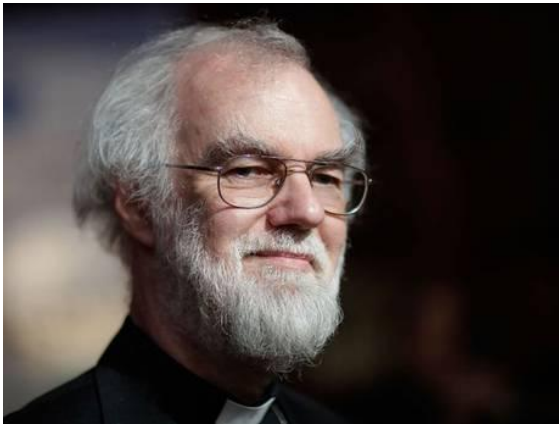


# Archbishop's last word: our view of elderly is a scandal

## Rowan Williams uses final speech in House of Lords to decry society's attitude to older people

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'They are tolerated but not valued while we look at our watches, waiting for them to be off our hands'

Getty Images

Old people in Britain are too often treated with "contempt and exasperation" by the rest of society creating a climate in which "elder abuse" is rife, the Archbishop of Canterbury has warned.

In his final speech in the House of Lords before he steps down, Dr Rowan Williams said too many old people were now thought of as a "problem" and waiting to die in a country "frenetically oriented towards youth". He warned that such attitudes were contributing to abuse ranging from patronising and impatient behaviour to actual physical mistreatment. And he called for elderly people to be viewed as "participants" in society rather than "passengers". Dr Williams, who hands over to the Bishop of Durham Justin Welby at the end of this month, said: "Too often we want to rush children into pseudo-adulthood; too often we want older citizens either to go on as part of the productive machine as long as possible or to accept a marginal and humiliating status, tolerated but not valued, while we look impatiently at our watches, waiting for them to be 'off our hands'." He said that the "extremes of human life" – childhood and old age – were both being sidelined because of an "eccentric idea" that only those in the so-called prime of life could make a contribution. "We tolerate a very eccentric view of the good life or the ideal life as one that can be lived only for a few years between, say, 18 and 40," he said. "The 'extremes' of human life, childhood and age, when we are not defined by our productive capacity, and so have time to absorb the reality around us in a different way – these are hard for our society to come to terms with."

Dr Williams called for the Government to appoint a national Older People's Commissioner as he pointed to estimates that one in four older people had experience one form or another form of "elder abuse" "It is assumptions about the basically passive character of the older population that foster attitudes of contempt and exasperation, and ultimately create a climate in which abuse occurs," he said. Dr Williams told peers of studies showing that more than half of all over-60s already carry out some form of voluntary work, to "support the fabric of society". He said that the unpaid care or volunteering work was worth the equivalent of at least £50 billion. Recently published census figures show that one in six people in England and Wales – or 9.2 million – are now over the age of 65 with another 3.3 million more due to retire in the next few years alone. "[It is an] undoubted fact that we are becoming dangerously used to speaking and thinking of 'an ageing population' as a problem, a burden on public purse and private resources alike," said Dr Williams. "If we live in a society that expects its older citizens to continue to support the fabric of their society and values them for doing so, we shall at least put to rest the damaging stereotype of older people as essentially passive in relation to society at large. "And that means in turn that we may stop seeing the older population as primarily 'dependents' on the goodwill of family or neighbourhood or state." Dr Williams drew parallels with scripture which he said resonated with society. "Running through my head has been one of the most haunting prayers in scripture: "Do not forsake me when I am old and grey-headed", he said. "It is a prayer addressed to the creator but it could very well be addressed by older citizens to their fellow

citizens.”

Michelle Mitchell, the Charity Director General of Age UK said: “As a society we need to change our ideas about older people and what they have to contribute; for example, encouraging employers to look at the maturity and experience that an older worker can bring to the workplace. “Long term unemployment for those over 50 is scandalously high – if you are a man in his fifties and become unemployed then you have a 50 per cent chance of being out of work for over a year. Yet more and more people are choosing to work past their traditional retirement age so careers do not have to have a best before stamp. “Perhaps perceptions around age are stuck in a time warp because many younger people have less day to day contact with older people than those of previous generations. The way we live has changed and grandchildren are less likely to live around the corner from their grandparents. “We need to find new ways of bringing different age groups together to demonstrate the important contributions all generations make to our society.”

A spokesman for the Trades Union Congress said: “One thing that has happened is the ending of the default retirement age, that was a landmark. We are finding that people are working past their retirement age because they don’t have enough pension savings. We have an ageing workforce but no savings culture. We now have automatic enrolment, which is good. But that will take decades to take hold. “People need to start saving, which we have started. But they also need to start saving more. A landmark was reached with automatic enrolment but we are dealing with decades of falling pension provision. Workplaces will need to encourage people to work more. “In the meantime, we may have a generation which needs to keep working because they cannot afford to retire on the money they have.