

ROBERT LISVANE – INTERVIEW WRITE-UP

Robert Lisvane is a British life peer and retired public servant. He served as Clerk of the House of Commons from October 2011 until August 2014 and currently sits as a crossbencher in the House of Lords. Robert has been involved in every aspect of parliamentary procedural and committee work during his career and having served for over four decades in the House of Commons, has considerable depth and breadth of understanding of its culture and practice. Robert is co-author of *'How Parliament Works'*, and author of *Order! Order!* and *Who Goes Home?*

LEADERS ADMIRIED

Ken Clarke, William Hague & Justin Welby were three notable leaders referenced by Robert as being especially admired. Ken Clarke, who is a former Conservative Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer, was noted as, unlike many others, being open-minded in all his parliamentary roles. He liked to be challenged by civil servants, and liked to be tested when he was told what was wrong and why. William Hague was also recognised as having the same attitude as Ken Clarke and commended in his approach by demonstrating EQ appeal in his role when Foreign Secretary.

Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury's leadership attributes were commended, especially with reference to his effective handling of holding the Anglican Communion together in difficult circumstances. His notably emotionally intelligent approach was demonstrated by the extent to which he valued the views of others, despite these potentially not being in his own best interests.

EQ – A CIVILIZING INFLUENCE

Putting yourself out there by exposing your own views and being willing to listen to others' points of view and genuinely take them into account, was described by Robert as being a potentially hazardous but compelling leadership trait. Treating people with genuine respect, including actively listening to and having authentic consideration for their views was essential for effective leadership. An important part of emotional intelligence emphasised as being the need to engage in an effective way with others by first seeking to understand them before getting involved in further interactions. During Robert's role as Clerk & Chief Executive with responsibility for two and a half thousand people and a half billion-pound budget, leadership attributes such as sensitivity and respectfulness were felt to be especially important.

SENIOR MILITARY EQ

Robert also said that, in his experience, good senior military officers also display a high level of emotional intelligence. An example was the Special Air Service Regiment (SAS) and its informal but effective teamwork. Command and control are vital in military operations, but senior officers need to show emotionally intelligent leadership.

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IT'S LEADERSHIP VISIBILITY THAT COUNTS

'Restructuring can be uncomfortable without buy-in.'

A particular situation Robert referenced, where EQ was paramount, was in leading a programme involving a requirement for 17% funding cuts. As CEO, Robert acknowledged that restructuring can be an uncomfortable process. Dealing with its disparate parts involved challenges such as recognising that people's first reaction was likely to be a deep concern that their jobs were under threat. There were likely therefore to be some awkward conversations where emotional intelligence at all levels was critical to effective leadership engagement. Buy-in needed to be the main focus by equipping people to go along with the change journey involved, and effective leadership communication was essential to embrace the real modifications that would be needed.

As a leader, it was important to listen and to understand others' concerns. Robert's regular leadership habit of frequently spending an hour a day walking about and consciously engaging with people was seen as contributing to people's understanding that intentions to seek their views and mindfully listen to them were authentic. People knowing you genuinely wanted to engage got a far better reaction. Maintaining leadership credibility meant that engaging with visibility – not just *'stage presence'* direction was critical for effective communication. And evident demonstration of commitment to mindful engagement by listening to their ideas and seeking buy-in to the changes that needed acceptance resulted in a twenty times better reaction.

THE MICHAEL COCKERELL PROGRAMMES

Michael Cockerell is a British broadcaster and journalist who is recognised for his political documentaries. His documentary series called *'Inside the Commons'* which was filmed over the course of a year prior to the 2015 general election provided an unprecedented inside look at the workings of democracy in Westminster. Robert's input in his role described as *'being its most powerful official whose job it was to keep the whole show on the road'* was prominent in Episode 1, *'Lifting the Lid'*. Reference to the series is included on the BBC website.

While the general tendency was referenced by Robert to teach parliamentary process as an organisation, his view is that its workings more closely reflect the elements of an organism. Its function and effectiveness were likened to being more like a family relationship whose effectiveness is determined by the way people work together and the mutual respect required for productive working relationships.

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WESTMINSTER'S PRESSURES – A 'DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY' CULTURE?

'All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.'
Leo Tolstoy (from *'Anna Karenina'*)

The extraordinary pressures that people are put under in the hothouse of Westminster was likened by Robert to have a connection with Leo Tolstoy's well-known quote about unhappy families. Multiple pressures included: issues perceived as being more relevant to local rather than national government responsibility, the tendency for polarisation of views which failed to recognise the opinions of others, an unwillingness to listen and openness to discuss differing points of view, plus the inevitable influence of social media's increasingly insulting and unforgiving narrative and discourse.

EQ was noted as being a survival technique, especially with reference to issues where there is violent disagreement and evidently helpful in situations where productive working relationships between people were in short supply. Negative behaviour and cultural dysfunctionality influences such as bullying and harassment could however occur, with such behaviour breaches governed by expected standards in the Parliamentary Code of conduct and Rules of the House.

Bullying is described as being offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour involving an abuse or misuse of power that can make a person feel vulnerable, upset, undermined, humiliated, denigrated or threatened. And harassment as any unwanted conduct that has the purpose or effect of violating a person's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for them. Both behaviours in total contraction to mutual respect, a core attribute of being emotionally intelligent.

In the case of John Bercow, whose role in high office as a former Speaker of the House of Commons against whom allegations of bullying were upheld, Robert (Lord Lisvane) was one of the three complainants. The Independent Expert Panel Report (available via the parliament.uk website and printed in March 2022) concluded that the Bullying and Harassment Policy was breached repeatedly and extensively by the most senior Member of the House of Commons. The report expressed the view that a great office can be filled forcefully and effectively without descending to bullying behaviour. It also concluded that such behaviour "has no place in any workplace", and that John Bercow "fell very far below the standard of behaviour which the public has a right to expect from any Member of Parliament".

Robert's conciliatory reference to demonstrations of bullying behaviour - noted with emotionally intelligent understanding, was that bullying behaviour of an adult can potentially stem from childhood experiences of being abused to becoming an abuser. And as Michelle Obama's thoughtful reflection quoted in her book, *'Becoming'*, commented: *'Bullies are scared people hiding inside scary people.'*

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INTERDEPENDENCE – AN INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGE

'Disagreement encourages short termism – we need to think longer term.'

Buy in is needed with others rather than the waste of time and resources that accrue from political division. And general elections in particular tend to incur wrath and a lack of mutual respect between government and opposition, with views that don't fit prompting an *'It's rubbish'* auto-response. *'Citizen disagreement'* also encourages short termism, whereby a more productive approach is achieved by thinking and acting for the long term.

Common understanding is needed of the issues we face, a critical issue at international level being the climate change that brings damage to our planet. The danger at international level discussions being however that individual national representations can be dominated by authorised points of view and a pre-approved script, rather than having the prerogative to change policy according to demonstrated evidence and informed discussion.

Emotional engagement is inevitably easier in an intimate environment, where people may be more prepared to remove artificial barriers by exposing their views and be willing to take knocks. The same principles of having a long-term focus and agreement on the most appropriate actions to achieve the widest benefit, apply however whether it's a group of ten people or at international level. International level agreement and follow up action is nevertheless harder to achieve with the sheer volume of participants and disparate points of view involved.

ADVICE TO YOUNGER SELF

Reflecting on experience in his 20s, Robert said that he was guilty at the time of being too prescriptive about what he expected the world to be. His advice to younger self was:

- You will regret *"not doing"* much more than *"doing"*.
- There are fifty ways of doing a job well and there's no single answer – others may well have better or simpler ideas.