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## Policy People

Dr Ann Limb  
CBE DL

in conversation with  
the Serco Institute

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“I really think it is important for  
leaders to be open about their  
identities.”

**Policy People is a series of interviews with key figures across the international public service landscape, produced by the Serco Institute, a global think tank.**

In this volume, Ann Limb reflects on a remarkable forty-year career spanning multiple sectors. A former college principal, senior civil servant, political adviser and Local Enterprise Partnership leader, Dr Limb has since 2015 served as the first female chair of The Scout Association – one of several non-executive roles she continues to hold three decades after being appointed to her first public service leadership post.

Named in 2019 as the most influential LGBTQ+ role model in the public sector, Dr Limb speaks openly about the challenges of leadership in the modern world, and the place of values and inclusion in modern public life. In wide-ranging interviews, she considers the future of the education sector, the nature of social mobility, and the challenges facing twenty-first century, post-Covid Britain. This Policy People volume promises to hold great interest for students and researchers, public and civil servants, politicians, educators, and all those with an interest in public services today.

The interviewee's answers reflect their thoughts alone, at the time of writing.

The interview was conducted in Summer 2020.



## Dr Ann Limb CBE DL

Dr Ann Limb CBE DL was born and raised in Manchester, before studying French at the University of Liverpool. Her early career was spent in further education; by the age of 33, she was a Principal, and subsequently led colleges in Milton Keynes and Cambridge. She then held senior roles in both the public and private sectors, including as Group Chief Executive of the University for Industry, and as Senior Vice President of the management consultancy Citizen Service Transformation.

Since 2010, Dr Limb has focused primarily on a portfolio of voluntary and non-executive roles spanning a diverse range of sectors. She is the first female Chair of The Scout Association, and was for eight years Chair of SEMLEP, the UK's highest-performing Local Enterprise Partnership. Active in politics and the public arena, she has been a Ministerial appointee to the board of Homes England, and has served on working groups for both the Labour Party and the 2010-15 Coalition Government. She is currently Vice-President of the Helena Kennedy Foundation, which she founded in 1988, and Vice-Chair of the City and Guilds Group.

Appointed OBE in 2011 and CBE in 2015, Dr Limb is a proud Deputy Lieutenant of Buckinghamshire, her adopted home since 1986. Dr Limb will also be High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire in 2023. She lives near Milton Keynes with her wife Maggie.

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## ON SOCIAL MOBILITY

**Ann, you've had a remarkable career across a range of seemingly contrasting fields: further and higher education, enterprise, housing, culture, to name but a few. Is there, from your perspective, a linking thread through all these fascinating roles and sectors?**

That's a very good question, because I don't think I ever set out to do anything that would result in that list of connected areas of life! What does unify them, though, and explain my involvement in each, is the experience I had as a child. I was born in the mid-1950s into Moss Side, an area of Manchester with a notorious reputation, although it has subsequently improved with much regeneration.<sup>1</sup> At the time, interestingly, it was very much the northern exemplar of the benefits of Windrush.<sup>2</sup> At that time and in that place, housing – just to pick up on one area where I've subsequently worked – was a major issue. We lived in a flat above a shop: my dad was a butcher and we got some accommodation with that. Others, however, were in a much less fortunate position. My best friend, a little boy called Peter with whom I played in the back alley, only had one parent: his dad was nowhere on the scene and, where we had four or five rooms, he and his mum basically lived in one. Peter and his Mum were black – and in 2020 might be referred to as 'people of colour'.

An awareness of other people's experience of life – where they live, how they survive – has dominated my own career, stemming from those early days in Moss Side. Central to that is the concept of enterprise and entrepreneurship: as a small trader, that's how I've always viewed my father. Like anyone, my own life experience has created a cocktail of experiences which have manifested themselves in the professional avenues I've taken.

**There can't be many daughters of butchers from Moss Side who end up in roles like the first female Chair of the Scout Association, or as a Deputy Lieutenant of Buckinghamshire. Do you feel that such a story of social mobility like yours is more or less likely to come about today, than for someone born in the 1950s?**

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<sup>1</sup> See also *Policy People: Justine Curran QPM*, available on the Serco Institute website, where Curran discusses policing the Moss Side area in the 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> The 'Windrush generation' is a phrase commonly used in the UK to describe the large number of people who moved to the UK (and other countries) post-World War II, including 802 people who arrived in London on the HMT *Empire Windrush* in June 1948. The British Nationality Act of 1948 provided rights of entry and settlement to residents of UK colonies. In 2018, the wrongful detainment and deportation of a number of 'Windrush generation' UK citizens led to a significant national scandal and debate, and an independent review.

Again, it's a very astute question. As a northerner, moving south was a big thing in itself, but I've now spent over half my life in Buckinghamshire where, as you say, I'm a Deputy Lieutenant and will, in 2023, be High Sheriff: I've become part of the British establishment, and in quite a different area of the country from the one where I was brought up.<sup>3</sup> It raises questions about how that has happened, and whether it would happen again today. For me, the time in which I was born was a significant factor, and the direct answer, therefore, is that I'm not sure it would come about today. There are lots of different career and personal development routes possible for somebody born in 2020, but we sometimes forget that social mobility can mean 'down' as well as 'up'. It will be very interesting to chart those changes for people born today, as compared to those born in 1953.

The opportunities I had to access high-quality education were what enabled that change to take place. I was able to go to a Church of England primary school and then, through the 11+, to get into a grammar school.<sup>4</sup> That was a platform for entertaining a wide range of career choices; finding that university was an option – a huge leap for me, the first in my family to go – made a range of scenarios possible for me. I think it's more complicated these days: there are still routes, and social mobility is certainly possible for many, but the steps were perhaps clearer in my day.

### **I wonder if you lament the loss of the grammar schools.**


I don't, no, because the system was incredibly divisive. I was lucky to get in, but it was a small percentage that did (and of course, more likely if you were a boy). If I were a legislator I wouldn't stop those grammar schools that have continued, any more than I would wish to get rid of private schools, but I do think the aim should be equal access to education, for all. There was nothing about grammar schools *per se* which couldn't be replicated elsewhere, and in fact many successful comprehensive and academy schools these days are doing that.

What I lament is that we don't have enough good schools. That's what bothers me, and it can be fixed. There are lots of different ideas about how to do that, but look at the London Challenge initiative which Tim Brighouse led: resources were put into inner-city schools, into raising

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<sup>3</sup> With Saxon origins, the office of High Sheriff is a single-year, non-political appointment in 55 English and Welsh counties. Today, it is a primarily ceremonial, local leadership role, supporting the Crown in the county as well as a range of voluntary and other organisations. Deputy Lieutenants are, as the title suggests, deputies to a Lord-Lieutenant, who is the Monarch's representative in a particular county or area.

<sup>4</sup> Although it is still used in some UK regions today, the 11+ is generally taken to refer to a national exam, largely phased out by the mid-1970s, which determined the secondary school placement of UK pupils. Specifically, the results of the 11+ determined whether or not a pupil could subsequently attend a grammar school, which tended to have stronger academic programmes and results. As Limb notes, many found the system to be divisive, while others give it credit for the subsequent careers and achievements of many intelligent pupils who, without grammar schools, may have enjoyed a less rigorous, academic education.



attainment and into giving all young people access to good schooling.<sup>5</sup> State schools in London are good as a result, and we should perhaps see more of that sort of programme going forward.

2020 is the 150th anniversary of the establishment of universal state education in this country, and more schools than ever before are now judged by the regulator Ofsted to be good or outstanding.<sup>6</sup> It would be nice to think that, instead of there being a hierarchy of independent and state schools, the aim of governments of all political colours should be for all schools, regardless of type, ownership or perceived status, to be of the highest world-class standards.

### **You've mentioned the North/South divide, which is often talked about in policy circles. What more do you think could be done to change that situation?**

First of all, I think it's good to have got it into the collective consciousness; for so long it hasn't been spoken about. There are undeniably areas of the UK which are much, much worse off than others, and we ought to be trying to direct resources towards them. That isn't a political statement, just an observational fact: whichever government is in power, they should look at the areas that need support the most, wherever those are, and ensure that policy is influenced by trying to take action that is directed towards those areas specifically. In taxation terms, we expect those with the broadest shoulders to bear the greatest burden, and I think that kind of principle should apply more widely.

Therefore, I'm pleased by the levelling-up agenda so prominently spoken about by this UK Government. Fundamentally it is a social policy issue, but it has – unhelpfully, in my view – become a political one too, because it's associated with the Conservatives having won Red Wall seats.<sup>7</sup> Making such an issue political skews resources and skews thinking. It can also end up being patronising and misguided. There are parts of Surrey and Sussex and Kent and Essex and Cambridgeshire, never mind the coastal towns in the South and East of Britain, which have pockets of huge deprivation, but which don't fit within the north/south divide which we so often speak of. It's much more relevant to try and look at that index of deprivation, see where those pockets are, and try to target initiatives onto those.

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<sup>5</sup> London Challenge was a landmark programme of the Blair Government, running from 2003 to 2011, designed to bring about a "step change" in the UK capital's schools. It was initially led by Sir Tim Brighouse, as Schools Commissioner for London from 2002 to 2007. Brighouse had previously been a deputy headteacher, Professor of Education, and local authority Chief Education Officer.

<sup>6</sup> The Elementary Education Act 1870 made a range of improvements to state education in England and Wales, as one of a series of related Acts over a twenty-year period. It included the foundation of local education authorities, and authorised public money for school improvement.

<sup>7</sup> The term 'Red Wall' was first used by political strategist James Kanagasooriam in 2019, to describe a number of UK Parliamentary constituencies in the North and Midlands of England, traditionally returning Labour Party MPs. In 2019, many of these constituencies supported the Conservative Party – unusually and, in some cases, for the first time ever.

**You are a founder of a major social mobility charity, the Helena Kennedy Foundation, and chair of one of the greatest non-classroom educational movements in the world, the Scouts. To what extent do you feel that non-governmental organisations are, in fact, better-placed to tackle social mobility, and create a culture of lifelong learning and personal development, than state actors?**

It can't be either/or; it has to be both/and. You are absolutely right to suggest that, for many, many young people – and I see this in the Scouting movement – experiences outside the classroom are instrumental in developing skills for life.

There's a broader, personal development angle too: informal learning can help you to find your own identity, becoming somebody who perhaps you wouldn't become in a more formal educational setting. The size of the Scouting movements – over 750,000 young men and women in this country alone – is testament to the value of those opportunities, and without them our human experience would be limited. If you only went down an academic or technical route, and your learning was always and only measured by your achievements at school or college or university or the workplace, you would miss out.

Baden-Powell had a very specific idea, when Scouting was founded, and at heart it was about identities being developed and supported through a range of activities that help you work with other people, help you discover your courageousness, help give you confidence, help you to help other people, help you to realise that you may have a skill in one area but actually, as a team, you get further working with those whose skill-sets are quite different.<sup>8</sup> All of those things may be acquired at school, and some schools will pay attention to them, but I suggest that you're much more likely to find true inclusivity in a setting where the activity and learning that you're focussed on is something that's not going to be measured by a GCSE or A Level or City and Guilds success.<sup>9</sup>


In this country, we don't give enough value to that. You don't hear it that much talked about. The world is going through an extraordinary period of change and, because of that, we're facing up to, debating and reflecting on, our own mortality. Some of the issues that are explored around a camp-fire, or in any informal setting with young people, are questions about 'who am I', 'where am I'... Whether there's a religious underpinning or not, that kind of searching, which is at the

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<sup>8</sup> Robert , Lord Baden-Powell (1857-1941), founder of the Scout Movement. The Scouts' current vision and strategy can be seen at <https://www.scouts.org.uk/about-us/strategy/>.

<sup>9</sup> The City and Guilds Group (formally the City and Guilds of London Institute) is a major UK educational organisation, and the awarding body for the wide-ranging City and Guilds qualifications. Ann Limb is a Trustee.





soul of every human being, is much more likely to occur in a safe and informal setting, and where you can have a bit of fun too and not feel threatened by ‘the other’.

What drove me to set up the Helena Kennedy Foundation was seeing the experience of people in further education who clearly had battled through an awful lot of difficulties, overcome a huge amount of barriers to get back into education and have a second chance, but because of the range of disadvantaged circumstances that they found themselves in – particularly at a time when educational maintenance was not so readily available and university fees were coming down the line – struggled to progress to higher education. It seemed really critical to help those people. Again, it’s the same fundamental question about giving everybody reasonable, equal access to education.<sup>10</sup>

**As you’ve mentioned, we’re living in a moment of profound turmoil – Brexit, Covid-19, Black Lives Matters, huge changes to the nature of politics, the ever-increasing presence of technology. What do you feel any or all of those might mean for social mobility, and for the current generation of teenagers in our colleges and schools? Are they aids or abettors?**

Some of both, really. Technology is a wonderful aid provided everybody has equal access to it. For five years in the Blair days, I was the senior civil servant responsible for getting the nation online through *UKonline* and *learndirect*, so I firmly believe that technology is a force for good.<sup>11</sup> Even so, we do know that just in this country alone, this pandemic has revealed the number of households where children haven’t had access to the appropriate equipment. Young people now are digital natives – a well-worn but appropriate phrase – but they need equal access to the kit. If they have that, it is an enabler to social mobility.

If you put the serious economic condition of the country and the globe as a result of Covid, alongside exiting the European Union in this country, there is ample evidence that young people today will find themselves in a very uncertain world, particularly in terms of getting and keeping employment. The coincidence of those two huge factors has exacerbated that, with new statistics every day suggesting how bad the recession is going to be. Everyone will be affected in some way, of course, but it may well be hardest for the young.

Brexit and Black Lives Matters both, for me, are about the wider issue

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<sup>10</sup> Founded by Limb in 1988, the Helena Kennedy Foundation “exists to overcome social injustice by providing financial bursaries, mentoring and support to disadvantaged students from the further and adult education sectors, enabling them to complete their studies in higher education and move on successfully into employment or further studies”. See [www.hkf.org.uk](http://www.hkf.org.uk).

<sup>11</sup> Tony Blair (b. 1953), Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1997 to 2007

of identity and identity politics.<sup>12</sup> Each of us has to find ourselves, develop a sense of who we are, and what our identity – individually and communally – means to others. It's very clear to me that there is structural racism in this country and others; despite efforts that have been made (and without wishing to knock those) there is such clear evidence that, if you're black, things happen to you in a different way. In the same way, if you are a woman, or if you're gay, different things happen both internally and externally, in terms of how you assimilate your own experience.

How is Brexit related? For me, it was as much about identity – wanting to be European or not – as about economy or sovereignty or legislation. What's interesting, in America, is the significant numbers of white people really speaking out: it suggests that, despite the structural injustices, there can actually be a 'coming together', a recognition of others' identity and voice, and that is particularly true among young people. In that regard, these painful moments might actually be aids to social mobility and a more equal education system, in time.

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<sup>12</sup> Brexit is the colloquial term for the UK's decision, via a referendum in June 2016, to leave the European Union, of which it had been a member since 1973. The UK left the EU, after a period of negotiation, in January 2020 (with a year-long transition period until December 2020). Black Lives Matter refers to a global movement for non-violent protest against racially motivated violence, though it is also the name of a specific, related organisation in North America. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was first used on social media in 2013; the movement gained significant international prominence in May 2020 following the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin.



## ON EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING

**You spoke movingly, earlier on, about your own upbringing and education. To what extent was your decision to build an initial career in further education a product of that?**

It wasn't at all! That's why it's hilarious, really, that I am such a passionate advocate for further education, a sector where I had a very successful career but in which I never intended to work.

I set out, thanks to that grammar school education and discovering a love of languages, by doing a French degree, and thought that my career would be as a French teacher – which would have been wonderful. I remember going to a careers evening with my parents when I was fourteen or fifteen, and it looked like teaching was what I'd end up doing. As we walked away from the school, my mother said, 'That'll be really good, because you'll have a pension when you retire.' Neither of them had anything like that: they never had an occupational pension, so the idea that you could enter such a profession was really significant.

That career seemed fantastic to me, but I got into FE by accident, teaching part-time while I was working on a PhD. I learnt so much about the experience of those who benefit from FE: the students taught *me*, as they always do, and I realised that there were so many people with such talent but who weren't enabled to take their education further. And so I ended up staying. Ten years later I was a Principal. My lifelong experience has stayed the same: students teach us as we teach them, and – as Helena Kennedy's report so aptly put it – 'learning works'.<sup>13</sup> That needed, and needs, shouting about.

Recently, Gavin Williamson – the current Secretary of State for Education – made one of those landmark speeches, the like of which hasn't been made since about 1990 when Kenneth Baker was Education Secretary.<sup>14</sup> Baker was the one who originally referred to FE being the 'Cinderella service' and committed to the Conservatives changing that, which they subsequently did with the incorporation of the colleges in 1993.<sup>15</sup> They took FE seriously. Gavin Williamson's speech reminded people that, even thirty years on, FE is still too forgotten, as are its students. That thirty-year period was my career! I've been pleased to work in a sector which has done so much good and produced so many good people – even some MPs now have an

<sup>13</sup> Kennedy, Helena, *Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education* (Further Education Funding Council, 1997), available at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/9063796.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Gavin Williamson CBE (b. 1976) has been UK Secretary of State for Education since 2019. Kenneth Baker, Lord Baker of Dorking CH PC (b. 1934) was Secretary of State for Education and Science from 1986 to 1989.

<sup>15</sup> The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 led to the incorporation of FE colleges in 1993, a move which in effect took those organisations out of local authority control.

FE background, more so than thirty years ago – but you still don't get enough of that, and you don't get enough people who've had FE experience out there in the world and people knowing about it. Maybe that will come in the next thirty years.

**Cinderella was abandoned by her parents: she was forgotten because they died and she went to live with someone much less pleasant. Why is that the case with FE? Why has it been abandoned and forgotten, and what would you most like to see Governments embrace and lead in changing that?**

The problem is that we have two more favoured children! Schools equals votes; education is synonymous with schools. It's the more prominent child with its hand always up – and of course schools are a critical part of society. The other favoured child, again essential for any country, is the university sector. The universities have always been better at speaking with a unified voice, and therefore they've been heard.


Between the political imperative of every government of every colour having to consider school education, and world-renowned universities being the research lifeblood of any country, of course FE was going to get trapped. Behind that, though, there is something more significant. Not enough decision-makers have experienced FE enough to have integrated it into their own lives in such a way that it's at the core of their policy thinking.

Why the Blair Government didn't take it seriously enough I could probably write a volume about! They *did* have an Education Secretary, in David Blunkett, who had been to an FE college and who did 'get it' – but it was a question of sheer, political priorities. They chose – and I don't disagree with it, at all – school education and, especially, literacy, numeracy, and leadership of schools: elevating successful headteachers, London Challenge, the Literacy Hour, Sure Start – all good things.<sup>16</sup> But during that period of thirteen years, they never had a really clear policy on lifelong learning, and the early attempts of Blunkett were never fulfilled.

Although I acknowledge that, personally, I'm liberal and left-leaning in my thinking, I'm critical of that Labour Government which didn't, in FE terms, do what I think it should have done. In fact, just this week I've gone on record saying that Tories have been the real reformers for FE, both in 1992 and now with this current government.

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<sup>16</sup> These were all significant planks of the Labour Government's education programme from its election in 1997 onwards. High-performing headteachers were given wider leadership roles, regionally and nationally, while London Challenge was created to raise attainment in the capital. Sure Start was a wide-ranging programme, introduced in 1998, to improve childcare, early education and health, and community development.



In the space of two years, two different Conservative PMs – May in February 2018, Johnson at Dudley College more recently – have made major speeches from FE colleges.<sup>17</sup> I don't think Blair ever knowingly went into one! When Andrew Adonis came to mine in Cambridge, he said that big, general FE colleges were like department stores – too many faculties, not enough specialism, not enough focus, and they won't last.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it's because of the levelling-up agenda we mentioned earlier, but I sense that this current Conservative Government realises FE can't be forgotten anymore, and is giving it that leadership. They've picked up the orphan and adopted it, and they are going to put it both in the spotlight and under the microscope. The FE sector should celebrate that, but it should watch out too: having a chance to get it right means it needs to!

**That's quite a statement for someone who describes themselves as liberal and left-leaning to make. The education establishment is often seen similarly; I wonder why you think that is, if the greatest drivers of vocational and technical education really have come from the Conservative side of the aisle.**

It's not a matter for me of wanting to make a political statement; I'm simply basing it on the evidence. Some colleagues would, I imagine, say to me that we haven't had the evidence that this Government *does* care about FE: it has been mostly dealing with Covid, after all. But the autumn White Paper on FE is a very good indicator, as are the statement from the DfE on technical education and the speech from Gavin Williamson delivered to the Social Market Foundation.<sup>19</sup> The stall is being set up. Yes, it has to be followed up with money, but even making the statement and getting the words 'further education' into the general discourse and debate is a lot better than people not knowing the difference between sixth-form and FE colleges, which was the evidence of my lived experience between 1997 and 2005, in that system under Labour.

Ed Miliband, as Leader of the Opposition between 2010 and 2015, did try and have a look at this. He didn't then get elected – he was responsible for one of several poor defeats that Labour have had – but things that he and those of working with him suggested were then picked up by the Tories, like the Apprenticeships Levy. The problem for Labour (and to some extent the Lib Dems, even though they were

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<sup>17</sup> Theresa May, then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, made a speech at Derby College in February 2018 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-the-right-education-for-everyone>). Boris Johnson, Prime Minister at the time of writing, made a speech at Dudley College in June 2020 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-economy-speech-30-june-2020>).

<sup>18</sup> Andrew, Lord Adonis PC (b. 1963) worked in the Number 10 Policy Unit from 1998, and led it from 2001 to 2005, when he became a Labour Life Peer and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Schools.

<sup>19</sup> See <https://feweek.co.uk/2020/07/09/government-to-reveal-plans-this-autumn-to-create-an-employer-led-german-style-fe-system/>

<sup>20</sup> Ed Miliband (b. 1969) was Leader of the Labour Party from 2010 to 2015, when he resigned following Labour's defeat in that year's General Election. At the time of writing, he serves as Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, in the Shadow Cabinet of Sir Keir Starmer.

in government for five years)<sup>21</sup> is that they haven't been able to take the reins of political leadership – which, in turn, influences the media, the choices that parents make, and the view that young people have of what they want to do.

There is a clear link between these things, and I just don't think we can underestimate the impact that Williamson doing that kind of speech – moving on from Cinderella to saying that we won't forget about you – can have. It's remarkable, really, that the media haven't quite cottoned onto that in that way, which I wrote about in FE Week recently.<sup>22</sup> One piece which I saw, about the Williamson speech, somehow turned it into commentary about the effect on higher education! The lens through which the media still sees things is schools and universities, too. Apart from a few people – Evan Davis and Steph McGovern, for example – most don't have a clue about FE, or understand it.<sup>23</sup>

**Your FE Week article calls for the 'mainstream media' to embrace further education. Is the disinterest you perceive endemic of a deeper culture in the UK – do you think we simply lack a culture of lifelong learning, and a respect for technical education? Are there other countries from which we might learn?**

It reflects a reluctance, ingrained in many of us, to consider that we *can* learn throughout our lives. That culture isn't there in the UK. I don't know much about many other countries, so this could be specious, but I get the impression that in America individuals feel responsible for their own learning (they pay for their own learning quite a bit, too); there's an understanding that through learning, and investing in learning, you will get on through life. They don't necessarily shout about it, and it isn't all Americans, but there's more of that culture of lifelong learning. We don't have that. Here, learning is often for other people, and is certainly – especially if technical or vocational or craft – associated with what *other* people's children do and not *our* children. Those class prejudices have really led to years and decades of us not valuing technical education.


That's why apprenticeships (again, a Labour idea but acted on by the Conservatives), technical equivalents to A levels and so on, are so important as equal routes, but with different types of learning. Williamson quotes the German system; I don't think it's always wise to try and import things because they work in very different countries,

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<sup>21</sup> The Liberal Democrats are a UK political party who, between 2010 and 2015, were the junior partner in the Coalition Government led by Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, at which point they had 57 MPs. At the time of writing, the Lib Dems are the fourth-largest party in the UK House of Commons, with eleven MPs.

<sup>22</sup> Limb, Ann, 'FE's time has come – the mainstream media should celebrate this', in FE Week, 13th July 2020, available at <https://feweek.co.uk/2020/07/13/fes-time-has-come-the-mainstream-media-should-celebrate-this/>

<sup>23</sup> Evan Davis (b.1962), economist, writer and BBC presenter. Stephanie McGovern (b. 1982), presenter and journalist.



but of course we can learn from Germany and France and the way they value technical skills as highly as other kinds of attribute or aptitude.

**At risk of stretching the Cinderella analogy too far, if you had a family with a forgotten third child, you might expect the preferred siblings to support them a little. Should schools and universities be doing more to raise both the standard and awareness of FE?**

Yes, and that has been part of the problem, though I can understand why it has happened. A very simple illustration of this would be that most colleges, in a town or city, didn't historically get access into the Year 9-11 youngsters, to help them make choices about technical education. The schools want to hang on to people in the sixth-form years: teachers want to teach older children in their specialist subjects, and of course there are resources attached to it too. It's perfectly understandable, but the reality is that the school sibling has not necessarily bridged the gap. There's more evidence of it happening now, because of the freeing of the market: with the growth of Academies, Studio Schools, UTCs and so on, we don't have one overall system - it's more a question of a series of different place-based systems.<sup>24</sup> It's quite complicated. That does offer the space for really creative, innovative people to bridge the gap between siblings – but it also provides an excuse for the ones who want to batten down the hatches and do their own thing in their own little bubble!

The university sector is very varied: some are much more research-intensive, some teaching-focussed, some both. Some have a strong regional focus and bridge the gap with their local FE colleges, with very good partnerships schemes; others don't see their place as being a regional centre of learning working with other local partners. Consequently, the pattern of the older sibling helping the FE college varies enormously. I think a smart vice-chancellor moving forward will, if it's appropriate to their university, plug into the government's attention on FE and exploit that in a regional sense.

Anglia Ruskin University is a good example: very recently it opened a University Centre in Peterborough.<sup>25</sup> Anglia Ruskin University is a regional university operating in Chelmsford and Cambridge, with good existing partnerships. Peterborough is a big, developing, important town with no university education. That's a good model for the older sibling embracing its younger, forgotten one.

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<sup>24</sup> Academies were first introduced in the Learning and Skills Act 2000; they are state schools but independent of local authority control. Several types of Academy have subsequently been set up, including Studio Schools (generally smaller institutions focussed on vocational education) and University Technical Colleges (14-18 schools sponsored by universities and with close ties to business). Both Studio Schools and UTCs have attracted some controversy; a number have closed, while others have proven successful.

<sup>25</sup> See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-53395011>

**You wrote another article recently, calling our current time a ‘highly teachable moment’ and calling for ‘cultural change’ leading to ‘a long-term plan for education and skills’.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, the reforms you suggest in that paper are primarily for government and policy-makers, albeit ‘co-created’ with educators. In this age of organic, grassroots campaigning and transformation, do you still feel it should be the state leading culture change in the education and skills landscape? What is the role of unions, businesses and charities, and of more ad hoc movements?**

There is a role for all the organisations you mention, but I don’t think their primary task is to be the cheerleader for education. If you’re a business, your primary task is to run that business and make money and employ people and keep the nation prosperous. That’s very simplistic but fundamentally it! I’m a great believer in primary tasks, and in that sense it goes full circle to where we started: some charities, some churches and religious organisations, some unions will all have a hand in education, and it may well be important to them, but it isn’t their primary task. The state provides for the education of its citizens, and we’re celebrating 150 years of that: we no longer have to rely on those other organisations to run schools. We pay taxes, some of which are used to provide a space in which you can gain an education. I think it’s an important principle: individuals contribute something, your basic education is therefore provided free, and the state is in the driving seat.

Of course, each new government might not need a backseat driver, but it does need a map, a sense of where it’s going, and how long it will take to get there. It also has to take account of the starting point, because it’s far from a blank sheet. Rather, we have this series of ecosystems that is so varied and mixed. You want to use all the benefits of the networked society that we live in, and the ability that we have now to use distributing ways of learning: you don’t want the state just to be a kind of command and control situation, but a more organic, developmental network. That’s why you need a plan, with state funding attached to it, systems for accountability, and some flexibility to allow interpretation of that plan that suits local and regional circumstances. That makes for a more complicated system, but that is twenty-first century life! The world itself, in 2020, is a more complex network than in 1870. Change now happens in different ways, but that doesn’t mean the change can’t be positive if it’s handled in the right way.

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<sup>26</sup> See <http://www.annlimb.co.uk/blog/view/a-highly-teachable-moment-if-not-now-when-new-skills-for-a-radically-differ>





## ON LEADERSHIP, IDENTITY AND VALUES

**You were a college principal at the age of 33 – the youngest ever FE college principal, in fact – which you’ve openly described as a ‘tough’ experience. What were the principal challenges you faced as a young leader, and do you believe there is more support for young leaders today?**

There is much more support for leaders today and, therefore, if you’re in a position of leadership and you’re quite young, the expectation is that you will have coaching and mentoring – you will be guided and supported through, and given a whole range of opportunities that are much more structured. I can answer that bit quite definitely based on the experience I see, for example with The Scouts, and also because I do quite a lot of mentoring of younger leaders now. Back in the mid-1980s – it was 1986-87 for me – there wasn’t really that notion around in quite the same way. You had to pick up your leadership understanding and ideas from wherever you could find them: for example, there was an American guy called Tom Peters who I came across and who talked about leadership.<sup>27</sup> But generally, it was all very haphazard!

That said, and to be fair, when I took on the role as Principal of Milton Keynes College (within a year of being appointed Vice-Principal) they suggested I go on a management course, which was quite enlightened – and they did suggest that I went to Cranfield, which was close by!<sup>28</sup> Nobody really supervised me, though, so I chose something which appealed to me: that was fantastic. Through that course I realised that who I was as a person, and what I wanted to do with the college I was leading, were probably quite culturally different from the organisation that was starkly in front of me, the way things were done, and its focus. That leadership course was helpful in terms of self-awareness, therefore, but subsequently I had to look all over the place and devise my own ways of how best to lead my way through the situation that I found myself in.

**And how does a leader do that? What is the place of values in a leadership role, and – perhaps more importantly – how do you execute that culture change if you’re in a resistant climate?**

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas J. Peters (b. 1942), US writer, academic and business expert


<sup>28</sup> Cranfield is a postgraduate university in Bedfordshire, UK, incorporating the Cranfield School of Management

I can only tell you what I did, because obviously there are very many ways you can change things! Subsequently, in the 2000s, I started to work with and support a young leader, Matt Hyde, who became CEO of the National Union of Students in his very early 30s, and is now CEO of the Scouts.<sup>29</sup> Because Matt was a young leader – two or three generations younger than me – he had a different take on things from me and I learnt a lot from how he approached leadership. He was not afraid to ask for expert help and he set up an external sounding board of three experienced people who acted as his ‘change management mentors’: a kind of control group to support him through the culture change he was embarking on with the NUS. I told him that I wished I’d thought of that when I was younger! Instead, I’d done it with and through the structures around me; I didn’t think of getting external advice and help, whereas Matt set up a sort of ‘board non-managerial supervision’ – experienced people but whose organisations weren’t engaged with or accountable for the outcomes of the NUS. By contrast, I had assumed that the governing body I worked to as a chief executive was the only group of people I could look to for guidance. The college chair of governors was my line manager and the governors had a vested interest in the outcome so their support was always tinged with consideration of their own governance obligations.

What I *did*, leading an education institution, was to start with the purpose of the organisation: learning. I tried to do everything through the point of view of the learner, and put the learner at the heart of all that we were doing. That was the antithesis of what was going on, and there the difference of values and culture came in. The people working in the college, not to put too fine a point on it, were doing a job: teaching their stuff to somebody else, them as boss and student as receiver – a very different dynamic from one which says we’re all part of a learning culture. Of course students are there to learn, but educators have to learn from them as well, and the student experience is where you start from. There was a pedagogical underpinning to what I was doing, which was at odds with people who went in, taught their skills, took their money, and went home. Remember, this is back in the mid-1980s and they were not bad people, but it was functional and minimalist and the students weren’t at the heart of things. I set about trying to make the student experience better, articulated that, and made it clear what the expectation and accountability was of the lecturers and teachers. That’s when tensions began to emerge: some people found the culture uncomfortable. Of course, with a new

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<sup>29</sup> Matt Hyde OBE (b. 1975) is now Chief Executive of The Scouts.



sense of vision going forward, other people were then attracted to the college, and that's how we got the change.

**To what extent was the 'toughness' of those early years because you were a female leader, or an openly gay one, and – again – do you feel that has changed subsequently?**

I wasn't openly gay then: in fact, I did everything, if not to hide it, at least not to have to engage with that. I couldn't hide the fact that I was a woman! It has something to do with it, but I'm not sure it was the only reason. There are just aspects of being a woman in society that you learn to deal with, and people patronising you has nothing to do with you being a leader – in fact they might be less likely to do that if you're a woman in a position of authority and power, because those trump your gender.

In relation to the role and being a woman, in some ways being young made me blissfully unaware of things. I didn't always realise that it was tough: I was so idealistic, so driven by wanting to make things better, so sure that at the heart of education was learning, and those things almost shielded me from some of what was undoubtedly said or going on. When you are the leader in an organisation, nobody ever tells you the truth: they project onto you their own ideas of authority, which may bear no reality to who you are as a person. That brings in issues, for you, about who you really are, how your persona is perceived, and how you shape that.

These days, we talk about 'authentic leaders' which certainly wasn't spoken about then – or at least I didn't know about it. I think I was just authentically me, which some people found refreshing and positive. The fact that I was a woman was probably good for some women – and for some men! But for others it was too uncomfortable and it was too challenging. That was the toughness: dealing with people's different styles and expectations, and that at the end of the day I would say 'we're here, taking the money, doing a job, and I expect people to do that in a particular way'. What they got away with in the past when there were no forms of accountability, no systems – that was another thing. This was a college that lacked structure and formality, so there was a very big transformational job to be done. That's why I spent ten years there, gradually changing it each year, because you can't transform anything overnight: it needed changing in every little nook and cranny, over a long period of time. The more people got into that transformation, and the more that others who didn't like it left, because they retired or moved on, the easier it became.

**You've also said that you never formally came out. How important, do you feel, is public acknowledgement around issues of personal identity, particularly for leaders? When does it help leadership, and when does it hinder?**

I think it would have hindered it then, not least because the climate was one where, in the teaching profession, you had Clause 28 prohibiting the teaching of homosexuality.<sup>30</sup> People felt very strongly about that. There was a risk to it, even if you were a gay woman leading an organisation: I might have been seen, although I wasn't actually living with another woman at that point, as promoting a lifestyle which was against the law. I don't think it would have helped.

Additionally, as part of the values work that I quite deliberately articulated and made part of the vision and culture of the organisation, there was a whole equality issue to do with getting women into senior posts. As a result of that, we did engage more women, and I ended up with two women as Deputy Principals to me: a triumvirate of women! A Principal was unusual enough at that time – maybe in ten out of 400 colleges nationwide – but with two Deputies as well, we really were highly unusual. One of the male headteachers in Milton Keynes, who was very worried about losing sixth-formers to an FE college – especially when we started to get a better reputation – disparagingly referred to Milton Keynes College as being run by three lesbians. I only learnt that subsequently. It wasn't true: the other two women weren't, and they didn't know I was! That would, of course, be completely unacceptable today.

We live now in a very different environment, thank goodness, and I really think it is important for leaders to be open about their identities.

It was only last year or the year before that I asked myself why I didn't make it more explicit, back then. As our student numbers started to grow and our curriculum began to develop and the college got well-established in a growing city, which is what I was there to do, there would have been men and women who defined themselves as homosexual or bisexual or transgender (amongst the students, never mind amongst the staff). Not being open about that probably was not helpful, but I sensed I would have been vilified or undermined. Now, people are more accepting, enquiring and understanding, and it certainly can be very good to have and celebrate leaders who are open about any aspect of their personal life – whether that's being a Christian or being a Marxist or being gay!

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<sup>30</sup> Clause 28 of the Local Government Bill 1988 stated that local authorities should "not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship". Controversial from its creation, the Clause resulted in the foundation of LGBT rights charity Stonewall, and a range of campaigns for its repeal. This subsequently happened in June 2000, in Scotland, and three years later across the rest of the UK.


**We're talking, really, about the nature of privacy and the way that has changed, as well as societal acceptance of the 'protected characteristics' that you're talking about. I wonder whether you feel, in this seemingly and increasingly un-private world, that leaders have an obligation to share more about themselves, in personal terms – or whether that's in fact a worrying trend.**

It's a very, very good question. Each of us – leaders, but anyone in the workplace – has the right to determine themselves what they do and don't disclose. The pressure to be 'out there' – a different sort of pressure from the suppression that I've talked about in the 1980s – is now an expectation that you bare all. It's the other end of the spectrum! For leaders, it is important to set an example that these are personal matters. What they choose to disclose, and the language in which they disclose it, are one issue – but setting a culture around that potential disclosure is critical, too. I can fully understand why some people may not wish to speak about aspects of their private life, and retain something of it, but it's harder and harder to do that.

That said, I do also think that we all bring our personality and our character to our interactions with others, including at our workplaces. You can't fully leave something about yourself at the door. What you *can* do is make a judgment, be discerning about situation and context. By my second Principal's job in Cambridge, after ten years at Milton Keynes, I was in the relationship I am still in thirty years later, but I still wasn't overt about it. I didn't go in guns blazing and share everything about myself, even though things had moved on by 1996, but I found ways of explaining who [my partner] Maggie and I were. People didn't have to ask, or not ask, if I was a lesbian – that was how I did it, and it became much easier. It was probably helped, as well, by us not being a particularly 'couply' couple: we've done things independently. But it was important, as I went on, that I didn't ignore aspects of my private life in the workplace.

**And now that you're Chair of the Scouts, an organisation where so many young people discover and develop their own identity, how consciously are you a 'female chair', an 'openly gay chair', and of course the first of each, or does it not matter in how you actually do the job?**

It does matter: like it or not, any of us who are in a position of authority do become a role model, and a model of affection or envy or hatred or whatever.



You have to accept that, as a 'first', people will sit up and take notice. It matters to me, especially in a movement that is so clearly for young people of all genders, that I identify as a woman, and that's what we stressed when I was appointed six years ago; we made it clear that this was a historic thing for the Scout Association. I was never asked about being gay, but I was completely open about it. When I was elected, Maggie came along with me: being Scouts, that ceremony is done in a very formal way, and having her sitting there with me was a real indicator of how different life is now. Nobody batted an eyelid. The Scouts I meet tell me that having a woman chair, a gay chair, matters to them: they want their leaders to value difference and to celebrate the uniqueness of every single human being, which has always been my approach.

I think being a Quaker is also of interest to people. They focus on that label: what's that? Are you a Christian then? It leads to questions as much as being female or gay. One or two people may still be uncomfortable, and I can understand that – for my late parents, who were born in the 1920s, it was a big thing to come to terms with in their own daughter. But by and large, nobody questions it anymore. I have a niece and nephew now in their late 20s and 30s, and it's a complete non-issue. Watching that change does affect how leaders at all levels feel they can operate, what they share of themselves and what the value of that sharing is, and how they can utilise identity in creating culture change.

## ON PARTNERSHIP

**You've worked in the private, public and voluntary sectors. Do you have a natural comfort zone, or place particular importance on one of these above the others?**

I am essentially a public sector person, although in my own life I've always seen public and voluntary as almost interchangeable, despite their differences. But I hugely value the private sector and, having grown up the way I did, I've often adopted some quite private sector attitudes.

As a very small child, I helped my father in his butcher's shop; when he became a milkman I helped with that; then he went back to butchering and sold cheese – so I knew family business, and we relied entirely on what he earned as a self-employed small trader. I was exposed to business from birth, and to the notion of entrepreneurship. When I chaired the Doncaster Education and Skills Commission, I asked people why I had been chosen.<sup>31</sup> They answered that I had a reputation for being an entrepreneurial public servant. I hadn't thought of putting those two things together, but actually that nails it: I think I'm pretty good at marrying best practice.

The liberation of colleges from local authority control gave principals the opportunity to be quite entrepreneurial in running their institutions: to be business-like in running a public sector organisation. I felt then, as I do know, that if you take public money, you have a responsibility to handle it and steward it and guard it in a very business-like fashion, as opposed to some of the worse public sector practices then: there were those who saw it as 'somebody else's money'. so it didn't matter what you did with it! I didn't see that attitude as harnessing the resources and treating them in the most enlightened way. Of course, there is good practice and good leadership in all sectors, and much more they could learn from each other.

**What does really exceptional partnership between sectors look like, and what more could be done to drive that?**

Regretfully, I'm not sure we have enough good examples of really good public-private partnership at a strategic, macro level. The

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<sup>31</sup> Aiming "to help raise attainment levels and ensure that young people have the right skills needed to secure new jobs that are being created in the borough", the Doncaster Education and Skills Commission reported in October 2016. See <https://www.doncaster.gov.uk/services/schools/education-and-skills-commission>. Limb's Vice-Chair was Sir Tim Brighouse (see earlier footnote).

Local Enterprise Partnerships were set up in 2010 by the Coalition Government – itself a model of partnership which actually I rather liked, but for which ‘the people’ hadn’t really voted.<sup>32</sup> The LEPs offered potential for public-private partnership in local economies, centred around enterprise, but I think, ten years on, my view would be that the quality of those partnerships is variable. For whatever reason that relationship between public sector and elected leaders, whether mayors or council leaders, and private sector, however represented – there are different models now in play, which makes it difficult – hasn’t worked that effectively. There was nothing in the 2019 Conservative manifesto about the LEPs, and I sense they’ve reluctantly accepted that LEPs are here and have to be worked with, because “there’s no other show in town”, as a local authority leader said to me recently. Perhaps in another five years those public-private partnerships might have further strengthened, and there will be some really strong evidence that local authorities and business working together at local level are the right vehicles to make a visible social and economic impact on their communities.

The voluntary sector can work very well with the public sector, where charities provide services which would previously have been run by the state, and charities can benefit from private sector expertise on boards. But I can’t think of a really good example of *all three* working together brilliantly, at least in the sectors where I have expertise. The exception might be the best-run charities, which combine charitable fundraising and activity with business-like principles and a sense of public service, developed through partnership with a wide range of actors from each sector. City and Guilds, of which I’m a Trustee, might be a good example of that. As an organisation it certainly operates in quite a corporate way, but is by status a charity, and one very much providing a public service in terms of what it does.

**It’s interesting that you haven’t mentioned colleges and universities. Should they be working more closely with business, with public services, and with charities too?**

Yes, and I think the best colleges and regional universities do that.

Interestingly, I was on a webinar just before this interview, about the forthcoming White Paper on FE. There is some speculation that the Government, following Gavin Williamson’s recent speech, will take money from HE and give it, at last, to FE. Will the media use this as an

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<sup>32</sup> Between 2010 and 2015, the UK had a Coalition Government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, following the General Election of 2010 which resulted in a hung parliament. The Coalition Agreement supported “the creation of Local Enterprise Partnerships – joint local authority-business bodies brought forward by local authorities themselves to promote local economic development – to replace Regional Development Agencies (RDAs)”. See [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/78977/coalition\\_programme\\_for\\_government.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/78977/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf).



opportunity to pit universities and colleges against each other?

What would be far more exciting, instead of universities moaning about losing income, would be if they really collaborated with the FE sector. Of course, the good ones do – Sheffield Hallam, Anglia Ruskin, many others – particularly where there is a strong regional focus. They don't need Government to tell them to do it! And it's a big ask of FE to now reach out to universities, when so often the universities have ignored FE. But in principle, of course the relationships should be stronger. Those partnerships should be fostered around the *different* contributions that HE and FE, as well the civic, business and charitable communities, can bring to a sense of place, and I hope that's where the agenda will shift. Ideally the current Government will marry the FE and Devolution White Papers in a way that will encourage that leadership and holistic development of place, seeking out opportunities for those different leaders and partnerships and collaborations to work to mutual benefit.


**I wonder if you'd like to see a greater devolution of power away from the centre, in the UK.**

I would, partly because I think it is happening anyway around the rest of the union. Labour, post-1997, enabled great change in the leadership of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and I suspect that this will be a really interesting and positive challenge for the next generation, which I hope I live to see it my bath-chair: how do you maintain a United Kingdom, and maintain existing devolution, but with some sense of 'English' identity and devolution too?<sup>33</sup> What is the role, too, of regional leadership, which was originally rejected under Labour but which has since developed with elected Mayors and other reforms? That's going to require the right kind of leaders at the right time. Brexit may offer an opportunity in this regard, because we have to refashion our identity as a nation, and a group of nations, who all voted quite differently.

**At a national level, Brexit and now Covid-19 will inevitably mean changes to the way the UK works with other countries. What do you see as the principal opportunities and challenges of that within the fields of your expertise? What, specifically, might the implications be for international organisations like the Scouts?**

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<sup>33</sup> Following its election in 1997, the Labour Government led by Tony Blair embarked on a programme of devolution which included the establishment in law of the Scottish Parliament, Senedd Cymru, the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the London Assembly. The move also led to the creation of the Campaign for an English Parliament, a cross-party pressure group.



For the Scouts, it starts from a very good position being truly worldwide, and I can't see that anything other than continued good can come out of that.

Young people who go into Scouting want to meet other young people from around the world – if you've ever been to a World Jamboree, even online these days, it's about enlarging your mind and increasing your experience of people other than yourself. That is not going to go away. Politically, though, I don't quite know where the current situation leaves us, particularly given the forthcoming US election<sup>34</sup>, and the changing nature of Europe triggered by Brexit.

The UK needs to accept that its situation in the world has changed significantly. As we discussed earlier, Black Lives Matters is related as well. This combination of events and circumstances raises interesting opportunities for the place Britain occupies in the world. We are undoubtedly still one of the most tolerant and democratic, respected societies – one of the least corrupt in the world, with Parliamentary democracy, human rights and the rule of law at its heart – but where do we now fit into the world? It's a fascinating, interesting, exciting question to ask for future leaders. The answers must come from that younger generation who must move the country forward by taking the good things that already exist and developing them in a very different way to shape our changing world.

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<sup>34</sup> This interview was conducted prior to the US Presidential election in November 2020.

