

RICHARD BALFE – INTERVIEW WRITE UP

Lord Richard Balfe is a politician who was created a life peer in 2013, taking the title Baron Balfe of Dulwich. He was a Labour Party Member of the European Parliament (MEP) from 1979 but joined the Conservative Party in 2002. Political roles include President of the Cambridge Conservative Association, Honorary President of the British Dietetic Association, and member of the Advisory Board at the UK-based 'Polar Regions' think-tank. Richard is currently President of the TUC affiliated Union BALPA (the British Airline Pilots Association). Amongst others, Richard's role experience also includes Foreign Affairs, Security, Economy and Petitions plus Presidency of the European Parliament Members Pension Fund. In line with his pro-EU views, he played an active role in 'Cambridge for Europe'.

LEADERS ADMIRE

'I like going to bed with a little Trollope!'

Richard's depth and breadth of connections with senior figures including those whose influence impacted British politics throughout his early career prompted particular admiration for Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson. Harold Macmillan, Britain's Prime Minister from 1957 to 1963, known for his pragmatism, wit, and imperturbable unflappability, caricatured as 'SuperMac', was particularly admired for having an insouciant style that shone through, described by Richard as being the 'last one with style'. A particularly famous Harold Macmillan witticism noting 'I like going to bed with a little Trollope', referenced Anthony Trollope, Britain's most prolific Victorian author, celebrated in particular for his 'Chronicles of Barsetshire' series which remain some of the most popular of his forty-seven novels.

Harold Wilson, leader of the Labour Party 1963-76, and Britain's Prime Minister from 1964 to 1970, and then again 1974-76 was noted for his commendable leadership, in particular by demonstrating his ability to steer Britain in the right direction after taking over at a rocky and difficult time and achieving a sea change in the country's position. Having been an MP for 38 years (1945-83), his perceptive and astute leadership style was also acclaimed as having a particular instinct for political survival. Despite Harold Wilson's cabinet at different times including acclaimed 'heavyweight' politicians such as George Brown, Denis Healey and Tony Crosland there was however a failure to put theories into practice. A break came however following Harold Wilson's tenure as Prime Minister, with political leadership described by Richard as 'never being the same again'.

CONSIDER EMOTIONAL IMPACT

'Seek to get what you want with minimal conflict – and consistently reference emotional impact.'

While political judgements inevitably bring challenges, never causing pain if you can avoid it and seeking to get what you want with minimal conflict was noted by Richard as being his consistent approach. Reference in particular related to his experience when dealing with a right of centre group in his Greater London Council, Chair of Housing role.

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Taking possible consequences into account when making important decisions was emphasised as being a necessary political attribute - the potential emotional impact on people affected by the outcomes of decisions should always be a key point of reference.

COUNCIL HOUSES DILEMMA

The Housing Act 1980 implemented '*Right to Buy*' legislation and council house sales as a result was seen as a positive outcome; there was however insufficient recognition of the extent to which people wanted to own their homes. Ministerial decisions were however expressed as '*being light on EQ*' when initial council house sales were not followed up by continued reinvestment in building more homes. The result was a significant reduction in council housing stock, detrimental not only to those who sought to buy once residency conditions had been met, but also to people who needed affordable rented accommodation.

POLITICAL COMPLEXITY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

'Understanding the 'Merkel impact'

Metaphorically, the European Union was described as a '*puppet show*' - people pulling wires according to their role and influence. Ted Heath, Leader of the Conservative Party from 1965 to 1975 and Prime Minister from 1970 to 1974 and John Smith, the Scottish Labour politician who served as Leader of the Opposition and Leader of the Labour Party from July 1992 until his death from a heart attack in May 1994, were nevertheless both noted as being political leaders who understood the EU.

While David Cameron, UK's Prime Minister 2010 to 2016, was recognised for his clarity of vision about where he wanted to take the Conservative Party and the changes needed to achieve this, he was however perceived as having less comprehension about the EU and its multifaceted culture and complexities. A particular challenge was suggested as being his lack of emotional understanding of EU leaders and their influence, notably in his limited recognition of the '*Merkel impact*'. Inevitable negotiation complexities ensued in achieving a Brexit deal agreement following the EU referendum which he had called in 2016.

THE SUEZ CRISIS

'A setback to global Britain'

According to Richard, Anthony Eden, the former Foreign Secretary, and subsequent Prime Minister from 1955 to 1957, got the Suez situation wrong in 1956 by maintaining a 1930's mindset of Britain's influence as an imperial power. Britain's position was seen to have suffered because of its weakness, by being on the side-lines rather than being ready to strike, Richard's assertion being that a '*make it happen*' approach should have been taken. Failure to understand America, suspicion of Nasser and a locked in approach to the Middle East being key factors that influenced Anthony Eden's stance. His reputed

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dislike of Italians, governed at the time by Mussolini, as well as opposition to Chamberlain's policy of appeasement towards the country being additional elements.

The Suez crisis experience, generally seen as signalling the end of British predominance in the Middle East and a significant setback to Britain's global influence was arguably Anthony Eden's downfall, his failure perceived in part by a dominant civil service rather than political mindset. The consequential humiliation that Eden felt both for himself and the country was out of kilter with his previous experience and was followed by his resignation from office on grounds of ill health. While Anthony Eden was not a Europe person, Harold Macmillan, who succeeded him as Prime Minister recognised however the importance of European connection and led the drive towards Europe.

POLARISED EMOTIONAL TOXICITY

Arthur Scargill's attempt to bring the Conservative Party government down with the miners' strike 1984-5 in an attempt to prevent colliery closures created a fraught situation, not only between the National Coal Board (NCB) government agency and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), but also between other miners caught up in its wake. In some areas of the country miners and most unions did not join the strike, not even giving covert support but taking the view of leaving things to '*wither on the vine*'. Concern about picket line violence along with the lack of a national ballot prompted Neil Kinnock, leader of the Labour Party to play what was seen as a valuable peacekeeping role behind the scenes by using EQ to reach out and connect with the various parties involved.

Margaret Thatcher, Britain's Prime Minister at the time was driven by a determination to reduce the power of the trade unions, the eventual outcome resulted in people starting to drift back to work, influenced primarily by the awareness of miners' wives that their children were suffering significant deprivation. While trade union power may have been curtailed, the hardship it caused was however significant, notable too as an episode aptly described by Richard as being one of '*polarised emotional toxicity*'

THE HOUSE OF LORDS – A DIFFERENT CULTURE

'Somehow, it works.'

The House of Lords culture was celebrated as being significantly different to the House of Commons, a contributory factor being the perceived strength of being a non-elected chamber, and not in competition with the Commons whose primacy is accepted. Most people in the House of Lords were described as having goodwill towards both main Political Parties, their entitlement to reject is subsequently not party political or based on affinity to either Party, a different atmosphere and different temperaments prevail as a result.

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Members' range and depth of expertise and experience was celebrated as a valuable a *'thinking again'* opportunity to consider amendments, noting that 90% of amendments are made by consent. Recognition was noted too that lobbyists sometimes have good points that should be thoughtfully deliberated on. Different beliefs and differing voting, sometimes not reflecting an EQ approach, was not seen as malpractice; the democratic practice of voting promoting a peaceful transition when power changes hands.

THE INTERDEPENDENCE FACTOR

'Identify 5 things that really matter, then diagnose what divides.'

&

'It's important to engage with people - whoever they are.'

Whilst the UK no longer has the dominance it commanded at the height of the British Empire as the foremost global power, its influence as a sovereign nation is maintained by engagement and strategic alliances with other nation states. Seeking common ground with others, whilst striving to achieve the best for the country or collective of countries as the European Union seeks to do, also resonates with the UK's *'Global Britain'* intentions.

Promoting cross Party agreement rather than confrontation and connecting with people whether they are union officials, shadow ministers or have any other political negotiating role, was also proposed by Richard as being the most effective tactic for getting what you want. Identifying the important things, diagnosing divisions and engaging with people whoever they are to find shared purpose, is the suggested way forward. Two people were mentioned as being particularly effective, Theresa Villiers, a former Member of the European Parliament was noted as being good at working out Britain's global position, and Liz Truss, appointed Foreign Secretary in 2021 was also commended for her promotion of the UK as a first world country.

ADVICE TO YOUNGER SELF

- Don't worry if you're unpopular if you believe that what you're doing is right
- Courage mon amour!