Bringing Generations Together For a Better World

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Good afternoon everyone:

It is often stated in the newspapers that young people are not interested in politics or the problems in our society. It is said that young people are passive, and do not want to take active roles in society. Is this claim true? Are the young people of our time more passive than their parents were when they were young; do they only care about their own interests? I would like to address you on this matter today and talk about the different ways that young people are being active in today's world even if those ways may not be valued very highly by our society.

According to recent surveys it is true that young people are not very interested in politics. But instead of simply blaming young people for passiveness and laziness, we could further examine the reasons for this lack of interest.

Voting is considered the most important way of influencing domestic policy and getting one's voice heard. Young people are often considered lazy voters, but not voting seems to be a growing trend in our society in general. The turnout of voters in general elections has steadily decreased over the past twenty years from 81% in 1983 to 69.7% in 2003. People in general are not as interested in politics as before. And if the parents do not exercise their right to vote, it is understandable that children follow the example of staying home on Election Day.

Another reason for the lack of interest in politics among young people could be the fact that in Finland today, the biggest political parties seem to be very similar. It can be difficult for a young voter to notice any differences between them. In the campaigns for the past general elections, all the big parties seemed to emphasize the importance of maintaining the welfare state, giving more benefits to families with young children, and so on. The parties may have different means of realizing those promises, but young people can find it hard to determine how those different ways would influence them and their everyday lives. Also, none of the big parties really promised any changes to the student benefits or educational opportunities. So, who do you vote for, when all the parties promise the same things and when none of those promises actually include you or your interests?

Could the reason why young people stay away from politics be that they are kept out? Could it be that the older generations are not interested in the problems of the young and do not care about their ideas?

Even if young people were lazy voters, they are still a part of society, and are affected by it. Nowadays, with the help of the Internet, it is easy to keep in touch with what goes on in the world. The news is often depressing. We hear about conflicts, hunger, poverty and global ecological problems. Unlike some may think, the news does worry the young people of today. Even though they may not believe in voting, they do believe that through their own actions, they can make a difference in the world. But instead of making a difference through domestic politics, they turn elsewhere, toward non-governmental organizations.

Many young people believe in taking action and making their statements heard by demonstrations. In Finland, as well as elsewhere in the world, young people have organized demonstrations for or against matters that, in their minds, need more attention than they are getting. Most of the themes in the demonstrations that gather a lot of people have to do with the inequality between the rich and the poor countries, like in the demonstrations against World Trade Organization in the USA, or against the abuse of animals, like the demonstrations against fox hunting in the UK.

Generally, demonstrations are seen as an ineffective method, and some even seem to think that young people take part in them merely to riot, rather than to promote a good cause. After the unfortunate events in demonstrations in Seattle and Göteborg, government officials are planning strict regulations for such events out of fear of riots. Even in Finland, the number of police officers supervising demonstrations has been increased. For example, there were a lot more police officers controlling the demonstration outside the Presidential Palace during the Independence Day reception last December than there had been in previous years. Some of the demonstrators wore masks, and after the demonstration it was suggested that demonstrators should not be allowed to hide their faces. It is very unlikely, however, that such a motion could be passed by the Parliament, because it would violate civil rights.

Now that there is a new war going on, there have been numerous demonstrations in countries all over the world, Finland included. What has been surprising is not so much the demonstrations themselves, but the fact that so many older people have participated in them. Demonstrations are considered to be the means of the young, not the old. No one is surprised by

the fact that a lot of young people are demonstrating against the war, but there has been surprise that their parents also have joined the marches.

It seems that the decision makers of today have forgotten what it is like to be young. They too held demonstrations in the 1960's and 70's against the injustices in the world. But as they grew older, they seem to have lost their passion. Maybe this war can show us that the gap between the old and the young is not as great as we thought. Hopefully in the future all people, young and old alike, can find a way to work together for a better society and a better world.

Thank you.

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