

The Foundation Dialogue of Generations Promotes a New View of Old Age

# “See Age as an Opportunity and not a Burden”

*The sociologist Dr. Thomas Druyen advocates dialogue between the generations. In this interview with the Börsen-Kurier he explains why he feels the need to do so.*

The EU Commission is currently advocating raising the age of retirement. A green paper even talks about pushing the retirement age up to 70 in response to the demographic trend in Europe. “People will have to work more and longer,” according to a spokesperson. The German sociologist Thomas Druyen agrees. For years he has been advocating changed societal attitudes toward old age.

**Börsen-Kurier:** Professor, together with your wife Jenny Jürgens, you founded the Dialogue of Generations Foundation in 1999. What prompted this initiative and what is the goal?

**Druyen:** In 1999 the impacts of the demographic change were well known in academic circles, but in public the subject was taboo. My wife and I saw the abundance of opportunities offered by dramatically longer life-spans and we both have a great deal of respect for age. What would any of us be without our ancestors. Inspired by this idea, we wanted to do something to promote a better dialogue between the generations. It was a cause that was close to our heart. The aim was to contribute to drawing scholarly and public attention to the opportunities and challenges of the new age.

**Börsen-Kurier:** In your book *Olymp des Lebens* you painted a new picture of old age and called for a new social attitude. Who could be responsible for this new attitude?

**Druyen:** All generations. A lifespan that has increased by 30 years has impacts on all phases of life. Our entire lifecycle has changed as a result. One can't spend thirty years just in retirement; society as a whole therefore has to respond to

the new possibilities. Most people won't just work longer, they will also have to change careers several times during their working lives. We have to engage in a process of lifelong learning and entrench it in society. In this respect, we don't regard the new age as a burden, but as an opportunity to get fit for the 21st century. This concerns all generations.

**Börsen-Kurier:** Policymakers have been advocating raising the statutory retirement age for years. How important would such an increase be?

**Druyen:** This change has an essential dimension. An increasing number of older people and more and more young people cannot live in the same organisational structures that we have been living in for the last 30 years. Here it is up to politicians to offer us new models and make suggestions. Unfortunately, there is a frightening passivity here. Politicians usually make minor adjustments until the problem has spun out of control. This is why ultimately the challenge is to take preventative and far-sighted action. Foundations, scholars and especially business must set an example here in order to exert more pressure. In this sense, policies must be made for the public and not with a view to upholding political interests.

**Börsen-Kurier:** Is the older generation able to cope with the changes in the working world, with the rapid technological change?

**Druyen:** The future doesn't ask any generation whether it is ready for change. Either we try to shape things or we will be dominated by forces outside our control. It is therefore high time that we give older people the practical skills to use the opportunities offered by modern technologies. There is not just a gap between rich and poor, soon there will be one between those who are networked and those who are isolated. Especially in old age, the sensible use of technology can do a tremendous amount to make life easier and also offers opportunities for all kinds of training to preserve social health.

**Börsen-Kurier:** You advocate justice between the generations. When would this be achieved?

**Druyen:** There are too many aspects to intergenerational justice to list them all in a single response. But one essential point, is certainly the responsibility that rests upon us all to give children, young people and future generations a world that can sustain itself. Predatory exploitation in this context is criminal in the extreme.

**Börsen-Kurier:** The global financial and economic crisis has raised doubts about one of our major social achievements – secure pensions. How important are private pension schemes?

**Druyen:** Absolutely essential. I think that we will have to get used to the idea of having to save to provide at least one third of our retirement income ourselves. However this cannot mean that those who have paid contributions all their lives are suddenly left in the lurch. No government can be released from this political responsibility. Those who save banks that are considered too big to fail, must keep their word to the ordinary citizens.

**Börsen-Kurier:** In a recent interview with an Austrian newspaper, the actor Klaus Maria Brandauer said: “It’s not about staying young, but about growing old gracefully.” How do you grow old gracefully?

**Druyen:** What Mr. Brandauer said is a fantastic life motto in this day and age. In future every generation will have to do what it is really capable of doing. Even if the entire world has been swamped by a desire for consumption, life is not a product or a piece of merchandise. Anyone who wishes to remain young in all respects has failed to grasp the meaning of life. Of course you can stay young at heart, but to mature is not to decay but the central task of our being.

It cannot be denied that the physical process is often painful.

We will probably have to seek new role models. Among today's celebrities, there are too many examples of people who have nothing to offer us. Ageing gracefully also means accepting responsibility for ourselves and for others.

Thank you for the interview.