

Future Generation and 2Fold: Investing for impact
Episode One | Natasha Stott Despoja AO

Future Generation acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia, and recognises their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.

CAROLINE GURNEY: 2Fold is a new podcast series from Future Generation. At Future Generation, our purpose is twofold. We generate wealth for our shareholders by giving them access to top fund managers and we invest to change the lives of young Australians. We've already given over \$52 million dollars in the past six years to a variety of youth-focused charities. I'm Caroline Gurney, the CEO of Future Generation. Every month, I'll be speaking to leaders about their two driving purposes in life. Today, I'm thrilled to welcome my good friend Natasha Stott Despoja AO. Hi Natasha.

NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA AO: Hello.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Natasha's been on the public stage both here and abroad for 30 years. She is the youngest woman to ever enter Parliament. She is a former leader of the Australian Democrats, and she currently sits on the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of the Discrimination against Women. In between all of that, she's founded a not-for-profit, she's written a book, which I had the honour of hosting the launch of in Sydney. She has served on countless charity boards, worked for the World Bank, and has been named as one of the top global influencers on gender policy. There is way more, she is such an over achiever! But if you want the full list, have a look at Wikipedia. What isn't on Wikipedia, although it might be after this podcast, is that Natasha is one of the world's best chocolate givers. Whenever somebody's sick, celebrating a career win or suffering a setback, Natasha could be relied upon to send a box of chocolates and to bring them to Board Meetings. So Natasha I really hope you have that rather large box of chocolates I've sent you to give you a sugar hit while we're speaking and also I hope they're on brand.

NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA AO: They're absolutely spectacular. I like to think of myself as a bit of a brand ambassador for Haigh's or any South Australian chocolates Caroline, so I'm feeling

very sugar hit today, thank you and chocolate frogs are always my favourite, but I think it's the reason why people put me on Boards now. It has nothing to do with my merit anymore, I'm convinced of that, it's just if I bring the chocolates, they'll put up with me.

CAROLINE GURNEY: That is actually very true. I love a Board Meeting when you're there because I know you'll bring the chocolates, but also the fact that you bring so much wisdom in the room. To kick off, Natasha I spoke earlier about Future Generation and its twofold purpose, which is the title of our podcast, so what are your two main objectives in life?

NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA AO: Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of your very first podcast. I love the title of your podcast and narrowing down to two objectives is very hard, but I have always considered my role in life, certainly something that drives me, is the idea of creating change; positive, progressive change. I want to make a difference and that's what spurred me into politics and to different areas of work and life and mainly focused around the concept of fairness and equality and specifically gender equality, so I feel very strongly that that's been an objective. In life happiness is quite elusive, but the ability to make a difference is what has certainly driven me. The other thing these days, in a very personal sense are being a good mother, a good role model, a good parent to my children. I want to instil in them really wonderful, healthy, ethical values so that, I hope, I don't insist, but I hope that they go on to have similar objectives and to try and make the world a kinder, fairer, greener more equal place.

CAROLINE GURNEY: I can see now why I've been such a fan of yours for so many years. I mean you know we've been friends for a while, I mean I was at your 50th and I've been to your home in Adelaide and in fact your husband Ian Smith who is one of those major political and business influencers actually introduced us. What really cemented the fact that I admired you so much was the reason you founded that and you set it up to really succeed in that area. Could you tell us a little bit more about what Our Watch does and why you found it?

NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA AO: I can't take all the credit. You're very kind, but in actual fact it is the brainchild of two wonderful political women and in a very unusual twist, two women on different sides of the so called political spectrum. The former Victorian Minister for Families, Mary Wooldridge, really initiated the concept of a national foundation to prevent violence against women and their children and she worked absolutely collaboratively with her Labor counterpart

Federally, Julie Collins, to found this extraordinary national body, and that was back in 2013, and they approached me very early on in the piece to see if I would be the inaugural Chair and try and help grow this organisation into what is now a truly national body. As you would know we've seen every State and Territory as well as the Commonwealth of course join onto this organisation which has the primary function of primary prevention, so stopping violence against women and children before it starts, and we know that Australia's been a world leader in this form of prevention whether it was to do with sun and skin care, whether it was to do with the issue of smoking and tobacco and preventing people from taking up smoking or whether it's seatbelts, so safe driving. We've been a world leader and we have now translated that into ground breaking work nationally on the issue of the prevention of violence, family violence, domestic violence and sexual assault.

CAROLINE GURNEY: You can't listen to the radio now, turn on the TV without hearing about domestic violence, especially during COVID and what's actually happened. So I mean I'm just recovering from COVID now and it was really quite bad, so I can't actually imagine what it would've been like to be trapped in isolation with a person who was abusing me. We've talked a lot about domestic violence, what have you seen in the past two years? How has it really exacerbated the domestic violence epidemic in our country? Is that something that is now quantifiable?

NATASH STOTT DESPOJA AO: There are many reports and they all point to the fact that COVID has exacerbated inequalities generally across the world and in Australia, but specifically in relation to the role, the work, the opportunities and the health of women. We have vast amounts of evidence to show an increase in violence generally including physical and financial and emotional abuse as well as, this is hardly surprising, an increase in online violence and bullying and abuse. In fact, in 2020, as I recall during the Easter long weekend alone, there was a 600.0% increase in reports of online attacks and violence, and those statistics are just scratching the surface of what we've seen, not just domestically, but across the world. Women have been described as the shock absorbers of the pandemic because of its quite disproportionate impact on women, partly because of the exacerbation of rigid gender stereotypes, you've sort of seen a reverse, a reverting to very traditional roles for women in terms of caring, not only for children but also older parents and loved ones, but you've also seen many women on the frontline, whether that's in caring professions, in teaching, in health, in

nursing, and cleaning, so for women generally it has put our rights back and that means we have to have women's' and girl's' rights in the forefront of the work that we do whether it's in budget and policy work in Australia or whether it's across the world in terms of multilateral policy, we really need to centre gender equality as part of the reform or the coming back from this awful period. And I hope you're feeling better by the way, after talking me up on the chocolates I don't think I sent you any medicinal chocolates and I need to improve.

CAROLINE GURNEY: I know and I didn't actually tell anybody I had it until pretty much afterwards 'cos I just wanted to be left alone. I think what you said in terms of domestic violence and those physical injuries and bruises, it really affects women and children in so many ways and that leaves them very vulnerable to mental ill health and homelessness as well and that's incredibly close to my heart because that's really what Future Generation is about, on the social impact side, in focusing on mental illness prevention and youth at risk. As you say, the main cause of domestic violence is gender inequality and yet Australia is this amazing, privileged, developed country and our record on domestic violence is really not good. Are we all really trying to figure out how to fund it and how to make a real impact, because I think we know what works, but how do we actually make it happen so there's a real impact?

NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA AO: There are so many things there. The first point is something you referred to earlier and that is the level of community awareness and understanding, obviously that's grown exponentially. We know that there is no one single issue of violence against women and children, but we do know that higher levels of this behaviour are linked to a number of attitudes and behaviours including the notion of rigid gender stereotypes. The idea of limiting women's independence financially or otherwise. The issue of male peer relationships that emphasise aggression or condone disrespect of women, so the drivers are becoming so clear that we can now begin to address them and this is the positive message that is really important to get out there and that is that violence against women is preventable, it's not an inherent part of our biological conditions, it's something we can stop, so how do we do that? If we know that gender inequality is at the core of the problem, clearly gender equality is at the heart of the solution, so we start to address some of those inequalities in our society whether it's in our defence force, our media, the representation of women in sport, representation of women in Parliament, decision making institutions, all of those issues you start to examine and see how you can create a more equal, ethical, fairer society. You also require goodwill or

political will and that comes with resources and the idea of ensuring that as human beings, as leaders, as politicians wherever your work and role maybe including vitally as parents and caregivers that we also model respectful, healthy, ethical relationships. I'm a big fan of political will and resources that goes into turbocharging not just policy reform, but cultural change and cultural change is tough and it takes time, but we have the evidence base now so there's no excuse, no excuse for us not to do something about it.

CAROLINE GURNEY: I think what you're saying also is that politicians really need to lead with our leaders in the country and you obviously were in Parliament House the youngest woman to ever enter, what was it like for you back then? I remember you once saying that you felt like a novelty. You wore your Doc Martens and everybody sort of reported it across all the media, what's your view of the current crop of women who are coming forward who are really calling out on the actual current culture?

NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA AO: I can't help but giggle when you refer to me as the youngest woman to enter Federal Parliament. Obviously it's a record of which I'm very proud, but now that I'm a woman in my 50's, I sometimes make people laugh overseas when they look at me and they go gosh if she's the youngest woman to ever enter the Parliament, what's the average age of the place and I have to explain no I was in Parliament a long time ago, certainly yes 26 years ago. There is a link between leadership and women's representation in politics and leadership roles and the issue of addressing violence against women and girls, so unashamedly I am very passionate about increased representation of women in all our diversity and difference in our decision making institutions because we know it matters, we know it works. Of course there are other ways to achieve change and I'm not suggesting Parliaments are the only way. My experience is as a relatively young woman, and let's face it 26 isn't that young, but certainly I was a novelty. I mean we had a very stereotypic notion of what constitutes a leader or a politician, certainly a senator. Male, pale, middle class or privileged in a way that most of us couldn't even begin to relate to at that age. When I got in 14% of the Parliament was female, so it was a very marginalising environment and so to be relatively young or to wear sensible shoes or all of those things that you associate with being a young person who hasn't been skilled in the art of giving political answers. I was just honest, maybe a little naïve, but I was passionate and I knew my stuff and that's the reason that I guess I survived, but it wasn't easy and I was subject to, as some your listeners may even remember, ridiculous stereotypes and comments

and sometimes debilitating experiences and people have seen this played out in recent years, harassment, sexism, unwanted attention, physical and otherwise, so the one thing I take heart from as many women who've been in politics or indeed who are still in Parliaments is that you do create role models. You do set a standard. You start to show that we can be what we can see and so that made me happy that there is a steady trail of women, particularly young women, who did enter politics after me knowing that they could do it because someone like me had been able to do it. I think that the leadership piece is important. Politics is important. My experiences at the time range from debilitating, laughable, sometimes horrendous. Caroline the first business lunch I went to I was asked if I went into politics to find a husband. I often laugh despite the calibre available that was not my motivating factor, so I like to think things have changed and to your last point about these experiences aren't new, but what is new are these extraordinary young people, young women in particular who are calling out these bad behaviours. They're exposing shameful truths. The Grace Tame's' and Brittany Higgins' of the world is only two examples are shining a light on some pretty uncomfortable truths and there are women from all backgrounds who are part of this movement and when I say women, there are men, women, nonbinary, there is however people choose to identify you are seeing a lot of young people just say we're not putting up with this and that gives me great hope for the future.

CAROLINE GURNEY: It seems to be taking such a long time for change to really happen. You were in politics as you rightly say 26 years ago, but we're still talking about the same issues and I think there are some very brave women that have stood up in the past sort of five, 10 years and more so now I think that are actually calling out the system. When you talk about the disillusionment in Australian politics right now, we've got gender equality, climate change, accountability and we're seeing that rise at the independent movement and people turning away from the major parties around the edges, I'm not actually sure exactly how whole scale it is, so with that sort of current political climate is it time for change? Is there a return for a party like the Democrats? Wasn't the tagline keep the bastards honest, I love that. I remember being in the UK and hearing that and thinking oh wow they can do so much in Australia.

NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA AO: That was the greatest unofficial slogan of a political party ever but even that was interesting because polling was conducted that showed that the men saying that was okay, but when the then leader used that expression and I used it so basically any woman used it, it actually didn't poll well, so people were offended. So we always used to

say we'll keep them honest, it was quite extraordinary when you look back on that 26 years ago but look the pace of change is slow. I'm hugely disappointed at the woeful pace of change. I think women in politics particularly for me has been heartbreaking, not just the experiences that we've seen exposed particularly in recent times, but the lack of parity. I thought by the time I was in my 50's that we would have equal numbers of men and women and hopefully our diversity and difference reflected and represented and that hasn't happened yet and that's a problem if you really believe in a meaningful representative democracy. We should rejoice in some small victories. Please don't think that just because the pace has been slowed, that there hasn't been progress and there's been extraordinary progress including on the issues dear to our hearts, including the issue of violence against women and our understanding of gender equality generally and indeed the issue of gendered violence specifically. We've seen progress in terms of the positions that women are holding, women's levels of education, changes in the home, but none of this has happened fast enough and it does need to be turbocharged and against as I say it's not just about the policies or the regulatory frameworks, it is so much about goodwill and it's so much about cultural change and that is such a generational thing, it does take time to change people's attitudes and behaviours. We are getting there, we've got national community attitude surveys that tell us clearly that views are changing, especially among young people, but when you still have a fifth of the population that believes that men make better leaders because they're less emotional than women or more rational, yeah you've got some work to do and I would like to see, I'd like to see more work whether it's in our workplaces, whether it's in our schools, indeed in our representative institutions or on our sporting fields there is so much work to be done. I don't know if any of your listeners paid attention the South Australian election and I'm not being partisan about this, but what I am excited by is what looks like almost parity in our State Parliaments and our Parliament is the first in Australia, the only one left that's never had a female Premier or Chief Minister, so we've got a long way to go considering we were the first place in the world to grant women the right to vote and stand for Parliament back in 1894, so there's a lot of change that could've happened more quickly and I'm confident that perhaps the next generation will help us with that.

CAROLINE GURNEY: What do you think about the Independents? Do you think that that is really going to challenge the status quo at the moment?

NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA AO: Definitely. I think that's part of that change. I laugh, my slogan as leader of the Democrats in the 2001 election such a fraught and vexed election it was but was change politics and I do think that there is a sense now that people aren't complacent. They don't want to put up with the same old same old. That the two party rigidity it never really suited us and while that's not going to be broken down very quickly, the idea that people are looking at independent voices and particularly women, says something about our system. It may not change overnight, but it will change and I am confident that there's an appetite for something better, whether it's in terms of behaviour or procedure or indeed in policy, people are not apathetic, they're certainly cynical and sceptical, but I love the way that that's been channelled into change and I hope, I hope that the women's vote if there is such a thing these days will actually see change, because there is absolutely a dire need for more women in our Federal Parliament and I suspect those female Independents will be a part of that momentum.

CAROLINE GURNEY: You're right. I can really see that happening. I know that family and community is incredibly important to you and obviously you're the mother to two children, Cordelia and Conrad, I've always wanted to ask you this but never actually asked you, how do you actually discuss gender equality and domestic violence with your children in that sort of age appropriate way as they go through different stages and how do you talk to them about respectful relationships, what that actually looks like so that they're a bystander in the right way and they never end up as a victim or an abuser but they actually know what to do when they're in a situation and how they can actually change that situation for the best?

NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA AO: That's a tough question because obviously our focus at Our Watch and elsewhere has been about age appropriate education on respectful relationships and the one thing that we know is it has to be multifaceted and it has to be in all the places where we live, love, learn, work and play. It's not just enough to have your Mum and Dad modelling equal relationships or sharing the chores or speaking in a way that doesn't condone disrespect against men or women, boys or girls or anyone because the messages that come from so many other parts of our lives are so strong. I've often told the story about my Son getting certain messages from me and his Dad and then playing sport and being told that he's a Mummy's boy or he's kicked like a girl, I mean these things thankfully are not happening as much, but they do still happen. The messaging through popular culture and media whether it's Married at First Sight or whether it's a pop songs lyrics, these are huge influences on our children

and I guess for someone like me I've got to be careful that I don't almost, for lack of a better term, overdo it because I suspect those of you out there with teenagers will know that they do rebel a little bit and sometimes Conrad will say Mum come on not everything's about gender equality and I've got to go actually no just hold it there, we'll just move on. But I also tell the story of my Daughter Cordelia when she was much younger and she was in the car with my husband Ian and son Conrad and Ian went passed a caryard and said to Conrad oh look check out those cars son and Cordelia piped up and said oh what Dad girls don't like cars, so you know my kids certainly keep us on our toes as well and I've been really proud of little things that I've heard that Conrad's done because I don't underestimate the peer pressure on boys as well as girls, but to not get too caught up in these discussions and he didn't tell me little things like one year he initiated the ribbons for International Women's Day at school, but if you draw that to his attention, he's don't Mum I don't want to talk about it. The things to remember is there are so many influences on young minds and it's not just the parenting or not just the school's responsibility and not just on the sporting field, it is the intersection of all of those things that as parents or guardians or caregivers the one thing that we can do is model those relationships ourselves, that is the single biggest influence at the moment, but closely followed by celebrities and sporting stars, they're hugely influential and as you would know Caroline that's why we use them in Our Watch as key ambassadors and role models because we know young people, they're not going to listen to Conrad's 52 year old Mum, but they might listen to someone who is a brilliant cricketer or AFLW player etcetera.

CAROLINE GURNEY: That's exactly right. Just one final question because I could actually talk to you all day and the time obviously is running out. You have a really full plate. You have so much that you've done, that you're doing now, but what is next for you? When you wake up first thing in the morning what do you think and next I want to be?

NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA AO: I don't know if I've ever thought that way, isn't that funny. I just find I've been very fortunate that life's headed me in certain directions. Some it's hard work. Some of it's luck. Some of it's a whole range of things of course. But admittedly when I wake up in the morning now, because I'm on a United Nations Treaty Body as you mentioned they're working through the night in Geneva, so I wake up to an enormous number of terrifying emails, so I sort of think oh gosh wouldn't a bit of a break be nice, but more seriously I love the fact that I'm so fortunate to have an interesting mix of things. Whether it's not-for-profit Boards like

Carrie's Beanies 4 Brain Cancer or in the past wonderful Our Watch. I'm fortunate to be on the Australian Ballet Board which when we talk about all these big tough issues and violence against women haunts me, it is a tough issue with which to deal let alone those people who are extraordinary people on the frontline working every day to keep women and children safe, so for me what revives us, what keeps us energised for me is culture and it's the arts and it's ballet and it's music and reading, so that's the stuff that I love to do. In the meantime, I'm going to work as hard as I can and I'm lucky enough to work for Deloitte as a principle advisor particularly on these issues and associated issues of cultural change and diversity, but I think the UN will keep me pretty occupied for now and I do love that international focus. My main aim, if I could state anything right now is I will not rest until I see more women represented in powerful bodies, but particularly in Parliament and I will live vicariously through others, I don't think Australia is really ready for a return from me, but I will do my best to support women across the political spectrum, obviously with a view they've got to be committed to progressing the rights of women and girls and children, but that will be my focus and I will continue to my dying day to work on that. A full plate Caroline, it's all good, but a full plate because I'm sitting here surrounded by Haigh's chocolates, so don't feel too worried about my afternoon, I know what's ahead of me today.

CAROLINE GURNEY: Thank you so much. I would love you to return to domestic politics without a doubt but thank you very much for your time and speak to you soon.

NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA AO: Thank you.