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Turning back the tide, but how? Citizenship Education for a citizens' Europe

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Abstract

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The twelfth century historian Henry of Huntingdon came from the town where I grew up in England, and so he is of special interest to me. He tells a story which is probably famous around the world: the story of King Canute who tries to stop the tide. This story is often retold as if King Canute was naive enough to believe he could stop the forces of nature, but in the original account Canute knows full well that the tide cannot be stopped, and he sets up his throne next to the lapping waves to demonstrate to his courtiers that he is not as powerful as God, that secular power is nothing compared to divine power. A couple of centuries later, another famous person from Huntingdon, Oliver Cromwell, led a contingent of angry commoners in revolution and would sign the paper to cut off a king's head, showing perhaps that if kings are no more powerful than Nature or God, they are also no more powerful than their assembled angry subjects.

Which tides might we want to turn back today? Here are three: some people want to turn back the 'tide' of immigrants, others want to turn back the tide of 'populist' parties, others still, taking the metaphor literally, are concerned about the rising oceans. If we learn something from the allegory of King Canute, it is perhaps that we should think carefully about which tides we try to stop, and ask what is in our power.

It is arguable that the flow of migrants is unstoppable - human movement a natural phenomenon - and that vain attempts to stop it will only result in the tide bringing in more dead bodies. Citizenship education here needs to lead to a moral reflection on the consequences of our policies and privileges, and to provide both newcomers and autochthones with the skills, resources and confidence to deal with diversity, change and welcome.

Climate change and the rising sea levels as a result of human activity is something that we can address, even if preparedness for more extreme climatic events is a prudence we should learn: here citizenship education has the urgent roles of promoting a self-conscious use of resources, and learning of skills for mutual aid and responsibility.

What to say about the rising-tide of the populist parties? Are these the signs of the rising power of the people, the result of a tide of discontent, or are they something more sinister, a rise in the power of ignorance and hatred? Surely here several things are mixed: amongst them justified indignation at economic injustice and political



failure; a sense of declining influence and power in a globalised, complex world; a cultural and moral void exacerbated by consumerist capitalism. Here citizenship education has a task no other form of education can reach: to provide the imaginative resources, moral referents, practical skills and factual information to empower citizens themselves to take action to address those injustices that are in our power. Such skills can create a modern cosmopolitan commonwealth of citizens, which will set its own limits to the power of our leaders.

