



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

Doing it at sixteen

Finally 16-year-olds are on the national agenda on a host of issues – and the beauty of this debate is that we are at cahoots whether they should be getting more rights, other roles and further responsibilities. I must admit, this is music to my ears!

In this article I will be focusing my reflections on whether the consent for sexual relationships should be pushed down to 16 years of age.

If truth be told, many people still perceive young people as being the decadence and debauchery of our society with the usual moral panic button being pressed fixatedly. But it still is virtuous to hear politicians and commentators talking about 16-year-olds, trying to understand, even if it is one of those issues that bamboozle our society, how young people think in terms of sex at what 'we' consider as being an 'impressionable' age. But the mistaken thing to do is to set down all 16-year-olds in one basket because there is no way that 16-year-olds subscribe to one homogenous cluster.

In all truth, one generation after another we have tried to be *au fait* with young people's sexual encounters. For ever there existed this outlook that youth are amoral, immature and impulsive when it comes to sexual behaviour and hence the need for strict legislative protection.

As we coast into a post-modern society, it makes it even more difficult for the community to keep tabs on what young people are doing and saying and hence the moral panic. This makes 'us' rather scratchy and abrasive towards new-fangled lifestyles.

Some 10, 15 or possibly 20 years ago it was comparatively easy to herd young people into youth centres flushing into them guilt feelings from the first to the last minute they spend on site, controlling relationships, monitoring behaviour and

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putting on the spot anyone who dares think of 'doing it' at 16. How can we dregs of Gen X think clear when adults patrolled each corner of our improvised discos and it was only with some luck that we managed to get hold of each other's hips as we swung left to right with the emblematic glitter ball throwing colourful rays all around and the stroboscope making us look like robots as we moved to the ABBA and Bee Gees beat.

Let's face it, the lack of control that middle-aged people have on young people injects in 'them' a state of alarm. It has always been like that and probably will not really change much in generations to come.

Dr Godfrey Farrugia, MP,

family doctor and Whip on the government's side has rightly so re-ignited the debate around sexual consent. The Opposition seems happy to have this debate as well from what I gather. Even though this shouldn't automatically mean we need to change things to appease the Europeans, we are practically all alone in the EU. All others consider it legal for people to have sexual encounters at 16 years of age or less (with the anomaly that in Malta we already allow marriage at this same age perceptibly with parental consent).

Some are arguing that it is high time that this issue is sorted out as we need to get ourselves aligned with modern Europe. Local experts, both legal and medical, have spoken about the positives of having the age of consent pushed down to 16 years. Recently, during the TV discussion programme *Xarabank* even Bishop Charles Scicluna seemed to favour this position affirming that we need to be sure the checks and balances are in place.

However, these 'yes-no' positions bother me in extremis as they risk trivialising and simplifying a very complex debate. The matter at hand is much more multifaceted. Beyond the morality we need to read into the details.

The truth is that the empirical research that has been presented on this issue at local level so far is not compelling. We could do with data that is not just looking into acuity but understanding actual behaviour and lifestyle.

There is also the complex issue of whether amending the law and accepting that young people have sexual relationships is something that

should be led by politicians or whether it should be a debate that is taking place amongst experts in youth studies, counsellors, therapists, medical professionals and legislators in close assembly with young people themselves.

This does not just concern young people but is also about a transformation in the way we do our formal and informal education, about the skills needed by educators, pharmacists and parents, it is about improving our medical services in terms of GU clinics and therapists amongst others.

We also need to strengthen legislation that will protect young people from potential adult abuse because we need to admit that there are predators out there and that such a change in the law will make it increasingly difficult to prove wrong doing. In the UK and the US we have repeatedly read about relationships that are happening between teachers and their students for example.

The role of politicians is to raise this issue on the national agenda.

Now it needs to be taken away from their hands and left for experts and young people themselves to balance out the pros and cons, examine the current laws, understand the morality and ethics behind the possible scenarios and see the wider implications of such a decision on the lifestyle and transitions that young people at that age are going through.

Only then will it be the turn of the politicians to take the decision and legislate accordingly. Forcing the debate would be wrong but letting it pass like water under a bridge is terribly unfair.

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~~Seven dead in space shuttle disaster~~

The American space shuttle, Challenger, has exploded killing all seven astronauts on board.

The five men and two women including the first teacher in space were just over a minute into their flight from Cape Canaveral in Florida when the Challenger blew up.

The astronauts' families, at the airbase, and millions of Americans witnessed the world's worst space disaster live on TV.

The danger from falling debris prevented rescue boats reaching the scene for more than an hour.

In 25 years of space exploration, seven people have died – today that total has been doubled.

President Ronald Reagan has described the tragedy as "a national loss".

The Challenger's flight, the 25th by a shuttle, had already been delayed because of bad weather. High winds, then icicles caused the launch to be postponed from 22 January.

But Nasa officials insist safety remains their top priority and there was no pres-



sure to launch the shuttle today.

The shuttle crew was led by Commander Dick Scobee, 46. Christa McAuliffe, 37, married with two children, was to be the first school teacher in space – picked from among 10,000 entries for a competition.

Speaking before the launch, she said: "One of the things I hope to bring back into the classroom is to make that connection with the students that they too are part of history, the space programme belongs to them and to try to bring them up with the space age."

President Reagan has put off his state of the union address. He was meeting senior aides in the Oval Office when he learned of the disaster.

He has called for an immediate inquiry into the disaster but he said the space programme would go on – in honour to the dead astronauts. Vice-President George Bush has been sent to Cape Canaveral to visit the victims' families.

This evening, the president went on national television to pay tribute to the courage and bravery of the seven astronauts.

He said: "We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them this morning as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and slipped the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of God."