**Felicia:** Welcome to For Impact, the charity podcast. We're here to give voice to the sector and talk about the taboos and challenges holding it back and what we can do about it. Our topic today is Polite, Posh and Problematic Inside Our Sector's Class Problem.

I'm Felicia Willow, a consultant and interim CEO, also known as the Mary Poppins of the charity sector. I work directly with charities on interim leadership, governance, strategy and change and increasingly look across the sector to address the systemic issues that hold For Impact organisations back. I'm joined by my co-host, Chris Pitt from the Benefact Group.

**Chris:** Hello, Felicia and hello, everyone. It is great to be here again.

**Felicia:** So, the charity sector is there to serve society's most marginalised. So why do we see so few of these people either at the helm or on the board? In this episode, we confront the For Impact sector's greatest taboo, its uncomfortable relationship with class. Who holds the power? Who is silenced? And why your accent still seems to matter? Is the sector ready to face its own class problem?

**Chris:** Well, I don't mind admitting that I feel rather uncomfortable, too. I find this uneasy because you can't tackle this topic without a bit of self-reflection. It makes you think about who you are, what your journey in life has been. But that's the point of this issue. I think it's conscious consideration of class. So, this podcast is already doing its job and I'm looking forward to getting stuck into it.

**Felicia:** It's certainly not a clear cut and dried concept. You know, I'm from Australia, while we have a class system, it's not directly comparable to the one here. And having an accent places you in a different class in the UK, it seems. But overcoming assumptions is definitely something I'm familiar with grappling with as a migrant.

**Chris:** Yeah, I find the preparation for this podcast really made me reflect on my preconceptions of the charity sector. So, from an outside perspective, the For Impact sector looks pretty diverse to me, pretty inclusive. But I guess my impression is dominated by what it does rather than the people within it doing it. We see charities every day doing hugely diverse work in the hardest places. And these charities are a world away from the corporate world of financial services that I'm in. But that doesn't mean there is balance, equity and diversity in the leadership behind these charities. So, I think I've got to look a bit harder. And I think this is what this podcast is going to help me do.

**Felicia:** Great. So, let's get started. First, we'll hear from Dorothea Jones, an inclusion consultant who has a fascinating personal story to share of her journey from a London estate to becoming a charity leader and expert. Next, Alex Evans, consultant and sector stirrer, talks to us about what class even is and how we can be more cognizant of the power dynamics that surround us. And finally, Duncan Exley, former director of the Equality Trust, author of The End of Aspiration and consultant specialising in helping For Impact organisations widen participation. Let's head over to Dorothea Jones. She's an inclusion strategist, ADHD UK ambassador and founder of Inclusivation, a consultancy dedicated to building inclusive workplace cultures across industries.

Thank you so much for coming on the podcast. You were the first female CEO of one of the UK's longest running anti-racist charities. You led on race hate crime for the mayor of London. But your journey started on a council estate in North West London. So how do you think your background shaped your path into the sector?

**Dorothea:** It was absolutely foundational. I grew up on a very notorious North West London council estate, which has now been demolished. They were made up of interconnecting walkways. It was called Chalk Hill Estate. And in the early 80s, it was actually named as the most violent estate in the country. So, I think how it helped me, how it assisted me really, was really looking at solidarity. So, it was a lot about community and struggle side by side. We hadn't heard of things like community organising. It was just neighbours helping each other out to get by. And that shaped my politics long before I had any language to speak it, I suppose.

And I think when you grow up seeing how systems fail people, whether it's housing, whether it's education, whether it's policing, you carry that awareness wherever you go, whatever room you walk into. So, it made me determined to change the system in some way. And I think the way I did it by becoming the first female CEO for the longest running anti-racist charity, we can name that charity, it's the Monitoring Group, was because my son was racially abused at school and then I got involved in that system. I was doing something completely different. I thought, actually, I want to do this because I'm good at it and because I want to see change. And it was very male led as well at that time. And that involved men and from different classes as well. I think that was quite important. Because I think we know that in the UK, the bottom two income quintiles underrepresented in charity leadership, I didn't get involved in it because of that, is because most senior leadership are from upper- and middle-class backgrounds. And yeah, I think that's very evident really within the charity sector.

**Felicia:** Why we wanted to talk about this issue, because it's not talked about and you've managed to rise to senior executive leadership in this sector that doesn't often make space for working class people with working class backgrounds. So, what did you notice as you moved through the system, especially in terms of who gets heard, who gets hired, who gets held back?

**Dorothea:** Well, I think a lot. Firstly, there's this unspoken idea of who's charity material, I think, for want of a better word. And also, it's often white, middle class, degree educated, well-spoken. And I was degree educated, but I went to university when it was actually free to go and when I think there were 15 to 20 percent of the population went to university, now I think it's 46 and above. So, there were very few of us that went at the time. But this affects who hires, doesn't it, and who gets listened to once they're in? Because people like affinity bias. They like to see people that look like them, that sound like them, that reflect them, and often you don't. And I think that's something that's made me think people are definitely being held back.

And I've seen brilliant working-class colleagues overlooked because of their accent, their postcode, their style of communication. And when decisions are made behind closed doors, it's usually the same kinds of people at the table. And I think that's becoming dull. And when we're looking at charity work, you're supposed to be looking at people that don't have a voice and that are underrepresented. So, there's a bit of uncomfortableness really there, I think. And it's just continued. And I think if you look at some of the top charities, especially some of them that are tackling poverty, if you look at the class element of that, it's quite stark really.  
And I think that's something I've noticed massively when working in sort of charity work, for sure.

**Felicia:** Absolutely. It's funny, I do a lot of governance reviews and in those governance reviews, there's a lot of people think the same, you know, they share the same background. They might have different specialisms in their work, but actually, ultimately, they're middle class educated, as you say, and they don't have a lot of debate. And you often see when people come in with those different backgrounds, it's very, very hard to get themselves heard in there because there's all these strict shared mental maps around how you behave in this room, which isn't fit for purpose for our sector at all. And I often fight against organisations who say they want their values to be inclusive, because it's like, are you there? You know, you might be in your delivery end, but are you at the board? Are you in your senior leadership team?

**Dorothea:** No, no. And I think that's where it matters, because that's where the decisions are made. If you look people on the front line, of course, they're much more reflective of the communities they're in. But if you go further up the food chain, for want of a better word, it's so evident and it's quite depressing in lots of ways because that's the sector that should really be changing. And I think that lack of change is worrying because we've gone through sort of social periods. We've looked at social unrest, Black Lives Matter, all of those things that have happened over these years, and all those promises that we're going to change, we're going to make sure that we look at anti-racism and we look at class and gender and nothing changes. So, something needs to give, doesn't it?

**Felicia:** It does. And then this is that kind of disjoint between this idea of the charity sector as values led and inclusive and the reality. And it seems like race is definitely not where it needs to be. And I'm hoping to talk about that in a later podcast. But it does seem like we're talking about race more. Why do you think class is still so often missing from that discussion?

**Dorothea:** I think it's because it's uncomfortable. You can't ignore race. Race is there. I'm a mixed heritage woman. You can't ignore my race. But the fact that I've done a degree, I've done a master's degree, I'm doing a PhD, you can ignore my class. You're what you can try to. And I think it's especially uncomfortable for organisations that pride themselves on being progressive, which is quite interesting. So, talking about class means talking about power, it means talking about money, it means talking about privilege, and more importantly, it means talking about gatekeeping and who gets to set that conversation.

And as my dad always said to me, nobody is willing to give away their power. And I think that's part of it. And also, I think there's a fear of getting it wrong. I think that, you know, if we're going to be sort of a little bit generous here, there's a fear of that. So, race right now is rightly on the agenda, but class still is treated like a private matter. And I think if we're going to look at class as well, I know I can't divide race and class, I just can't because it's in me and it's so intersectional. And I think, like you say, people are just scared of getting it wrong because we hear this term white working class and we're thinking, well, it's that division as well, isn't it? Because obviously, we know there are black working-class people, there are people from the Asian diaspora that are working class as well. But it really is about that.

And I think a very protected characteristic, I think that the worry is you can't talk about any of them meaningfully, including race, without talking about class because it shapes how access is, visibility is, safety is, every single thing. So, I don't quite understand why classes is such a thing. And I think because it doesn't get talked about, we're seeing lots of people quite unhappy about that. And I think something needs to change because it underpins every single protected characteristic anyway.  
  
**Felicia:** Absolutely. Yeah, I think that's such a great point. How do you think all these different intersectional characteristics in your class, race, gender, neurodivergence, interacted in shaping your experience of leadership and inclusion in the sector?

**Dorothea:** Well, I think neurodiversity is something I only found out in 2022, so I had no idea. So, I was walking along in blind ignorance, I suppose. I think navigating leadership really as a working-class neurodivergent woman of colour meant I was constantly code switching. And I'm so good at it. One of my friend's daughters actually said, Dorothy is so good at code switching. And I didn't realise it's so evident, you know, you're in this room and this is how you behave. You're in that room and this is how you behave. You do it without realising it. So you've had to fight really, I've had to fight to be taken seriously and again, to fight to be fully seen as my whole self rather than you're ticking a box here, you're a woman or you're a woman of colour or you're working class or come from a working class background or you've got a degree or whatever it may be.

And I think because I gesticulate a lot, because I smile a lot and I'm quite, I suppose, certain in my opinions, my morals, my beliefs, I'm sometimes seen as I'm too much or I sometimes step in a room and think, oh gosh, how do I play this one? So, then I'll feel like I'm not enough. So, I'm either too direct, in some places I've been too academic, some places not academic speaking enough, too emotional, not strategic enough. Those labels really were about discomfort, I think, and difference. And I think that's where it is, because somebody can't pigeonhole you or put you into a space. That's what they want to do. They want to sort of to put you somewhere. And I think they can't do that. And look, I think women of colour only make up 0.2 percent of charity CEOs in the UK. That's so depressing, isn't it? And I think that tells you everything about how systemic exclusion works, especially at the intersections.

**Felicia:** One of the things I find quite interesting is that many charities work with people living in financial insecurity. I had a period of quite severe financial insecurity during my university years, which was quite confusing because I'd also gone to a private school and had a middle-class background. And then I found myself living below the poverty line. But it seems like growing up in that environment makes it less likely that a career in the sector is an option. I think that experience that it gave me gives me a huge amount of understanding of how hard it is and how stressful it is and all the kind of different things it does to you to be there. So why do you think that is and how does the sector need to change?

**Dorothea:** I think the sector was never set up for us in mind, really, to reach those sorts of higher echelons. You are okay to be a client or a customer or somebody that's supposed to be helped, really. So, it's about a lot of people volunteering. Some people may get to the volunteer stage or they're doing things like unpaid internships. So, you know, if you come from a working-class background, you can't afford to do that. You need to make money. You need to make that hustle. You've got to make something, haven't you, to make sure that everybody, including yourself, eats. And if there's people relying on you, that makes it even worse. So, I think it's trying to negotiate that in expensive cities, in particular cities, without support.

So, if you're from a background where every penny counts, you can't really afford to volunteer or intern your way in. That's one of the ways I think people from working class backgrounds are excluded. I know there's a lot of stuff going on around reverse mentorship and stuff going around mentorship as well within organisations like the Social Mobility Foundation and others. But I think progression is slow, especially as if you're not seen as the right fit. And as I'm going to always say this, it's about cultural and affinity bias, and our sector, the charity sector, needs to reckon with that. Because I think if you look at young trustees, for instance, 40 percent of young people from low-income backgrounds said they've never, ever, ever considered a charity career because of financial barriers and because it seems very exclusive. So that's quite interesting, really. You'd think they'll be thinking that more about going into finance or something like that. But something that could help their community, they just wouldn't even consider.

I mean, I'll give you a little bit about me. When I was growing up as a child, we had a social worker involved with our family, very sort of, I'm trying not to stereotype here, hush puppy wearing, lumberjack shirt, sort of middle class, came with a notebook and, you know, caused absolute chaos and we'd probably fight even more after he'd gone. But it felt completely out of reach. So, it's almost like you had sort of, I suppose, saviours coming in, middle class saviours coming in, do-gooding and then going back out again. And that's what it felt like. And I think with working class kids, that could be that perception. That's why that needs to change. It really does. Particularly from the top, you can see those guys doing stuff, youth work, all of those kinds of things, lower down. And that's great. But what about what's coming from the top? And I think that's why you're starting to see people branch off and do other sorts of things, really, that doesn't promote because they feel excluded from the normal realms, I suppose, of charity sector work.

**Felicia:** Yeah, it's this whole thing, isn't it, it's like doing to people rather than doing with people. It just feels like that Victorian idea of charity is still so intrinsic within our sector in a way that it really shouldn't be in 2025. It just feels wrong and outdated.

**Dorothea:** It really does, doesn't it? And I think when we had the Grenfell tragedy, I worked a bit on that as well, that felt a bit like that as well at the beginning. But then I think when Grenfell United really came together, that was from the community that was sort of determined because this is their lives. And I think if charities worked a bit more like that, because obviously a lot of charities give out funding and they give out grants as well, and its people having to comply in certain ways to get support. So, there is a lot of politics sort of tied up within this really, isn't there? Who has access to the purse strings and can make somebody's life significantly better? And it’s generally people that are not from working class backgrounds.

**Felicia:** These ideas of professionalism, so what does professional look like? These unspoken assumptions like language, accent, education, background. So, have you seen these expectations kind of shape who's seen as credible in our sector? And I mean, what can we do to challenge that type of thing?

**Dorothea:** It really is about sort of middle-class standards that are dressed up as a form of neutrality. This is how it is. So, it's almost seen as the neutral starting point, which is not. It's about tone, how you speak. I'm very expressive when I speak. So, I'm trying not to use my hands. So, it's about accent. It's about how you dress. It's about vocabulary. It's about postcodes. We know all of this and it's about school you went to and all those unspoken, whether you had free school meals, what your parents did for a living. It's all of those things. That's really inclusive of the working-class experience.

**Felicia:** Absolutely. I see a lot of times that people with lived experience who come onto boards and have left boards. And I'm often told, oh, they were just too busy. And it's like they were just too busy often means you didn't make the space for them. You had these barriers in place so that their passion was criticised or they weren't heard, or they couldn't change things. And I do think when its personal, people aren't going to stick around because it's painful to watch that kind of ignoring of those types of things.

**Dorothea:** It is. It dismisses your lived experience. You're thinking, hang on a minute, I know this because I've lived it, I don't have to quote statistics that you may have picked out on a piece of research rather than saying, I know what works. I know what didn't work as well. And I think that's part of it. And like you say, if someone feels excluded, they're going to go where they feel they're going to belong. And I think that's what's happening more and more and more. And yeah, that needs to change.

**Felicia:** What could change look like? What would a class inclusive future actually look like for the sector? I mean, I'd love to dismantle the whole the whole structure and restart again. But in the reality of what we live, how can we actually be more class inclusive?

**Dorothea:** I think, I mean, it has to be intersectional, obviously. I'm definitely going to say that it will not work unless it's intersectional. And it really is about not just diversifying faces. It's not about that tick box. It really is about that redistribution of power. And I think that's the only way we're going to see change. So that's paying people fairly from entry level to exact level depending what their experience is and also value lived experience on par with degrees. You say, yeah, degree and relevant experience. But how many people actually look at that and think, yeah, that's important, we're going to do that? And a class future would look like people from all backgrounds shaping strategy. It's about strategy, isn't it? And not just delivering the frontline work, because you see so many people from the working class delivering the coal face, the tough work, I call it.

And I suppose it needs to be led by communities, really, not them just being oh, we're going to do consultation. This is a focus group. We want to know what you think. It's about being led, and it needs to feel more honest and more human and definitely a lot less hierarchical. It's incredibly hierarchical. I think that's an issue.

**Felicia:** Yeah, problematically. So, I often think board meetings are set up. They're very corporate, patriarchal kind of structure that really doesn't fit what we're actually trying to do in the charity sector. And I'd love to see. And there's no reason why board meetings can't be shaken up. They don't have to be a droning kind of process. But yeah. Brilliant. Well, thank you so much for your time. Really appreciate it. And yeah, thank you, Dorothea Jones.

**Alex:** I'm Alex Evans. I'm a consultant in the charity sector by day, but by night, like Batman, I'm fighting injustice in the voluntary sector and trying to get people to be a little bit more aware of the kinds of power that are involved and how we might want to start trying to challenge those.

**Felicia:** Here we are talking about class. But what exactly does that word mean? You know, I think it means different things to different people. But I know you've got a really interesting insight in this. So, Alex, what does class mean when we talk about it like this?

**Alex:** Well, first of all, I wouldn't want to take other people's definitions away from them. But for me, I'm very influenced by the Marxian analysis of class, right, which says that class isn't just about who you are, but it's about how power and wealth are organized in society. So, it's not just your personal background, your identity. It's not just where you went to school or what your parents had as their profession. It's actually about your relationship and the group of people in your society, their relationship to power and wealth and resources. And so, for Marx, a class is a group of people who share particular material or economic interests.

So, for example, people are talking a lot at the moment about the division between wealth and work. Right? So how do you make your living? Do you make it from wealth and the things you own, or do you make it from your work and do you sell your labour? That's a classic class issue. Right? You know, there's one class of people who make their money from wealth and they want very different things in society, very different roles, very different rules and institutions. They have very different ideas than people who make their money from work.

The thing is, in general, what you find, and this is what Marx told us, is that the most powerful class in a society at any one time always shapes the ideas we have, shapes the laws, it shapes the rules and the institutions. And so, they have a lot of control over how we live and how we think. And that's why class is so difficult to shake, because even though it's so important to think about people's individual class and trying to include people and trying not to be sort of prejudiced about class, the real structures of class aren't just about individuals and their backgrounds. They're about ideas and they're about the institutions that shape our lives.

**Felicia:** Great. So, you and I have had a few conversations about class in the sector. Which I always find very interesting. How do you see class showing up in the charity sector?

**Alex:** I think at the end of the day, you see a very Victorian version of class, really, where at the top you see wealth and you see people who actually put the money into the sector and they seem to have all the control there. Then you go down and you have a very professional elite class who manage the wealth. Then beneath that, you have a sort of management class who are managing the shop floor and making sure that people sort of do the right things that they're meant to do. And then you have the worker bees who do the frontline work. And then you have the people at the bottom who are the poor and sort of destitute who receive the work. And if you actually look at how that structure works, it's an incredibly fixed and classic class structure, probably such that you don't see in many other areas of life. So, in other ways, it's obviously around philanthropy, which is very central to the sector. And again, you see the power in that situation where whoever has the wealth gets to decide everything.

So, I think often what you also find is that philanthropy is used to show, for example, that people shouldn't be taxed. And you actually have people who claim that they're doing philanthropy in order to show that actually if you let the wealthy choose how to use their wealth, they'll use it much better. Because if you just give it directly to the people who it might benefit, then they'll just fritter it away. And this goes back to people like Andrew Carnegie, who argued that really that the wealthy were the finest among men and they were the ones who could really understand how wealth might best be spent. So, what you didn't want to do was give taxes or give it directly to people because then they wouldn't know what to do with it. So, I think a lot of the time philanthropy is just there to defend those class structures and the power of the wealthiest in our society. And often they say these days that they want to tackle the root causes of poverty. But the problem is they are the root causes of poverty.

**Felicia:** I think that's really interesting when you look at the charity sector, because when you think about the roles, as you've described, in terms of the different layers of the charity sector, I bang on a lot about how I feel that the trustee structure is very Victorian, the kind of unpaid role of these, often the great and the good. And I know a lot of organisations are trying to change that. They are trying to diversify and challenge these assumptions about trustees. But there are ingrained things around the structure that really perpetuate that. So, what role do you see trustees play in how class operates in charities?

**Alex:** Sure. I mean, again, the thing I want to say with all of these things is I'm not talking here about there being naughty, mean people out there. The thing is structures are much more important. And what happens is that we all internalise these structures and we internalise these ideas and we continue doing them unless we challenge them and think about them. But at the end of the day, trustees have always historically been representatives of the elites, right. So, it started off with a priestly class, then royalty took it over. You know, Henry VIII was always into that. Then you had the mercantile classes, the people who were selling stuff. Then it became the bourgeoisie, right, the factory owners, that kind of thing. They've always been the people, whoever's in charge at the time of the money and the resources are the ones who end up on trustee boards. And one of their key roles is deciding who is deserving of charity, right. And in fact, the original role was called overseer. Okay. So, if that doesn't tell you something, I don't know what does, right.

And really, still now, if you look at it, shall we say, uncharitably, you could say, well, the thing is that trustees are there to keep an eye on the money. And to sort of make sure that nobody gets any funny ideas, right. So, in a way, they maintain that status quo. And how could they not? Because if you look at some charities that have been around for 500 years, they elect themselves. So, you've got an unbroken line of 500 years of people who voted in the next lot. And you could imagine in every interview for trustees, if they ever did interviews, right, they'd be saying, now we just want to check. Do you think exactly the same way that we do, right? So, then you end up over 500 years with the ideas of the elite, maybe slowly changing, maybe some different faces and a few different ideas coming in. But you're really going to find change very difficult to make happen there. And as I say, you'll see different faces. You'll see more women. You'll see more people from ethnic minorities, none of which are as good as we'd like. But you'll only see them there if they think the right thoughts. So really, trustees are there to keep an eye on the money, make sure that no one starts using any of that money to do things that might actually challenge the real power in society, much as there are some great trustees out there. But there's also a lot of bad trustees and we don't talk about that.

**Felicia:** Absolutely. I do a lot of governance reviews. And the thing I find most interesting is when I ask the question about what happens when trustees disagree on something? And I'm so often led to be reassured that we don't fight, we don't have conflict. There's generally very rarely any major disagreement. And that to me says, well, we don't actually have the right board. We don't have the right diversity of thought in the room. But our whole society, especially I think, English and especially Southern English is all set up around very strict politeness norms, which feel like they are quite specific to certain classes and shared mental maps and those kinds of things. But it does directly link with trustee effectiveness and board effectiveness. And yet we don't seem to accept that and recognize that as a society.

**Alex:** I think that's right. And I think at the end of the day, what we talk about, for example, is professionalism. Now, what does professionalism mean? It actually means essentially that the behaviours of being of a certain class, right. So, the thing is that what we often do is exclude people from boards or exclude them from power, exclude them from senior roles because we think they're not sufficiently professional. But one of the things that professionals are there to do is make sure that they don't challenge any of those ideas. If you do, then you'll be considered unprofessional.

**Felicia:** And then obviously speaking about structures and systems, the Charity Commission is obviously at the heart of how our sector is structured. Things like that trustees can generally not be paid and how that all works. So, what influence do you think the Charity Commission has and how does that fit into this whole class structure of the sector?

**Alex:** Sure. Well, one thing is, I mean, the idea that trustees can't be paid. What does that do to who's actually able to be a trustee? So, you end up with a lot of retirees, but you usually end up with professional retirees and so on and people who can afford to do the work for free. So, there's multiple things that are affecting that there. But I think one of the main things that you see is especially over the last 15 years or so, this idea that charities really should be quiet and shouldn't be allowed to get political and Orlando Fraser, the last chair, was particularly strong on this. And I think what the Charity Commission has often done is reinforce that idea that you're allowed to help the deserving poor, but you're not allowed to question how that inequality is produced.  
  
Now, what's really interesting and one of the things I was talking about in detail in one of my blogs was that you actually found at one point right wing think tanks were actually arguing that charities shouldn't be allowed to say political things at all because they weren't part of civil society. As far as I'm concerned, we're civil society. Right wing think tanks really aren't, right? But actually, you got to the stage where Orlando Fraser was saying that those right wing think tanks were great contributors to our democracy, whereas charities, when they spoke out, weren't at all. Now, what's the difference here? Whose interests are those two different groups representing? You can also see it around rules on fundraising, and those have been in place for centuries. I've just been tracking those recently, and they've always been about protecting the interests of the wealthy. When people say, oh, but we've got to make sure that we protect the public, and they're giving, and so on, that really isn't who they're talking about, I think. It's really about the big givers, and so on.

So, I think in some ways, the other thing it does is it starts as policing ourselves. So, we get to the stage where we're scared to say anything that might be considered political, or where we actually feel a bit ashamed and a bit grubby asking for money. And I've always felt that. I know lots of fundraisers feel that, too. But why shouldn't we ask or even demand money from people in our society who have far more than their fair share? So, I think the commissioner's job really isn't about protecting the public. It's also about keeping charity politically safe for the wealthy and making sure that any voices for change aren't really heard.

**Felicia:** I know a lot of the arguments they use in favour of these rules are all about public trust in charities and the system. But actually, the research I've seen, there's so many stats that just undermine that completely. You know, what the public knows about charities is fundamentally wrong. The whole idea that they only trust the system because they're run by voluntary trustees doesn't stand up when people you actually see what the public knows and don't know about the sector. And I think there's some of the Orlando Fraser's outgoing comments about the charity sector being lovely people, doing lovely things. I felt really epitomised the way that they try and keep us small, unprofessional, so that we don't have to be taken seriously, even though charities are working at the coalface of society's most pressing needs. I find it quite triggering, shall we just say. It makes me quite cross in a very impolite way.

**Alex:** Absolutely. I mean, it hasn't been good for my blood pressure. I think the thing as well is that I decided maybe a year ago now to start being open about these things. And you know, it isn't necessarily great for your career to do that. But at the same time, I think as a lot of people are finding in the charity sector, it's quite tiring to hear this stuff and experience this stuff and feel silenced and not be able to talk about it. So, I think the more we do that, the less we're going to burn out. Because at the very least, if we can't change it, at least we can talk about what's wrong. And that's the start of fixing some of these problems, I think.

**Felicia:** Absolutely. I know you and I've talked before about the emails you get, the messages you get after you've put something out on LinkedIn from the people who are really grateful that you've said it because they don't feel they can. And I always feel pleased that I've had that impact, but at the same time, really sad that these people don't feel that they can speak openly when they're working in a charity role and they don't feel they can even like something or comment on something publicly because it might have repercussions for their organization.

**Alex:** Yeah. When I, the first thing I put something about class on the, on LinkedIn, the first time I did it and I put it on there and then I thought, what am I doing? This is such a stupid idea. And the first comment I got was something just, just horribly right wing. And I thought, oh no. And I almost deleted it. And then slowly, it was the first thing I'd ever posted where it sort of took off. And I had these people emailing me with these incredibly sad stories, you know, and what got me actually was there was a sense of sort of grief as well as anger there, which I thought was really sad. And I find it quite affecting. And I think that was one of the moments where I thought, okay, no, it's time to start talking about this.

And this is one reason why much as I talk about class as a wider system and a wider structure, people's individual experiences are important too, because there's a lot of shame involved in class. There's a book by a guy called Richard Sennett called The Hidden Injuries of Class, and he talks about this subjective experience of class, especially when you maybe move from a very working-class background into a more professional or middle class one. It's something that changes and it's something you never feel fully comfortable with.

**Felicia:** So, what would need to change for the sector to take class seriously?

**Alex:** First of all, we need to start talking about it. And the thing is that it still feels really naughty to talk about class. And I've even seen, for example, I say the most benign things which are related to essentially social democracy of the type that we might've had in the 1960s. And everybody laughs nervously as if I've called for an armed uprising or something. And I've had this in groups of trustees where I've mentioned the fact that we're talking about elites here and so on. Good Lord, the panic that sets in! And certainly, I've found as I've talked about these things that people will come out swinging, they'll get very concerned. But that's a sign that you need to talk about it because people are genuinely threatened.

I think we need to address that individual class aspect and class prejudice, but it's not going to be transformative. We really need to think about how we're challenging power and wealth and work in the sector and to help people speak out. And the other thing is we can't just do a load of tweaks. We always say, well, what policy change shall we do? Well, let's just change this little policy and then it'll all be fine. Well, let's have another sort of a change diversity policy. You know what, guys, that's not going to fix this or shorter application forms or participatory grant making. We do have to talk about some of those fundamentals.

Another thing I really worry about is just how conservative the sector's loudest and most official voices are. And I just wonder sometimes whose work are they doing, the infrastructure bodies, the think tanks and so on? Do they really represent the sector or indeed the people who are actually receiving help from charities? Don't we need some new voices?

**Felicia:** I think we might have talked about this before, but the idea that sometimes it feels like you become an insider and then you toe the line. And so some very well-established, respected voices tend to be representative of the incumbent power dynamic that we have, where it's often a lot of consultants, yourself, me, a lot of other people across the sector who are the ones who I guess we see things so broadly because of all the people we work with, but we're also not constrained in the same way. So, we're talking about people not quite knowing what to do but feeling frustrated. So, imagine if people are sitting there listening to this, they're fed up with how things are in the sector.  
Maybe they haven't felt that they can comment on it. Where should they start? What could they do? What would you advise?

**Alex:** I think we have a huge amount of potential. And I think at the root of it all is that charities are actually quite dangerous things because we're right there among people who don't have a lot to lose, who've been kicked about and trodden on. We're people who work there and see these injustices and really do want to change it. And we're often part of those same communities. You go to food banks, and you'll see that the people who receive food bank parcels are also the people working in them, right? So now imagine if people started to organize and shout and argue for change instead of just delivering interventions in the sector in this very professionalized way. That could be very troubling for the powerful class interests in our society. So, it's no wonder that we've then got to be regulated in all these ways.

So, what would remind people is that if you're doing it right, the kind of work you're doing should be precisely the kind of thing that is challenging that power. There's a lot of latent power in the work that charities do that we just don't really recognize or use. And I think we just need to start using it.

**Felicia:** Fantastic. Well, if people are not following Alex on either Substack or LinkedIn, they should absolutely do that because he's always got fascinating things to say and goes into, I love the fact that you get into the research and you get into the depth of issues. You don't kind of, it's not just a soundbite. It's much deeper than that. So, I highly recommend you follow Alex and thank you so much for being with us today, Alex.

**Alex:** Thanks, Felicia. And don't forget, there's also some really rude jokes on there. So that's always an attraction.

**Duncan:** My name is Duncan Exley. I work with charities who want to become more representative of the population in their workforce and supporters and who want to work in ways that allow everyone to work more effectively.

**Felicia:** Brilliant. Welcome to the podcast. Thank you so much for coming on. I first came across your work through the research you did with the EY Foundation. So, what did your research with the EY Foundation reveal about how class operates in the charity sector?

**Duncan:** Well, the first thing to say, I think in a lot of ways, but I think probably the big headline is that people from what are called, referred to as the lower socioeconomic backgrounds are substantially underrepresented in charities, especially in the more senior and influential roles to a greater extent than in the private and public sectors. And also that people from those backgrounds who are in the sector, the staff, volunteers, supporters, disproportionately say that the way things are done in their organisation feels designed around what might feel comfortable and common sense to some people, but it puts us on the back foot.

I think it's important to say that in the more influential roles, at least, and from my work with clients, I suspect in the sector more broadly, we're not just talking about an underrepresentation of people from working class backgrounds, but from lower middle class backgrounds as well. So really, it looks like the sector is prone to viewing the world through the perspective of the minority of the population, if you like, who come from professional and managerial backgrounds. It looked at partly funders and trustees as well. And it was notable in there that organisations who are led by people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to get less funding.

And I think one of the things that a lot of my clients say to me when talking to them about this and about how they find time to say this is that they have limited headspace. So, if funders and trustees aren't saying we should attend to inclusion, they're effectively saying we shouldn't. And I think a lot of that comes from the demographics of the funders and trustees themselves, which again, you look at the data there, and they are not from a representative range of backgrounds. So quite often, they look around and they think, well, these people look normal to me. Because as humans, we tend to overestimate our own normality, because we're surrounded by people like ourselves. There's something there about, well, how does that work? And the roots in as well.

So, one of the big things was volunteering. A lot of organisations see volunteering as a prerequisite. But there are differences in where the opportunities to volunteer are, who can afford to spend time, they could be earning money, not earning money and volunteering. And there's some research coming out as well about what volunteering is seen as valuable. So, a lot of volunteering in the community, as a carer or something like that, is not seen as proper volunteering. Or people who come from certain backgrounds don't think of that as volunteering, they think of that as their normal life. And so, they then try to get a job, or they're working at a voluntary level. And it doesn't look like they've got a very rich CV. You're also almost endemic, unnecessarily requiring a degree. There’re things about geography, are there opportunities to do this sort of thing where you live? There's a problem with low and insecure pay as well. There's a lot of people, if you don't come from an affluent background, then going into a charity job, where you may have a one-year contract, that's a big risk if you don't have a safety net. And I think a big thing, and it does come up a lot, is what might be called sector capital. So, you see this in other careers.

So, there is research done by my friend Sam Friedman, who shows that doctor's children are 24 times more likely than the rest of us to become doctors. And the same thing happens in charities as well. So, a lot of my clients, when I do the demographics, and sometimes I ask, did you know someone in a relevant career when you were growing up? And disproportionately, yes, they did. So, it all forms a bit of a bubble because of that.

**Felicia:** Yeah. So, we haven't mentioned yet that you have written a book, The End of Aspiration. Tell me a bit about the book and what motivated you to write it.

**Duncan:** I was, having got a campaigning job, I developed myself up in that world and I eventually became the chief exec of the Equality Trust. Now, when you're talking about income inequality, you end up talking about social mobility quite a lot. And in that role, I was almost comically stereotypical as a social mobility story, that someone whose dad worked down a coal mine and is now the chief exec of something. But what I was hearing about social mobility in politics, as a lot of politicians were talking about it at the time, and in academia, it didn't sound like me. It sorts of, those were not the mechanisms that propelled me up this ladder.

While I did draw on the academic literature about why upward social mobility is now actually less common than downward social mobility in this country, for the core of it, I worked with people who had gone from working class to, or lower middle class backgrounds to higher status roles. So, politicians, barristers, the odd billionaire, including one from a major charity as it happened, and basically asked them, what happened to you that didn't happen to the kid you grew up next door to? That was interesting because it revealed the things they were talking about either weren't in the political and academic discourse or were footnotes to it. And I think actually, this makes me think, now you ask, that it's similar in a lot of charities and think tanks and that sort of organisation that quite often people from ordinary backgrounds are at worst wheeled out to illustrate points made by more privileged people. So, you're wheeled out if you already agree with what they wanted to say. Sometimes you might get asked for your views on the questions that those people have. Very rarely, though, are people from actually more normal backgrounds involved in deciding what question should be asked in the first place. That's one of the things I spend a lot of my time thinking about.

**Felicia:** Yeah, and so I understand the work you do with organisations, it's looking at things like job descriptions, recruitment processes, organisational culture, those kinds of things. So, when you look at those things, where do you see that class exclusion shows up most clearly?

**Duncan:** I think in a number of ways, what I see happening is we all, as humans, have a bias to seeing more value in things we already have and are familiar to us than in things we don't. So, there was an organisation I was talking to some time ago and I said to them, look, quite a lot of your staff have the same degree from the same university, Oxford PPE. And they said, yeah, it teaches good analytical skills. And I said, yes, but the people who do that tend to be quite a narrow group and it teaches the same analytical skills. So, you tend to find the result of this is like having a toolbox full of hammers and then along comes a saw and the hammers all say, well, that doesn't look very good at banging your nails. And that happens quite a bit in job descriptions, in interviews and in who gets to speak up in organisations. I think that happens a lot.

I think also I say to people quite often, look, you're opening your doors to say we welcome people from broader backgrounds, but that won't pull in people who never walk down your street. So, if you have the same job descriptions asking for the same things, they're advertised through the same channels, they will get to the same people. And there's also something there that quite a lot of people rule themselves out of jobs. If I saw an advert for an astronaut, I would assume that I don't fit the bill. You have to go to people proactively and say, actually, we do mean you here and you have got something we value. There's a thing on boarding as well about basically the curse of knowledge. There's a lot of this about biases, actually, in here. So, we don't tell people about things that are so obvious to us that we don't think about them. Just things like, what do you say when you answer the phone? How do you behave in various things? If you go out for team lunch, are you going to have to pay for that? Or all sorts of things.

So, there's a lot of issues in people aren't told the way things are done around here. And this is really important. Sometimes when you are told the way things are done around here, it's not clear, is that just the way things have always been done? Or is it the way things should be done? And can you, because you come from a new set of backgrounds to what we normally see, will you be welcomed in saying, hey, you could do that differently?

**Felicia:** I really love the book Rebel Ideas by Matthew Sides, which talks about that kind of hammer and saw. I haven't heard that analogy specifically, but that kind of the value of the different viewpoints in the room. And I just think everybody should read that. Certainly, everyone on a board should read that because it really beautifully illustrates the problems that come with people who all have the same background or think the same way. And how difficult decisions actually tend to be the better decisions rather than easy consensus. Easy consensus is a sign that there's not the right people in the room or there's not enough difference within the room. How would you start the conversation with organizations that say they're too stretched, or they don't feel that inclusion in relation to class is a priority right now?

**Duncan:** That is a problem I come across a lot, that people come to me and say, okay, we want to do this, but we are stretched for time in here. And quite often, I think it's important about how people see things, how the people in the organization see things, how their trustees see things, how their funders see things, that this is not separate to the mission. This is a vital component of how we deliver mission. So, there's a thing I talk about in my book about Brexit and how I was meeting with someone from a think tank, a think tank that was also a charity, and it was about six months before the Brexit referendum. And I said, okay, well, what happens if there's a leave vote here because that could affect what we're planning? And he said, he just looked at me as if I was utterly stupid and just went, well, that's not going to happen, is it? But he was very North London. But whereas I was hearing from the people that I grew up around, I was hearing from my mum that she was the only person she knew voting ‘Remain’. My partner who grew up in Bedford was thinking the same thing. So, if you're not open to those sorts of insights, you are not going to be seeing something and you're going to be wrongfooted by something that literally the average person in the street could tell you about.

And a lot of organizations were wrongfooted by the Brexit vote. It scuppered their plans no end. But at least they knew they were wrongfooted by that. And sometimes you see organizations delivering work that doesn't deliver as effectively as it might. You see them putting out messages that leaves people cold or downright alienates them. And sometimes there are people in their organizations in backroom roles saying, I knew that wouldn't land. But there's not enough of them and they're not an influential position. And it's not just getting people in. It's also wasting those resources that are already there. Because if you do inclusion work, that demographic by demographic by demographic, you end up alienating people who experience some element of inclusion but are not being talked about at the moment.

**Felicia:** Yes. And I was painfully conscious that I was doing exactly that in this podcast because I wanted to have a focus on class. But it is everything is intersectional. And, you know, it's like, I'd like to do another podcast on race. But again, everything is intersectional. So, it's very hard when you're trying to do a deep dive, because I think you're absolutely right. These things are not things that you can actually extract and consider independently in their entirety.

**Duncan:** It came up really forcefully, what I do is generally look through what's at every stage of participation. And I bring in people from the organization who feel excluded, and say, okay, I'm going to give you some thinking tools so that you can do this yourselves. And I want to get from you, what are your examples of where you've seen it? And quite often, those sorts of hidden protocols come up about the rules of the game that nobody tells you, but some people have absorbed from their social circle. And what quite often happens in there in a recent one, this really happened. Somebody said, oh, yeah, well, I didn't know those things. Not because I'm from a lower socioeconomic background, but because I'm not from this country. Or because I'm from a minoritized ethnic group and we don't get these things either. So quite often, the stuff that I look at, it's putting most people on the back foot.

**Felicia:** Yes, yeah, absolutely. Well, as a migrant to the UK, I completely understand that. Brilliant. Well, thank you so much for your time, Duncan. I really appreciate it. It's been great talking to you and really insightful contributions. Yeah, brilliant.

**Duncan:** Oh, no problem. I can bang on about this for a long time.

**Felicia:** That was Duncan Exley talking about his work helping organizations widen participation. I have to say, I found all our guests this week fascinating and very hard to edit.

**Chris:** Oh, so many thoughts about our guests and their contributions today. I'm not sure where to start, but I think Dorothea's comments about gravitating to what we recognize and what we know, birds of a feather flocking together, springs to mind. It's really not natural for us to seek to be uncomfortable. So, I can understand why this is such an issue. And then I can see how code switching is a normal part of everyday life. As a result, we flex our appearance, our behaviour, our means of relating to people. And this can be a really good thing. You know, in my working life, I've been taught mirroring to build relationships, but we've also got to be conscious that it doesn't erode who we are. And it doesn't mask our real perspectives and personalities because we need to bring them too.

**Felicia:** Absolutely. I think sometimes there are some fairly trite ideas about the bringing your whole sense to work concept. And I've found that personally quite inspiring, the authenticity thing. That's something I've really worked on as being my authentic self. But we've got to appreciate what that means for everyone. And we need to be conscious about the challenges that that expectation can bring and who still feels like they can't. We can't just say it and have it so.

**Chris:** Yeah, I must admit, I prickled at the discussion you and Alex had around politeness norms. I think this is exposing my English core and not being too flippant, but I've come to really believe in politeness to be able to rely on these norms. I hate my kids not being polite. That's my number one pet hate. But if they get in the way of having open and proper conversations, perhaps we shouldn't be as nice anymore.

**Felicia:** It's so interesting because this comes up so often when I try and talk about the politeness idea. And I think what's the really important thing to talk about is that what you think of polite isn't necessarily polite for everyone else. And so, I think I've come across this a lot as an Australian migrant to the UK. In the UK, it's not considered polite to immediately introduce yourself when you start speaking to someone if you're at a party or standing on a train platform. You're supposed to have a vague conversation first about the weather or the cheese board and then kind of like, oh, by the way, I'm Felicia, as if you'd forgotten to introduce yourself. But if you actually go straight up and say, hi, I'm Felicia. I don't know anyone. Can I talk to you? That's a bit forward. That's not very polite here, whereas that's what's polite in Australia. So, if you kind of flip them over, they're not the same standard.

So, the other one that really drives me crazy is the we must have a coffee British thing when you don't mean it. That's really rude by Australian standards. But for English people, they think they're being polite, you know, but why suggest it if you don't mean it? So, I think that's probably the point for me around politeness norms that these English middle class politeness norms that they dominate boardrooms, they dominate professional environments. They freeze out different approaches and different definitions because they're not universally shared. So personally, I differentiate between politeness and respect. And I completely agree. I would be really upset if my kids were disrespectful to people. But I think you can be respectful while still going outside some of those more rigid politeness norms. That's how I see it anyway.

**Chris:** Well, I think I'm going to be far less polite to you, Felicia, from now on. I do respect you hugely. But let's be polite to each other. And I think Duncan's idea that even if your doors are open, you still get the same people who walk down your street is really interesting, that the idea that you might be open minded, but you've really got to shift the foundations of your organisation to make it really change.

I think my big final thought is that to be truly diverse and inclusive organisations, we need to reflect the world around us in every respect. And class or social mobility is another perspective we need to look harder at, and we need to consider more. And achieving this is important everywhere.  
You know, the organisation I work in, in organisations everywhere. But I honestly do think it's more important in the charity sector than anywhere else. Why? Because charities are changing and shaping our society. They have to reflect it, be from it to really do this job well. Otherwise, as we've mentioned, we're creeping into charities doing good in the world, rather than really changing it.

**Felicia:**  Absolutely. And that is so why we have to talk about this stuff. This has got to be a taboo that we end. We talk about class; we talk about the exclusions that we have in our sector to make it better. Thanks to all our guests today and to Benefact Group for supporting this podcast.