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## **Ageism is deep-seated but now is the time to tackle it, writes Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive, RSA**

Discussions about population ageing are complicated by the very different circumstances of the affluent and healthy on the one hand, and the poor and incapacitated on the other. After all, if we all worked until we were 65, lived healthily until we were 80 and died after a conveniently short illness there wouldn't be much of a problem. But despite the diversity of people's experience of retirement, the plight of the most disadvantaged older people does, in part, reflect a general cultural problem with our thinking about old age. Ageism is an issue for us all.

The future for vulnerable elderly people looks pretty grim. The budget announcement of 50,000 internships for young people in the social care sector is welcome but it remains to be seen whether this will arrest the year on year rise of the threshold of need to receive publicly funded provision. In the coming years the number of people who need care will rise at the same time as we face a drastic squeeze in public spending. All of us, however fit and healthy, will depend on our pensions when we retire. The Government remains committed to implementing its reform package in 2012, but in the meantime it has decided to take additional tax revenue from pension saving, albeit from the well-off. And as we await the long postponed social care green paper, those from lower income groups continue to fear the loss, not just of their independence, but of their hard earned assets.

The new charity now formed from the alliance of Age Concern and Help the Aged will have its work cut out defending spending on older people but there is a more fundamental task. Young and middle aged people, and the mass media directed at them, too often portray getting old as a terrifying disease. This can then become a self fulfilling prophecy as we shun older people and see them as, at best, an object of sympathy. Instead, we should recognise older people as a resource; for their experience, their wisdom and the contribution they can make to a strong and cohesive society. The Equality Bill strengthens legal protections against ageism but the law is most effective if it works with the grain of public attitudes. It is important to understand why ageism is so powerful, especially at a time when social attitudes towards the other 'isms' have moved in the right direction.

Research into neuroscience and behavioural science offer clues as to why we have come to have such unhealthy attitudes, and how we might shift them. Behavioural economics and social psychology tell us that human beings tend to be bad at making judgements over the long term. This means not only that we don't prepare for old age (for example, saving far too little for our

retirement) but that we aren't very good at empathising with older people. Yet unlike race, gender, and even sexuality, most of us will have been on both sides of the age divide. We may fear getting old but when we get there we will want to make the most of it. As someone once said, the one good thing about getting old is that it is better than the alternative.

As many studies have shown (research brilliantly summarised by Dan Gilbert in his book 'Stumbling on Happiness'), we are poor at predicting how change will affect us. We assume that we will be happy for life if we win the lottery and sad for life if we become disabled. In fact, over a relatively short time, most people adjust to even major changes, ending up at the same level of contentment as before their life circumstances altered.

This inability to understand that we change when things about us change means we just can't understand what it is to be older. We tend to think old people are just like us except less fit, less conventionally attractive, and closer to death. In fact, we will adjust to old age and – as long as other things in our life are OK – the research shows we are likely to be more content in our seventies than in our thirties (the age/life satisfaction curve is U shaped with people being most miserable in middle age).

Relying on too fixed a view of human personality, we tend to underestimate both the brain's plasticity and the way we are all affected by the circumstances in which we find ourselves. So we think of old age as a linear process of decline instead of a stage in life through which we continue to develop. Experiments with older people undertaking low level cognitive and behavioural therapy have found major impacts on their sense of well-being. Life satisfaction appears to depend much less on age, and even income, than on the kind of networks we are plugged into (family, church, volunteering) and the neighbourhoods in which we live.

There are many other reasons why we view ageing so negatively: the youth fetish in fashion and the media, and – as a self fulfilling prophesy – the actual conditions in which many vulnerable older people find themselves left by family and society. Many visitors to this country, especially from Asian cultures, are shocked by our attitudes to older people.

In his powerful book 'The Challenge of Affluence', the economic historian Avner Offer argues that greater prosperity erodes the 'commitment devices' which protect us from our psychological frailties. We think we can do without supports and restraints including not just family and community but social norms, for example, respect for the old. Thinking that we will die in our 90s from a heart attack while water skiing (undue personal optimism is another hard wired human character trait), we tolerate ageism and the poor treatment of vulnerable older people. Our irrationality goes even further; we worry that even to show concern for the frail elderly somehow makes it more likely we will ourselves end up that way.

We can't go back to a previous era of greater deference. We need to construct a new respect for age and its insights. This starts from asserting that

one of the characteristics of a good society is that it honours (not patronises) its elders. It involves recognising that being a good citizen is not just about respect for people of different race, colour or creed but also for people of different generations - the one form of prejudice still routinely paraded by otherwise politically correct comedians. As we begin to understand how vital it is to build greater collective resilience we could see older people as key to strengthening community ties. Finally, and most importantly, we might see that personal well-being is impossible if we are denying or dreading what lies before us in the final fifth of our lives.

The failing system of social care reflects broader inequalities and genuine policy dilemmas, but our tolerance of the plight of the vulnerable elderly also shines a light on our hang-ups about ageing. Just as the threat of AIDS inspired gay people to mobilize and demand equal rights, so the fear of being vulnerable in old age should inspire us all to get on with the long awaited grey revolution.

May 2009