

Democracy Assembly

In one of those idle moments that all teachers say they don't have because they're far too busy with marking, some colleagues and I were recently discussing one of the great philosophical questions that has troubled mankind through the ages: who would win in a fight between a lion with a shark's head and an elephant with an alligator's head. It was a close call - the shark has pretty vicious teeth, but an alligator's head is heavily armoured and still pretty savage. In the end we decided that the elephant's body would trump the lion's and win the fight of the nightmare hybrids. Naturally, this heated and principled debate led us to consider other likely and noble contests. Who would win in a fight: Barack Obama vs David Cameron? Or Homer Simpson vs Darth Vader? Or Hitler vs Gandhi? For my money, the answers are obviously Obama, Simpson and Gandhi - and what a wrestling tag-team that would be, too... Our final hypothetical bust-up was between the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants from X-men and the staff of the RGS and we decided after some discussion that while Miss Lawson and Mystique were locked in deadly combat, Mr Travi would ring up the mothers of the mutants and put them in detention, and that would be game over.

This set us on another path of enlightened enquiry - is there a more irresistible and powerful force on earth even than the Travi detention? A hurricane? Perhaps, but they're predictable and more or less avoidable for most people. A super-volcano? Maybe, but how often do they even happen? Any good geographer knows that the most significant force on earth, just pipping after-school catch-up sessions in the computer room, is probably the humble water molecule. However powerful any creature or spectacular tectonic phenomenon may be, anything which can create the Grand Canyon is a force to be reckoned with, and all the more remarkable for being made of only very loosely connected individual molecules which have virtually no effect on their own.

Of course, the immense force that can be exerted by a collection of individually ineffective agents - this is the very point of democracy. No one person has exceptional influence, but everyone plays their part in potentially totally reshaping the landscape. I suppose it's like saying that Ironman would definitely win in a fight against a 1-year old kid, but against 100 1-year old kids? Or 1000? Or 10000? Soon enough, people power reaches a critical mass and Tony Stark would be dribbled to death if nothing else.

But if people power is so significant, I wonder why, for instance, only 1/3 of eligible voters in the UK bothered to turn up to the last elections to the European Parliament, the next round of which are this Thursday? That is to say, the European Parliament which shares national authority over issues like immigration, workers' rights and the environment.

I suppose some combination of apathy and distaste at the available candidates is responsible. Russell Brand articulated a lot of people's opinions, especially young people, when he said recently in a cracking interview on the BBC - look it up on YouTube - that he was "not voting out of absolute exhaustion from the lies, treachery, deceit of the political class ... where you have a disenfranchised,

disillusioned, despondent underclass that are not being represented by that political system."

Strong stuff and I would agree with Brand - up to a point. It's hard to escape the feeling that there is something self-serving in British politics. When was the last time you felt represented by Michael Gove or anyone in Westminster, for that matter? But surely we can recover the democratic urgency which led women to sacrifice their lives for the Suffragette movement, which led to over 500 million people voting in the biggest single election ever in India recently, which led to a nearly 60% turnout in Afghanistan even in the face of a coordinated programme of intimidation and suicide bombers.

For you guys, I think, the question should not be "should you vote when you're old enough", but "how do you start now to make your voice and your opinion relevant?" And "How do you make these people represent what is important to you?"

First of all, I would suggest, make sure you're well informed. If Cristiano Ronaldo's twitter feed is your only source of current affairs then you might just as well give up now and accept that your generation will be screwed over before you realise it's too late. Watch the news, read a variety of papers and blogs, listen to the world news on the radio, whatever it takes to know enough that you're confident you're not being hoodwinked by multinational companies, media barons or governments with an agenda of their own.

Then when you feel you know what you're talking about, make your representatives represent you. And do it now, not when you're 18. If our local MP got, say, 800 letters in his postbag on the lack of facilities for young people in Wycombe or overpricing of football tickets or the HS2 project or whatever, he would have little choice but to take it seriously.

You could attend demonstrations, serve on youth councils, badger your parents into considering your views before they vote, start a blog or use social media to talk about the issues that are important to you and try to get people behind you. You could join organisations that campaign on things dear to your hearts like Greenpeace, Amnesty International, Oxfam, Liberty and so on...

And in a relatively recent twist, you guys are in a fantastic place to utilise the communal power of the internet, using e-petitions like those on the "38 degrees" website. They've already had some serious impact, through claiming to represent literally millions of people, on issues like closure of A&E wards as in Wycombe, class sizes in schools and rising university fees, all things that affect you directly.

That name, by the way, 38 degrees, is apparently the angle of snowslope at which human-caused avalanches are most powerful. All those tiny, delicate snow crystals, tearing up the place. And so we return again to the idea of the irresistible force of the many. I suppose my argument comes down to this - if you think that politics is irrelevant to your lives then you're delusional. And if you think that not voting or ignoring the whole process is going to change anything,

you're plain wrong. But together, there are so many ways you can change things for the better, right now, if you only bother to find out more and get involved and make the people who represent you listen to what you have to say.