

## **EP.114 - Are We Educating Our Children The Wrong Way? With Sir Anthony Seldon (Headmaster, Historian and Author)**

**Simon Brewer**

William Butler Yeats, the great poet, observed, 'Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.' And whilst most would agree that education is the passport to a better future, how should we be thinking about education today and tomorrow? After three years of the Money Maze Podcast on which many of our guests have been armed with notable academic successes from a variety of institutions worldwide, we thought it overdue to examine the topic of education. Today, I hope we're going to discuss some of the important questions: How should we define a good education? How will AI influence both teaching and learning? Do the cost benefit of private education and university education represent a good return on investment? Was Tony Blair simply wrong in his desire to have 50% of the UK population university-educated? And how do we think about effecting change and defining great leadership? To attempt this, we sought out one of the most distinguished and respected figures in the world of education, a headmaster who has achieved formidable success at Brighton College and then Wellington, successes and changes that would make any CEO celebrated by its shareholders, but also a former Vice Chancellor of Buckingham University, the author of over 40 books including his masterpiece, 'The Impossible Office?', which examines 55 British prime ministers, and his most recent work which includes an excoriating assessment of Boris Johnson's reign. He's acknowledged as one of the most respected headmasters of the last several decades, and someone with the unusual clarity of thinking and of execution, and he is Deputy Chair of the Times Education Commission. So, Sir Anthony Seldon, historian, author and educationalist, a very warm welcome to the Money Maze Podcast.

**Anthony Seldon**

Hello.

**Simon Brewer**

As I read your book 'The Impossible Office?', you observed that former Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain always preferred face-to-face meetings and to quote you, telephone was not their preferred method of transacting business. So with that as a precedent, there was no way I was going to let you do this remotely. And so here we are, late August in our offices in Marylebone. So if we just jog back in time, you were born in Stepney, the youngest son of economist Arthur Seldon who co-founded the Institute of Economic Affairs. How do you reflect on your upbringing?

**Anthony Seldon**

Not enough, I think is the answer. I think none of us reflect enough on our parents and where we've come from and what our hopes were. Our lives go by too quickly and without sufficient depth, so not enough. But my father, remarkable. The Economist and the obituary described him as the architect of Thatcherism and Blairism. Not bad for one poor Ukrainian boy born in Jewish East End of London.

**Simon Brewer**

So when one reads your academic successes, undergraduate degrees from Oxford in PPE, and a post-PhD in Economics from the LSE, and then an MBA, one thinks absolutely terrific, but I did read in The Times that when your A-level results arrived, they were greeted with horror. In fact, your quotation was, 'I still remember the gloom that fell on the Seldon family home like a dark tarpaulin.' What happened next?

**Anthony Seldon**

Well, the tarpaulin remained rigidly in place for some time, and then it occurred to me that was a pretty dim way of living and I decided to re-sit my A-levels at a school called Tonbridge in Kent. The first time, I got two E's and a C. The teachers were so surprised by the C that they wanted to get it remarked by the examiners because they were convinced it must have been a mistake and it really should have been an E also. And then I did re-sit, and I did better the second time around.

**Simon Brewer**

So you take these degrees, but at what point did you know you were set on an academic career?

**Anthony Seldon**

I don't think I've ever been set on an academic career. I think life just happened. I'm interested in things, so power hugely interests me and writing about Downing Street and getting inside the heads of prime ministers and knowing them better often than they know themselves, as some of them would say, interesting, worthwhile, important. We're all interested aren't we in different things and to be able to follow through those interests all the way through to writing books about them. I'm now writing my eighth inside book on a consecutive prime minister, but that's not all I'm interested in. It wouldn't be enough. I don't think I could just have been an academic and I spend my afternoons in committee meetings. There's hardly a committee meeting I've endured in my life that I've ever thought that was worthwhile. I'm talking there about the ones I chaired. The others were often better. But we do spend too long in meetings. We often don't think clearly enough what are we trying to achieve here, do we really need to meet. I think we spend a lot of time in committee meetings and not enough with students. And I've loved my life. Look, I've spent it as a mixture of writing and teaching uni and schools and running the old school or other, but doing 101 other things that I love to do, the Royal Shakespeare Company, walking across Europe, creating this amazing new pathway and writing books about that. These are things that fascinate me, and the whole happiness agenda, the fact that we just waste our lives often beating ourselves up rather than discovering our own efficacy and making the most of our lives.

**Simon Brewer**

We're going to come back to a few of those, but let's just turn to education. If you were explaining to someone who knew nothing about the UK's education system, how would you characterise it?

**Anthony Seldon**

Well, I think Charles Dickens got it right in 'Hard Times'. We have essentially, for all the superlative work that teachers, parents and students themselves put in, it is fundamentally a 19th-century model. It focuses on passive learners and the absorption of material that is then regurgitated in examination halls, much like took place when schools really started spreading seriously in the 19th century. Indeed some students are taking exams in exactly

the same subjects, answering exactly the same questions, having been taught in exactly the same ways, and sitting in exams in exactly the same halls. So the world's moved on and a lot of that is okay, but I think that our education system here is falling behind others globally. We've all latched on by what we do well, which is exam pastures. We haven't looked enough at what's happening globally. We have an incredibly insular education system at university and at school level, and we haven't looked enough at the way that society and the economy are changing and whether employers are content with products coming out of schools, which categorically, they're not.

**Simon Brewer**

So how do you judge and measure achieving an excellent education?

**Anthony Seldon**

Well, how do we and how it should we are two very different questions. So how do we? We look at people's performance at schools, particularly in Britain at GCSE and A-level, sometimes for the imaginative schools and students, international baccalaureate, and then we look at their past classification at university and the university they went to. If it's Oxford and Cambridge or Imperial and a few others, that's great, and if they don't get into those places, it's not, and that's all wrong. So how we do look at it is different to how we should. We are all born with a set of potentialities that we then nurture and develop in our life. We all have many different intelligences. A great Harvard educationalist said don't ask a student how intelligent they are, ask rather how are they intelligent. And we're all intelligent in so many different ways. In the world of work, it doesn't matter if someone's got a triple-A star in pure maths. Can they deliver a deal? Can they turn up in the morning at 9 AM or 6 AM sober? Can they get through a period of duress without shouting or without throwing sickies? There are so many more ways to look at what it means to be an educated and contented person beyond the acquisition of exam success. Now, exam success might correlate with those things, but it often doesn't. There's a lot of people who've been spectacularly successful academically who are no good in politics, no good in creative business, no good in finance, insurance, law, accountancy, because it's not enough just to be very clever, very smart academically. You've got to have a personality, the self-command to be able to leverage your intellectual intelligence with a whole set of other intelligences. And that's what I think we should be doing, to answer your question, better at school.

**Simon Brewer**

So within that is this concept of the immeasurable or the intangibles that schools should do. Now, you are known as an innovator. You developed a vision which you implemented at Brighton and Wellington, now at Epsom. But how did your vision for running a school change and evolve?

**Anthony Seldon**

So the experience of running a school is tricky. Whatever school one is in wherever in the world, there are expectations of one from governors obviously and reasonably, parents, ditto, but also school system. And if you do not achieve the requisite number of top grades, then your school falls down league tables and that puts an enormous amount of pressure on schools to move away from the individuality of the school towards a much more homogenised factory-based process whereby we are implanting this information within young people. We don't actually, although we might say we do, but we don't actually care very much or even know very much what happens to them after they leave us. I'm sure it's really nice when people come back on open days and shake our hands and tell us what a jolly time they're having, but we don't really care or think about building up the skills

that they will need to be successful in life and not to have their life broken by mental or physical illnesses. We essentially just want to deliver the product, we deliver the product. And I think what I had to learn when running schools is you can do all that, you can give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but you can also do much more than that. By the way, if you do the other stuff really well, the kids will end up getting the same grades that they would do, but they'll be a whole lot more accomplished and rounded as human beings. So we reduce education to what can be measurable, but education is about much more clearly than that, and particularly for those people from lesser advantaged backgrounds where they didn't get another chance. There's not the social capital or the cultural capital at home to the same extent to have all your education, what's inside you drawn out. And education, to remind your viewers and listeners, not that I need to do that, is such an august body. I guess everyone knows that. They're putting their hands up, but this is recorded so I can't do anything about that. But big on you anyway. The word educate, which of course you all know what it means, don't you? By the way, I've never met an education secretary anywhere in the world knows what the word means seriously, but it means drawing out, it means leading out what's inside. So if you don't lead out what's inside, those things will remain dormant. Okay, so look, maybe you have a natural affinity for, say, playing a musical instrument. Now, if you go to a posh school anywhere in the world, you will have more chance that that is developed. Or maybe you have a great aptitude at- look, it's just endless. We have eight different intelligences, I think, which we could talk about, of which only one or two are measured by exams. And those if they're not drawn out, they will remain dormant. By the way, depression often comes where there is a sense that what you have inside you, you know that you have it, hasn't been valued by other people or identified and it's a crying shame. And education should be much better at recognising what's inside people and leading it out, as it says in the word. So to answer your question, what I learned was that you need to do more than this. You've obviously got to give the parents, the governors, the government what it demands, that pound of flesh. But you can also give other things too which will be enduring and of enduring value to those young people, which last a lifetime, not just to be a passport to get into university or get you your first job, after which people care much less about what grades you've got on your CV. So I hope that I learned a little bit about how to do that, how to do the broader part of the piece.

**Simon Brewer**

And what are those other educations that you refer to?

**Anthony Seldon**

Intelligences, really. Do want to know it?

**Simon Brewer**

Yes.

**Anthony Seldon**

So there's logical and linguistic intelligences. Now, they're very different and can be broadly defined by a breakdown between the science or STEM and the arts, humanities. And some of us can be more strong on the logical but less so on linguistic. Some of us can just be more intuitive about knowing things without quite knowing why we know them or why we're saying them. So those are measured to some extent by exams, but there are a lot of logical and linguistic intelligence that is not. But then to give another pair, there is the personal intelligence, intelligence to know how to live a meaningful, productive happy life. Now, mucking your life up by snorting cocaine or by drinking too much or by chasing men or chasing women isn't intelligent. It really is not intelligent. It's stupid. It's wasteful of the potential that you've been given. Not exercising well or eating junk food isn't intelligent because it will shorten your life and it will diminish the quality of life that you have. And with

personal intelligence goes, I was hitting quite hard there by the way, social intelligence, the ability to be able to relate to people and understand people, to be empathetic, which is clearly very important not just in one's working life but in one's private life also. And then another pair is creative intelligence. Creativity can be nurtured. We all have creativity in us and there are different aspects of it of which some more musical, some more bodily movement, dance, acting, creative and motion embracing and visual art. You want to have people in companies who are able to solve problems, who can see the potential there not just to think in a gray box tick way. And with that goes physical intelligence. Look, sport is going to become more important throughout the 21st century, not so much watching although watching was clearly important. But playing, being involved in it ourselves. It's one of the great joys of life going all the way back to ancient Greece and for millennia before that. And then two other intelligences are moral intelligence, the innate understanding of what is good and bad, what is right and wrong, what is truthful and what is untruthful. That is essential again both in our personal and in our corporate business lives. And then there's spiritual intelligence. Now, a lot of people will tell you that they've read Richard Dawkins or any other book and that that's all a load of crap. But what a sell-out if one doesn't recognise that the spiritual is what makes life worthwhile for any professed atheist to understand the sense of war and wonder, seeing a sunset, seeing an extraordinary seascape, being in love, the love of one's children, the love of one's partner. We cannot define life in purely rational, logical ways, in sequential ways. To deny the irrational, which itself is a pejorative word for what I'm talking about, there's that whole spiritual intelligence. Some people are just fantastic to be around. They just have extraordinary spiritual intelligence. So those are the eight intelligences which you asked for.

### **Simon Brewer**

So when I was talking to some parents whose children were there at Wellington when you were teaching, they said you broke with convention and introduced mental health lessons, teachings, understandings. What was the catalyst for that?

### **Anthony Seldon**

Recognising that you could do it. An amazing American I came across and then have got know very well from the University of Pennsylvania called Martin Seligman, possibly the most important psychologist in the whole postwar period, who said that psychology is obsessed by what goes wrong. We ask endlessly, 'What's wrong with you?' The doctor says what goes wrong with you, your coach or your therapist, rather than asking a different question, which is what's right with you? And what's going well, what goes well in your relationship, not what goes wrong, because when you concentrate on your relationship with what goes wrong, that then grows. What we give attention to grows. If we look at what goes right, then actually, the stuff that's not going so well will be looked after and diminish anyway. So recognising that there's this different way of looking and that we can have efficacy, we are able to choose our own fate. We are not self-determined. Tomorrow does not have to be like today just because today was like yesterday. If we think that we don't have efficacy, then we are hopeless. Nothing will change in our lives. And we can teach young people they do have efficacy. At the heart of happiness is the ability to make people realise that they can be active decision-makers and they can do things like learning how to form good relationships. Yeah, some people are lucky there, they just can do it naturally. But actually, you can understand how you develop relationships. Here's one. How? Active constructive engagement. Your child comes in from school or you see them in the holidays having a chat, you ask them a question, and you then lose interest in what they say. Active constructive engagement means that you're interested in what they say and you're constructively engaging with it in a way that is drawing them out. We all love to be drawn out about our good experiences. It's extraordinarily fundamental in building good relationships. By the way, being stuck at home with everyone just on their mobile phones, for example, over dinner is not the way to bring up a kid. And we should rightly be very worried about the children in 20, 30 years' time who've been brought up with moms

and dads who are on mobile phones and they're not engaging. The phone is the closest thing that we have to a great asset like AI, but it's also an enormous downturn also. The family meal table is the equivalent, it's a secular church or temple or mosque. It's the great place that we can all come to to engage actively with each other. We can learn how to live more happy, meaningful lives. Exercise, a lot of kids will do a lot of exercise when they're at school and they go up to uni, certainly universities in Britain unlike universities in North America and elsewhere where there's much more focus on sport, there isn't very much focus on sport. You're looking for it. At school, the sport comes to you. And for their mental health of young people to have the fun, the teamwork, the ability to forget your life because you're just immersed in the game, all that exercise is incredibly valuable. And the kids go up to uni, they're not doing that anymore, and they start developing enormous mental problems. There's so many things that we can learn about how we can have agency and how we can make good decisions in our life that will make us happy.

### **Simon Brewer**

That was beautifully expressed. I want to just laser in on effecting change. You, as we know, led and changed two schools, Brighton and Wellington, particularly Wellington, which many of us who are of a certain age, when you took over, it would not have been described as best in class. It is today. In your book assessing prime ministers, 'The Impossible Office?', you talk about the sub-structural forces, other factors that help determine success or failure which is equally applicable to headmasters or CEOs. Now, a friend Jonathan Glassberg who is a governor at Clifton College asked me, 'Could you have succeeded at Wellington 20 years earlier or at a more obscure and less well-situated school?'

### **Anthony Seldon**

So this is a point about all leadership, that the successful prime ministers like the successful CEOs or heads of divisions in big corporations have to realise what is possible. And most prime ministers achieve little and most are disappointing because they don't have a realistic understanding of what they can achieve, so the situational point is there. And the great prime ministers, like the great presidents of the United States, for example, are there at moments of great change. So if you are not there in a moment of war or an epidemic or a major economic downturn, it is harder to achieve greatness because the spotlight doesn't hone in on you in the same way. The same goes for vice chancellors and heads of schools, heads of any organisation. You just need to know what is there, what the potential is and make the most of the situation that you have. So I think at Wellington, like at Brighton, I was lucky because both those institutions were right for significant change. I then went and ran a university, University of Buckingham, which didn't have the resources to make the change. It had a sense that it needed to change, but it didn't have that same general agreement across it. It was just less evident about what needed to be done. So making transformational change there was harder. Not everyone can be a transformational leader. It has more to do with the events around you and the resources available at the time. And it begs the question that are great leaders made by great events much more than do they make great events. Churchill, for example, was a failure before May 1940 in many ways, not just in the First World War, but when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer and in his foreign policy ideas in the 1930s. But he was a magnificent prime minister during the war, and I have argued after the war also. So situational, yeah. I think the answer to your friend is we underestimate because we don't see the substructure. By the way, you look at prime ministers today and some people, like to some extent Rishi Sunak, Prime Minister of Britain at the moment in 2023, there's very little he can achieve because he's very likely to lose, not definitely, but he will achieve something no prime minister has achieved since 1832, which is when modern British democracy was first formed, which is to win five general elections to one party on the trot. It just hasn't been done, it doesn't mean it can't be done. But people will look at him and they expect there's an article in the Financial Times that's very weak denigrating him. Sorry.

His ability to make that transformational change was very slight. That would be true of people going into offices in whatever sphere, corporate, business, finance, professional services, whatever.

### **Simon Brewer**

So let's talk about AI. In 2018, you were early in advancing that discussion. You authored that book, 'The Fourth Education Revolution'. You wrote, 'We have allowed ourselves to believe that teaching can uniquely be done only by the teacher, that might in fact be better carried out by AI machines or at least in concert with teachers.' So as you're looking ahead, how do you think AI might change both teaching and learning?

### **Anthony Seldon**

AI is the biggest thing to hit education since the printing press, and we don't yet fully understand that. We are working out how AI is changing work and we are still educating people for a pre-AI world. Many of the most logical jobs will be done by machines. We are teaching people for the very skills, logical, intense, intellectual activity, that the AI, the algorithms will always be able to outperform a human being on. We need to start teaching people human intelligence rather than machine intelligence. At the moment, we're teaching them essentially machine intelligence. So AI is changing the world of work before our eyes and society before our eyes, and that's what our education system is not yet geared up to. We still have an industrial revolution-style education system, but it's also we're not embracing the way that it will do the heavy lifting. So AI will help every facet of a teacher's job, the preparation of material so that it's relevant to the individual student, presenting it to the student in a personalised way, mindful of them and how they're responding. The AI will be responding and see that the individual students on certain days, certain times a day are not responding well, they'll represent it. They'll give a quality of personalised attention that any one teacher, however brilliant, can never do, and also give formative assessment, which means assessment that is forming that child's or student's progress in real time, not having to wait a couple of weeks. You get a few ticks at the end, a mark that is meaningless. It will enormously help the students to learn but there'll still be the need for the same number of teachers. It will free up the heavy lifting of teaching, the preparation, the administration of teaching, the marking for teachers to be far more able to develop the human skills in young people. It will also mean that the idea that schools are places that we have physical boundaries, you come into the school and there's a sign on the front of the school and you go up to the door and in you go, and then there are physical classrooms, it's just ridiculous. Does anyone believe that stuff anymore? Students can get better lessons on physics or history often through AI. If they can't already, they certainly will in 10 years' time, and we need to be doing more to prepare ourselves and young people for that world.

### **Simon Brewer**

Because you have experience in all sorts of other theaters of operation in terms of education from China to Saudi Arabia, is anybody sufficiently ahead of this evolution that we should be looking to them and learning?

### **Anthony Seldon**

Well, they are. I mean, there's a lot happening in China, worriedly, and there's a lot happening in countries in South Africa and in Brazil and in Uruguay and in the Baltics. So Britain has been slow. AI remains, as when I wrote that book six years ago, it remains the Cinderella aspect of AI. We're doing well on AI comparatively and understanding its impact in health care, diagnosis, in operations, good on AI in legal work, in a whole range of mining extractive industries, service industries, retail, but not very good at AI in education. And I do think the British government needs to catch up and it's partly because it is fixated on its exam obsession, which by the

way, is very good at failing a lot of people. The people it fails are not the kind of young people who go to the schools where I've been head of, but it is those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who simply can't get their heads around or haven't got the encouragement at home or often they have or they haven't got the quiet, haven't got the resources at home to keep up and compete in the same way with others.

### **Simon Brewer**

So let's talk about excellence and cost and benefits. We're talking about an independent sector which is only 7% of the UK teaching system and becoming increasingly unattainable given the price of education. Price of fees has gone up a multiple of inflation over the last three decades. How are you thinking about that unaffordability and what it does to the teaching landscape?

### **Anthony Seldon**

There is no more important way that one can as a parent look after one's children than their education. It doesn't mean you have to pay for the education. Sometimes, better schools in any country will be the state-funded, public-funded schools rather than private schools. Private schools have gone up in real terms enormously, the fees over the last 50 years, and many parents' ability to pay has not gone up. And it's a crushing burden on many parents who are making enormous sacrifices. Nobody is able to grab the reins and say this is ridiculous. Sometimes, people stand up and say we shouldn't be letting our school fees go up this much, but they will carry on going up as long as people will pay. So in those schools that have boarding spaces, there are sufficient numbers, not least from Russia and China and elsewhere to pay for those places. China also massively underpins the whole university sector. And as long as people are able to pay, even if it is putting unfair pressure on the British middle-class parent, they will carry on going up. It is unfair, it is wrong somehow, and yet, nobody has been able to solve it and to get a grip. What would it mean? It would mean that cut-price schools would come in, but they haven't been able to do that successfully. London in particular suffers from the fact that you can't get premises that would in any way compete with the big existing independent schools. And even if one could earn a big income from the fees, if it was going to be more manageable economically to do it, then many more people would have started up and that would have brought the fees down because of new competition. There are some brave examples of people who have succeeded, but new competition in London as elsewhere hasn't really come into the sector. So it's just meant that the fees have continued to go up and up. There are more teachers, probably more teachers than we absolutely need, and there are more and better facilities, probably more and better than we actually need. So it goes on.

### **Simon Brewer**

So one of the things as we move towards university discussion now is this issue that there are expectations, some of them are unrealistic of people who pay those fees about the academic institution that they think is nirvana, often very mistaken and I think disappointing. But there is of course the levelling up, rebalancing, whatever you want to call it, where white privileged boys and girls are being excluded from universities they might have attended, and are significant as you know from Epsom. We all observe big brain drain to the US universities that have significant appeal. Now, we're going to talk as I said about these UK universities and why they might be disappointing, but is there a better way of resolving this ambition to level up than the one which is underway?

### **Anthony Seldon**



So governments in Britain have tried for 100 years to level up ever since the 1920s when it was an avowed aim of government policy recognising that there's a prosperous southeast dominated by London and the rest of the country which did well during the Industrial Revolution as global competition increased those areas and the industries and services that they were majoring on went into comparative decline. So Britain has a huge problem with levelling up and no government successfully has been able to address it in a sustained way for all the comparative success of the Birminghams and Manchesters. And there is pressure also, as you say, quite rightly so, on universities to admit young people who come from less advantaged backgrounds and to give them preferential grade offers to compensate for the fact that they have come from a disadvantaged background. And that is absolutely right that that happens because universities should be assessing potential not ability on entry. But no one needs to panic unduly because this year, 2023, where there was enormous gloom about infant school and middle-class children being squeezed out by both overseas students who pay investors a lot more money, but also squeezed out by government policy putting pressure on universities to take those from less advantaged backgrounds, for all that, the great majority of young people from middle-class backgrounds have managed to get university offers at universities they want. Looking at universities in America, it's an enormously attractive opposition, obviously depending on the University, where there are vast numbers of vastly different quality and type. But the top universities do offer a lot more than British universities. So a child comes out of school where maybe their parents paying 45,000 a year and they can be a little bit surprised by the comparatively spartan existence of life at university where they're maybe paying 10,000 a year because there's simply much less money. Fifty years ago, there was much less difference. Independent schools were far more spartan places. They were far less aware of the difference. So it's not really fair to universities for young people to say the accommodation is comparatively poor and there are not great opportunities as there were at my school for the arts and sports, which will be certainly true for all but the elites of those universities, and maybe the teaching quality and certain teaching numbers is nothing like this. All those things will be true. And the more affluent and better resourced British independent education has become, the more of a slight bump that appears, unless you are lucky enough to go to Oxford and Cambridge where the numbers, as everyone knows it's an independent school, of young people going has declined rapidly and will probably continue to decline.

### **Simon Brewer**

So you were Vice Chancellor at Buckingham University from 2015 to 2020. And going back through one of Tony Blair's early aspirations was the setting a target of 50% of young adults to go into higher education. Was that just profoundly misguided?

### **Anthony Seldon**

Well, I didn't think it was because I think university, and this is a nuanced answer to it, university is an extraordinary experience for young people, and properly lived, it is life-enhancing and life-changing. But I think far too many, that said, this is the nuanced bit, go to university without thinking why on earth they're doing it. It's just a treadmill. So they're going to Exeter because that's where their mates are going. They haven't really thought what am I going to get out of Exeter, what do I want to achieve there, what am I going to be doing to really make the most of opportunities. It just happens like on a treadmill. So I would much have a system whereby more people are going to university overall, but those people who are able intellectually and personally to benefit from it, but not those who just see university as just as an opportunity for getting stoned or wasted every night, which actually is not going to help them one bit and they'll come up three years far worse equipped to cope with the world than if they hadn't had that experience. So I think Blair was right. He was thinking of all those people who have those capabilities to go to university who are unable under the present, then present dispensation 20 years ago, but everyone needs to think about it. And it's not right for everybody. There are two-year degrees at Buckingham for some who just want to race through it. There are four year degrees in

Scotland, there are universities abroad, or there's going straight into work. Maybe in your late 20s, do an open university degree when you feel ready for it. You don't have to go to university, nobody has to go to university.

### **Simon Brewer**

So I suppose I take slight issue with that. According to research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development I was reading, 36% of graduates in the UK are overqualified for the jobs they hold. And back in 1992, for example, 3% of all bar staff had degrees. Today, it's nearly 20%. 2% of security guards have degrees. Now it's 24%. And that doesn't seem to serve either the students or society itself. And apprenticeships, which have been flat in the UK for a decade, are viewed very differently than if you look at the German model where you might go to a respected company like Siemens and after a while obtain important qualifications and you're highly regarded. I think there is some irony that Tony Blair son's business Multiverse is pursuing that exact apprenticeship aim. You didn't know, but my daughter just finished at Exeter University, and to say it was underwhelming would be a euphemism. We had Niall Ferguson on the show a while back and he said what has happened below the top handful of UK universities is profoundly disappointing in terms of contact, teaching hours, in terms of the quality of education, and so forth. So this leads me to bring both school and university education together with this question. If you were Minister for Education, what would be on the top of your list?

### **Anthony Seldon**

Well, I think education does need more money and it does need to be using AI much more systematically. Britain should be leading the world. It does need to be embedding good mental health and good all-around multiple intelligence, development of young people, including character development. And universities, rather than the government, are wasting a lot of political capital I think attacking them over woke this and woke that. Actually, start ensuring that they really are teaching better, the learning quality is better. But at the end of the day, they don't have a lot of money for each child. If you have had the privilege of going to a great independent school or maybe a great state school where the teaching will be as good but there won't be the same capital spending, it is a bump down. I'm not even certain that below Oxford and Cambridge, even in those universities like Durham and St. Andrews that people aspire to, that there is such more of a difference. I think there's an enormous difference between Oxford and Cambridge and the rest. Students can go to great cities and have an incredible time. That is still a wonderful experience, but they just need as I was saying earlier when you were asking about the mental health and what's the key to it and its agency, young people need to go and not be surprised. They need to know it's no bad thing if it's comparatively spartan compared to school. Hello, that's what life is going to be like. They're going to be living probably not like Mum and Dad. This is the first generation as we keep on hearing whose standard of living will not be better on average than mum and dad, and get used to it. And actually, having a fantastically palatial house and holidays and cars is no necessary ingredient for leading a good or a meaningful or happy life. But the quality of teaching at universities is a concern, as is the contact hours. But young people need to know that in advance. And to be honest, it's not going to change dramatically.

### **Simon Brewer**

So some closing questions, one on leadership because you effected change, and you wouldn't say it, but have been regarded as a very effective leader. In your most recent book on Boris Johnson, I have to just give a quote here, 'It's historic because of the extraordinary lack of respect for convention in the Constitution. He thought he could make up his own rules, but in the end, he found he couldn't. He ran out of oxygen. He went on and on defying gravity, and in the end, he fell from the sky.' As one of I think I'm right in saying 57 British prime ministers, who in that collection of prime ministers was, in your opinion, the greatest leader and why?

## **Anthony Seldon**

So I pick out 9 leaders out of the 57 there have now been up to Rishi Sunak. I can do the same with American presidents but let's concentrate on British prime ministers. So there's a strike rate of about 1 in 8 who really have made the weather, made a difference, made history, left the office, the country different in a better way after than it was before, and they have various similarities. We take the point that some of it is situational. If you come in with a big majority, if you come in with a lot of money, it's much easier than if you come in without a majority or if you come in at a time of great recession. But those who have succeeded have had clear agendas. Those who succeed as CEOs will have clear agendas. And it's remarkable that many prime ministers haven't. We do not know what the agenda was of many prime ministers. They come in, they're very good at winning elections, but they're not very good at governing and they have different skills. They are unwilling to learn from history. They don't know about history. They know less history and less about politics than most politics and history A-level students will. They're surrounded by advisors who are high on energy but know nothing about how to be a prime minister. They sack the people, like Boris Johnson and Liz Truss did, who can tell them how to run the outfit because they assume erroneously that they are malign or invested with the predecessor, and they're awful and they underperform, and it's not good enough to underperform as prime minister. As a prime minister, you have the most powerful job in the country. You have a duty bound to do your best. So it's quite a sorry story. Britain hasn't had a landmark prime minister since Margaret Thatcher left nearly 25 years ago incredibly. That's a long time.

## **Simon Brewer**

Three closing questions. If you could have dinner with one figure from history, who would it be?

## **Anthony Seldon**

William Pitt the Younger, not so well-known by many but the prime minister who took over when he was 24, left office dead age 46. He was the seventh longest serving prime minister in British history. He was prime minister at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, a similar mission therefore to Winston Churchill. But you know, Churchill would be not a bad dinner guest if Pitt was busy that night.

## **Simon Brewer**

In terms of dealing with resilience, you have written this book inspired by a soldier, 'The Path of Peace', as you dealt with your own tragedy. What advice do you offer to people who are asking about overcoming grief?

## **Anthony Seldon**

Accept it, embrace it. You have to know that grief, whether it's love, there will always be grief. Grief is the price we pay for love, as someone famously said. It's inevitable. What you can do is not let yourself be defined by it say like Queen Victoria did after she lost her beloved Prince Albert in 1861. There's no point to make yourself miserable and other people around you. You have children, you have employees, you have family, you have yourself. You have a duty to move on. It doesn't honor the person who is no longer on Earth if you make yourself miserable.

## **Simon Brewer**

You were described once as being restlessly ambitious. What is still out there that you want to summit?

## **Anthony Seldon**

Well, I quite fancy playing centre forward for England and I have been honing my skills. So I think that is, look, I don't want to be immodest, but I think that is definitely something that's on the cards coming up. I just want to be the best possible father, the best possible husband, look, to take one thing, as well as creating the museum of the prime minister, which I'm passionate about doing. It is creating this path all the way to Ukraine, the path of peace. So I wrote about it in the book called 'The Path of Peace' along the western front, defining a path which is 1000 kilometres, takes a million paces through soil where 10 million casualties, incredible. I think we all need to take time out in our lives. The best imaginable advice to everybody listening, watching, is take time out because it's never wasted. As we were beginning when you asked about reflection, reflect more on your life. Very few of us can truthfully say that we have lived the life or we are living the life that is the best possible life we can live, and many of us are mal-aligned in our life. We don't give enough time to those things that really matter to us, including our health and our family, but also our values. And we suddenly have a shock and it pulls us up short and we realise, what's happened? Go on a pilgrimage, go on a long walk now. Switch this off, turn it off, pack up, turn out the light, set out, wherever. Walk the Camino, walk the Western Front way, look it up, and just rework or find your own path for goodness sake, and meet incredible people who are so different to people you are seeing day after day, week after week, year after year, and rework your life, rethink it. You will never regret it. That's what I did in that book. And that quest goes on all one's life. But if I can then create this next part, the next part I'm walking from kilometre zero in the Swiss border, which is where the trenches ended, up through the Rhines and the Black Forest and across Germany and then Czechoslovakia and finishing in Auschwitz, and writing a book called 'The Path to Light', looking at those people as I'm walking along in those communities who did good things to resist tyranny. How many of us would stand up? How many of us know? Look at the dictators who are striding across the world increasingly. Is there any guarantee that we're going to have a Democratic president in America? Look at what's happening and think about one's ability to stand up for what we think is true and know is true. That's what that path is about. We've all got our own stories. Thoreau, the American writer, said most men and women lead lives of quiet desperation and go to their graves with their song still inside them, go to their graves with their song still inside them. That's exactly true and it doesn't have to happen. I go to funeral after funeral, where of course people are bigged up about everything they've done, but actually, inside is a yearning that that person didn't actually truly find their song glorious when they have, whatever your song is in life. Every single person has a song and our job is not to lead a life of quiet desperation and accumulating success but find that inner song which is unique to you, has your name on it.

## **Simon Brewer**

So normally, I summarise with some of the particularly salient observations. There are so many in there, I'm just going to encourage our listeners to listen to this podcast twice. It's been terrific having you. Thank you for giving us your time and for sharing your wisdom.

## **Anthony Seldon**

Thanks, Simon, for having me.

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