledge-lite education is no impediment to thought or opinion. Indeed, the perceived ability to build ideas and ideologies on limited understanding is a crowning achievement of educational reform over the past 30 years.

“It was our futures that you were voting on, not yours,” is the refrain of many disappointed young people. “What right does an older generation have to interfere with our demands?” There is an emotional, even poetic, allurements in all of this, of course. Its sinister and beguiling attraction was beautifully expressed in the “Cabaret” song, “Tomorrow belongs to me”.

Much the same cry was heard during China’s Cultural Revolution. Mao’s *Red Book* addressed the young and was

unequivocal as to their ownership of the future:

"The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you ... The world belongs to you."

Placing ownership of the future in the hands of the younger generation has a seductive but very flawed logic. Being readily open to manipulation it is, also, extremely dangerous, especially when it is based, at best, on lack of experience and, at worst, on lack of knowledge.

Survey after survey has shown, as I outlined in my CIB pamphlet *Generations Betrayed*, that most young people have very little knowledge of British history. Knowledge and understanding of how our democracy has evolved, for example, is largely unknown territory.

The latest version of the History National Curriculum is, in many ways, a surrender document to the European Union. It does not require the teaching of a single landmark event or personality from British history. Where specific events and individuals are mentioned they are only given the status of "examples (non-statutory) of what teachers "could include". The Napoleonic Wars have not even been awarded that status. They do not get a mention.

The Curriculum is a 'free for all'. Do what you what. It is Sex Pistols history – anarchy! The *Times Educational Supplement* resources website publishes model lessons for and from teachers. It is illustrative of how the Curriculum translates into classroom practice.

So, what history are teachers choosing to teach from, say, the 19th century? The site offers 23 model lessons on Lord Palmerston, 27 on Cecil Rhodes, 35 on Nelson and 37 on Pitt

the Younger. In contrast, there are 143 model lessons on Jack the Ripper. Topics are chosen on the basis of how far they allow history to be presented as 'detective work'. These days history teaching is all about developing so-called 'skills'. Content is largely irrelevant to this process. The History National Curriculum does, however, make an exception for the history of Islam, West Africa (Benin) and Central America (Mayas). These three topics appear on a statutory list, one of which must be taught.

The 'knowledge void' amongst young people has been filled in part by apathy. A willingness to participate in the EU referendum was much stronger amongst older people. The majority of 18-24 year olds, at least 57% it seems, chose not to vote at all.

This unwillingness to engage in the democratic process, a consequence of ignorance, surely, further emphasises a dangerous failure in our education system. Charles Moore suggested as much in a piece for *The Daily Telegraph* (28th June):

"In a democratic system, if you wish to affect your future, you must vote. This does not seem to be taught in schools any more – and nor is the impressive history of our parliamentary democracy – but it is the key point."

We should not, therefore, be too surprised by voting apathy amongst the young. Our school curriculum ensures, quite simply, that mostly they do not know enough to recognise the importance of political engagement.

Ownership of the future, consequently, should always be shared and cross-generational. The duty of older people to the young should never be benign acquiescence. Indeed, many young people, but not all, understand and expect direction and leadership from those who have seen and experienced rather more of the world.

Those young people who are now struggling to cope with the stress of the referendum result might have been better prepared had their education taught them that in a democracy one does not always get one's own way. It should, also, have taught them why their ancestors fought and died to preserve liberty, including the right to cast a meaningful vote.

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"Generation Snowflake" refers to young people, typically university or college students, who react with distress to the expression of ideas that they believe to be offensive or emotionally challenging.