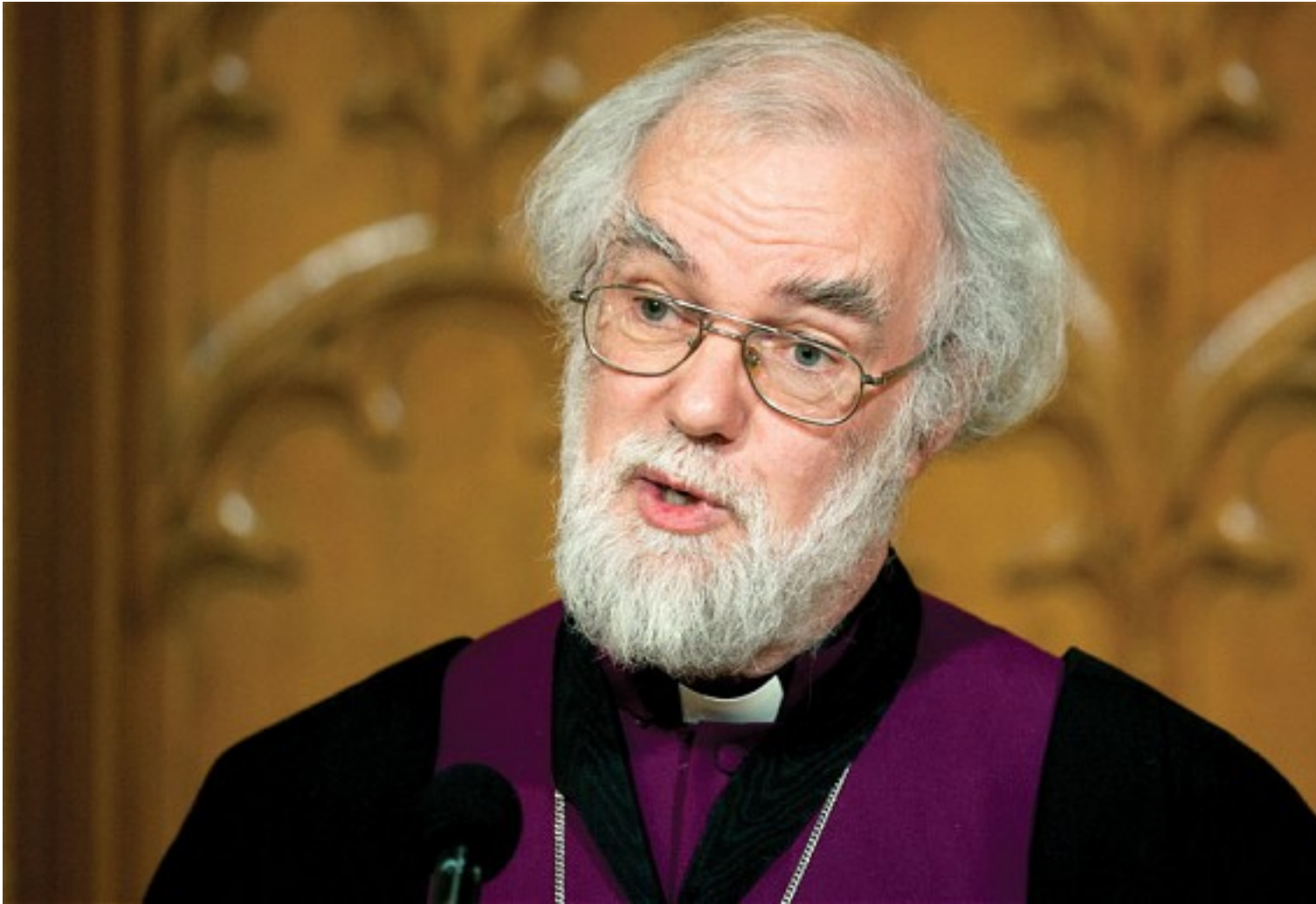


Archbishop of Canterbury: society can't wait to get old people 'off our hands'

British society is missing out on a massive contribution the elderly could play because too many people are simply waiting for them to die, the Archbishop of Canterbury has warned.



The Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams Photo: Christopher Pledger

In his last speech in the House of Lords before he steps down, Dr Rowan Williams said too many older people being were being “tolerated” rather than “valued”.

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.

And he warned that the tendency to view older people as “dependents” or a “problem” was the root cause of neglect and abuse.

Dr Williams, who steps down at the end of this month, was speaking as he opened a debate in the Lords on how elderly people should be viewed as “participants” in society rather than “passengers”.

The 62-year-old said society was so “frenetically oriented towards youth” that it is missing out on the contribution older people can play.

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“Its effect can be both to ignore the present reality of responsible, active people in older life, who are still participants in society, not passengers – and to encourage younger people to forget that they are ageing themselves, and that they will be in need of positive and hopeful models for their own later years,” he said.

“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.

“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.

“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 also warned that because families are becoming more scattered as people move to different areas, some young people are growing up with little contact with older people.

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.

Despite this, older people are routinely seen as “passive” and “dependents” instead of an asset, he said.

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 millions 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.”

He added: “We must recognise that 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.”

During the speech Dr Williams called for the Government to consider introducing a commissioner for older people along similar lines to the system in Wales.

Dr Ros Altmann, director general of Saga, welcomed the idea.

“It certainly makes sense to introduce some kind of role which champions this group and looks at their interests across the board,” she said.

“This is, of course, a huge role spanning a range of Government departments.

"We should start thinking of our ageing population as an asset. Incredible advances in health and medical care mean that people are living longer and healthier lives and older people continue to contribute to our society in many different ways - whether it is using their skills in the workplace, supporting their families or through volunteering and caring for others. People simply cannot be considered 'past it' or 'over the hill' in their sixties, seventies or beyond anymore. We have record numbers of over 65s choosing to stay in employment - providing a boost to our economy and generating an income for themselves."

John Bingham - The Telegraph