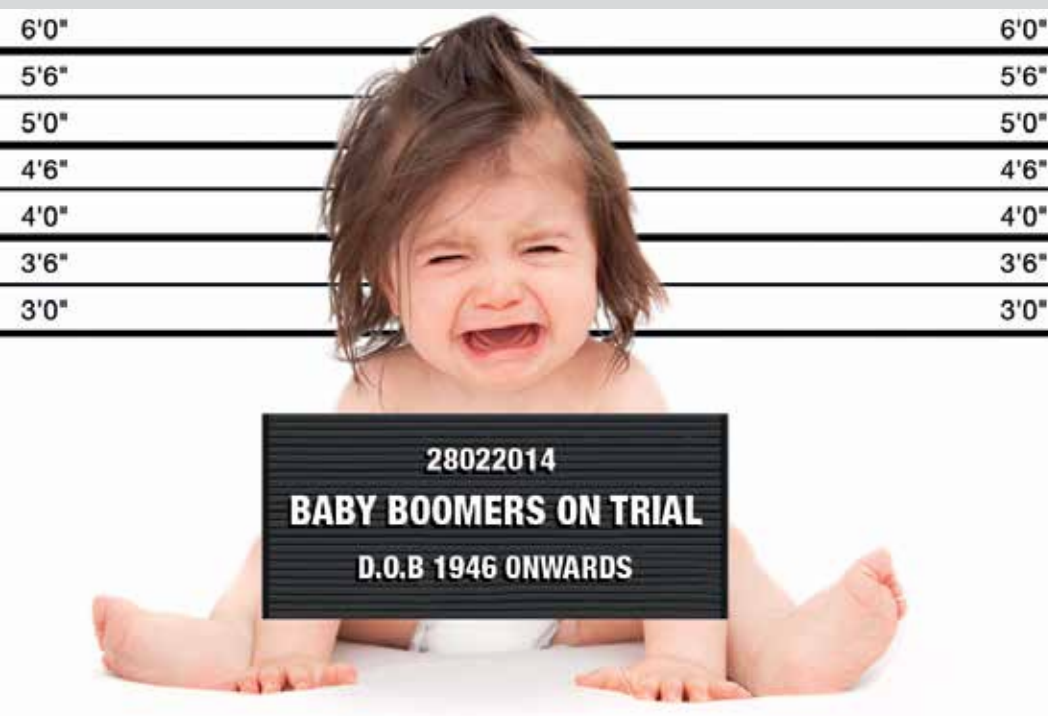


GUILTY AS CHARGED?

Do baby boomers really deserve all the blame for the ills of today? **Conor Gearty** examines the evidence and reports on a unique public prosecution at LSE.



Are the lucky post-war generation of “baby boomers” responsible for the plight we are all in today? Missing the wars that destroyed so much of the lives of their parents and grandparents, they went on to enjoy unprecedented levels of prosperity and security – but left what exactly to the rest of us? In the second of LSE’s unique series of public prosecutions, held at LSE’s Literary Festival on 28 February, the baby boomers stood accused of bequeathing a world to the young that is blighted by climate change, record youth unemployment and soaring bills for housing and higher education.

Justice demanded they pay a price for wrecking the lives of the generations that follow them and the charge sheet was pretty extensive.

The prosecution, led by a team of lawyers from Matrix Chambers, opened by explaining that the horrors of the second world war inspired the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and later international covenants, but, by their actions, the baby boomers have been multiple violators of those fundamental rights for Generations X and Y, and others still to come.

Expert witness for the prosecution, Bob Ward of LSE’s Grantham Research Institute, accused baby

boomers of having benefited from “dirty growth” that has ruined the planet to the detriment of future generations. The jury were told that the resources of the world have been so plundered that the basics of a decent, human-rights-respecting life – water, food, fresh air – can no longer be taken for granted. A second prosecution witness, Shiv Malik, the journalist and author, accused baby boomers of having benefited from state services such as free education, mortgage subsidies and rent control that, once in a position of power, they denied to future generations. He also pointed out that the young are now expected to work for free as interns.

The baby boomers’ defence, led by a team of lawyers from Brick Court Chambers, was surprisingly powerful. They inherited a world laid waste by war and rebuilt it, staying clear of further war despite the power of the weapons they had to hand. They evolved a welfare state and brought freedom to their colonies. The world they handed over was in decent shape and they have endeavoured to keep it that way by acknowledging climate change and negotiating legally binding international limits on emissions of the six major greenhouse gases.

Emma Soames, journalist and expert witness for the defence, argued that the baby boomers had done a great deal to make life better for future generations. Baby boomers, she pointed out, now undertake huge amounts of voluntary work, which balances out the internships that the younger generations are forced to do.

Professor Oriana Bandiera of LSE’s Department of Economics, another witness for the defence, argued that the actions of the baby-boomer generation had paved the way for the younger generations to thrive with, for example, more gender parity.

The baby boomers also argued that, with their compulsion to embrace the market, their lack of any kind of social solidarity and their failure to think imaginatively and together to solve the issues that confront them (much smaller than anything they faced), it is Generations X and Y that are the true culprits for the mess they are in.

The whole evening was overseen by a distinguished “judge”, Professor Judith Rees, a former director of LSE who is now co-director of the Grantham Research Institute.

While the jury were deliberating, and after an extensive Q and A, the audience voted on the verdict and found the baby boomers not guilty by a narrow margin (51 per cent voted “not guilty”, 49 per cent voted “guilty”). The jury, a specially selected mix of young and old, were more resolute and found the baby boomers “not guilty” with a majority verdict (10 to 2). Over 400 people crammed into the theatre to watch the drama. The device of a trial meant that it was possible to get under the skin of many of the issues but to do so in an accessible way, one which drew in not just the experts but the general public as well. This is exactly what the new Institute of Public Affairs will be seeking to do more of at LSE in the years to come. ■



Conor Gearty is Director of the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) at LSE.

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