



Policy on Purpose

Episode 25: Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan shares before and after story of Detroit

Announcer: This is Policy on Purpose, a podcast produced by the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. We take you behind the scenes of policy with the people who helped shape it. For more visit LBJ.utexas.edu.

Angela Evans: Hello, everyone. This is Angela Evans. I'm the dean of the LBJ School, and this is another one of our series of Policy on Purpose. And I'm so, so pleased today to have the mayor of Detroit, Mike Duggan, here with me today and I have a special place in my heart in Detroit, because I have a son who's there, went to school there and stayed there. And I'm very pleased to have the mayor for several reasons. One is the mayor has stepped in to public service at a time when his city was in extremis, but at the same time, when we look at Detroit, I think for many of us, Detroit is a symbol of what can happen in America, both in terms of good things and in terms of how we can challenge-- how we have some challenges. So, Mayor Duggan, thank you very much for coming and joining us today.

Mike Duggan: Well, it's great to be in Austin and thank you for inviting me during a week when Michigan is nine inches of snow. So, it's good to be in Texas.

Evans: And also, it's in Texas when we have our freeze, which is very unusual in November. So, thank you very much. So, what I want to talk to you about is really, this podcast is talking to people about: Why would you go into public service and why step into the arena? And in your situation, you're a white mayor in a predominately black city. A city that was, in the in the sixties and seventies had riots, and, you know, it was a city that had the Industrial Revolution joined. So, it's a city that's in a lot of transition. So, tell me, what moved you into doing that? Why did you step into public service?

Duggan: Well, I was born in Detroit, and my family had been there for three or four generations, and I remember Detroit when it was a vibrant community. But also, in my own family, my father was a judge on the federal bench for 30 years. My mother was a public administrator in one of the suburbs. So, I kind of grew up in a public sector ethic, and during my career, I've gone back and forth between the private and public sector probably pretty evenly.

Evans: But then when you think about, you know, the interesting thing, when people ask you to run for Mayor and wanted you to run for mayor. And you had to be a write-in candidate at that time because of administrative glitches. You had very good people around you, who you liked and you worked with and who were opponents in a political sense. And now they're your allies. And talk to me-- talk to us a little bit about the decision to say, "Okay, I'm ready to move at this point into the into this arena and take over the mayorship when we're in, you know, extremis in terms of, you know, you're your economic extremis in



terms of the city coming out of bankruptcy. Talk to us about that. That's what I really want people to understand: What moved you to do this?

Duggan: My life was when, my classmates out of the University of Michigan Law School, we're all going to Chicago or New York or L. A. I said, "I'm only applying to jobs in Detroit," and people, "To Detroit? Why would you do that?" But I want to be part of the city, bringing the city back. And over the last 30 years, I've had several careers, all in the city of Detroit, as a private attorney, as a government executive who oversaw the stadium authority that built Comerica Park and Ford Field, our football and baseball stadium, I ran the regional bus system, I was in the private sector for nine years running the Detroit Medical Center, our area's major hospital system. And so-- but everything I had done was in the city, and it was mission driven to help bring the city back and ultimately, six years ago took the final step. Which is to say, "Why don't I go ahead and try to run for mayor? I've been complaining about the people who were there long enough. Let's see if I could do any better and the community supported me,"

Evans: So, do you think all the work that you did in all those different positions, you know, we talked a little bit last night about the Detroit Medical Center and how they had hospitals see so many different patients. Do you think that exposure helped people really understand who you are and what you could do for the city? Talk to us a little bit about how you made those connections with people.

Duggan: Well, the racial divisions in this country are very deep and go back 400 years and for African American voters to support a Caucasian candidate, that doesn't happen because you give a speech or you tell people what they want to hear. That comes from trust over a number of years. That's why Joe Biden is doing so well at the national level right now, because there's a high degree of trust has been built up over the years, and the ultimate question was: Is that trust deep enough? You've known me on a number of public roles in the city for 30 years, certainly running a hospital system that sees 300,000 people a year in our emergency room in a city of 700,000 people, everybody in Detroit had a very definite opinion of how I was doing running the hospitals, and so the public decided that they felt confident about what I'd done in my other roles and elected me and re-elected me.

Evans: Well, again, I want to get back to a conversation we had last evening and that was one of the things that you did when you were campaigning was, "Invite me. I'll come talk to you. I'll come to your living room, I'll come wherever you are and talk to--" and one of the things we try to talk to the students about is, like, you have to get to the people. You have to talk to the people that you think you're helping. And if you if you don't, you're not going to get that connection with them. You're not going to hear what they have to say. They're not going to see that you make an effort to go where they are rather than you expect them to come where you are. Would you talk a little bit about that thing, what you do during your campaign as mayor.



Duggan: Yeah, Detroit is probably America's biggest small town and that families in Detroit are there two, three, four generations, so you have cities like Austin where people are moving in, cities like Denver where people move in. In Detroit, by and large, people stay generation after generation. And so, when I started my campaign, I said to the public, "If you invite me to your house, I'll come." And every night I would go to somebody's living room or backyard or basement and sit with six or eight or ten of their neighbors, and strangers would just call up and say, "Come on out, and I'd come out at six o'clock and they'd put out some water and some cookies and we'd talk 'till 7:30, eight o'clock, and then usually somebody there said, "How about you come to my house? I have a different group of friends," and as the campaign went along, it went from six or eight people in a room to 15 or 20 people in a room till the last month. We had to do everything in restaurants and churches because the crowds had gotten so big and I did 250 house parties. And there's no doubt that the connections that were made in those rooms-- when you look at all the racial distrust in this country, when you sit down with people in their living room. You break bread and you talk. You see each other as people, and not through the kind of stereotypes and the historic distrust that had built up. I heard a lot of very powerful stories from African Americans about mistreatment at many points in their lives in the hands of Caucasians, and the skepticism they had about supporting me for mayor. And as we talk to each other, you get to understand each other's heart. And when the results came in, they were very strong.

Evans: When you had those meetings, I have two questions here: What were some consistent themes that you heard over that time and in those meetings and that what surprised you the most about those meetings?

Duggan: Well, you had two levels of consistent themes. One was the basic questions: My garbage isn't picked up. My street lights are out. The ambulances don't show up. The buses don't run. I get abandoned houses on my block. And they wanted to hear not general rhetoric. They wanted to hear very specific plans.

Evans: What are you going to do about it?

Duggan: Exactly. And so that was one piece. And the second question was, people want to know what's your motive. I mean, I had a really good job running a hospital system. Why would you give that up to run for mayor? And they just wanted to look in my eyes and hear and make a decision for themselves that my motive was to make the city better. And ultimately, I think the great majority of public became convinced that. But those two things happened and every experience was different. Someone would have a huge bowl of spaghetti. We'd all sit around a big table. At another, there'd be 30 people jammed in the basement on little fold-up chairs, and they would be talking about the drug house down the street. And all they wanted to know was: How was I going to shut it down when the last mayor couldn't? And so, they were very different experiences. But you want to get to know neighborhoods in the city. You sit in the



living rooms, and I still do it once a week in a different neighborhood in somebody's living room. Every week I sit down because it's the only way to stay in touch

Evans: Yes, keeps you bonded with the constituencies. What-- When you get into situations where you really didn't have the answers, like specific answers, were they willing to accept the fact that you're going to try? Because sometimes what we talk about is you have somebody who's campaigning said I am going to do this and you know, well, that's the motivation, but you have to deal with City Councils, you have to deal with a lot of other things that you solo as a person cannot make-- you don't have a magic wand to say that's going to happen. So how did you answer those kinds of questions?

Duggan: I would say I learned something new and every one of these, and so I would find out the forestry department didn't trim trees in certain situations. The water department didn't clean storm drains in certain situations. That was amazing. All the policies in the city, some of which had a logic to them, many of which didn't. And I would say when somebody asked me that, "You know what? I don't know the answer to that, but I'm going to study it. Now, by the next night I had learned the answer. And so, once you got past 20 or 30, there were still things I was learning, but I think people were impressed with how much I had learned. And it was because, you know, I was listening to very specific concerns

Evans: And you had talked-- one of the things that when I've been reading about you, a lot of these concerns are infrastructure concerns, you know, you had so many, you know, street lights were out. You know, ambulances weren't showing up on the 911, you know, for an hour or so. People-- the buses, like you were saying. So, you know, the bus service was not only not good, but there were broken buses. So many of these problems were infrastructure problems, which, you know, these are concrete problems. Let's see what we can do about it. But the other thing was jobs. So, when you think about employing people, which gives them a sense of well-being and the fact that they mean something, those seem to be the two things that you focused quite a bit on, at least in your first years as mayor.

Duggan: There's no question. If you're in a city where every vacant building is covered with graffiti, where the street lights aren't working, and the police and fire aren't showing up, you're not bringing your business to that city, which just compounded an unemployment rate that was over 20% in 2014, when I started. So, I had to do two things at once. One is I had to show credibility that we could fix the services but at the same time had to actively recruit companies. Now the interesting thing is the city of Detroit's gone from a 1,000,008 to 700,000 people over 50 years. But the city government itself owns 1/3 of all the land. My predecessor saw that as a liability and said, "We need to shrink the city." People didn't like that. I said, "This is an opportunity for us to grow the city," and I started pitching companies on, "I can get this land ready to go now, we have a workforce that's available to work right now." And we turned it into a competitive advantage and started landing companies.



Evans: So, you were like a matchmaker. Say, "Good. Okay, we've got the infrastructure. We've got the land. We've got resources, we've got physical resources, we have human resource. You come."

Duggan: So, the first one we got was a company called Flex-N-Gate that makes parts for Ford Trucks. It's owned by Shahid Khan, who is the owner of the Jacksonville Jaguars-- major auto supplier. All of his plants were in the suburbs. He needed a 500-person plant for a new Ford truck, and my friends at Ford said, "Go talk to Mike first." And his problem was the last time he opened a plant in the suburbs where they had 2% unemployment, you can't fill 500 jobs. The quality of your workers is just not very good. And so, I convinced him to build in the city. He had 16,000 people show up to apply and the quality that he was able to hire in a short period of time, he started telling all the other auto manufacturers, "You're looking at this all wrong. There is a group in Detroit that's willing to be trained and work hard. There's a great work ethic here. And business has been abandoned so long people will go to work." And it really started a trend where a lot of suppliers have come back. And now we've landed, you know, the first auto assembly plant in the country in 10 years. North of the Mason-Dixon line. The Fiat-Chrysler plant that's building Grand Cherokees with 5,000 jobs is being built right now and so-- but it was a-- you had to prove yourself. Take the next step. Prove yourself. Take the next step it. And right now, we have a lot of momentum.

Evans: And have people who trusted you and you have success. So, you know, they say, "He did it, and it was successful here. Here's a model. See if this works for you," which is another, you know-- having those strategic partners in business. The other thing that I thought was really interesting about what you were doing is the partnership. We talk to our students about: when you're in public service, you're just not in the public sector. You're looking at the business sector. You're looking at the nonprofit sector. And how did-- Talk to us a little bit about how you use those different sectors to help you think about your aspirational goal for Detroit.

Duggan: Well, we've had enormous help. We had foundations like the Kresge and the Kellogg Foundation that have invested a great deal in our initiatives. I was trying to land the National Composite Metals Center, which would be 150 jobs to design the lightweight cars, material of the future, and foundations put in \$1 million to renovate the building, so that we could land it over a number of other cities. And so, I have had great partnerships there, and we now have several major corporations, banks, auto suppliers, Blue Cross, who are putting \$5 million each into individual neighborhoods. And what they're doing is, because we're trying to spread the growth, which is right now booming in our downtown-midtown area, into the store fronts of the neighborhoods, and they'll put up \$200,000 to get a new restaurant over the hump and get it started. They'll put up \$300,000 to renovate a vacant building for new apartments, and when the main corporations are doing this, not coming in and saying what we're going to do, But with the neighbors designing the redevelopment plans in saying to a TCF bank, "Hey, we'd like you to put money into rebuilding this apartment building," and the bank was spying on the neighbors' concerns. Now you get the kind of partnerships you're looking for.



Evans: When you're looking for a team of people who can help you think through these things or know when you've got an advantage-- when you have an opportunity that you think is really an important one, how do you choose those people? And then how do you manage and lead that group of people as you're working through these ideas?

Duggan: Well, I get a blend of the most talented people in Michigan and the most talented people across the country, and the interest in Detroit has helped us recruit nationally. But to give you an example, when I first came in, our computer system was completely nonfunctional. You couldn't open e mails because we were 10 generations behind on the Microsoft system, and President Obama brought in the National I.T. directors from eight major cities. The most impressive of all was a woman by the name of Beth Niblock from Louisville, Kentucky, and she seemed like a mission-driven person, so the week after she left, I phoned her, and I said, "I'd like to hire you." And she says, "Sorry, I don't come north." I call, I finally said, "Where are you going to be Friday night? If I drive down, will you go to dinner with me?" And I drove down to Louisville, Kentucky, she and her partner came to dinner and four hours later, she signed up, and they moved. And she has now rebuilt our I.T. system, which has given us a huge competitive advantage. And so, there's been some of that. There's also been probably the most prominent private attorney dealmaker in Detroit was a fellow by the name of Tom Lewand. He left his private practice and ran our economic development group and landed Fiat Chrysler, and so it's been a blend of the best talent in the city and the best talent from around the country. We even went to the media and took one of the most prominent TV journalists who came in and ultimately became our chief of staff, Alexis Wiley. So, it's been a really interesting mix of people from a lot of very diverse backgrounds,

Evans: But they're coming because of you. I mean, they're coming because of you. So, they see in you someone who's got a vision, who's got a passion, who's got a vested interest, who's been there for a long time. It's the way you've been working because people just don't do that, unless they feel like they're working for somebody where they can have a meaningful impact. So, part of this is, you know, we're talking about leadership and leadership, the way we're defining it is a force-builder, somebody who builds a force beyond themselves. And when they leave, there's still somebody there. So that's about your leadership and your leadership style.

Duggan: Well, I had people who worked with me when I rebuilt the bus system. I had people who worked with me when I built the stadiums. I had people who worked with me at the hospital system. And I won't say it's easy to work for me because I'm intensely metrics driven. And every week there's numbers up on the board. How many preventive maintenances did you get completed on the buses? How many storm drains did you get cleaned out? How many vacant houses did you get knocked down? But people who want to make a difference and are results driven love to be part of the administration. People who want to give speeches and go to meetings. They leave pretty quickly. But people who want to change the world tend to want to be around each other, and we've attracted a lot of them.



Evans: I think this is another great story about people in terms of working in public service because we talk about people-- lots of choices. You can go into business. You can make a difference in business. You can make a lot of money. You've worked across these different sectors, but the core of public service is making a difference for people. And before we, you know, end this podcast, and I really appreciate your taking time to do this, if you were to talk to students, people who are, you know, in their mid-twenties thinking about: Now, I'm stepping into this arena, and this arena is public service. What kind of advice? What kind of message would you give them?

Duggan: I would just say to everybody, "Follow your heart." And so, I was two years out of law school. I'd had a lot of public success in litigation and a private firm and the head of Wayne County Law Department came to me and said, I want you to head up our litigation division. I was 25 years old. I had to take a 50% pay cut to do it. But I was at a point in my life where it was me and a Labrador, and I could afford to do it, and that turned out to be one of the best things in my career because that opportunity exposed me to many other things. Now, if I had been at a point where I had two kids in college, it would have been a different conversation. But you need to follow your heart. But when I did that, my friends were basically, at one point the University of Michigan Alumni Group said I had the lowest salary of anybody in my graduating class three years out of school. They were embarrassed about it. A year later, I was a deputy county executive supervising 5,000 people. They wanted me to come back and talk to the law school. So, you got to not listen to the people around you. You've got to listen your own heart.

Evans: That's right, and we've heard that over and over again by people. It's like, "Listen to your heart," and the other thing, "Take risks". You're doing something and you're just trying. You're trying different things so I-- You're just-- It's so wonderful to have you here. I'm so pleased that you took this time for the podcast. And I'm so pleased you'll get a chance to meet our students. And thank you so much for coming.

Duggan: Thanks for having me.

Evans: Thanks.

Announcer: This is Policy on Purpose, a podcast produced by the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. We take you behind the scenes of policy with the people who helped shape it. To learn more, visit LBJ.utexas.edu and follow us on Twitter or Facebook @TheLBJSchool. Thank you for listening.