Launching Crossing Channels

**Speakers:** Rory Cellan-Jones (Host), Professor Diane Coyle (Bennett Institute for Public Policy), Professor Paul Seabright (IAST – Oxford)

*Rory Cellan-Jones:* Hello and welcome to *Crossing Channels*, a joint audio endeavour between the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge and The Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse.

I'm Rory Cellan-Jones and in this series, we'll use the interdisciplinary strengths of both institutions to explore and answer some of the many complex challenges facing our societies.

To expand on the sort of issues the upcoming series will cover, in this teaser episode we'll hear from Professor Diane Coyle, the co-director of the Bennett Institute and the Bennett Professor of Public Policy. And Professor Paul Seabright, visiting Professor of All Souls College Oxford, Professor of Economics at the Toulouse School of Economics and former director of the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse.

*Diane Coyle:* Paul, we've known each other for a long time now. It was after the financial crisis, when we had a conference in Toulouse, and we got psychologists to try and talk to economists about why the crisis had happened.

*Paul Seabright:* Yes, that was a magnificent event. And it certainly created in me the wish to see more of these interdisciplinary teams.
Diane Coyle: And in fact, we’ve both now been involved in interdisciplinary institutes. So I’m co-director of the Bennett Institute in Cambridge, where we sit in a political science department, but we have economists, political scientists, historians, engineers, all kinds of people working to bring together research, address the big problems of the day and talk to policymakers about it. And you’ve founded, even a little bit longer ago, a similar institute,

Paul Seabright: I think you have established an extraordinary track record in a very short time of bringing research to policymakers. We’ve been a little bit more on foundational research, but we want to move further in that direction. And I think we’ve been able to bring together some very unusual teams tackling very fascinating questions. So for example, we have some very lively anthropologists who’ve been working with political scientists to look at things like political leadership, but they’ve also been working with medics to look at the anthropology of ageing in different human populations. We have historians working with political science, on issues to do with bureaucracies and how they’ve developed historically, we have economists who’ve been working with epidemiologists, particularly in the recent pandemic. So we’re very interested to work with you, because we think you can bring some insights that we don’t necessarily have, and I think we can bring some to you that will make for a very interesting mix, both for our researchers and for our listeners,

Diane Coyle: I suppose we’re both passionate about the importance of interdisciplinary research. Can we say in a nutshell why it’s so important?

Paul Seabright: Interdisciplinary research works on problems rather than on tools. Now, obviously, you need to have the right tools to deal with a problem, but you often don’t know what the necessary tools are until you’ve looked at the problem in the round. One of the things that I think is exciting for us in this series is that often we don’t know what kinds of questions will turn out to have public policy importance. So you mentioned AI and computer science. But, for example, Jean-François Bonnefon, one of our researchers, was thinking about the ethics of difficult choices a long time before he realised that you could apply this to the question of how you programme autonomous vehicles. And of course, he’s now one of the world’s leading experts on the way in which both artificial intelligence, and specifically robotics and the robotics of autonomous vehicles, need to be based upon a careful thinking through of the ethical implications. So this is something where the foundational research was begun before it became clear just how important the practical applications were.

Diane Coyle: Let’s hope that listeners to our new podcast Crossing Channels will share our excitement and learn from the wealth of research that’s been going on.

Rory Cellan-Jones: Thanks Diane and Paul.

And thanks to you for listening to this preview of the Crossing Channels podcast series from the Bennett Institute for Public Policy and the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse.
If you liked what you heard in this episode, please subscribe to the *Crossing Channels* feed.

Our first full episode will be released on Monday 1st November, and will tackle the question “Why has it become so hard to run government? The role of civil servants and decision-making in society today.”

For more information about the work behind the podcast, visit our websites, bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk and IAST.fr.