

European apathy of the next generation

Source: *The Independent*, Saturday 26 June 2004.

Sir: At last the Prime Minister has begun to make a stronger case for British involvement in the EU, although it is regrettable that he chose to emphasise that which the EU is not, rather than that which it is. He should not underestimate the institutionalised apathy that he will need to overcome.

I have recently had two vivid illustrations of the difficulties facing the pro-European cause. I used the present European debate as the vehicle to deliver a Key Skills lesson to some sixth form students; on being given the task in hand, their reaction was that they knew absolutely nothing about the European issue, and cared less. Some were unaware that there had even been recent elections. When given a brief impartial outline of the issue, their general reaction was that it was of no importance to them. They could conceive of no time when the opportunity to work, live or otherwise participate in the wider European Union would be of any relevance to them. When required to develop some basic thoughts on the merits or otherwise of European integration, most of them came out strongly against it.

As teachers, we are rightly not permitted to promote partisan cases, but this alliance of ignorance and opposition is deeply concerning. There is some evidence (borne out by others of my students) that the more people know, the more positive they become, but if the vast majority chooses to remain ignorant, there is little we can do.

Later the same day, I received information from the AQA exam board. It is the only one to offer an AS-level course in European Studies, which I have taught for two years. Both times, I have had a number of students who have wished to continue the course into the Upper Sixth, but I was informed that the take-up of the course had been so small (less than 20 institutions offer it) that AQA is planning no future developments on quite understandable commercial grounds. Given the necessary neutrality of our educational institutions on this issue, and the inherent indifference of the upcoming generation, what hope is there of Britons engaging any further in the European project?

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