

Matt Cooper on Denis O'Brien: Not a good look for wealthy old men to punch down at younger generations

November 15, 2025

7–9 minutes

Denis O'Brien. Picture: Gareth Chaney

Denis O'Brien has his anecdotal evidence and I've got mine. Both should have no weight in coming to definitive conclusions on the topics he raised in a speech in Dublin last Tuesday... if indeed any firm conclusions can be reached on any of them. But here goes anyway, even if policies should be decided on proper research and hard evidence and not on the basis of hunches of billionaires or journalists.

O'Brien has concerns that [young people "have become entitled"](#). He believes that when young graduates come to companies for jobs, they seek to dictate in some job interviews when they would be available to work in the office.

"The system is mostly being gamed," he said. "Nearly every CEO of FDI [foreign direct investment] companies or Irish businesses that I speak to these days says that we have a big problem, which, should it continue, will greatly impact Ireland's FDI and reputation as a hard-working country. How can people learn, share and solve problems, and improve outcomes [working at home]? Never mind the long-term potential mental health issues. Young people isolated at home will have their learning curtailed because of a lack of human interaction."

Well, here's my take: every generation, including mine, and O'Brien's, has been made up of hard workers, moderately engaged ones and slackers. It's human nature and that doesn't change too much.

My own experience of working directly with twentysomethings in recent years is that the same mix is present: we have given chances to some who have been less than impressive, but others have wowed with their attitude and capability, and the latter is more often the case than the former. And that is as it has always been.

Indeed, my problem often is with employers who do not reward the young people adequately for their work, even when they are taking on considerable responsibility and working long hours, cynically thinking that they don't need to do so: other young people will take the same job on reduced terms for a chance of a start if those who feel exploited leave, or depart for jobs where they will be treated better.

Those same employers also often remove experienced people because they want their costs off the books but the institutional or industry knowledge they have is then lost to the newer recruits. The best companies use a mix of experience and little or none. There's little point in having all the young people together in the office if all the experienced people have been laid off or are at home.

It's not a good look for wealthy old men to punch down at younger generations as being somehow soft, the implication being that their generation was and is better. But that's not new either.

Another of O'Brien's sweeping generalisations was that workplace policies are being led by "weak" human resources people "who also want to work from home".

O'Brien is of the belief that working from home is majorly affecting productivity. "Everyone knows the new set-up is a mistake but won't admit that the system is mostly being gamed," he told his [audience at the Business Post Economic Outlook Forum](#).

Evidence of how productivity has been affected by people working in hybrid situations – such as two days at home (typically Monday and Friday) and three in the office (Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday) – should be demanded of any company that wants to return to the dictat that everyone should be in the office five days a week. There are few enough organisations that allow people to work exclusively from home.

But there are cases when that might improve the productivity of those at home. Not every person prospers in a team environment: sometimes they become victims of bullying or are excluded from cliques. For all those who complain that people working from home are actually walking the dog, or minding the children or doing the washing, there are those in the office who are constantly distracted or distracting others, going for regular coffee or vaping breaks or whatever it is that takes them away from work. But they can suck up to the boss and get the advantage over the others who might actually be working harder out of sight.

He reserved particular ire for the public sector. "It is difficult to see how we overcome our challenges with most civil servants working two days a week in their offices and three days a week remotely. Since this was implemented in Covid times there has been a marked decline in the efficiency in all parts of the government and the country is grinding to a halt. Every government department is suffering because of remote working," O'Brien said.

"It's as if we live in a two-speed Ireland, the private sector gets things done, while the public sector is stalling," O'Brien, who is resident in Malta for income tax purposes and lives for much of the year out of Ireland because of that, said.

Again, O'Brien needs to offer evidence for this contention: it is hackneyed to suggest without evidence that private is good and public is bad, a version of the Orwellian "two legs good, four legs bad".

And if there is a problem with decision-making in the public sector it may have more to do with attitudes towards risk-taking which have little to do with the location of the discussions about making decisions and implementing them.

In any case, the debate about the number of people working from home may be somewhat exaggerated. The most recent figures from the Central Statistics Office estimate that a little more than one third of people – about 36 per cent – worked at home at least some of the time around the middle of this year. This is up from 20 per cent in the same period in 2019, before Covid meant the government mandate to work from home where possible.

The proportion of people working from home has stayed relatively unchanged since 2022, but it seems that many people work from home fewer days in the week now than then. The luxury, if that is what it is, of working from home is also denied to many of those in jobs where it simply is essential to be present.

In case this column is seen as a deliberate affront to O'Brien, I should say that I agree he was entirely correct to raise questions about the "snarled up" nature of Ireland's infrastructure, and the lack of housing being potentially the single biggest impediment to Ireland's economic progress.

When we talk about infrastructure these days, we tend to emphasise electricity and water supply, as well as housing, with good reason. But we may need to talk more about transport too. With the slow rollout of additional public transport to match our growing population and record number of people at work, the numbers going to work in cars is closely related to the numbers who are required to be in the workplace.

The anecdotal evidence of the last week alone is that the traffic jams of the past are becoming a thing of the present again, especially on roads like the M50. If all of those who have jobs are required again to be present at their work location five days a week, then those traffic issues could get even worse, doing little for the mental health and productivity of those caught up in two lengthy commutes each day.