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In Session: Leading the Judiciary
Episode 32: What Matters About Generations
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Bobby Duffy: Generational thinking is an incredibly powerful idea that's been horribly corrupted by terrible stereotypes, myths, and clichés.

Craig Bowden: Today on *In Session: Leading the Judiciary*, we talk with public policy expert Bobby Duffy about his book *The Generation Myth: Why When You're Born Matters Less Than You Think*. Duffy discusses what's real and not so real about differences among generations. Stereotypes like baby boomers hate technology and millennials are lazy not only lack support, but can be dangerous by creating division and distracting from real issues. Duffy argues that to understand how different generations have shaped society, it's essential to consider the political, economic, and cultural contexts impacting everyone and the lifecycle changes common to all generations.

Bobby Duffy is a professor of public policy and director of the Policy Institute at King's College London. Previously he was director of global research at Ipsos MORI and the Ipsos Social Research Institute. His first book *Why We're Wrong About Nearly Everything*, published in 2019, examined the causes and consequences of human delusion.

Special thanks to today's guest host, Angela Long, senior education specialist for Executive Education at the FJC.

Angela, take it away.

Angela Long: Bobby, thank you for joining us this afternoon for the podcast. We're grateful to have you as our guest and to spend some time talking about your fascinating book, *The Generation Myth*, and dispelling some of the myths that we're all so familiar with.

So in your book you say a lot about what we've been told is generational actually, in fact, is not. So first things first. What is a generation and how are we defining it today?

Bobby Duffy: First, it's absolutely brilliant to be here. I'm really looking forward to the discussion, Angela.

Generations, as I talk about them here, are birth cohort generations. So they're defined by when you were born. In the book I try to keep it quite simple. So I just break it down into five main adult generations that we have right now. The pre-war generation, so those born before 1945. In the U.S. it's quite often broken down further into silent generation and greatest generation, but I just group them together because there's not that many of them in the population now.

Then you have baby boomers. The massive generation born in 1945 to 1965 really was the result of a baby boom. Then you have Generation X which is my generation. The best of all

generations in many ways but never talked about, hardly ever talked about in generational analysis, and we were born in 1966 to 1979.

Then you have millennials. Again a very famous high profile generation particularly compared to Generation X. They got a lot of blame for killing lots of things across social media and media reports. They were born from 1980 to 1995.

Then finally Generation Zers or Generation Z in the U.S. which is 1996 kind of onwards up to 2012-ish. We don't quite know the end point of that yet, but there are already people talking about the next generation of Generation Alpha which are effectively still kids. We don't know much about them as yet.

Angela Long: So how does what you call true generational thinking differ from more traditional ideas about generations?

Bobby Duffy: Yeah, I guess if I was summing up the book, trying to sum up the whole book and all the analysis that we've done in one sentence, it would be that generational thinking is an incredibly powerful idea that's been horribly corrupted by terrible stereotypes, myths, and clichés driven by media and social media reporting and stereotyping.

But true generational thinking is actually incredibly powerful. It goes back to some of the biggest thinkers in philosophy and sociology. People like Auguste Comte, the French philosopher, who actually thought generational change was *the*

key driver of how societies change. And there's a Hungarian sociologist called Karl Mannheim who gave us a lot about the thinking that we still use today about how generation effects show themselves.

Really there are only three types of change that explain all changes in society. First of all the period effects where something happens and we're all affected regardless of when we are born or our age. So things like an economic crisis or a pandemic, but also changing fashions and cultural norms count as period effects.

Then you have lifecycle effects in which we change as we age and go through different life stages. As you come out of education, you get a job, get married, have kids, and then retire. All of those different things shift us and our thinking behaviors and opinions.

Then finally you have cohort effects, which are true generational effects, where a generation is different from other generations and stays different throughout their lifecycle to some degree. This is where the big confusion comes as people mix up these effects. In particular they ascribe things as cohort effects, true generational differences, when we're really talking about lifecycle effects.

In particular, we mix up these effects for young people. So we look at the behavior of young generations and we say

that's a Gen Z characteristic or a millennial characteristic when really it's just a young person characteristic that they will grow out of as we did.

So understanding those three things. I use this three-way split of period effects, lifecycle effects, and cohort effects almost every day in my thinking about what sort of change we're seeing in society. It's a really useful framework to bear in mind.

Angela Long: You said the stereotypes have become pervasive.

Bobby Duffy: Yeah. That's the problem as we very quickly trip into caricaturing. Once you give something a label and you think you know something about them, you very quickly roll in other characteristics and think the whole of that group is like that. Really the task is to unpick which of those three effects is dominant in the change.

It's really important to understand that because, if generations are truly different from each other, then that's a key not just to understanding now but understanding the future. But the other effects are really powerful too. One is not more important than the other. Lifecycle effects are really powerful. Period effects are really powerful. So you just need to unpick them carefully.

Angela Long: I thought it might be helpful for our listeners to name some of the generational stereotypes. Some of the ones that come up for me are, for example, baby boomers' dislike technology. They resist learning new things and they're retired in place. Millennials are lazy, entitled, and disloyal job-hoppers. And Gen Zers prioritize autonomy and work-life balance. Are there others that you would mention that you hear a lot?

Bobby Duffy: Oh, absolutely. So many. There's more stereotypes than reality or more myths than reality unfortunately. Then there are really important realities that get lost in all those myths. I think, I mean, there's many. Some of them, the most damaging ones, are things around for example climate change where there is this very clear strong suggestion and impression that older people don't care about climate change.

So when *Time* magazine made Greta Thunberg their person of the year in 2019, they called her an avatar in a generational battle between old and young. That sets a really terrible tone about it's only young people that care about climate. Not older people. But actually, when you look at the data on this, first of all younger people are slightly more likely to say climate change is a serious thing. But it's a matter of a handful of

percentage points difference between say Gen Z and baby boomers. There is no meaningful gap anymore.

And then second, even more important in many ways, is it's actually Generation X and younger baby boomers who are more likely to boycott products or services for social purpose reasons than the youngest generation. Partly because they're a bit wealthier, they've got more choice, and maybe you do get a bit grumpier as you get older so you kind of probably act on that more. So note that's a really disruptive one because it's sending a message that's not true. Not just not true, but divides us on an issue that we need to come together on across generations.

Angela Long: So how do these stereotypes -- I mean they're so pervasive. How do they come to be and why do they persist?

Bobby Duffy: Yes, a really good question. I mean I do think there is that point of it's a human trait to categorize things into one group or another on the basis of some information and then to generalize from that because there's a lot of cognitive overload on us as humans. The particularity of every situation too hard for us to think through, so these labels provide really handy short-hand for this type of person and this type of person.

We like to define things by what they are and what they're not, so they quite often end up in opposition. So there's an

element for which this is a storytelling aspect of humans to make sense of the world. I do think there is also this sense of rosy retrospection. This is another absolutely key bias that we have where we tend to forget the bad from the past, which is a useful psychological trick that we have for ourselves for our own health. But it has the downside of making us think that today and the future is worse than it actually is because we forget what the past was like.

You can see that a lot in generational work because we always think today's young are the worst that has ever been in history. That is kind of, regardless of what era you go to, you always see exactly the same pattern of thinking that today's young are uniquely wrong and weird compared to everyone else.

You go back to Socrates, 400 BC, who had a massive long diatribe against young people of his day. He called them lazy, in love of gossip in place of activity, and having bad manners. You could just translate it to today very, very easily. But you can go to any era and you will see the same sort of thing. That's partly that we forget that we were also annoying and weird to our parents in our day. So there are these biases that push us in these types of directions.

Angela Long: That's pretty amazing, to think 400 BC and you could still translate it to today.

Bobby Duffy: Yeah. We did actually ask in a survey in the UK of -- we read out a big passage of Socrates' writing about young people, but asked people whether it applied to young people today. Over half of people agreed that it did. So there is this sort of constant sense that it's the same patterns again and again repeated.

Angela Long: What does your research reveal about the truth behind some of these generational stereotypes? Can you give us some examples of where research has really kind of dispelled some of these stereotypes?

Bobby Duffy: Yeah. I mean the workplace is a really key place to be very clear about the reality of differences between generations because it's one of the areas where some of the noisiest myths and stereotypes come from. There's an economic element to this where, if you say that this new generation is completely different, then you need to do completely different things and understand them completely differently. You'll need advice on that and how to do it, and we have the answer to that.

So there is a lot in the workplace about younger generations being particularly disloyal to their employers, or being particularly lazy in terms of working fewer hours, or just interested in their own advancement and not the overall corporation or organization. None of those are seen as true in any meaningful sense, that it is true that young people change

jobs more than older people early on in their career. But that's always been the case. If anything, the thing that has changed most in the workplace is older people moving jobs more than older people did in the past because jobs for life have gone to some degree and there is a bit more flexibility in the labor market. So young people are not acting that differently from before.

The working hours thing is interesting because this is a mix-up more of a period effect with a cohort effect because working hours have been declining historically. You know, over the long sweep of history, they have gone down quite significantly for people. So younger people, yes, are working less than younger people in the past. But those types of areas are really dangerous myths for people.

The trouble is it masks some really, really important economic changes where it just absolutely is the case that younger generations have had a tougher economic environment and context compared to baby boomers in particular who did benefit from the boom period where there was huge stock market growth and huge house price growth. So they accumulated an awful lot of wealth and wage growth.

Then as it came particularly in the U.S. and as it came to Gen X, wages started stagnating and people were more locked out of the housing market than particularly with millennials who

suffered from the housing price boom and then crash, around the financial crash and tighter lending rules and so many other changes in economic context. So they've actually had a much tougher economic time. Saying they're eating too many avocados or they've got this Netflix lifestyle and gym subscription lifestyle and that means that's why they can't own their own home or that's why they're not financially solvent, it's nothing to do with that. It is all to do with this changing period effect context of much tougher economic times.

The tragedy is, instead of people recognizing the changed context, what they tend to go to is blaming the victim. It's called fundamental attribution bias where, if something goes wrong for someone else, we think it's down to their character. If something goes wrong for us, we think it's down to the context of being more difficult. That's really important because it means that they get less help.

The policy and political context for them, I mean it doesn't bend towards their needs partly because there is more powerful political demographics in older generations. But partly because of these sorts of biases as well that people don't recognize the problem.

Angela Long: How can these generational stereotypes negatively impact employees particularly and managers in the workplace?

Bobby Duffy: That's a really good question. There are real costs and risks to this. There is something really weird about how we would ascribes a negative characteristic, like lazy or disloyal, to a generation but we would never ascribe to another protected characteristic like a race or gender or even an age group. That would be seen as clearly as prejudice. But generations seem to get a free pass on you can say anything about millennials or baby boomers, and that's very destructive in terms of setting a tone within an organization.

So I think you can waste a lot of money on this type of astrological thinking. A lot of it is really astrological where in some quite serious seminars and books on generations in the workplace they will say things like Generation X is cynical compared to millennials, and millennials like team working where Gen Z likes to work alone. Things that you could apply exactly the same to Taurus or Capricorn and you would be just as accurate. Not just a waste of money potentially, but also have a negative consequence on working relationships between groups.

Angela Long: It's fostering division.

Bobby Duffy: That is one of the sadness, because one of the big trends in generations over the years, is how different age groups and cohorts are living much more separately now than in the past. This is a real, real trend in the U.S. and the U.K. where some U.S. academics talk about this as a dangerous

experiment in age segregation. That's tragic because we know that both generations, both ends of the generational spectrum really benefit from intergenerational connection.

So this is why workplaces become really, really important because we've lost lots of the places, physical places, where older and younger generations come together. But the workplace is still one of those, if we encourage that connection rather than trying to say everyone is very different across the generations.

Angela Long: As you were describing that, I was thinking that so many workplaces are teleworking or hybrid going forward. Would that be a period effect?

Bobby Duffy: Good question on two levels. First, if you're at a particularly formative stage of your career or life when these big shocks happen, then that can have bigger repercussions for you later. We see that in COVID. More generally the young people, people going through transitions from school to higher education and to the workplace, were particularly vulnerable to the effects of COVID.

The second reason is really interesting. It's lots of people who look at organizational development have been worried about the extent to which more remote working generally will affect the career development of younger people. We actually did a study in London on the London workforce on this. The

interesting thing was that, while we're worried about young people's opportunities for advancement and learning through osmosis and observation, the young people themselves are really buoyant about hybrid working and saying actually that they feel positive about their opportunities to ask questions and their opportunities to put themselves forward for things. They actually themselves view this as quite a positive development.

So it's a really interesting question here, about whether that's a naive view from young people and they just don't realize what they're missing out on. That they can't see how people deal with difficult situations or if there are some benefits from this new environment. That maybe young people are right and this isn't going to halt their development if we can extract the good from the technology and this new way of working.

Angela Long: Okay. There are a lot of stereotypes and misconceptions, but are there any real generational differences? What causes them and what are their impacts?

Bobby Duffy: Yeah, there are huge differences and really important ones. That's some of the tragedy of these myths in stereotypes getting in the way because it's really useful to understand change. So a lot of them are economic. Some of the negative impacts of the much slower economic growth, much lower

wage growth, and particularly private wealth growth have utterly changed the life story for some groups of young people.

And it goes all the way through from that into many other sorts of behavior. One of my favorites is around alcohol consumption. It's an incredibly generational behavior in the sense of regular alcohol consumption. In the UK, for example, around 30 percent of the pre-war generation drink alcohol five times or more a week. It goes down to about 25 percent of the baby boomers, and 15 percent of Generation X, and down to like 5 percent of millennials and 0.2 percent of Gen Z. And this incredibly flatlines over time.

So people have been socialized into very different relationships with alcohol where it's not just the norm to have regular drinking. It's becoming increasingly less so. They seem to be fairly stable patterns that are staying with people as they go through different stages of their lifecycle. So those types of things you can only really see by looking at generations. They're important behaviors even if it's relatively small.

Angela Long: Are there any other rapid technological or social changes that come to mind for you and can you share some of those examples?

Bobby Duffy: Yeah. Technology is a crucial element of generational formation and then change and separation in many

ways and that goes all the way back to people like Karl Mannheim who thought about generations. But when he was talking about technology being vital to understanding generational formation, he was thinking about control of the means of production really because he was writing at the turn of the 20th century when there was a big move towards industrialization and higher tech industries for those days. That for him was like a move of power from older people with older skills to younger people with younger skills.

The trouble with understanding of technology affecting generations today is it tends to be trivialized into who's on the latest social media platform and who isn't. There are a million failed attempts at naming generations around technologies. You know, the Nintendo generation or the TikTok generation or whatever. Really it's those bigger trends that are really important to understand for technology the kind of huge transformation of our information environment.

During the growing up phase for a particular generation, that is a really big and important trend. There are lots and lots of benefits of that, of connection for people, but there are also very worrying signs about its impact on mental health for young people and young women in particular. So I do think technology is vitally important from an economic sense and then from these complete transformations of our information

environment, but it's much less about those trivial technological platforms that you will see often linked to explaining a generation.

Angela Long: It's a little overwhelming to think about, particularly when you think about the advent of the iPhone. So we're really only talking in the last 15 years, less than 15 years.

Bobby Duffy: Yeah, it's a very short term. We won't understand the full implications for some time. The risk is, if you too quickly say this is all about smartphones or social media, you miss the much bigger and more complex patterns. Then you're looking in the wrong place and you're taking the wrong sorts of actions.

Angela Long: So in the book you talk about the scam of generational workplace research. What is that?

Bobby Duffy: That's effectively, as we were talking about, that playing on managers' and leaders' uncertainty about younger generations in particular to sell them or to more or less create a problem to sell them the solution to that problem. That is the worry. It does connect some of the themes that we've been talking about because partly why leaders of organizations feel more uncertain now is because of that trend we were talking about, that actually generations live more separately now. The more separately you live, the less you understand each other.

The less contact you have between each other, the more alien you seem to each other. People are coming into the workplace not having as much connection across the generations and age groups so everything feels a bit stranger.

I see this a lot in a university environment where there's nothing in any of my data that says that this generation of young people coming through have particularly unusual attitudes on social issues or behaviors in most respects. Every generation is different and they're not changing at a rate or in a massive step change from the differences that you see between younger and older people in the past, but a lot of the lecturers and professors feel more alienated from them and that is partly because they don't see them as much anymore. They're in separate physical areas. They're in separate digital spaces where they're doing -- the professors and lecturers may be online, but they're not on the same platforms doing the same things as the young people.

So we're living parallel to each other. And when you come into contact in those sorts of circumstances, the other side is always going to seem a bit weird to you. That is part of the driver for asking people to come in and tell you how to do it. And, actually, it doesn't need that. It doesn't need the big generalizations of one generation is cynical and one is open-

minded. In those types of things, it needs connection between people and positive forums for them to do that.

Angela Long: What should organizational leaders and managers be doing that would be helpful?

Bobby Duffy: The old theories of contact theory is still very powerful. It needs to be in the right circumstances working towards a common aim or something that people can get behind with the right sort of power dynamics and all set up well. But that's exactly the sort of environment that good workplaces can create. There is a natural advantage to the workplace because we are all there to do a job and achieve something. So it's more about that. It's more about making those sort of spaces for connection.

I would really, really encourage people to be cautious with their use of generational labels at all in workplaces or elsewhere really. It's quite often what we're really talking about is 18 to 28-year-olds. That's roughly what Gen Z is now in the workplace. So talk about 18 to 28-year-olds, don't talk about Gen Z, because it's going to be a feature of their youth as much as their cohort. And creating this sense of identity, that's actually not going to stay with that cohort.

We should drop these labels. Quite a lot of very high quality analysis from Pew uses these types of labels. I think the conclusion from that for me is we shouldn't ditch the labels

for that type of proper generational cohort analysis that's looking at generations over time, but we should drop or seriously consider every time you want to use a generational label for a snapshot that you should think twice and probably not do it.

Angela Long: In thinking about what really matters, why do you say the bigger question is what work is?

Bobby Duffy: Yeah. I think there are some massive changes coming in through technology, and particularly artificial intelligence, and how that is going to shift what we do. I'm sure people will have played around with ChatGPT and other AI tools now and how remarkable they are at mimicking some aspects of what humans can do more in the knowledge space than in the physical space.

Technology and then artificial intelligence is going to transform the world of work, but we don't know quite in what ways. That's always been the case. The technology has definitely made some jobs redundant and definitely made other jobs simpler and quicker, but it's always grown the pie bigger than the loss of the jobs. So the question marks right now are really can that continue or will there come a point of acceleration on what the technology can do that actually means there is not as much work for humans to do?

This is not necessarily a bad thing at all. You may have seen recently there has been a four-day week experiment in the UK and in the U.S. that shows that actually a four-day week works really well. Productivity goes up unaffected from that four-day week and much greater satisfaction among the employees. So it's so much so that this trial, I think it's like nine and ten of the companies in this trial, are going to continue with it beyond the trial because it just seems to work.

So there are going to be these types of changes which you really probably couldn't have imagined 10 or 20 years ago. From a generational perspective, it's very easy to forget that while it's true previous industrial revolutions did transform our productivity and made it better for everyone eventually, there were decades of disruption between the beginning and end of those that really were not good for people caught up in it.

Angela Long: So do you feel like that's the future leaders should be preparing for?

Bobby Duffy: I think we should be looking for the opportunity, not just the risk. I suppose it's really hard as you get older, like me, to be open-minded about these kinds of big changes. Like this is absolutely natural and in fact essential to the movement of societies. If we as a slightly later career person are not uncomfortable about the changes we're seeing, then society is probably not changing enough.

Feeling discomfort is actually a good sign. There are demographers in the 1950s who talked about generations as a type of demographic metabolism that keeps society from becoming a stagnant pond. So it's not dissimilar to your kid's music taste. If you don't hate your kid's music taste, then something's probably gone wrong.

Angela Long: Then something is wrong.

Bobby Duffy: Yeah. Yes.

Angela Long: Well, I love the idea of that's normal. Your research has shown that prior generations have felt the same way and that it's actually necessary for progress.

Bobby Duffy: Yeah.

Angela Long: Bobby Duffy, thank you so much for your time today and in sharing your thoughts and ideas about *The Generation Myth* and your book. We want to encourage our listeners to read it. We hope they will. We appreciate the opportunity to dig into it a little bit with you. Thank you.

Bobby Duffy: Thank you. That was really great. Thanks, Angela.

Craig Bowden: Thanks, Angela, and thanks to our listeners. To hear more episodes of this podcast, visit the Executive Education page on fjc.dcn and click or tap podcast. You can also search for and subscribe to this podcast on your mobile device.

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