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**Crossing  
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Interdisciplinary answers to  
today's challenging questions

A Podcast series hosted by  
**Rory Cellan-Jones**

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Season 3 - Episode 10

## SHOULD THERE BE A COMPULSORY RETIREMENT AGE FOR SOCIETY'S LEADERS?

With

Diane Coyle (Bennett Institute)

Ruth Mace (UCL, IAST)

Paul Seabright (IAST, TSE)



## S3E10: Should there be a compulsory retirement age for society's leaders?

### HOST

Rory Cellan-Jones (former BBC correspondent)

### SPEAKERS

Diane Coyle (Bennett Institute), Ruth Mace (UCL, IAST) and Paul Seabright (IAST, TSE)

### Rory Cellan-Jones 00:07

Hello and welcome to Crossing Channels I'm Rory Cellan-Jones. Should there be a compulsory retirement age for society's leaders? That's the subject of the latest in our podcast collaboration between Cambridge University's Bennett Institute for Public Policy, and the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. And for the first time, we're taking to the stage and recording this episode in front of a live audience at the Institut Français in London. How fitting for this joint enterprise between the UK and France's great universities. As ever, we're exploring a complex question, does age determine leaders effectiveness? What are the social and economic consequences of a compulsory retirement age? And are there alternative policies or strategies that strike a balance between regular turnover of leaders while preserving expertise and

knowledge? To explore these issues, we've got a great panel today. We have Diane Coyle, from the Bennett Institute. Diane, start us off. What does your research focus on?

**Diane Coyle** 01:17

I'm an economist and I have been studying the digital economy and productivity for about as long as there has been a digital economy since the mid-1990s. I can't help noticing that the average age of those of us on the panel is rather higher than the average age of our audience this evening.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 01:33

I should say also, in the interest of full disclosure, I've been married to Diane for 34 years. So I should know what her research interests are by now. And joining us from the IAST we have Ruth Mace and Paul Seabright. Ruth, what does your research focus on?

**Ruth Mace** 01:48

I'm an evolutionary anthropologist, so I'm particularly interested in the evolution of behaviour and also the evolution of culture. So that's very broad. I know. So might be taking a slightly longer view than some of the other panel members on some of the questions.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 02:03

Yeah, we will have a long term and short term view, we will have a whole range of views here. Paul, what are your main research interests?

**Paul Seabright** 02:11

Well I'm so close to retirement that I can barely remember anymore, but last time I checked, I worked at the intersection between behavioural economics and the economics of institutions. So basically, where our pre-historic brain meets the modern world.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 02:25

Great, what a range of talents we've got here. So let's start with an awfully big question. What, after all, constitutes a good leader? And does their age have a major impact on their ability to lead effectively? Diane, kick us off?

**Diane Coyle** 02:38

Well, as you say, big question, and there are clearly lots of attributes that you need to be a good leader. And experience is one of them. So experience is probably correlated with age. But on the other hand, there are plenty of elderly politicians who've done nothing else all their life and don't seem to have any other experiences. So I'm going to go for what makes a good leader is actually the breadth of attributes. It's not

just technical skill, it's not just age and experience, good judgement, a range of people around you. So a portfolio of attributes of which age is only one thing.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 03:15

Yeah, we're obviously talking about leaders, not just political leaders, but leaders of organisations, leaders of businesses, too. And we'll get onto later on to whether there are different factors in different contexts. Ruth, what's your thinking on what constitutes a good leader?

**Ruth Mace** 03:31

I think different groups, people are going to choose their own leaders. So if you're talking about institutions, then experience might count for a lot. But if you're thinking about the younger generation, I mean, they might list people like Greta Thunberg and others as their leaders. And so they're looking at a completely different set of criteria, like moral integrity or something that represents what they care about, which might be completely different to what the elder generation cares about. So hopefully, different groups will choose their own leaders.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 04:04

And does their age have a, I mean, well think back over your experience, I suppose you will all have worked for leaders of one kind or another. Have you found that age is valuable, experience is valuable? As opposed to a fresh perspective?

**Ruth Mace** 04:25

I think it can be very valuable. And I think sometimes older leaders are less inclined to get into arguments about things, which is one of the things that I find quite useful in older leaders. That might not always be true, I'm sure everyone's got horrible examples that completely counter that.

**Diane Coyle** 04:37

They know all the tricks about how things work, don't they? So they know how to make the system work. They've got that kind of experience. I guess it depends on whether you want somebody who knows how to operate things or not stir up trouble, as Ruth is saying. Or do you want somebody who's going to have lots of fresh ideas. So the context is going to matter as well.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 04:55

Paul, I think you'll you're working on a project in this field generally.

**Paul Seabright** 05:00

Yes, I've been working with Guido Friebel at the University of Frankfurt and thinking recently about two kinds of talent that we look for in other people. And there are talents you might call skill and there are talents you might call judgement. And the big difference between them is that, to tell whether somebody

else's got skill, I don't have to have it myself. So I can tell whether somebody is a good juggler without being able to juggle. But to tell whether somebody has got good judgement, I actually need good judgement myself. If I want to know whether President Biden's approach to China is really a good thing for the world, I have to be able to go through pretty much the same steps of thinking about the issues that he does. And that's a problem because leaders are typically selected by people who are not leaders, we tend to select them for skill, for things like being able to deliver a good speech, which we can all tell even if we can't give a good speech ourselves. But we increasingly need them to exercise judgement about some of the big questions of the world. And I think that is a problem. And we'll talk later about whether judgement might be something that is particularly vulnerable to the pressures of old age.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 06:08

And what's your personal experience of leadership, both your own and people you've been led by. Have you over the years changed your view of what makes a good leader and whether their age is a factor in that?

**Paul Seabright** 06:23

Yes, I think one of the reasons why leaders tend to be older than the rest of society is exactly the fact that it takes time for the rest of the people they work with to figure out whether they have judgement or not. You can tell skill pretty quickly and in somebody pretty young. But usually you have to observe a leader over many years to see whether they exercise judgement effectively. And that's a problem because in some sense, you only become confident about the fact that they were good leaders at precisely the time when they may be ceasing to be as good as they used to be.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 06:56

Let's see if we've got any facts here. Are leaders getting older, on average? So is that a problem?

**Paul Seabright** 07:05

They are. So with work I've been doing with Guido we've been looking at the age of chief executives of large European and American companies. And we have data going about 30 years. And they've been getting older by about a year per decade, over that period. That may not seem like a ...

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 07:28

That sounds counterintuitive. We think particularly in the tech era that leaders of tech companies tend to be thrusting young technology-focused people.

**Paul Seabright** 07:38

Yeah. But there have always been young leaders. And they're not typical statistically of the rest of the population. And of course, the worrying thing is that if you project him forward many more decades, as we've seen in political leaders, so we have data on the governors of US States going back to the civil war,

and they've been getting older at slightly slower rate, they age by about a year, every 17 years. But from the civil war to today the US governors' mean age has gone from being in the late 40s, to being in the early 60s. And that's a big change.

**Diane Coyle** 08:09

How can, Rory is supposed to ask the questions, but I want to ask something. What's the change in the average age of the population that they are leading over that same period?

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 08:17

Yeah I was going to say the same. You would expect when life expectancies grow, that we would be looking for older people to lead.

**Paul Seabright** 08:24

I'm not saying it's surprising. But I'm saying that if you want to think about how the things you look for in a leader change with age, you want to take into account some basic demographics. And those are changing and those are changing in ways we might be concerned about. I'll talk later about whether I think we should but that the changes are happening. And they may not be surprising, but we should not pretend they're not happening,

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 08:51

Diane, I mean, many countries only allow those above a certain age, either at 21, 25 or 35, to actually run for office. If there are minimum age requirements for political leadership roles, why is there such reluctance to implement compulsory retirement ages for leaders?

**Diane Coyle** 09:11

It's a good question. And the rationale for having a minimum age is this supposition that somebody who's going to be in a position of responsibility needs to have certain skills, certain experience, a certain amount of judgement. So that's the rationale for the minimum. But you might say, as you're implying with a question, that there should be some criteria around the maximum as well. I think the challenge is that people age differently and their capabilities deteriorate differently. And actually, there's a lot of value in having the experience that comes with older leaders. So I wonder if the solution is to think about testing them in some way. Or having mechanisms to ask them not a particular age but if there are certain things that they obviously cannot do. I mean being slightly frivolous, one could say that a minister ought to be able to pass the citizenship test that they're setting for other people.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 10:13

If we started making those kind of rules every year.

**Diane Coyle** 10:14

But can we think of tests? Can we think criteria? I suppose at both ends, perhaps, it shouldn't be about calendar ages, but about some way of testing people's fitness for the role.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 10:25

Ruth, what's your take on that?

**Ruth Mace** 10:27

[So I'm just going to tell you about a paper that I read quite recently looking at cultural change.](#) And they were testing the difference between whether cultural norms change because cohorts die out, or whether we are influenced by a change in the air. So is the whole population changing its view about something? Or do we have to wait for generations to die out for anything to change? And overwhelmingly, it's the latter. So they showed very, very clearly, that older cohorts are pretty set in their ways. And younger cohorts, you know, have established different norms. And therefore, if we're talking about political leadership, I think there is actually a real problem here, in that the older generation is simply not representing the younger generation. And we also don't want the younger generation to lead because they are simply not representing us. And they looked at all kinds of ideas. There was actually one major outlier, which was attitudes to gay rights and homosexuality. That's one of the things that seems to have undergone not just a generational change, but it's affected all generations. But that really was an outlier. And most other behaviours that they looked at, in this paper, it was really quite frightening how much of a change in social norms was to do with actual cohorts moving on. So if you think about it like that, then it's not even about competence. If it's about representation, then we're going to have trouble. And also, no one's really mentioned power asymmetries, either, which I think because you've been talking about competence, but these leaders might be successfully hanging on to positions of authority, not because they're competent, but because they're powerful. And that's the other problem we've got.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 12:13

Paul, isn't there a different dynamic when it comes to politicians than to say, business leaders? Politicians are looking at people who vote, and the older you are, the more likely you are to vote. So therefore, perhaps, a grey hair more valuable in politics than in business where you're more inclined to want to perhaps appeal to a younger demographic to show yourself to be a young vigorous company?

**Paul Seabright** 12:42

I think that's a rather optimistic view of the situation. If you think that the reason why older leaders hang on longer as it were in politics than in business, I'm not sure it's true, but if it's true, if you're right, that that's the reason I think that would be broadly encouraging. But I'm not sure it is. I think it's because it's much easier for leaders in politics, who are much further away from the people who put them there to be checked by the people who put them there. The information that the citizen has about his or her leaders, is much sketchier, much more superficial, much more manipulated by the media than the information that people working in a company have about their CEO. And so I think that it's sadly quite likely that the

ability of older leaders in politics to hang on for longer has to do with the fact that they're more entrenched rather than necessarily because they're more suitable.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 13:42

Is it true though, that it's more sort of random how politicians, older politicians are chosen. I mean, the democratic process involves far more people than say, are involved in choosing a chief executive or choosing who runs a university, there tend to be a elites involved in that rather than the masses.

**Paul Seabright** 14:06

Well, the masses do something but in fact, we were talking about Rory Stewart, the British politician, just when we were in the room before coming here, and in his memoirs, he says that he was very frustrated at one point because he felt that he was being valued for the things that he did. Like being able to good give good speeches at the despatch box and remember a number of important statistics when questioned by journalists, but not for the things that he thought were important, like having a good strategic vision for the departments he was managing. Now, you know, if a politician like that is admitting that what he's selected for, what he's rewarded for are qualities that are not the ones that are most important for doing the job then I think we ought to take that seriously.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 14:52

Diane, let's be positive about older leaders in politics, business or academia. What specific qualities or skills improve with age? Do most things improve with age? I mean, we, we all value experience?

**Diane Coyle** 15:08

Well, there's a distribution among older people, I must say, Ruth is making me rethink what I think about this. But as an older leader, I'm going to try to make the positive case. It is really experiences. I don't think you can argue that skills improve with age, if anything they're going to deteriorate. And particularly in ...

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 15:29

Well at a certain level, I mean, presumably, your skills improved for the first 10 years and then start going downhill.

**Diane Coyle** 15:38

And it depends what the area is, what the domain is. Because in a technical subject in the academic world, your skills can actually deteriorate very quickly. And that's why we'd like to have lots of young researchers alongside us because they've got those technical skills. So you're really then talking about the experience and the judgement. There's this phrase in Aristotle that, as far as I understand it, is practical wisdom, as far as I understand, it means that there's a combination of the experience of having seen a lot of things and knowing how to react to them, as well as inherent judgement. And I guess that's the kind of thing that is correlated with age. So you can't be sure that an older leader is going to have it, but it's a little bit more

likely than somebody who's not had that same range of experiences and problems thrown at them that they've had to react to. So that I guess, is the positive case.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 16:25

Ruth, what's your take on that?

**Ruth Mace** 16:27

I think most things get bad quite rapidly. I mean, going back to my evolution of life history, I mean, you start, I mean, once you, you know, take an evolutionary view of ageing, once you've raised your children, natural selection is not acting very fast on any aspect of your being, because to put it crudely, your genes are passed on into the next generation. And beyond the age where you're having any more children, natural selection is not repairing your DNA or a new age. And this is what happens, and there's not a lot you can do about it. And we're quite good at getting rid of infectious disease and things like that, which is why our life expectancy has gone zooming up. But we're not very good at tackling, you know, the problems of ageing, because that's actually a much more difficult thing for natural selection to get a grip with. So all of our sort of mental and physical capacities, as we all know, start to suffer a little bit.

**Diane Coyle** 17:30

But don't you think there's something in having seen something a bit like this once before? So you've got an idea?

**Ruth Mace** 17:34

No, I'm not. Yeah, I mean, yes. I'm not denying that there are also useful skills that you are accumulating, and, you know, one of those might be power. So you can keep yourself in a position of authority, because you have accumulated a lot of power. But, you know, I have sounded a little bit pessimistic about the benefits of having very elderly leaders, which is obviously being brought into sharp focus, with what's going on in the American elections, but I actually think that you can compensate for some of it, but you can't compensate for all of it.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 18:14

Paul, I mean, I suppose there's a difference, isn't there between somebody who comes to a position of power and leadership later in life and does it for 5, 10 years, and somebody who comes much earlier and just hangs on and on and on?

**Paul Seabright** 18:30

Yes, absolutely. But what worries me actually is not whether on average, older leaders are better or worse, I mean, I am completely with the rest of the panel on the many qualities that older leaders have. What I'm more worried about is what happens in a crisis and how easy it is to deal with a crisis. And I'm struck by the fact that in dealing with dementia, for example, which I've had to deal with in my own family, and



which is something that's going to hit the world in a much bigger way in the next decades to come. And will start to trouble our leaders in future decades to a much greater degree than it has up to now. When you deal with dementia, one of the things you worry about is not that the person whom you love is forgetting names and occasionally wandering out. It's that actually they lose judgement. So they may or may not have deteriorating memory. But the real thing you're scared with when somebody close to you has dementia is that they'll sign away their life savings to a plausible stranger who calls them up. And it's the fact that in some sense, judgement goes before a skill visibly goes that really scares me in the case of elderly leaders. So I can quite believe that the average leaders might be getting better and better for quite a long period of time. But the rogue leaders whose prefrontal cortex has gone may be very much more difficult to get rid of. And that's that, for me, is the nightmare.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 19:55

But isn't it the case that in today's much more transparent era, we've become aware of their failings very quickly, you know, there's a clip of, you know, President Biden falling down some steps out there within 10 seconds. Whereas, you know, Churchill, possibly Harold Wilson, two eminent British Prime Ministers were obviously failing in their later stages but that was kept from the public.

**Paul Seabright** 20:22

No, you're exactly right. But in some sense, the example you've given of President Biden only reinforces the point I want to make. We can all tell whether he's as skillful in getting down steps as he used to be. But if he's skilled at getting down the steps starts to go, that doesn't have world shattering consequences. If his judgement about how to deal with potential aggression in Eastern Europe, the Asia Pacific, and so on, if that has completely gone. And if the equivalent of somebody asking him to sign away his life savings is getting a broad smile from him, then that really does have world shattering consequences. So I think that the fact that we appear to know more is biasing us because the things we do know more about are things like whether somebody can get down steps.

**Ruth Mace** 21:08

You're thinking also about democratically elected leaders. And of course, there's an awful lot of the world doesn't have democratically elected leaders. And they have basically a lot of gangster politics, which, you know, we're almost going the same way. And these people can't retire because ...

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 21:28

... retirement means death.

**Ruth Mace** 21:30

Exactly. If you've killed a lot of people on the way up, you're, you're not going to live very long on the way down, and therefore you you're not ever going to give up and you're going to do everything in your power to get rid of any rules that might have forced you to retire. And, I mean, I'm sure some of you know more

about this than me, wasn't it the Mo Ibrahim Foundation who tried to offer a huge prize for African leaders that retired and sorted out their succession because nobody was. And therefore they thought, okay, if we offered them very large amounts of money so that they can retire successfully and willfully and safely, maybe there'll be a better sort of turnover of leaderships. And I think they've only managed to give their awards to about four individuals in a very long space of time. So it's, I think that's a real problem. And I think most political leaders around the world, you know, have not achieved that position of leadership in the benign way that we're talking about, most of them have had to fight their way to the top and probably kill lots of people, either physically or metaphorically. Which just means they are definitely not going to be remotely interested in any rules about retirement and try and change them, as you know, has happened recently, for example, in China.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 22:46

Diane, do you think our attitudes to age in our leaders have changed because we are now more aware of the truth about what's going on? We can see President Biden falling down. We were more respectful, say 30, 40 years ago of their privacy?

**Diane Coyle** 23:07

Well, I think a lot has changed in the past 30 or 40 years that make that not straightforward to answer yes or no. Ruth gave the example of Greta Thunberg. And the way that you need cohorts to change to bring about new kinds of values or priorities in leadership, which is a strong point. I mean, for me, given the work I do, one of the issues is technology. And the lack of understanding that older people have about technology when it's changing incredibly rapidly as it has been, and still is in digital, and other scientific domains. [There's a very excellent well-known economist Bob Gordon](#), who famously wrote a big book saying that one of the reasons productivity growth has slowed down is that all the technologies that we're inventing now are absolutely useless compared to the ones that were invented in the early 20th century. So if we think about indoor plumbing and electric lighting at home, and the assembly line, and so on, they were absolutely transformative technologies. But now he's saying everybody is just, you know, on social media, and is wasting time. And that's such a narrow view, when you think about the whole range of technological innovations that are coming along that I'm not thinking about chatbots. But all of the digitally enabled medical innovations and genetic technology, the potential for transforming energy to a zero carbon energy system. Those would be big world changing things that happen. And so if you then turn that spotlight on people like Joe Biden and Donald Trump, my worry would be, can they evaluate policies around generative AI, when all of these plausible young Silicon Valley dudes are coming along and saying, it's marvellous, it's going to increase growth and create jobs. And you might be addressing leaders who are still printing out their emails, and don't really have any basis on which to evaluate that kind of thing.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 25:04

So you're saying that they might be too credulous, not just didn't understand it, but they were too easily taken in.

**Diane Coyle** 25:12

If you've got experienced early 20th century technologies or mid 20th century technologies, that experience doesn't help you.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 25:18

That surely, Paul, in the age of AI, every organisation now being told they've got to confront what AI means, would militate against having older leaders, particularly in business, I'm still puzzled by this idea that business leaders are getting older.

**Paul Seabright** 25:36

Well, you're exactly right, that we may want to say that the cost of having an older leader in place at a time when technology is changing particularly fast, may be higher than it was 10 or 20 years ago. And that should be a reason why we should evaluate the characteristics of leaders, including their age, with a slightly different set of criteria than we used to. But in a sense, I think we're drifting away from the topic of the question, which is not are older leaders better or worse. But should we have a retirement age because the retirement age is a way of saying regardless of how good we think they are, they should go after a certain point. And so I think the question isn't really, do we think they're getting better, because as democratic citizens, or as people involved in choosing leaders in business, we can make that decision, we can be swayed by these arguments. The whole point, and it's a rather counterintuitive point, about having a retirement age is it says, no, when the leader has reached a certain point we should no longer be trying to make that judgement. And I think that if we weren't worried about the outlier cases, the disaster cases, there would be no case for a compulsory retirement age, because we just say, sure, you know, there are good arguments why in this current world we should be mostly electing younger leaders. It's precisely the fact that we're worried about the disaster cases and we're worried about older leaders becoming entrenched, when even though we might want to get rid of them we can't, that I think the arguments for a compulsory retirement age become strong.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 27:11

And when you think about, for instance, the United States where you can't serve more than two terms as President, I mean, that is quite a powerful curb on overweening ambition. And would retirement a retirement age, do this something similar?

**Paul Seabright** 27:30

Well, I mean, what we've seen is that having term limits, which are still enforced in the United States, even though they've been circumvented in both Russia and China are no doubt a good thing, I would entirely support them. And indeed, I think that whenever a leader proposes to change the rules to circumvent term

limits, that should be in itself a warning signal. But what we've also seen is that having term limits doesn't stop us having very old leaders. So I think the case for term limits and the case for all the leaders are both strong, but they're separate and term limits don't solve the problem of older leaders.

**Diane Coyle** 28:06

So I feel the need to argue with Paul here.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 28:09

Oh, good.

**Diane Coyle** 28:11

I think there's a principle of not discriminating on the basis of personal characteristics. And so I would be focusing our attention, I mean, term limits are great, but I would focus our attention on reducing the voting age in political contexts, actually, because if you want to respond to the concerns of younger generations, and any of us who are in universities will know that they are very different for younger cohorts, would be, I think, in favour of reducing the voting age to 16. And actually, the older I've gotten, the more powerful I think this argument has been.

**Paul Seabright** 28:46

Well, I love it when Diane argues with me, but it doesn't make me want to argue with her. I actually agree with you about lowering the voting age. And I would even be prepared to be talked into not having a retirement age, if you can give me an alternative set of mechanisms that might help us deal with these outlier cases, like an older leader whose judgement has really gone but whose skills seem to be at least somewhat okay. Now, you said something, which I think is very interesting, we might want to delve into, you say, maybe we can do measuring better than we used to? I mean, I'm sure we're now all of us wearing intrusive surveillance technology on our wrists. And it may be that actually it's possible to put in place mechanisms for telling us things about what our leaders are doing that massively bypasses or depasses.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 29:35

So you can be as old as you like, but we're going to watch your every step and, well, if you fall below certain measures you're out.

**Paul Seabright** 29:43

Well, that's a possibility. It was Diane who brought it up. So I'd be interested to know what she had in mind.

**Ruth Mace** 29:50

Paul, I don't think people are voting for like Trump or Biden on the basis of their competence.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 29:56

That's an extraordinary statement.

**Ruth Mace** 29:59

No I mean, I wouldn't think it was extraordinary at all.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 30:05

No, I'm joking.

**Ruth Mace** 30:06

I mean, they have decided that they represent a whole kind of identity or pack of views. They don't. They're not under any illusion that I honestly don't believe they're voting for individuals here. I think they're voting for ideas. But I mean, maybe you're the political. I'm not a political scientist. But I would, that's the way it looks to me.

**Diane Coyle** 30:28

So I wonder if we should be talking not about the individual so much. And we are falling for this myth of the heroic leader who's in charge. And obviously, you get that in a presidential system. But actually, it's the leadership team that matters more. You would hope that in a democratic environment, the leader, the person elected to be president or prime minister, does have an eye to the variety of experience and knowledge on their team and can appoint people who compensate for their inadequacies. Now, I have to say, I'm not sure this has happened in any of the countries that you might be thinking about at the moment. But, you know, ideally, you would want the Lincoln Team of Rivals structure for effective leadership of a country.

**Paul Seabright** 31:10

Yes, but come on Diane, I am going to argue, you goaded me beyond endurance. I mean, when a US president comes in, obviously, he or she is entitled to choose their team. He or she is not entitled, suddenly, to fire all of the people in the line of command, manning the nuclear missiles. There is a very well established protocol that ensures that there are mechanisms in place to ensure that these things are not fired by accident and so on. And there's a whole series of things, which in some sense, are overlooked by the US Constitution, but which are embodied in day to day sense in a very large number of protocols that constrain the things that a leader can do. And what I'm suggesting is that thinking about what might happen to an older leader who's losing it belongs in that family of protocols. Now, how we should insert it in there, whether the way to insert it is through a compulsory retirement age, or whether there are other ways of implementing those protocols is, I think, entirely up for argument and very interesting thing to think about, but just simply saying, well, actually, if the leader comes in and says on day one in the Oval Office, I'm going to say, for example, that whether we launch, a nuclear strike on Russia, is going to be

decided by popular vote, you know, the Iowa primary, I think, you know, the deep state, it would be said is going to prevent that. And thank goodness.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 32:36

Okay then, let me put a proposal. We're going to make 70, the compulsory retirement age for leaders across politics, business, and the universities. What's the downside, Diane?

**Diane Coyle** 32:50

That you get rid of some very good people, and that it breaches principles of non-discrimination on the grounds of personal characteristics.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 33:00

We could still keep them in lower level positions, they just couldn't be leaders.

**Paul Seabright** 33:07

So I was going to say, I mean, you say get rid of I find this rather sinister. What is going on in Cambridge these days? You're smacks of Sweeney Todd. I mean, do they just disappear into the cellar in Churchill College and they're never seen again. I mean, they don't disappear. They just don't no longer have their finger on the nuclear button.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 33:25

Ruth, you sat here looking like you're a tennis match between these two ping pong back and forth.

**Ruth Mace** 33:31

70 is too old. That's the downside of that. It should be much earlier.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 33:38

You want a compulsory retirement age much younger than 70?

**Ruth Mace** 33:40

Well if you're talking about leaders, yes. You can't, I mean, I think a lot of the younger generation think they're never going to retire because of the change in the financial circumstance. I don't think you can make compulsory retirement ages. But when you're talking about people who are presumably got plenty of money, then maybe you do have that option. I just quickly want to say I have a very quick look to see if there are any anthropological examples of compulsory retirement ages, and the only one I could find was a pre-war Japanese households where at 60 the father is meant to pass on the running of the household to his son. And I think that probably works because it's a relative, so there's no conflict of interest there. He's still living in the household. He's not really giving up a lot. Still got somewhere to live. And he probably wants to pass his house on to his son anyway. And so that works pretty well. And actually I've lived in the

far East a little bit and the age of 60 is considered a important age where you've kind of done your stuff and it's time to pass on to others. Having said that, I'm over 60 and I'm not retiring. So I know I'm a hypocrite. But that's why you have to get me out.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 34:49

Let's, I think we're drawing to a conclusion here. And I'm going to ask, if not compulsory retirement, what else? What else can we do to ensure a regular turnover in leadership while preserving valuable knowledge and expertise, Paul?

**Paul Seabright** 35:07

Well, I do support a compulsory retirement age. And I actually would like it to be quite young. And I think it's precisely because we tend to think of retirement as the end, that we haven't thought creatively enough about how to use the wisdom and expertise and experience of older people in society. But I think that if you are going to ask people to be taking some critical decisions, like the ability to launch wars, then you really want to put some very strict criteria in place for who has the right to do that. I mean, even the fact that somebody might launch a war at the age of 82, which would cut a year or two off that person's life expectancy, but cut decades or more off, the life expectancy of the rest of the citizens seems to be a fundamental breach in the social contract. So I'm actually sticking for a compulsory retirement age. But if we can't have it, I'd go with much, much closer medical monitoring of society's leaders, and obviously not have that displayed on the internet in real time, but to ensure that there's a group of people with a very strict set of rules and the mandate to monitor that information. So I think that would be a Plan B, but it's a pretty inadequate Plan B compared with my preferred Plan A.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 36:23

Ruth, which plan are you for compulsory retirement or something else?

**Ruth Mace** 36:28

For leaders? Well, I'm just going to give a very anthropological answer, which is just all about power structures. So if, anthropologists don't like saying should because it's all relative. But I think it would be a good idea, but I don't know how you'd enforce it. You'd have to have a lot of fights with a lot of powerful people. And that's the cost you'd have to put into your decision-making.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 36:58

Diane, you seem to be against...

**Diane Coyle** 37:01

I'm against it. I don't want 25 year old men with their finger on the nuclear button either. And on balance, I think they're probably more likely to start it. We've got an ageing population, compulsory retirement is just not going to happen. So let's not waste time on something impractical. I think the things to go for are term

limits where they don't exist and significant reduction in the voting age so that younger people at least have more influence over who becomes the leader.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 37:25

Well, that's a fascinating note on which to end [we did have one episode of Crossing Channels in which somebody advocated that children age six to be given the vote](#). So radical ideas always from this podcast. That's all we've got time for, as I said, thanks to Diane Coyle, from the Bennett Institute, and Ruth Mace and Paul Seabright from the IAST. This episode recorded in front of a live audience at the Institut Français in London is the final edition of season three of Crossing Channels. We'll be back in October with a fourth series when I will actually be a keen listener, as this is my last episode presenting Crossing Channels.

**Paul Seabright** 38:04

Yes, I really want to say at this point that there's a very large number of people that I would like to nominate for instant retirement and Rory Cellan-Jones is not one of them. I mean, what I'd really like to say is that I think we owe him a lot. I mean, when, three years ago, it was proposed that Rory Cellan-Jones be the host of this, you know, some of us worried whether this relatively green and inexperienced reporter, you know, who'd worked for a few minor organisations like the BBC was up to the exposure and the pressure. And you know, the fantastic public outreach of the Crossing Channels podcast. But I must say, he's grown in the job. But we owe him a great deal. And I think we would like to thank him in our own way.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 38:45

Well, thank you very much, Paul, and thank you to the audience. And thank you everyone for tuning into this series of Crossing Channels. Stay tuned for series four, where we'll continue to investigate many more policy challenges. Thank you.