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Listening to Voices of the Future

an invitation to contribute to a special issue of *Policy Quarterly* on cohort-based or generation-based policies

The future is hostage to the past

It has long been observed – since Heraclitus, at least – that change is the only constant in life. In some spheres of life, change is easy, as it is gradual and continuous. Scientific discoveries are made and novel products are developed. Fashions come and go and come again. New music is introduced and old standards are gradually displaced. Yet in other spheres of life change is difficult. Things are done in the same old ways, and change is vigorously opposed by groups who want to act as they have always acted.

Public policy is an area where change can be slow. When stability and continuity are prized, deference to the past is perfectly desirable. Even when change is desirable, however, societies often continue with policies based on their previous choices rather than future possibilities. The

need to honour commitments to older generations and observe their traditions slows the process of change and limits a society's ability to respond to new opportunities. Change, when it eventually occurs, takes place in intense and messy periods of reform.

Does it have to be this way? Are there public policy issues where the pace of change could and should be accelerated? Are there reasons why change in some areas of public policy is so slow and difficult? These questions have underpinned intergenerational debate and conflict for generations immemorial.

We would like to invite people to explore ways that public policies can be designed to facilitate the process of change. Our focus is specifically and deliberately on generational change – how society can best enable change when younger and older generations have very different views on what is important, what is possible and what is desirable. We want to explore how successive generations can shape the future so that it better reflects their issues and concerns. These changes do not concern just age, but can cover a broad canvas of themes related to issues such as gender or ethnicity, or the environment.

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Why is policy change difficult?

We all know change can be difficult because old habits die hard. It can be difficult for individuals to change their careers, for families to change where they live, or for firms to change the ways they operate. Many attempts at change fail even when the costs and benefits of change are 'internalised' to the decision-making entities because they affect the same individuals, families or companies who make the decisions. When some people find change more costly than others, society-wide attempts at change may fail because of resistance from those who have the biggest costs or the fewest benefits.

conflicts cannot be resolved, societies can fail to adapt with the times. The problem becomes more acute when several related policies are involved, for big, system-wide changes are more difficult to negotiate and implement than policies that can be changed at the margin, one at a time.

Exploration

We wish to explore whether a society can design and implement public policies in an alternative way as its preferences evolve. One possibility is to find processes that enhance the voice of young people in the policy development process. Society may still apply a single policy for all people, but

were paying more and more relative to the amount spent on their own education. New Zealand has already adopted a cohort-based policy to help deal with this issue: cohorts born after 1970 have been expected to take out student loans to pay part of the costs of the higher education expenses they incur, to reduce the taxes paid by cohorts born before 1970. But future cohorts may want a different solution; they might want free education funded by higher cohort-specific taxes, for example, or they might want higher student loans to pay for a better quality of education. A cohort-based policy would enable each cohort to choose the mix it wanted, while reducing the impact on other generations.

Retirement income policy is another example. New Zealand's pay-as-you-go scheme requires working-age people to pay taxes that are transferred to older people. Younger people may wish to change the current system, not just because the benefits they can expect to receive are lower than the costs they expect to pay, but because the form of the system may not be suited to their circumstances. Young people may want a system of personal retirement accounts because it enables them to receive a pension if they spend a lot of their time working abroad, or because it provides them with a larger pension for the contributions they make. New Zealand's current system makes change difficult as young people cannot reduce the amount they pay without reducing the amount older generations receive. But it may be possible to design and adopt a set of retirement policies that are different for different cohorts, enabling change to occur now, and enabling change to occur in the future should future cohorts want something different again. People born after 1980 could have a compulsory retirement saving scheme and low income taxes, for example, while those born before 1980 could retain the current system.

Other examples exist. Younger generations may want to live in cities amply supplied with bus lanes, walkways and cycleways, for example. Older generations have had a preference for living in suburbs and driving cars. The architectural and environmental effects of these preferences will be borne by today's younger generations as the use of land for roads and

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The difficulties and complications associated with change are larger when the changes initiated by some people affect others. If the costs and the benefits associated with change fall on different people, it is natural that some people will be opposed and will resist. Change in such circumstances requires negotiation or force. Negotiation is seldom simple, as few people find it easy to see the bigger picture and search for opportunities that make all parties better off (Foster, Mansbridge and Martin, 2013).

Most public policy changes initiated by government are of this nature. It is especially difficult to implement public policy changes when the costs of a policy that benefits one generation are borne disproportionately by another generation. There are many examples of public policy changes that affect different generations in different ways, including changes to education, retirement income or health spending. People may resist paying for services obtained by other generations that they never received, or they may object to new rules outlawing activities they enjoy or had long anticipated doing. If these

this policy will better reflect the preferences of young people. This type of approach is reflected, for example, in efforts to encourage higher voter participation by young people in national elections.

A different possibility that we wish to consider is a system of cohort-specific policies – policies that are designed to be different for one generation than for another. (In this context, a 'cohort' refers to a group of people born in a particular year, while a 'generation' is a related collection of cohorts. A person born in 1985 belongs to the 1985 cohort, the 1980s generation and Generation Y.) Cohort-specific policies enable a country to adopt different policies for different cohorts, so that policies better reflect each generation's changing preferences and changing circumstances.

Consider, for example, education. Traditionally, older generations have paid for the education of younger generations, but younger generations have received a disproportionately large fraction of the return on these investments. As education became more valuable, and more was demanded, older generations found they

parking places prevents the expansion of other forms of transport. Some policies try to address these issues at the margin, by altering the incentives to use (say) bicycles and petrol-fuelled cars. However, young and future generations may want more radical solutions – for example, completely redesigned cities that enable people to live and work in close proximity so that there is far less need to travel. Is it possible to adopt cohort-based policies to reshape the cities of the future so they reflect what young people want? You can imagine a policy that prohibits people born after 1980 from owning petrol-fuelled cars, for example, but would it work?

We do not pretend to know what young people want. However, it seems clear that three conditions are necessary for cohort-based policies to be an effective method of enabling change. First, different cohorts must want different things. Second, it must be feasible to have different policies for different cohorts. A solution requiring people born after 1980 to drive on the left and people born before 1980 to drive on the right obviously would not meet this criterion. Third, some additional intergenerational transfers may be necessary to reach a practical political solution if cohort-based policies make some generations better off and others worse off. If these conditions hold, cohort-based policies may be possible to better enable society to change in the face of changing circumstances or changing preferences. Moreover, not only will cohort-based policies enable current cohorts to obtain policies that they want, but a great advantage of such policies is that they more easily accommodate continuous change as future generations make their own policy modifications.

The invitation

We would like to know if there is any demand for cohort-based or generation-based policies among young people. As a first step, we would like to know what young people want. Are there issues where their views are distinctly different from those of older people? Are there policies that they would really like changed to enable them to better live the lives they wish to live? Are there current policies that they think are antithetical to their

interests? Are there cohort-based policies that might enable their children to make different choices from their own?

We are seeking essays from people born after 1985, coming from all kinds of background, to be published in a special issue of *Policy Quarterly*. We are looking for examples of major systemic changes involving public policy that will have significant effects on their lives now and in the future.

To make a meaningful contribution to this intergenerational conversation, these examples need to involve policies where young people want very different options

said that as they were paying they would order for you. Would you eat differently if you could choose your own meal? How would you order if you could choose your own meal but also had to foot a big chunk of the bill? We are interested in whether there are policies that you would definitely like to be different from those chosen by your parents' generation, and maybe how you might arrange to split the bill.

Conclusion and next steps

If you wish to participate and contribute to this exploration, individually or with a group of people you wish to work with,

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from the ones currently on offer and could be amenable to distinctive policies for current cohorts.

We are looking for thoughtful and structured contributions relating to specific examples that describe the changes that are desired, and the ways a new set of policies might enable these changes. Some thought should be given to how a feasible transition might be arranged and, if the policy imposes big changes on older cohorts, how the new policy options might be negotiated, funded and managed. Would you be willing to pay higher taxes, now or in the future, to adopt the policy? A possible test you could consider is whether you could imagine holding a referendum, or set of referenda, among people born after 1985 on a policy that applied only to people born after 1985. The policies can be about anything; indeed, our hope is that you come up with some issues that we do not normally think about.

An analogy may be helpful. Suppose your parents took you to a restaurant and

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We will select ten submissions, and invite the authors of these selected submissions for a conversation. Following that, you will be invited to write a 2,000-word article to be published in *Policy Quarterly*. A final version of the article will be needed by the end of February 2020.

We will then submit the various ideas generated through this process to a national survey based on a sample of people who are under the age of 35. Eventually, this whole process, including your articles (possibly extended), will be published as an edited book.

Reference

Foster, C., J. Mansbridge and C.J. Martin (2013) 'Negotiation myopia', in J. Mansbridge and C.J. Martin, *Negotiating Agreement in Politics*, Washington, DC: American Political Science Association