

ASTC SPEECH

Embargoed until Saturday 24 September

A new word entered the vocabulary this year when the UK voted to leave the European Union – Brexit. Only weeks after the historic decision, we still don't know what Brexit truly means, but it seems to have unleashed something which is reverberating not only around the UK and Europe but also the entire world. The general consensus is that we are now watching the emergence of a new divide that is likely to shape the world's political, economic and social fabric for the next 50 years.

Who voted for Brexit? The answer was disproportionately older, white, working class, less educated and poorer people. Those who voted to stay in Europe were, in the main, younger, ethnically diverse, better educated and better off. I guess this sounds familiar to Americans in the audience, because for the most part, this mirrors the divide playing out in the current presidential election.

This divide is rooted in the central reality of our times – a world being reshaped by the advance of globalisation and technology. Although economics was undoubtedly an important factor in the Brexit vote, the most disruptive element by far is NOT the fast and free movement of goods, services and information across the planet, but the movement of people. This migration of people in and out of countries has produced an emotional backlash against immigration, refugees and indeed the entire idea of globalisation. Starkly put, economic issues affect the head, identity issues hit the heart. Even before the Brexit vote, many of us were aware of the current refugee crisis in Europe which has provoked a palette of reactions in public opinion, ranging from unconditional solidarity to pure xenophobia.

There is a new divide. On one side, there are people who see an open world - with globalisation and technological change - as broadly beneficial but on the other side, there are others who regard these forces as threatening and destructive.

It seems that the new politics of our age will not be 'left versus right' but 'open versus closed.'

Over 65 million people in the world today have been displaced by conflict and persecution. Immigration is causing large societal changes that play out in specific, tangible ways in our communities. How do we integrate so many new people? How do we deal with different languages, beliefs, customs and religions? At the ECSITE conference last June, Bojan Markicevic, a refugee of the war in Sarajevo, had the sharpest words and bleakest assessment on the relevance of science centres. Next to his life and death stories of separated families, starvation and deprivation, science centres seemed of limited use to migrants and refugees.

Of course, science centres are not a substitute for addressing immediate needs, like food, clothing, shelter and healthcare. But we do have a duty to engage with new members of our communities, wherever in the world they might be – and we are starting to do so.

Let me offer you some examples.

In Germany, the Deutsches Museum found that offering free entry to migrants was not enough. As their exhibitions director said: 'how can you feel at ease and learn anything if you wander round on your own in a cultural institution whose codes and language you don't understand?'

Instead, the museum provided German lessons linked to an understanding of the country's technological culture and way of life. It also catered for young refugees with low educational backgrounds offering workshops run by their own retired craftsmen who volunteered to share mechanical and technical knowledge.

Here in the United States, the Explora science centre in Albuquerque, New Mexico has held an ongoing series of conversations with a wide range of communities including Mexican, Vietnamese and Chinese immigrant groups – they asked participants to describe the kind of community they want, their aspirations, and the obstacles standing in the way. Recently, their visitors have said: 'I like that there are people like me here' and 'I tell my friends that they shouldn't be intimidated to come here'. When prompted to explain what does "like me" mean? Explora says there are many answers – it's about how people look – clothes, tattoos, piercings, skin or hair colour. Often it's about staff being warm and welcoming. Sometimes it's not exactly clear. A visiting first grader said: 'I think I don't know what I think. But I think I wanna come back here again' So Explora is certainly doing something right!

And of course there are many more examples of innovative approaches. From the Immigration Museum in São Paulo, working with some of the estimated one million overseas immigrants in the state, to the award-winning social programmes at Science Alive in New Zealand, for families displaced by the Christchurch earthquakes. Every country on every continent is affected in some way by migration and the movement of people.

And as chair of ASTC, I am very proud of what our global community is doing. In 6 weeks' time, ASTC joins with UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific

and Cultural Organisation; with ICOM, the International Council of Museums; and with networks in other continents of the world – in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, India and South America - to celebrate the first World Science Centre and Museums Day. This really is a big deal for us. It's a fantastic opportunity to showcase some of the great things we are doing and to highlight that collectively we can address global challenges such as the ones I have highlighted this morning.

International Science Centre and Museums Day is on November 10 – I'm sure you have the date in your diary and are planning great things but if you haven't, there's still time. And you'll be able to find out lots more about it during the conference.

Many of us have been comfortable talking about the role of migration in a historical context when we cover early human evolution. But I think we need to recognise that this is also a contemporary story, a permanent characteristic of humans to which we can adapt and respond but not ignore or deny.

Major shifts in demographics and therefore increasingly diverse audiences are going to impact more and more on science centres. If you're thinking that this is something that can be shelved for a few years while you deal with greater imperatives, or that the answer lies in creating a few special programmes for minority groups - think again. This is NOT an optional box ticking exercise.

There will come a point, sooner for some of us than others, when the current core audience becomes the minority. When that tipping point inevitably occurs - we need to be ready.

This requires a step change in our thinking – and a fundamental re-examination of business models. What is fit for purpose today, will not be fit for purpose tomorrow.

I hope that we can explore this together at the conference, share experiences, learn from each other about what can work – and just as importantly, what doesn't work.

It's time to wake up and smell the coffee - wherever the beans come from. Science has the power to be a unifying force. Let's not miss this opportunity to make a difference.