



‘The future of Europe: what do citizens say?’

Keynote speech at the Networking European Citizenship Education Conference 2018

*European Ombudsman, Ms. Emily O'Reilly
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Good evening everyone and thank you for the opportunity to address this conference which I've been following on Twitter for the last few days and the energy and passion exuded by all of you is most impressive.

You've had three days to discuss this issue in all its complexities so what I will try to do is to show you what it looks like from my vantage point in Brussels, the focal point of much of this debate and where my job is essentially to make sure that the EU institutions do what they're supposed to do when it comes to serving the people of the EU.

But before I do that I want to share a conversation I had with my youngest child a few weeks ago when she was offered a university place to study history. She enjoyed history in school and had put it down as one of her preferences.

But what, she asked me, would she actually do with a history degree. Of what practical value would it be? I answered that I couldn't think of anything better now to study, that the world actively needs people whose knowledge of it reaches back further than that day's Twitter feed. It needs people who are not seduced by populist magic, who can analyse a political play or a political player with references that reach back even to antiquity.

In its reference to Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World*, this Conference precisely recognises that need for context, for enlightenment, for the cool and rational understanding of this highly excitable, bewildering world of ours. Critically the conference also acknowledges the power of emotion in shaping our world the human capacity to make choices for bad or for good from the heart and not the head.

Orwell's book, alongside other English language dystopian novels from the past including George Orwell's *1984*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, all enjoyed a huge revival after the election of Donald Trump

as that election was perhaps the ultimate contemporary triumph of emotion over reason.

Last week, defending himself from damaging allegations in a new book by Watergate reporter Bob Woodward, Trump denied having used crude and cruel language in private conversations. I don't speak like that, said Trump, if I spoke like that, I wouldn't have got elected. The point of course is, that he does, and he did. People simply didn't care. Emotion over reason.

A quotation from Ray Bradbury's book might also have been useful for the conversation with my daughter. Fahrenheit 451 imagines an America where books are banned and history is therefore unknowable. The title refers to the temperature at which paper catches fire.

"With school turning out more runners, jumpers, racers, tinkerers, grabbers, snatchers, fliers, and swimmers instead of examiners, critics, knowers, and imaginative creators, the word 'intellectual,' of course, became the swear word it deserved to be."

Or perhaps from Orwell's 1984 which imagines a world where truth is whatever those in control say that is, where lies pass into history and become settled truth and where those in control can bend and twist it as they will.

Or indeed from Brave New World where the ultimate subversion of truth has taken place and control is exercised over : 'a population of slaves who do not have to be coerced, because they love their servitude.'

In those extracts we see traces of the darker elements that have reached perhaps a tipping point in some contemporary liberal democracies; the manipulation of thought, the distortion of truth, the incremental rise of authoritarianism, even a growing indifference by some to all of this once certain economic needs are met or latent prejudices validated by those in power.

History teaches us that none of this is new. At times of stress, economic, industrial, demographic, ambitious men –and it is usually men – have always sought to profit from the panic by painting black and white scenarios of who is to blame and who alone can make things better. History also teaches us what the outcomes have been, not necessarily what they will be, but pointers nonetheless.

This conference believes that one antidote to this move towards damaging and divisive populism is the development of citizenship education and on a European scale. I take this to mean increasing people's capacity to understand and to exercise good judgment on the nature of the political, social and economic world around them and to make rational decisions from that understanding that contribute to the common good whether through the simple act of voting or through greater active involvement.



I do have some hesitation about the phrase ‘citizenship education’ although I accept that it is widely used and understood and is often used interchangeably with ‘civics education’. Yet it can imply something imposed, something from the top down, something that suggests that there is one shared view of what citizenship is.

I imagine that Donald Trump’s view of what constitutes good citizenship would differ from that of many other Presidents for example or that the exercising of good citizenship in parts of 1930s Europe would look remarkably different to how it appeared in the post war years.

Today, in the EU, the exercising of good citizenship might include reaching out to refugees, while for others good citizenship would demand the creation of legal and physical barriers to keep them out, both groups believing themselves to be acting in the common good.

Even the word citizen is problematic as it suggests someone who is a legal citizen of somewhere as opposed to simply a person whether a legal citizen or not and as Ombudsman I of course deal with issues of concern at times of non-citizens.

Many countries have also citizenship tests that concern factual knowledge of a country’s history and laws rather than an assessment of how people will act as citizens. Passing the test does not mean passing a true test of what it means to be a rational actor in your community or in the country in which you live as a legal citizen or otherwise.

So if you strip all of that away, the challenge is how to increase people’s understanding of the environment in which they live in order to make rational and positive decisions that serve a wide common good and not a narrow self interest. Clearly education is vital but the factors that ultimately determine the quality of an individual’s ‘citizenship’ are multiple and in today’s technology driven world, a highly fractured and polarised media environment makes it exceptionally difficult to drive through a coherent message.

Many of us would see a vote for Brexit as an irrational act, one not in the common good. Yet, more than half of the British people voted for it and while many did so out of fear and frustration at their own life situations, many – often very comfortably off and well educated felt it to be a rational act and were politically led by people many of whom are very aware of indeed of history and of its lessons but who choose to advance politically in defiance of those lessons nonetheless.

Arguably, better citizenship education might have encouraged more young people to vote - ironically and sadly the group most opposed to Brexit - but what would citizenship education look like in a divided Britain now?

What would it look like in an even more divided United States where nothing that President Trump does or says disturbs his supporters and where the possibility of him winning a second term of office is a plausible one?

Is it possible to have a pan European citizenship education acceptable simultaneously to say: Hungary and France, or to any other combination of countries whose politics and attitudes towards the EU have become more polarised and where civil society organisations risk being labelled as outsiders, as others, even as enemies of the state. Can we have conversations now, not in our own echo chambers, but across that growing divide, before it is too late?

The 'Brave New World' theme of the past three days is certainly appropriate for describing the emerging new chaotic status quo in our democratic systems, even if some of the 'new' norms and political strategies we are witnessing hark back to earlier authoritarian eras.

Self-styled illiberal disruptors act by seeking to demoralise proactive citizens upon whom democracies rely to advocate for and uphold their values. Truth isn't just turned on its head but becomes entirely subjective, a matter of preference or prejudice rather than objective fact.

Responding to this challenge means not only ensuring that the tools for active civic engagement exist but also empowering and motivating citizens, and making sure they are not intimidated into inaction.

You clearly play a crucial role to this end, by making people aware of what options exist and by encouraging them to be active citizens, but responsibility also lies with our democratic institutions themselves who now, arguably, more than ever, have to behave with impeccable judgment and integrity. We cannot afford by our actions or words to give ammunition to those who would seek to use it to destroy something that is so precious and which was created out of – in Europe – the unspeakable evil of the second world war.

Some institutions may object to being asked to operate at a higher standard than others but that is the challenge and that is also part of the solution to regaining a calmer civic space and a re-strengthening of European democracy.

As European Ombudsman, my role is to act as an interface between citizens and the EU's administration.

The complaints I receive range from simple administrative oversights to difficulties with grants and contracts, conflict of interest allegations, alleged charter of fundamental rights violations, failure to invoke infringement procedures among other matters. What is common to all is a wish for the institution to be responsive and to be open, and not to rely on bureaucratic defences of their behaviour that lack empathy and understanding.

At a macro level, European citizens want open and ethical public institutions that are accessible and responsive to their needs. They want an EU that they can understand even at a relatively basic level and to know how they can be active participants in its decision making and not passive recipients of those decisions.



Most of my broad strategic priorities relate directly to this, whether we are talking about the right to participate in the EU's decision-making process, transparency, the accountability of the institutions or the ethical conduct of EU civil servants and particularly top officials.

In terms of public participation in decision-making, a lot of the complaints I receive relate to how the institutions organise their work, including the languages in which they operate and the accessibility of their procedures and websites.

The European Citizens Initiative is one tool that the EU has for facilitating the direct participation of citizens in the policy process. After six years, it has not yet delivered on its promise. Just four officially "successful" initiatives in six years, out of around 70 proposals, is not a lot.

The European Commission has worked to improve the ECI, and its proposal to reform the ECI regulation is, as you know, currently in the legislative pipeline. It is to be hoped that the EU legislators can sign-off on an ambitious reform before the elections in 2019.

Active citizenship cannot be a one-way street. Much of the public disaffection with democratic institutions derives from a perception that, while there may be structures to allow it to be expressed and heard, public opinion is not being listened to.

Democratic institutions cannot create tools for public participation but then ignore the issues raised by the public through these tools. The challenge of encouraging active citizenship, which is possibly the fundamental challenge for our democratic system, is to ensure that our institutions also respond to the views articulated by citizens.

My office has also dealt with various other types of complaints and launched inquiries concerning public participation in the EU's decision-making process including the transparency of so-called trilogue legislative negotiations, as well as trade negotiations; public consultations carried out by the Commission; and the public accessibility of documents, websites and other information, including for people with disabilities.

A common principle in how we have approached all these issues is the need to ensure that the EU's policy and decision-making process is structured in a way that encourages public participation, rather than acting as a barrier to it.

My ongoing inquiry into how the Council of the EU, which is the EU institution which represents the national governments, considers draft laws is one example of this. It is also a matter that is ongoing, as I have referred my findings to the European Parliament to seek its support

In order for citizens to be able to hold governments to account for the decisions they make on EU laws, they need to know what positions they took in the legislative process.

Greater transparency would also help enable those interest groups with a legitimate stake in a particular law to try and bring their views to the attention of European lawmakers..

One particular frustration for those who follow the EU's law-making process, is the practice by which member state governments criticise decisions taken "in Brussels" towards their domestic audiences. Yet, very often, during the legislative process "in Brussels", they had supported and/or shaped the very decision they subsequently criticise.

Systematically recording the identity of member states expressing positions in the preparatory bodies, and disclosing these records, would go some way to addressing this problem. It would also enable active citizens and civil society to better engage with lawmakers earlier in the decision-making process, with a view to ensuring their interests are properly taken into account.

2019 will determine the extent to which so called populism has taken hold across the EU and the composition of the next European Parliament and consequently of the Commission will be the test of that. So too, will be the political agendas that they set.

History teaches us not to be complacent , not to take anything for granted and that includes democracy. It remains a fragile thing. In my work I see the great benefits that the EU has brought to millions of Europeans. As an Irish woman I recognise that it was our membership of the Union, and not my own government, that liberated my generation from the kitchen and allowed us into the public sphere. I witness on a daily basis the quiet and effective work of thousands of EU civil servants much of which goes unremarked yet which directly assists the lives of many people across our union.

The EU has a good story to tell but it must also be open to challenge, to criticism that is constructive and must be brave and acknowledge its shortcomings when they emerge. It must above all seek energetically to engage with the people who will decide whether to confer legitimacy on it and particularly with the young people who will inherit it.

Only by doing so can the EU show its citizens that it is responding to their concerns. This is arguably the best way to motivate active and engaged citizens to promote and defend our democratic institutions.

The simplest yet most powerful act of civic engagement is nonetheless the act of voting..

Brexit showed that the failure to vote can have devastating consequences and this could also apply to the European Parliament in 2019. So I would urge you to



continue to play your part in encouraging as many voters as possible to exercise this power. This is your world and this is how you can create it as you wish it to be.

And to conclude, I should tell you that in the end, my daughter did indeed decide to study history, but has added politics as well.

