

Speaker Series – *The Future of Us* with Dr Liz Allen

Interviewer: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner West Library Speaker series. We acknowledge the Gadigal and the Wangal people of the Eora nation on which this podcast is produced. Today, we welcome author and academic Dr Liz Allen to discuss her book, *The Future of Us*, published by New South Wales Press. Liz Allen is a demographer and social researcher at the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods. By tracing connections between a populations past and present, demographers can foresee its future. The true wonder of demography though, is not its ability to predict the future, but to shape it. *The Future of Us* does more than help you find your inner statistician, looking beyond births, deaths and marriages. Allen takes apart inequality, migration, tax and home ownership. She also dissects how the word population became so charged, daring to ask what Australia might look like in 20 years if we had zero immigration. Now let's drop into the mix a somewhat unexpected pandemic and learn from demographers what Australia can look like on the other side. Welcome, Liz.

Dr Liz Allen: [00:01:17] Hello.

Interviewer: Hi. Welcome. Thank you for joining us. In your book we journey through your pathway to becoming a demographer. Can you tell us a bit about this? And why was it important to capture your personal history in tracking the future of us?

Dr Liz Allen: [00:01:36] It's a long story and I'll try and capture it. But I fell into demography by accident, and that its often that those accidents are so lovely and serendipitous that they change our lives forever, and demography did that for me. My background has been marked by abuse and disadvantage, poverty, homelessness. Now, my life, my home life was not stable, and I spent time in my early teens in care outside of the home and which then led as it often does to homelessness for me. So by 16 I was homeless. And shortly after I had my first daughter, my oldest daughter.

And it was during that birth that I realised that something had to give. I suffered an adverse reaction to medication during labour, and I had a seizure and fell unconscious.

And when I came to deliver this baby and as a young woman, I recall holding this baby thinking, wow, first of all, this is pretty amazing, but then, second of all, I've got to get my life together. And to that point, I hadn't finished high school. The most I'd ever got to in terms of completing high school was the end of year seven.

I tried to dip back into high school, but it never, high school never worked for me. It was because of the home stuff and the life stuff that I was dealing with school. I never fit in, and so, it was at that moment I thought, I've got to get my stuff together, and I, I thought, I'm going to finish school and I'm going to do it for this kid. And that was the moment that changed my life. And so I went to TAFE at Mount Druitt, and got my year 10 and year 12 equivalent and nothing was going to stop me from then on.

And I got into university, and the first year I had to choose this social science degree, I had to choose an elective. And it was between demography and jurisprudence. And I can only just now say jurisprudence, but I couldn't at the time. So I thought it would be safer if enrolled in a subject I could say. Right? So I had to Google of course to know what it meant.

But when I sat in these lectures, it was like it was a ticket to freedom. It was finally it was like putting all these puzzle pieces of my life had been scattered over a table and I was finally able to connect them together with the realization that I wasn't the problem. I wasn't deficient. It was that this is the social structures that were, that are meant, and that you hope are going to protect young kids and vulnerable people, they failed me. And so what demography did was and, you know, I kind of liken it to standing tall and proud with your chest out and your cape behind you blowing in the breeze. I was able to finally do that because demography taught me, that about how my life had come to be that. And then it was a matter of destiny, perhaps.

And that it was not me, but rather a failing of society. And more importantly, it could be corrected and that other kids wouldn't have to go through this. And so with that in mind, I wear my cape proudly with the knowledge that demography can and does change lives. We just need to put those puzzle pieces together and have policy makers listen to the experts.

Interviewer: [00:06:14] And that's a pretty extraordinary journey. And it does lead onto my next question about, you know, how your lived experience influences now your practice as a demographer, particularly, you know, examples of reporting under reported populations, et cetera.

Dr Liz Allen: [00:06:32] Being homeless, it's hard to explain. So the best way for me to explain homelessness is in a physical way. You're constantly hungry. You are constantly thirsty. So you're the physical manifestation of homelessness of the wanting to be fulfilled, needing to get a meal, needing to get water. Think about when your mouth is so dry that your lips are all sticky.

That's what homelessness feels like, for me. When I think of it, people don't see you. They ignore you, or they laugh at you. Will you smell because you've not been able to bathe or your shoes are tight or holey, so you kind of stand out as another. But, just because you stand out doesn't mean you have been seen. And I was left out of a census in 1996 because, I was homeless. I wasn't counted. And that to me, left a mark in my mind, that, we count what is important. And so the flip side of that is if you're not counted, you're not important. And so in my work, I try and seek to give a voice to that, which is not seen or given a platform. And to that end, I look for opportunities to, I guess, have that lived experience of that which I'm an expert in, to come through in whatever way I can. And so I look for opportunities to ensure that people are represented in data, because when you're seen in data, you can then understand the complexities and the issues around life circumstances. And that can then inform policy, because often when, just because we know that there's a problem, so say, for example, we know that there's a problem with regard to gender inequality, okay, just because we intuitively know that, doesn't mean we know the full breadth of the issue. And data allows us to understand that full breadth of that issue. And more importantly, look at the trigger points, the levers that can be pulled and where things are going wrong, perhaps on that trajectory of that particular outcome, to then inform policy so that interventions can be made before a problem emerges. And so much of my work, much of my work has been motivated by my personal circumstances and the desire to make things equal and fair.

And I know that that sounds like a little kid with their head in the clouds. And perhaps I am still a little naive about the world. But might we like to think that in

Australia we are a fair and equal society, and the reality is that we're not. The reality is that we still see social mobility is not a thing. If you're born poor, you will likely remain poor for the rest of your life. And with that, suffer health and other consequences concerning that poverty. And that is a confounding factor over your life course. And the gap between the haves and the have nots increases over time because of that low starting base out in life. So if I could, if I could have one thing, it would be that we make a commitment to listen to the evidence and fund evidence gathering to ensure that we know enough about ourselves so that we can chart a course for the future where we are all on board.

Interviewer: [00:11:10] If I can take us on to the next question cause a lot of people are sort of thinking about this at the moment, and to lead us into some COVID 19 reflection and response from a demographer's viewpoint. So demographers track the social and economic impact of dramatic change in Australia. What events in Australian history can we compare to our current situation? What can we learn?

Dr Liz Allen: [00:11:40] What demography can provide is quite an important foundation to charting the recovery of a post coronavirus.

If we compare the current crisis in socio demographic and economic terms, the best comparison we have is the Great Depression. That's pretty, pretty stark, isn't it? Do you think?

Interviewer: It is isn't it? Yeah.

Dr Liz Allen: [00:12:12] If we look at the Great Depression, there was an enormous decline in fertility. And when a demographer says fertility, they mean number of children. We have the really cool word of fecundity. I'll say that again, because I love saying fecundity. It's a clean word, fecundity, and that relates to the biological capability to have children.

So in the general term, people say fertility, you might be having fertility treatment. In demography we would call that an issue of fecundity. And fertility is rather the outcome of the live birth.

Interviewer: [00:12:57] Right.

Dr Liz Allen: So if we look at birth rates, birth rates fell very quickly, and very sharply in the Great Depression, and coupled with that, we didn't have net overseas migration, so we had a pretty stark and pretty severe impact on our demographic structure during that time. And that was during a time when we didn't have access to birth control, mind you. So, if we then kind of take that learning, the lessons learned from the Great Depression, we're likely to see because of the socio-economic insecurity of the time that we're experiencing now, people are not going to be having lots and lots of babies just cause they're stuck indoors or stuck home with their partners. In fact, you're likely to see the opposite. We're likely to see births decline, and they may not ever recover. So we may not see a correction where we might have a boom afterwards. That's a problem because we have an aging population, with an aging population means we have fewer people entering the workforce than leaving the workforce.

So that means that we have fewer relative proportions of people paying income tax, which is what supports our well-being as a population. So we're faced with the challenge, which also is an opportunity, but we're faced with the challenge, that our well-being might decline by sheer function of this lower income tax base.

Now, at the moment, we're also faced with a closure of international borders. We will need as part of our coronavirus recovery, immigration to commence, when it's safe, and within safe health limits, to be able to enter a phase of nation building. We've not seen nation building in recent history in Australia. And so that's what government will need to do. To pull the nation out of the crisis we will need to see enormous monetary investment in major infrastructure projects - think the Snowy Scheme.

That's the kind of thing that we're going to need to invest in. The roads, housing, industry, and schools, and also the social infrastructure as well.

The stuff that's not built, but rather, within, people and the like that needs to be to be built on. So we will see an enormous nation building and demography and the understanding of demography will help us make sure that that is a fair and equal experience for all Australians. Part of that is to ensure that education is accessible to young people and to those that wish to retrain and can then take part in that economic

windfall that will hopefully come from that nation building. It's very, very scary at the moment. But please have faith. There are so many opportunities in the challenges that we're presented moving forward, and opportunities that through this process we've recognised the value of social supports, the increase in income support and welfare payments.

We've realised the value of telecommunications and telecommuting. Right? We've learned these lessons. We can carry these lessons to make a fair and more equal society moving forward. We just have to have the leadership and the commitment to do so. And I think we've got all of those.

Interviewer: [00:17:09] It's, you know, on an optimistic note, which, takes me to you know, there has been a lot of social and political commentary about this pandemic as a catalyst, to rethink and reboot the way we operate our lives in Australia. So in response to this, what would be the Dr Liz Allen democracy makeover? What would, what would this look like?

Dr Liz Allen: [00:18:02] We need a blueprint for our future. We need some kind of policy framework or suite of policy issues that, we're able to lay out a series of goals for what we want to be. So, for example, we want to see greater gender equality or greater accessibility to childcare, those sorts of things.

Healthier life expectancy for people of low socio-economic backgrounds. We can set these as goals, right? And then we can collect data and at regular intervals ensure that we're progressing well against these, these goals for our future. So it's a time to recalibrate this idea of the Advance Australia Fair.] We need to set out what we want to be and then set goals for how we're going to achieve that.

So if we do have this demographic makeover for Australia, we will need to look beyond the three year or even six month political cycles or terms that we're seeing at the moment. It's a pretty disastrous and grim situation where politics and the six months cycle of who is favourable in the Prime Minister chair.

That's how we fund infrastructure. We've got to move beyond that and we need to move to something like we're seeing in this national cabinet, so that we are investing

in the future beyond these six month cycles of success. And that means that we will be able to better envisage the future and meet these goals because they go beyond political ideology and they should, sometimes and not too often they don't, but they should.

And that's what we need to be getting ourselves into, is this national set of goals and a map, if you like, of how we're going to achieve them so that we do advance a more fair Australia.

Interviewer: [00:20:00] And it's also about, you know, how do we communicate those values as well?

Dr Liz Allen: [00:20:07] Yes. And that does take leadership, so for some, the idea of the lottery of life, you know, the ovarian lottery is like, yes. What's wrong with that? Why? Because they're the winners of that lottery. Right? And so it and the fear then becomes, well, if we do do set this new course for the future, am I going to lose? No, no. People are not going to lose, it just means that society will get better at providing a safety net for all, and we will be giving everyone the opportunity. The opportunity will come back to this word again for social mobility, that all people have the same equal opportunity to gain that same quality of education, the same job opportunities, and so the same health outcomes. The fact is that if you are born poor, your life expectancy is lower. Your quality of life on average is lower. We need to correct that. It doesn't mean that people will be losing out at the top, but rather, it means that we're all in this together.

Interviewer: [00:21:25] That's a lovely end to that, though. One last question Liz, and, working in the library, I really do need to ask what you're reading, watching or listening to in this pretty extraordinary time?

Dr Liz Allen: [00:21:41] Do you know what? I probably I'm not embarrassed to say, but I'm sure that some will cringe when I say this, but my kids are big fans of *Bluey* and that the ABC program *Bluey*. Yeah. Gosh, I even watch these, these episodes without the kids. My favourite episode, and if you're someone who doesn't watch *Bluey* or has no reason, you think, to watch *Bluey*, watch it in private anyway. My favourite

episode is The Grannies. And, the other favourite for me at the moment is baby dad, no, Dad Baby. And so get in on *Bluey*.

I also enjoy reading the Bluey books for the kids. But for my own enjoyment I guess, and for my own intellectual stimulation, I've finally got hold of a book that I've been looking to read, and that's by Shakira Hussein called *From Victims to Suspects: Muslim Women since 9/11*. And very relevant, too, to the current discussion about immigration and migrants and whom we value in this country. And it'll be interesting to see where that thinking takes me. I look forward to reading the book, as well as watching *Bluey* episodes.

Interviewer: [00:23:15] It sounds like balance there.

Dr Liz Allen: [00:23:24] Look, life is all about balance, and *Bluey* I'll tell you what is, if you like *Simpsons* as kids, adults get into *Bluey*. It's like these bite sized chunks of just heaven.

Interviewer: [00:23:37] Wonderful. Well, thank you so much, Liz. And to continue the conversation with Liz, she can be found on social media under her alter ego, Dr. Demography. Gleebooks a partnering bookseller are hosting a digital launch of *The Future of Us* on Thursday 14 May. And they are offering library listeners a 10% discount. Just enter the word *future*, into the discount field with your online order. Thank you for listening. And look out for upcoming digital content through the Inner West Library What's on and social media channels. Thank you for listening.