

War on the old

I once received an invitation from a well-known university to attend a conference on ageing, and was astounded to see on the accompanying email quotations which painted older people as voracious pirates stealing the wealth of the country and leaving the younger generation bereft.

They were taken from a statement by Andy Haldane, Chief Economist of the Bank of England, and read, "Since 2007, the real disposal income of pensioners has risen by almost 10%. Those over the age of 65 have harvested fully two-thirds of that £2.7 trillion increase in national wealth."¹ I pointed out that these observations were taken out of context and were ageist, and was invited to put the other point of view as a speaker at the conference.

Economist don't seem to like older people. An article written by another said that they slow down global growth because they are not prolific consumers.² Others refer to them as a financial burden and a drain on the country's resources.

Yet a report by SQW, a leading economics consultancy for the Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS, now RVS) found that the older generation's contribution to the exchequer in 2010 was around nearly £40 billion and that by 2030 the overall value of the net contribution is anticipated to grow to nearly £75 billion, an increase of 89%. "The 'discounted' value of future economic contributions of older people is estimated to be worth £879 billion over the 2010-2030 period", it added, significantly exceeding the costs to the state of providing valuable state services and support, including the basic state pension (to which they have themselves contributed via accumulated national insurance contributions during their working lives), other welfare payments and services and health services.³

How many people know that? Perhaps Lord David Willetts, founder of the Resolution Foundation which lobbies government to tax the elderly in order to pay more benefits to the younger generation. Recently the Foundation's Intergenerational Commission report called for an NHS "levy" of £2.3 billion paid for by increased national insurance contributions by those over the age of 65.⁴ It said that all young people should receive a £10,000 windfall at the age of 25 to help pay for a deposit on a home, start a business or improve their education or skills, raised from extra taxes on pensioners.

It is not the first time he has suggested taking from the old to benefit the young. He seems to be ignorant of the struggles that many of today's pensioners had when they were young; many started married life sharing rooms in others houses, only dreamt of holidays, and "made do and mended" because they could not afford to buy new. Yes, they lived through more stable times, but they are not responsible for the globalisation that sees corporations depressing wages and fragmenting communities, or for the 2008 banking crash that was driven mainly by people in their 30s and 40s.

This financial intergenerational warfare was predicted in 1969 by Dr Rob Butler, the psychiatrist and social activist who coined the term "ageism".⁵ He said that ageism is a combination of three connected elements – prejudicial attitudes towards older people, old age and the ageing process; discriminatory practices against older people; and institutional practices and policies that perpetuate stereotypes about elderly people.

¹ Quoted by Salford University on its invitation to conference 'The Future of an Ageing Population Conference', 10 Nov 2016.

² <http://www.nber.org/papers/w22452>

³ https://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/Uploads/Documents/gold_age_report_2011.pdf

⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/pensioner-tax-millennials-25-10000-generation-gap-inheritance-a8340601.html>

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Neil_Butler

But, finance aside, there are other arenas in which ageism flourishes. A study by the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH), showed that millennials (those aged 18 to 34) have the most negative attitudes to ageing and older people, compared to other age groups. The study, “That Age Old Question”,⁶ described an appalling view of old age: forty percent believe that there is no way to avoid getting dementia as you age, a quarter believe it is normal to be unhappy and depressed when old, and the same number thought that “older people can never really be thought of as attractive”. The RSPH put this down to the segregation of the ages in our fragmenting families and communities, and suggests more integration between young and older people, and the banning of ageist sales slogans by the cosmetics industries.

A subtle, daily bombardment

Every day we are bombarded with negative attitudes about age and ageing, including in the workplace, and in the allocation of NHS resources, according to Age UK. The charity recently published research⁷ showing that nearly two million people have no purpose in life and believe their lives are not worth living – largely because they have absorbed ageist attitudes about being old.

Yet this rolling stone is being scraped of its moss. Eleven professors in nine European university centres are developing social interventions to combat ageism, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).⁸ Underlying much ageism in the younger is a fear of death, say the professors; younger people associate older people with the nearness of dying, and being near them, or even thinking about them, tends to evoke “death anxiety”. Other psychologists point to the inevitable tension between the young and the old as the young reach for autonomy and purpose in their lives.

Governments are realising that the older generation is too large to be doing things “to” and “for” and needs to be engaged in doing things “with”. The World Health Organisation (WHO) is tackling ageism all around the world.⁹ Greater Manchester struck a great blow against ageism in 2018 when it organised a “Festival of Ageing” to promote positive aspects of being old, with a host of fun activities across three major centres in the first two weeks of July.

Busting ageist myths

Ordinary people are demolishing ageist myths simply by ignoring them and getting on with their lives. We do not read their stories in the general press, but there are examples of a 101-year-old lady expanding her business by buying another sewing machine, and a 105-year-old who still teaches yoga. I have written about Douglas Higgins, a retired teacher and lay preacher who wrote a book at the age of a hundred to win others to Christ. These are not exceptions. Researching for my book, “What’s Age Got To Do With It?”¹⁰ revealed so many older people happily working in their 90s and 100s that my files were bulging! But the media is run by younger people who tend not to be attracted by oldies’ success stories.

Thanks to nudges by the WHO and the UK government there are other interventions, particularly in the charity sector. South London Cares are recruiting younger people for all kinds of events involving older folk.¹¹ Housing and care homes are welcoming visits from schoolchildren and others on a regular basis. Older volunteers in churches are helping in communities, saving the NHS around £3.5 billion a year, according to a recent report by the Cinnamon Network.¹²

⁶ <https://bit.ly/2Lft9P>

⁷ <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-news/articles/2018/march/age-uk-warns-of-risks-of-getting-into-self-destructive-rut-as-we-age/>

⁸ http://www.cost.eu/COST_Actions/isch/IS1402

⁹ <http://www.who.int/ageing/ageism/en/>

¹⁰ Lion Monarch, 2017.

¹¹ <https://southlondoncares.org.uk/home>

¹² <http://www.cinnamonnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/CFAA17-National-Report-update.pdf>.

Changing perceptions

The greatest challenge is to change people's perception of ageing and being old. "Old" is a cultural concept that changes with the context, and is certainly changing now, as longevity continues to increase. In my father's time many people died in their 70s, and 65 was considered old. Now, 85 is thought by many to be when old age begins.

Ageing is something that God designed when he set time in motion. His view of age is that it is a time of fruitfulness; of learned wisdom through experience; of a better emotional balance that does not catastrophise and takes the long view. The Scriptures imply a sense of "seniority" for older people. At the age of 46, gerontologist and social activist, William H Thomas, wrote a book called, "What are Old People For?" subtitled, "How Elders will Save the World",¹³ about the purpose of older people in society, introducing precepts that echo Scriptural principles. His publishers advised him to change the title, because a book about older people would not sell – it went on to win several awards.

Are we winning the war on the old? It is here, I believe, that our church should show the rulers the wisdom of Christ. Many churches are run by seniors and would collapse without them. As a rule, they work hard to attract younger people and look after them well, too. But there are also churches with profoundly ageist attitudes. I read a Christian magazine article recently entitled, "Why doesn't he go?" about congregations that say a pastor should always leave his church at a certain age. And retired pastors I meet at conferences and Christian events sometimes say how they feel abandoned now they have stepped down from churches that they helped to build up in the first place, because the new, younger pastor does not want him there.

Yet in Scripture the only place retirement is mentioned¹⁴ is when the Levites were instructed to retire at age fifty but were then encouraged to stay on to help their brethren with the work.

This is a war we simply must win. We will all be "up in years" one day, and we need to look forward to all that God has planned for us to do, and enjoy, without feeling that we are a burden, or "less than" others, when in fact we are "trees planted by the water, still bearing fruit".¹⁵

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¹³ *What are older people for* <https://www.amazon.com/What-Are-Old-People-Elders/dp/1889242209>.

¹⁴ Numbers 4:46-49.

¹⁵ Psalm 92:14-15.