The phrase “OK Boomer” got to be front-page news when Chlöe Swarbrick, a youthful member of the New Zealand parliament, used the phrase against a heckler. She had been trying to explain why her generation was unwilling to accept delays in addressing climate change. She pointed out that her generation, and the ones to follow, did not have the luxury of sweeping the problem under the rug the way many in the older generation had done.

The “OK Boomer” phrase is apparently an outgrowth of an endless series of exchanges about the “problems with today’s youth” on the one hand, and “older people have ruined everything” on the other. Which is all very normal in intergenerational relationships. It’s a debate that the younger generation always wins in the long run by outliving the other side. But this situation is a bit different, because we Boomers are leaving the next generation with an incurable problem that will last far beyond their own lifetimes, global climate change.

Swarbrick herself offered an important insight into what’s wrong with m any people in my generation. In a later essay explaining her concerns, she said:

“Wisdom – that being the skillset of a critical mind and solid judgment – comes from consistently exposing oneself to new and novel situations, in turn developing greater understanding of the world, those in it and how to solve evolving problems. When you close yourself off to new ways of looking at things; when you become conservative in mind – that being, a preference to shut down conversation and the potential for progress associated – you become intrinsically less likely to hold the requisite open, critical and creative ability to tackle unprecedented, evolving socio-political challenges.”

There’s a lot of truth to that, and it’s probably part of the reason why Boomers — my generation — are on average much less likely to deal with an unprecedented problem like climate change. You can even see the generational difference among Republicans, despite the GOP’s current ideological commitment to climate denial. According to a recent Pew poll, “about a third (34%) of Millennial and Gen Z Republicans (including those who lean to the Republican Party) say human activity contributes to climate change a great deal, more than double the share of Republicans in the Baby Boomer or older generations who say the same (14%).” As I discussed in a 2018 post, a similar generation gap exists across the population as a whole.

Apart from the biology of aging and its effect on the brain, there are probably other

reasons why Boomers are less likely to be on board. On the whole, education levels are lower among the older generation, and they lacked early exposure to climate science. Moreover, as Chlöe Swarbrick herself was saying at the time she was heckled, her generation will be around in 2050 and beyond to experience the cascading impacts of climate change; Boomers generally will not.

Of course, these are only statistical generalizations. There are climate denialists among the young and climate activists among the old. And we shouldn't give up on the idea of bringing more Boomers on board, as I tried to do with this open letter.

The balance of power in society will inevitably swing more and more to millennials and their younger successors. But the climate crisis doesn't provide the luxury of simply waiting for that power transition to play out. For that reason, it remains crucial for all of us to push for immediate action, despite what sometimes seem like high odds. If some Boomers are too blinded by ignorance or ideology to see the need for action, the rest of us will have to work all the harder.