

TODAY'S YOUTH, TOMORROW'S POLITICIANS: WHY EUROPE CAN'T AFFORD TO IGNORE THE ROLE OF YOUTH

Europe's democracy is at risk. Forget the threat of terrorism, the rise of nationalism and the migratory patterns of sick birds. The threat is not external, but emerges in the guise of political frustration among Europe's youngest voters. Marginalised and ignored by institutional politics, technological empowered and politically aware, young people are looking to non-traditional measures to respond and express their issue-based concerns. If European politicians do not react, appease and incorporate the views of young people, they risk losing an opportunity to give political space to those who are potentially the greatest advocates of the 'European dream'. They also threaten the very basis of Europe's participative democracy.

Alexander Macleod*



* The author is the editor at Generation Europe - the online platform where young people give feedback to corporate leaders and EU policy-makers on important political, current affairs & cultural issues.
The views expressed in this paper are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of Generation Europe.

"Youth is the future smiling at a stranger, which is itself." (Victor Hugo, Les Misérables, V.1.x, 1862)

It is a political reality that the future of democracy depends on the participation of young people. Yet why do young Europeans remain ignored and marginalized? Are they perceived as too radical or fickle for mainstream politics or perhaps the stigma of apathy excludes them from political attention?

Over the past five years, Generation Europe has worked to direct the views of young citizens towards influencing institutional and corporate policy as well as to remedy the misguided perception that young people are not important until they are of voting age.

This paper attempts to explain why the young are so important to Europe's future and to suggest that if they are ignored or marginalized, the European dream could become a European nightmare.

From enlargement to euthanasia, youth have strong views. The new media have overtaken traditional methods of opinion-making. This has meant that the young are increasingly making up their own minds as to what they choose to believe in, and are rejecting mainstream forms of expression in favor of blogs, chats and instant messaging. Rather than being apathetic towards politics, as some politicians would have us believe, the young are frustrated by institutional barriers that bar them from being heard by policy makers. They are, instead, choosing alternative routes to express themselves through technologically driven, informal and non-institutional channels.

The issue of Turkey's accession into the EU is particularly relevant in this respect. Young Europeans, at the forefront of Europe's ambitions, view the prospect of Turkey joining the EU as an opportunity, not a threat. However, concern for such issues as human rights suggests that principles will come before politics, and Turkey's accession will not be approved without certain political conditions first being met. As the recent demonstrations against the 'occupation' of Iraq eloquently illustrate, young people are not prepared to play geo-political games with human lives.

Apathy, Anarchy or Exclusion

A survey run by Generation Europe on 16 June 2004 three days after the 2004 European Parliament elections echoed the sentiment that young people have strong views on the future of Europe, but are not being adequately represented by European and national parliaments. The poor turnout reflected the fact that 'young Europeans are politically aware, under-represented, dissatisfied with party politics and lacking confidence in the European political process.'¹

¹ Generation Europe: *Findings of 2nd Pan-European survey of youth opinion and European politics*, 16 June 2004, <http://www.generation-europe.eu.com/images/files/GEApathySurvey2004.pdf>.

When asked about their reluctance to vote in the European elections, 24 percent of respondents replied they had 'no confidence in the European political process' and 24 percent agreed that 'young people do not participate in mainstream politics in general'. Lack of information' was given as a reason by 18.8 percent of respondents, whilst 17.7 percent agreed that politicians do not listen and therefore do not respond to the needs of young people. Just 8.3 percent said they felt their needs were best served at local and national levels. These sentiments were also acknowledged by the UK's Power Commission who concluded, in an inquiry in February 2006, that "the current way of doing politics [in the UK] is killing politics."²

On how to increase the participation of young voters in European elections, 40 percent said the solution lies in making mainstream political agendas more progressive, and 29,5 percent said that they would be more willing to vote if politicians actually campaigned on the issues that matter most to youth. But why have European politicians failed 18 – 25 year olds?

The process of selling politics is widely seen by political communicators as similar to that of selling a product. Whilst companies attract customers with financial and product incentives, politicians are in the business of selling ideas. As anyone in advertising knows, with the advent of new technologies the market for ideas is increasingly sophisticated. MTV (Music Television) – considered as the number one channel for young people - estimates that by the age of 20, young people will have seen up to 100 million media messages.³

Unfortunately for politicians, they are fighting for youth attention on the same battlefield as glossy magazines, fancy phones and aggressive advertising techniques, yet without having the same weapons to spread information and offer incentives. If political elections are going to compete, then campaigning will have to use techniques that young people use.

The Big Brother phenomena, and recent music and film awards, have shown that when millions of young people vote online or via SMS or TV screens, there can be no doubt that we have an active, critical and vocal population, keen to express their opinions. This does not mean there should be celebrity endorsements for the single currency or the European Constitution, but rather that politicians should use the technologies that young people know and trust.

Branded Politics

While it might be possible to include Europe's young in the electoral process, why should politicians bother? After all, the electorates that count are the traditional

² "Brown backs votes at 16 in radical shakeup of politics" *The Guardian*, 27 February 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/frontpage/story/0,,1718729,00.html>

³ MTV also claims that by the age of 20 young people would have listened to 60 million songs.

voters; those in the middle ground most affected by decisions of parliaments – not those whose greatest dilemma is whether to use the summer holiday to travel the world or to get a job!

Again, the analogy with business is clear. Corporations do not wait until young people have financial independence to buy their products before campaigning for their attention. In a tough market place, corporations target young people well before they reach double digits, in order to develop brand recognition and loyalty. Politicians must assist young people to develop a sense of ‘political branding’, i.e. to know how parties differ, what options exist, how policies vary, and what role young people can play in strengthening Western Europe’s democratic heritage.

Like him or loath him, Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi began giving evidence of his ability to blend corporate experience and political affairs when he recently sent a note to all Italy’s new-born, welcoming them to Italy, and informing their parents that they would receive a ‘baby bonus.’⁴

Whether or not inundating pre-natal children with pictures of smiling politicians in suits will actually develop a sense of participative democracy is yet to be seen; what is clear, however, is that within the next 20 years, Europe’s democracy will depend on them.

Young People: Driving the European Dream

European politicians should care about their future voters, not only for their political survival but because Europe’s young are often the most likely advocates of the European dream.

Free from the legacies of nationalism, single currencies, and interstate rivalries, young people are at the vanguard of Europe. Young Europeans have grown up with greater political, social and economic freedom than their parents, and are the recipients of the best of what the European Union can provide in terms of education and culture.

The Erasmus, Leonardo and Socrates programs of the EU, as well as greater labor, currency and travel mobility, have nurtured a generation (in most countries) that ‘feels’ a sense of ‘Europeanness’ in tandem with, if not greater than, a national identity. Whether cyber- chatting to Greeks about pending holidays, choosing Italian over French cuisine, or debating the merits of Sweden’s welfare system, in this pick-and-mix culture, young Europeans take the best to meet their everyday needs. European politicians should embrace this generation as the symbol of what Europe has achieved in ‘peace, stability and freedom.’

⁴ “Berlusconi woos the very young (and their parents)”, *International Herald Tribune*, 20 January 2006, <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2006/01/20/news/italy.php>

In the Eurobarometer survey of 2003⁵, the views of youth in the existing Member States and the candidate countries towards the EU were consistently positive. Most of Europe's young see the EU as an opportunity to; 'create a better future for young people', 'create jobs', 'go wherever I want in the EU', and as 'a means of improving the economic situation in the EU.'

The survey concluded that the EU is overwhelmingly perceived as a benign force in creating a better future. These positive attitudes were also reflected in response to the question, what the EU will have brought in ten years' time. The top four answers across 'new' and 'old' Europe were the same -- 'a better quality of life for most people', 'the use of Euro as the single currency in the EU', 'more opportunities for people like me to find work', and greater ease in traveling, studying, working and living anywhere in the EU.'

The same Eurobarometer survey also pointed to a similar degree of enthusiasm for the EU as a conduit for mobility. The encouragement of greater mobility among young Europeans is evidence that young people are the EU dream personified, as they share the aspirations of the Lisbon Strategy in becoming a mobile and competitive workforce.

Global Issues, Youth Responses

Evidence of the politicization of young people and their use of technology as informal channels to spread campaign messages can be seen in the Toronto based organization, 'Taking It Global' (TIG).

TIG is led by young people and empowered by technology.⁶ It connects youth around the world to find 'inspiration, information and to get involved improving their local and global communities'.

With a global membership of 100,000, TIG has been involved in helping young people organize their response to the UN's Millennium Development Goals. TIG has also been at the forefront of galvanizing young people to take action on other issues, such as voter apathy and HIV/AIDS.

In parallel to TIG, Generation Europe has also been on the frontline of helping to identify and transmit the concerns of young people. Working against the mainstream political perception that young people are interested only in fashion and frivolities, Generation Europe has concluded that young people have strong opinions, but not always the means to express them.

⁵ Eurobarometer: *Candidate Countries: Youth in New Europe*, January 2003, http://europa.eu.int/comm/youth/doc/publ/summary_young_people_in_the_candidate_countries_en.pdf

⁶ Taking IT Global, <http://about.takingitglobal.org/>

For example, respondents to a recent survey were asked to rank five issues of importance. In descending order, these were: 'foreign policy' (34 percent), 'environment' (26 percent), 'unemployment' (20 percent), 'terrorism' (11 percent), and 'immigration' (8 percent). Significantly, despite a high level of political awareness, only 35.4 percent said they had participated in the 1999 European elections.⁷

If their interest in making a difference was not clear enough, 600 young people from 120 countries descending on Scotland for the 3rd World Youth Congress in 2005 is a good illustration of political awareness and activity.⁸

These congresses bring together activists in the field of development to promote volunteering, global citizenship, and sustainable lifestyles. An additional aim is to draw to the attention of government and aid agencies how much young people can do – and are already doing - to support development goals.

The outcome of the congress in Scotland was an 'action toolkit.' The toolkit assimilates the experience of youth leaders and workers, providing an armory of knowledge and enthusiasm to fill the social gap left by 'bickering' politicians.

Its coming marks the arrival of an active and aware political force, empowered with the technology to develop networks, spread opinion and challenge the state by filling gaps in civil society. When young people ask to be included, when they demand to be heard, it is not just a cry for less homework!

If this force is to be controlled, legitimized and ultimately adopted by mainstream politics, its ideas need to be confronted. The challenge for politicians and policy makers is to examine the views of young people and to channel them into their manifestos.

A New Political Breed?

In the current political climate, however, these views are being ignored and young people are therefore seeking alternative means of representation. One such means has taken the form of support Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

In the Generation Europe survey on political apathy, 51 percent of respondents said that they supported Amnesty International, whereas only 32.6 percent said they support a political party. When asked why they were more likely to support an NGO rather than a political party, the respondents answered; "I feel more useful supporting an NGO than a political party with which I have, most of the time, diverging interests and opinions..." "NGOs are more trustworthy...more successful, transparent, down to earth and less corrupt than political parties"⁹.

⁷ Generation Europe: *Findings of 2nd Pan-European survey of youth opinion and European politics*, 16 June 2004 <http://www.generation-europe.eu.com/images/files/GEApathySurvey2004.pdf>

⁸ World Youth Congress, <http://www.scotland2005.com>

⁹ Generation Europe: *Findings of 2nd Pan-European survey of youth opinion and European politics*, 16 June 2004, <http://www.generation-europe.eu.com/images/files/GEApathySurvey2004.pdf>

Whether or not they have similar political beliefs, it is clear that young people favor supporting single issues with which they have a personal affinity, rather than a political party with an ideology they do not share.

The emerging electorate is living in a world that has moved beyond ideologies. Belief systems crumbled with the Berlin wall and the only voting intention passed between generations is the intention to abstain because it's not just young people who think that politics is boring or irrelevant to their lives. However, the success of celebrity inspired campaigns on issues understood by young people provided by Live 8 or the anti-war movement indicate that a political appetite exists.

If young people support single issues over ideologies, then in order to grasp the youth vote, politicians will have to identify the veins that thinly divide them, using means of communications that young people can access.

A good example has been EC Commissioner Wallström's use of internet 'blogs' to communicate her activities (under Plan D – Democracy, Dialogue and Debate).

Despite the fact that this is in English only, and despite the fact that it used for 'EU-bashing', it is nevertheless a courageous attempt to respond to criticisms that the EU is a distant, closed institution. The role of technology in spreading ideas, developing support, and bridging demographic gaps cannot be underestimated. Whether this bold step opens the door to public scrutiny remains to be seen.

Turkey, Youth and the EU

Turkey signed an Association Agreement with the then EEC in 1963. This was followed up by an application for full EU membership in 1987. Most young Europeans recognize that Turkey still has a way to go in such fields as human rights, the Kurdish issue, and the penal code, before it can be considered for membership, they welcome accession negotiations. However, they are not prepared to accept another EU member unless police and judicial reforms achieve parity with those of the EU Member States.

From blogs to bricks, the views of young people on Turkey have been vocal and polemic. The EU has often been criticized for being a political lightweight in global affairs, but this issue, brought to the EU's doorstep, is seen as an opportunity to revise the EU's 'soft power diplomacy' into something tougher-- putting the political and social integrity of the EU before economic benefit and its commercial and political interests with the US. The issue has also engulfed young people, who see Turkey's membership as a clear battle between human rights and economic welfare and therefore a symbol in the anti-globalization struggle.¹⁰

¹⁰ "Turkey and the EU", *The Brookings Institute*, 2 March 2005.

From the point of view of Turkish youth, a survey carried out by the ARI movement in 2004 - *The Perspectives of Turkish Youth on the European Union* – concluded that the majority of young Turks want Turkey to join the EU. Their reasons stem from the perceived benefits of improved education, health services, human and economic rights, and the benefits of mobility.

Specifically, 70.5 percent of the 24,571 Turkish participants between 15-18 years old support Turkey's membership of the EU, with only 16 percent saying 'no' to joining, some 71 percent of respondents would choose to live in another Member State, if Turkey joined the EU, and more than 70 percent of all respondents believe that standards in education, health, human rights and the economy would improve in Turkey as a result of EU membership.¹¹

Whatever perceptions young people in the EU may have towards Turkey, the fact that they are increasingly aware of Turkey is testament to the country's growing relevance. Furthermore, as Turkey and the EU draw closer, it will be the current generation of young people that will watch developments with the greatest interest.

Youth as political agents

For all its desire to 'become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' – as stated in the Lisbon Agenda – the EU has paid little regard towards young people. The European Youth Pact¹², agreed by Member States at the Spring European Council in 2005 to develop a unified and coherent approach to youth issues, has remained largely rhetoric.

Cultivating and maintaining the ignorant attitude that young people are not interested in politics is unrealistic as well as dangerous. By understanding, incorporating and pushing forward the concerns of young people, European politicians will be safeguarding our European democratic future, and will be putting it into the hands of those who most believe in it.

As future voter Mahboobe Ellahee stated; “nowadays, loads of people who are older than us aren't actually voting. My dad didn't vote in the last election. They think: "What's the point? I'm not going to make a difference." But children have a more positive view, and if you start from an early age it becomes a habit.”¹³

Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, declared young people; "the most precious resource this planet possesses". This is one resource that we cannot afford to waste.

¹¹ ARI Movement, *The Perspectives of Turkish Youth on the European Union*, 21 September 2004, www.ari.org.tr.

¹² YOUTH, European Commission, http://europa.eu.int/youth/news/index_1794_en.html,

¹³ “We can have sex, so why can't we vote?”, *The Guardian*, 28 February, 2006
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,1719479,00.html>