

Grasping for Unity in a Divided Britain: Ageism, Brexit-Era Politics & the COVID-19 ‘Boomer Remover’

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On the 19th March, the day before Boris Johnson ordered restaurants closed, I walked past the window of a packed Wagamama.

The day that it had been announced that London would be facing lockdown, tube stations would be closing, and the UK had reached a state of emergency...and there, in that Wagamama, was a group of young adults, so manned that they filled one of the restaurant chain's distinctive long benches with spill-over.

Why were they not taking social distancing seriously? Or, as popular discussion would have it, why were younger people specifically still insisting on meeting friends in public spaces, going out for meals, and to the pub?

A recent new phrase doing the rounds on social media has labelled COVID-19 the ‘boomer remover’, so-called because the mortality rate is higher in older people. Were younger people carelessly flouting public health advice because of ageism? It would be too easy to conclude this.

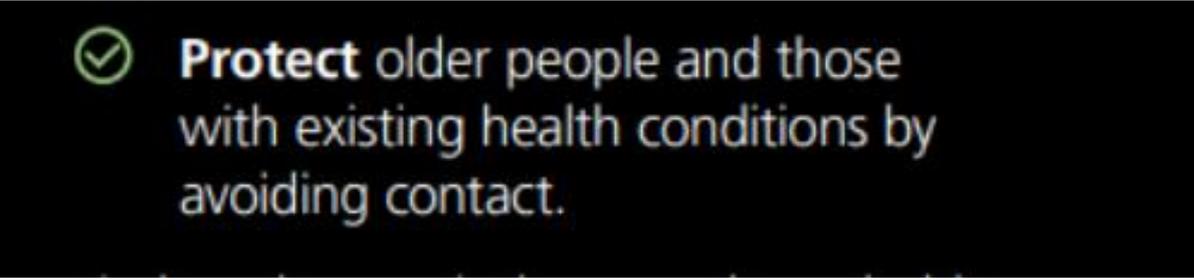
Instead, if we look to the past few years of British politics, we may find an answer to Britain's apparent lack of public health advice obedience, and a clue as to why we may be in our current situation in the first place.



But first, it may be useful to explore the British resistance to social distancing and the place of complacency in our collective narratives. The oft-cited, now-doggerel of a catchphrase to ‘KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON’ is an excellent starting point here.

Created in 1939 by the Ministry of Information to encourage people during World War Two, this phrase has found a recent resurgence of fame and has arguably been adopted as quintessentially ‘British’ by souvenir makers, poster-purchasers, and Brexiters alike. And once, when our ancestors faced the uncertain times of WWII, keeping calm and carrying on might have been a good strategy. However, despite the media's obsession with announcing the ‘war’ on coronavirus, this is a very different foe- and one for which the ‘carrying on’ tag line does not serve us so well. Instead, we should not ‘carry on’ with business as usual, but do something drastically different – shut ourselves at home and avoid everyone else. WWII wisdom does not altogether apply in the wake of COVID-19, but this mindset may be nevertheless difficult to shake. Not to mention the subtle semiotic semblance between the British royal crown atop the catchphrase and the implicit ‘crown’ of *corona* (Latin), so named for the virus’ ‘spikes’ that resemble a crown, subconsciously linking this wisdom to our COVID-19 response perhaps.

Yet, there may also be something else at play here beyond misguided understandings of how to react in a crisis, that speaks to the wider political circus of a Brexit-era Britain.



✓ **Protect** older people and those with existing health conditions by avoiding contact.

Arguably, what is distinctive about public health advice about coronavirus has also been distinctive about the last few years of politics in the United Kingdom. There is a generational divide.

We all know by now who is most at risk from the virus. The NHS announces on public health posters that we must “protect older people...by avoiding contact”, and those over 70 have been instructed to self-isolate at home. Global mortality from COVID-19 has disproportionately affected the elderly, and we have very real cause for concern over the health of this demographic in these times. However, we have also witnessed a media-led assault on inter-generational harmony over the past few years of British politics – a tense environment within which to now make an about-face in the name of public health. With tabloids persistently pitting the young against the old in the battle for Brexit and, more recently, Downing street occupancy, what now that unity is being swiftly invoked?

Before delving further into this, suffice to say that this is in no way a suggestion that the youth of Britain would actively ignore public health advice knowing that they might endanger the lives of the elderly. Nevertheless, if we are to begin to understand the deadly delays of a Conservative Britain’s reaction to COVID-19, we must pay attention to recent political representations and query their influence. After all, public health exists within its social, political and cultural context, and must be understood as such.

In 2016, the Brexit referendum result to leave the European Union was an early indicator that Britain was not a homogenous country in its approach to politics. Among many ‘divides’, some were reported louder than others: class, educational level, and *age*.

A frequent narrative of ‘greedy oldies’ swindling the young out of their futures became an repetitive trope, and the intensifying hostility towards older people over the referendum has incited some to suggest that age should be included amongst the possible categories for hate crime in the UK (Karpf, 2018) It has been reported that young people would be willing to agree to pension reductions in exchange for stopping Brexit, and generalised animosity towards older people has

caused a reduction in empathy towards elders. Interestingly, economists have argued that age was not the leading factor of a ‘leave’ Brexit decision at all, but instead individual unhappiness and personal finances were much more prevalent indicators (Liberini et al, 2017). Yet despite this, the ageist divide and the perception that older people have led the young to ruin has perpetuated, resulting in a persistent inter-generational ill feeling for some.





Whilst Brexit age-related indicators might not express quite the age divide as portrayed in popular media, recent voting patterns do instead suggest generational differences. Specifically, YouGov states that “age is still the biggest dividing line in British politics” and reports a persistent pattern of younger people voting for labour and older people voting conservative. For example, whereas 56% of 18-24 year olds voted for labour, only 14% of 70+ year olds expressed the same desires. Instead, 67% of the eldest demographic voted conservative, whereas only 21% of the youngest felt the same way.

Whether one personally supports the conservative party or not, this is the government that finds itself in charge to lead the response to coronavirus. Sadly, many have found the reaction of the prime minister Boris Johnson to be in the camp of ‘too little, too late’, as mass gatherings and lack of business closures have continued unabated whilst we watch the numbers of the infected rise at an alarming rate.

Now, after four years of consistently underscoring the generational incompatibility of Britons and fuelling the fires of age-based animosity, an about-turn is being attempted to implore people to suddenly prioritise the health of a demographic they have long been encouraged to vilify. This is inherently problematic.

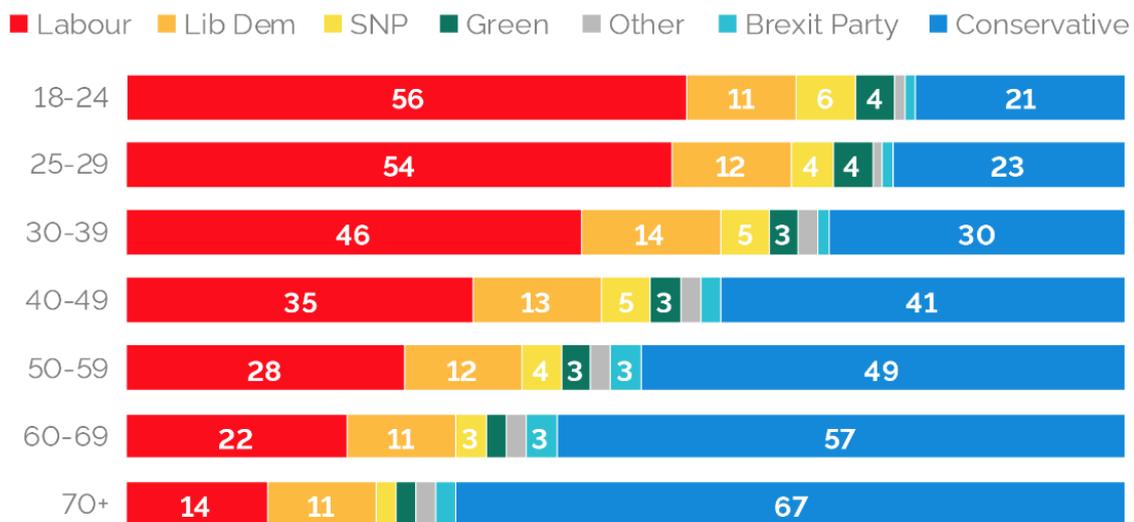
However, beyond the tensions in beseeching an age-based social awareness after encouraging the opposite are other factors to be considered. Specifically, the attitude of youth towards their lives; a subject very-much intertwined with the aforementioned political context in which we live.

Are the youth of Britain already somewhat apocalyptic in their approach to life?

Let’s start by looking at life security available to younger people in the UK today. As the phenomenon of zero-hour contracts, lack of living wage employment, and increased tuition fees for education, amongst other things, have begun to

Vote by age

% of 41,995 adults who voted at the 2019 general election



burden the youth, a distinct aura of insecurity and impending doom arguably hangs over younger people attempting to establish themselves today – especially in London. But to avoid becoming mired in ageist duels, we can stick to the facts.

Home ownership. In 1960, the average age of home owner was 23. Indeed, even in the 1980s when my parents wanted to buy in London, this was within their reach. Both in their early twenties, both unskilled workers. Nowadays, the average age of home ownership is 30. My friends and colleagues, many in their late twenties and early thirties, and skilled, cannot afford to buy.

Of course, it is not the fault of individual older people that this situation is so- but it does underscore the lack of security that younger generations have compared to their parent's generation. To bring this back to COVID-19 then, we may have a generation of people who face life differently than previous generations. Even apocalyptically, perhaps. Underscoring this, a young Miami partygoer was quoted as saying recently of his rejection of social distancing, "if I die, I die".

Then, if the world is ending, why not go to the pub?, this logic argues. And not for the first time. In the 2004 zombie-apocalypse British comedy film "Shaun of the Dead", Simon Pegg's character Shaun actively plans to reach his local pub as part of his apocalypse end-game, repeating his plan:

"Let's go to the Winchester, have a nice cold pint, and wait for this all to blow over."

Of course, this film is a comedy about a very different scenario than that in which we are living, but the underpinning logic is not so distant. If life is insecure for younger people in Britain as it is, led by a government that was largely chosen by an older generation whose desires and needs are different, why social distance? Why not go to the pub?

And so, to the pub they went.

That this was in direct opposition to the health of older people is not the suggestion here, only that it serves us little to point a concerned finger of judgement at the wanton behaviours of one demographic under a COVID-19 emergency without first turning to the wider political and social context that might have made such behaviours possible in the first place.

Indeed, the last decades of UK politics may have set us up for the incoming wave of infections far more than the behaviours of individual citizens. As reported in the British Medical Journal, death rates in the UK had already been rising under David Cameron's stewardship of state, with "unprecedented" increases affecting older adults, contributed in large part by [drumroll]...influenza (another type of coronavirus). The report suggested that austerity in the UK played a major role in this, resulting in earlier deaths from those with long term care needs and advanced age (Dorling, 2016).

If this is the health context that our recent politics have bequeathed us to deal with a pandemic, we need be concerned. Whilst individual behaviours and social distancing have been globally called upon to stem the spread of COVID-19, it is important to remember why our health system response is how it is, and why groups of younger people might not be so inclined to social distance on the instructions of a government that they never asked for.

Finally, although we have now finally seen the government-ordered closure of pubs, clubs, restaurants and leisure centres, these deadly delays may have come too late. However, blaming the young for socialising would overlook the delays of a government that did not seem to learn from the mistakes of other nations dealing with COVID-19.

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(Images from Pixabay, the Telegraph, NHS, and YouGov).

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