

Bartek Ogonowski...: Welcome to season four, Future of Business, where we take you on a journey to explore the diverse range of sectors and stories embedded in the Oxford MBA cohort and beyond and how they will shape the future of business.

My name is Bartek Ogonowski. I will be hosting our conversation today with Kiran Fothergill, a current Oxford MBA student and conservative party candidate for Harrow on the Hill, in this year's local elections. Welcome, Kiran.

Kiran Fothergill...: Good morning, Bartek. Thank you very much for having me today.

Bartek Ogonowski...: Those local elections took place here in the UK on May 5th but since we recorded this podcast a few days earlier than this, you will have to wait until the end of the podcast to find out if Kiran was successful or not in getting elected. But in the meantime – let's get back to the podcast. So - Kiran, tell us a little bit about your background and how you actually ended up in the seat with me today.

Kiran Fothergill...: Yes, of course. Thanks, Bartek. I'm on the MBA, as you mentioned, just there. For me, coming back to Oxford was the only choice, really, having done my undergraduate degree here way back in 2012: started in 2012. I think it's a fantastic program. I've met some wonderful people. It's just a shame that it seems to be ending so quickly. But it's been a wonderful experience so far.

Prior to coming onto the MBA, I'd set up a business in travel, which was a startup based out of London but focusing on holidays, on sailing boats in the Mediterranean. We had a good run for a couple of years. Unfortunately, COVID torpedoed our strategy somewhat, which isn't to excuse some of the mistakes that we'd certainly made along the way. But it proved a little bit too difficult at that time. Fortunately, my business partner is carrying on. But I've left the business to focus on other things, hence the MBA, and also an increasing focus with working with my father in the family business, which spans the engineering, hospitality, and cybersecurity sectors. But as you mentioned in your introduction, I'm also tentatively getting involved with politics these days.

Bartek Ogonowski...: Yeah. I think this conversation, for all the listeners, is going to be quite focused around business in politics and, I guess, the future of politics and how business can be incorporated within. A candidate like Kiran is a perfect example of this wide array of experience from his background and how he can actually bring that into his borough and also into future politics. In terms of your campaign journey, I mean, I know the past couple of weeks - and you and I have caught up separately before this - the past couple of weeks and months has been a huge journey leading up to this election. It'll be great to hear some of the methods, the learnings you take from it, some of the greatest experiences, the worst experiences, and maybe what did you bring to the table as Kiran Fothergill that was potentially different?

- Kiran Fothergill...: Yeah. I mean, it happened all quite organically, I would say: got involved with the local party, started to meet some people on a more regular basis and started helping out with some leafleting and canvassing, knocking on doors, et cetera. Then, I ended up being the candidate for this year's election. This was around last August/September. Since then, I've had some wonderful experiences campaigning out in Harrow, which is where I've lived since 1997.
- I think, despite what the media would have us believe, in some polarized world that we live in, certainly, online and on social media, where you think that people are either with you or against you, actually, in reality, on the doorstep, people are good people. The middle ground is far larger than anyone would have us believe. I've had some wonderful experiences, really, honestly, just speaking to people who might not vote for me but are thankful and are grateful that I'm actually out and about and trying to work hard for the residents, irrespective of their political leanings. I've knocked on thousands of doors, and 99.9% of the experiences have been positive.
- Bartek Ogonowski...: How important is that in-person interaction? I know we spoke a little bit about COVID earlier or touched on it. That in-person interaction of going door-to-door and actually letting them know that this is who you are, this is what you can represent, does it make a huge difference?
- Kiran Fothergill...: Yeah, absolutely. I think people value that. The literature that we drop through letterboxes, of course, reinforces our message and is important in outlining on paper our policies and our pledges so that people can go back to that and really think about what it is that we are trying to do. But I think if you can put a face to a name, and you can actually hear someone's voice interact with them, I mean, it counts 10 times, which is why I still think in these local elections where it is just about manageable to get a team to canvas a whole district, in-person canvassing, knocking on doors, the old school method is unbeatable. Social media will only take you so far. This is really is where it's won or lost. You have to put the time in.
- Bartek Ogonowski...: Awesome. Well done. I know you've put a lot of hard work and effort. From our side, wishing you all the best for the elections, if that's a fair term to use. Then just that last question, which I want to go back to: what did you bring to the table in terms of your business experience and maybe some of your background that assisted in this campaign?
- Kiran Fothergill...: Sure. Actually, let's take an example. At the very local level, one of the policy pleasures that I've put in place here is to reinstate an hour of free parking in Harrow on the Hill. Now, that might sound innocuous. It might sound completely insignificant, but it's very important. Why? Because local businesses, particularly restaurants in Harrow on the Hill, are not able to open currently for lunch because of prohibitive parking restrictions, which have been imposed recently, which mean that people who are coming from different areas, for example, can't park their cars unless they have a permit. Therefore, they can't eat at restaurants. That has meant that a number of businesses, which are just

up the road from where I live, have had to close down their lunchtime offering, significantly impacting their revenue models. That's something that perhaps was overlooked when it was introduced.

Perhaps the concerns of businesses weren't taken into account. This is where I think just that mindset, understanding businesses' priorities, can make a huge difference in those small policy changes that can really mean a lot to individuals. Moreover, there's another side to that coin, which is elderly people as well now, if I'm elected, and I can reinstate this free parking over lunchtime, can now come and shop as well.

Bartek Ogonowski...: Awesome. I think that leads us nicely into our next topic, which is the lack of business acumen in politics. You've got to have this knowledge of business and have certain experience in order to put those experiences in place or those changes in place. Maybe the next thing we can chat about, and then maybe the next topic, is the lack of business acumen in politics. I know it's something you and I have spoken about quite extensively. For the purpose of this podcast, we can maybe highlight some of the key points. But particularly in a post-Brexit UK world, the future of business in the UK with young, intelligent business minds - take us through that journey and take us through the current lack of business acumen that you currently see in the political world.

Kiran Fothergill...: Yeah. I think I'll start with maybe some statistics. I think there was a parliamentary file released following the 2019 general election, which is the last general election we had, which shows that only 25% of conservative party MPs have business or commerce experience. Only 5% of labor party MPs have business or commerce experience, followed by 16.7% of SNPs and about 18% of Lib Dems. The point of that is that it's not enough. I think it's quite clear that there aren't enough MPs who do have a real firm handle on the issues that businesses face.

What does that mean, I mean, in terms of the schemes that we have in place in the UK, which are numerous. We've got some brilliant schemes for entrepreneurship, the EIS, the Enterprise Investment Scheme, for example, Seed Enterprise Investment Scheme. But the problem is, certainly, some studies that I've read and some surveys, show, particularly from the innovation agent which have been conducted by the UK's innovation agency, show that not enough MPs, number one, know that these schemes exist and, number two, know how to advise startups and their constituents on how to use them effectively. This is an issue. There's a disconnect between what we actually have, which is some great policy, and actually what the MPs understand that we have, and, next, how we actually might use that in the most efficient way.

I think this is an area I think we need to raise awareness. We need to have potentially more focus groups. We need to have more training for MPs to understand what's actually going on. I think that would be beneficial for everyone.

Bartek Ogonowski...: Awesome. I think that's really good: to bring some good statistics to the table and such a low percentage of people that are effectively making huge political decisions in the UK and around the world. I mean, we focus on the UK for now that don't have that business acumen. I'm sure the skills that you could learn from an MBA and your experiences with Oxford people, in general, would assist that.

Kiran Fothergill...: Yeah, definitely. I think the MBA is a huge benefit to me, both in terms of the fundamental grounding I'm going to have in some of these business areas. I mean, I read German and Spanish literature as an undergraduate and then went into the world of entrepreneurship just without any formal training in business. This is really solidifying some of those experiences that I've had previously and actually giving me some of that academic foundation that I really need. But I think, coupled with, of course, the fantastic network, I think it's going to be a hugely profitable experience. I would also say-

Bartek Ogonowski...: If Kiran starts saying "*mi hermano*" a couple of times... I'm just kidding.

Kiran Fothergill...: No, I only do that off the podcast with you, Bart. No, I think that's another thing to touch on here, which is... It's come up in the news recently, particularly around certain MPs, but it's about second jobs. Of course, being a member of parliament is a... which is, I should say, where I aspire to be at some point. Being a member of parliament is a hugely intensive time, intensive task. It's a full-time job. It's well paid. Nevertheless, it is not illegal to have a second job, at least in an advisory capacity. That is what I would intend to do, certainly, if I'm able to organize my time efficiently. But I think it's a good thing. I think it's a positive thing.

Some people say, "Well, actually, MPs shouldn't have second jobs. They've got enough on their plate." Other people say, "Well, what about the experiences they're bringing from the real world?" That experience and that know-how/that business knowledge into politics is a good thing. I think if we have a diverse range of MPs with diverse backgrounds and experiences, which particularly have a positive knock-on effect on how they conduct themselves or how they think about things in the political sphere, I think it'd only be positive.

Bartek Ogonowski...: Yeah, for sure. That's an interesting point. I think moving on to maybe just uncovering a bit of the big issue focus that we spoke about now, and how you or other politicians or how other people could bring and encourage entrepreneurship in politics. How do you actually raise awareness for that? How do you get more people that are focused on business to want to enter the politics world or people that are in the politics world want to actually learn more about entrepreneurship?

Kiran Fothergill...: Sure. Yeah. I think we need to get young people excited about business and excited about entrepreneurship. I think that's where we start. We get into schools. We get politicians into schools to talk about exciting schemes. It's not always about going to university. Sometimes, it's about learning a trade or a skill

and combining that with studies of business to understand how you might set up your own company, for example, and making that as easy as possible. We already have a great system in place to set up to incorporate a company in the UK with relative ease.

But I think it's about spreading that knowledge, getting into schools, into high schools, into sixth forms and speaking to the pupils directly and saying, "Look, these are the opportunities available to you. This is how we'll help you set up a business from a government perspective. These are the schemes that you can use," and get people excited about working for themselves because, ultimately, that's the backbone of the UK economy. Why we are such a resilient economy is because we have a huge number of small businesses, often family-owned, which operate, often, locally but are the real lifeblood of the UK economy in difficult times in particular.

I think we need to just get the young generation excited about that, certainly. I think Brexit presents all sorts of opportunities. Brexit was incredibly divisive. Fortunately, we have now seemed to have moved on from those discussions. We are embracing it. I think it presents a number of opportunities, particularly around diverging from EU regulation. Let's make the most of this now. Let's get people excited about it and wanting to get young people into business.

Bartek Ogonowski...: Kiran, brilliant point. I mean, for those that can't see. When Kiran does talk about politics and his passion for it, it's quite evident that this is what he wants to do. This is something that you've got to be passionate about and strive towards. I think that's awesome. Maybe just to add some experiences from my country, South Africa, there are a lot of public/private partnerships already in place. Getting a lot of the top CEOs from the listed companies in South Africa to assist with government policies or big decisions... That's something that we really worked well. I know that's taking place throughout the world but just something that I would like to add because, especially in a third-world developing country, as they refer to it still. But really good business minds that can make influential decisions or assist with those influential decisions in the country, that's important.

Kiran Fothergill...: Do you see yourself ever setting up a business in the UK, Bartek?

Bartek Ogonowski...: Oh, the podcast has turned tables.

Kiran Fothergill...: Yeah. Couldn't resist it.

Bartek Ogonowski...: Yeah. I think so. We could have a whole other podcast about this. But I do think the UK is an exciting place, especially in the entrepreneurship landscape. There's a lot of big opportunities, specifically in the tech industry, at the moment. That's something I'm focusing on, but more for another day.

Kiran Fothergill...: Sorry.

Bartek Ogonowski...: No, but awesome. It's been a great place to learn. Maybe moving on to one of our last topics and to wrap up the conversation. It's been an exciting journey. I know it's hard to wrap everything up within 20/25 minutes. But what inspired you along your journey and maybe what are some of those key moments that really got you toward where you are today: second time in Oxford, studying a degree... or reading a degree, I should say. Take us through some of those big moments and those big inspirational stories.

Kiran Fothergill...: Yeah. Well, one of the things that attracted me to the Oxford program was a focus on impact. I didn't really understand at the time what impact meant for me. It's something that expanded around a lot. It's something that isn't easy to pin down because it has so many implications and so many potential meanings, which is a good thing.

Now, I was thinking about, for me, what does impact mean? I think it's having an impact in politics. I mean, I think that is one of the areas of life, public service specifically, where one can have a real, tangible impact on people around them, often an impact on people who are not aware of the avenues available to them to solve problems, people who may not have the time or the capability to solve pressing issues which affect them and their families in their daily lives.

One of the aspects of what I do, even as a private system, as of yet unelected... One of the things that I do derive real satisfaction from is assisting people to help themselves basically or to help them with things that are important to them. That's having an impact. That's something that I've taken away from my experiences in the last year and has inspired me to continue and to put more time into this. But it's also something that's been born out of conversations I've had at Oxford at the business school talking about what it is exactly that we want to go out and do in the world. There are so many wonderful people here who are doing some awe-inspiring things. It's an inspiring place to be, specifically when you think about what you might want to do.

Bartek Ogonowski...: Yeah. I think that's a really good point to start concluding the conversation. I know you're a busy man at the moment. I guess, from us, we want to thank you for being here today. Maybe one closing remark, I mean, for wrapping up your thought process, your journey from sailboats to politics, to business ventures, to a number of different journeys. Now, you're focused on bringing all those experiences from an entrepreneurship perspective into politics. Impact in politics... Maybe sum it up for our listeners just to have a good one-line or two-line closing.

Kiran Fothergill...: Yeah. I think this is a journey that has no fixed agenda, as it were. It's incredibly unpredictable. It's something that you have to take day by day, week by week. As they say, "a week is a long time in politics" is a great UK expression there. But it really is if you just watched a new cycle. It's something that you can never get ahead of yourself with. It's something that is constantly evolving. But it's incredibly exhilarating. I think it is a hell of a worthwhile thing to get involved with that's both business, entrepreneurship, and politics because of the impact

that you can make on both sides. If you can combine the experience with both and bring the two together, I think that's where we can see real change being initiated. I mean, I look forward to my career down both paths and we'll see how it plays out.

Bartek Ogonowski...: Awesome. Thank you, Kiran Fothergill. It's been great chatting to you today. I'm sure our listeners would agree.

Kiran Fothergill...: Thank you, Bartek.

Bartek Ogonowski...: Well, the results of that election are now out and unfortunately Kiran wasn't successful this time around, but he will no doubt try again in the future as you can tell he is passionate about the interface of business and politics and the impact that can have. Thank you very much.