

Transcript

Shermar Pryce

Welcome everyone to the Oxford Student Voice Podcast. I'm Shermar Pryce, the SU's President for Communities and Common Rooms. And today we're joined by a very special guest, who's here to talk about Oxford generally and basically solving the mystery of how it manages to work, how this bumblebee manages to fly despite being constructed in such a way in which it really should not. And so without further ado, I introduce you to Sir Ernest Ryder, Master of Pembroke College and the current Chair of Conference of Colleges. Before arriving at Oxford, Sir Ernest had a distinguished legal career serving as a law justice of the appeal and the senior president of tribunals. In that role, he essentially led the UK tribunal system, overseeing the leadership of thousands of judges across the country. We'll be looking at how colleges are run from his perspective as a head of house, how they collaborate through conferences of colleges, and crucially, how student voice reaches the very top levels of university governance. So, Sir Ernest, welcome.

Ernest Ryder

Thank you very much, Shermar, and hello to everybody who's listening in.

Shermar Pryce

So let's just start with a bit of background. Well, beyond who you are, nominally, how did you get here and what was your journey, for lack of a better term, to where you are now?

Ernest Ryder

The quickest way I can describe it is moving out of a small town in the industrial northwest of England. from a fabulous family who'd never had anyone go to university before, through to Cambridge, into the law via all sorts of ways of raising money on the way, and then practising as a barrister in administrative, civil and family law. And out of that came Silk, the High Court bench in 2004, then the Court of Appeal, and then a head of jurisdiction, and mine was the only Chief Justice where you have to retire from the role at the end of five years. It's non-renewable. And so I knew I had to find something else in life to do. I could have gone backwards, but that's not me. And I was headhunted for heads of house in Oxford and Cambridge. And I saw Pembroke and loved it from the minute I saw it, and I'm still here.

Shermar Pryce

Wonderful. So moving on to the now, the present, I guess we should start with the basics, your job, your role at the moment. And so the question is, what does it entail? What is being a Master, Provost, President and equivalent? What does the day-to-day look like?

Ernest Ryder

I think everyone is completely different. All 39 colleges and the PPHs have their own style and identity. But there's one thing that becomes very clear to you, and it's what attracted me to being a Head of House when it was offered, is that this is people first. So your entire day from 7 in the morning till long after nightfall, dependent on what your evening is during the week, you're dealing with different people and they are your first priority. So things like student safety, resilience of the fabric that we're We use both the joyous history and some of the less than joyous, risky buildings that we've got, and the vision of the colleges that we're in and their financial future. All of that in the context of what on earth is the public service we're supposed to be doing is about people. And that is what I love about the role. And it's what each of us does in very different personal ways in each different college.

Shermar Pryce

Lovely. So I'm quite interested in how your previous roles and your current role differs. Obviously, they're at surface level very, very different professions, but I'm quite interested in the similarities and how perhaps you've used some of what you've learned in your current position.

Ernest Ryder

Difficult, you're absolutely right, difficult to compare. The classic image of a judge is somebody making a decision, and that's true, whether it's at 7:00 in an emergency duty court on a Friday night, or after a long trial or with a jury. Each one of those different styles is very important, but it's all about the quality of decision making. Whereas what do you do in a college isn't immediately that. You're not making the decision yourself. But there are some things that carry across beautifully. The general public are not always aware of how much a judge is speaking to the different constituencies that are in front of her or him. So whether it is the jury, the victim, the perpetrator or those who would be affected by a decision commercially or administratively in England and Wales or indeed in Scotland or Northern Ireland. You need to fashion your narrative, the story you're telling, to the people who will benefit or potentially not benefit from the words you're going to use and work out what the impact is and how you're going to describe that. That's actually what you are doing with people in college and in the collegiate university. You're working out what to say that will actually hopefully pursue some common purpose to a better place. It doesn't always work that way. It frequently fails. This bumblebee you've described doesn't always get off the ground. And it's a day-to-

day challenge to work out whether colleges are with you, students are underpinning what you're doing, whether it's undergraduate or graduate, and if they're not, where are they and what do they need? And let's not forget the hundreds of people that service colleges as our staff, the communities that we've got. And then the broader academic community, which has so many different facets to it. And it's not just the divisional differences and the departmental differences below them. It's different intellectual mindsets in a place like this that should be fostered rather than curtailed. And how do you do that without creating division, discord, and sufficient respect for people that they're able to say what they want to say. That's a daily challenge. It's not always as much fun as I've made it sound. It can be quite difficult, but it is what you're here to do.

Shermar Pryce

Well, that's very interesting itself, and particularly the similarities, which wouldn't necessarily be obvious just by looking at the titles there. but overall looks like Pembroke is in very good hands. So let's move on to the other hat you have, which is chair of Conference of Colleges. And so I'm sure many of the people listening would have perhaps never heard of Conference of Colleges, you know, as a concept or as a sort of the pseudo organisation it is. So could you perhaps explain what Conference of Colleges is and what being chair entails?

Ernest Ryder

It's like a lot of Oxford's governance, lost in the mystery of the history of time. You wouldn't have invented it in the way that it exists if you were starting now. That said, it's very difficult to think of governance relationships that work as between independent charities, that is the 39 colleges, including the societies that are still part of the university, and the PPHs, and the university, which is a charity in its own right, with different regulators, different rule books, different purposes, different statutes. How do you get all of that to work as an informal federation, while respecting the obligations of trustees of each of those bodies, and the fact that we're all serving the same people, that is, students and communities across Oxford and across the UK and internationally. So we're a very odd thing. We're an unincorporated association. As a lawyer, I'm not even going to bother going there. We can't tell anybody what to do, but we can and very rarely do have binding votes about things. I suppose the classic there is Are we going to do our admissions in person or digitally in the longer term? We've already had one binding vote about that in the time I've been a head of house and there's going to be another, I suspect, by the end of the year. But more often than not, what we're working out is what is the consensus between colleges and playing that into university committees and council and to some extent congregation, although that is less of a concern for colleges. So conference exists to try and test the temperature of the water, either at the behest of the university or individual colleges and groups of colleges. And the one thing we all do on an extraordinary regular basis is talk to our JCRs and at the

corporate level, the conference of JCRs, the student union itself, about what people think. And if we don't do that often enough, it very quickly becomes clear we're out of kilter. And that's what we should avoid. We shouldn't avoid public debate about different opinions, but we should avoid clashes that could have been resolved where we're not actually able to get on with what we're doing, which is research, teaching and making the place better for people who are in it.

Shermar Pryce

Wonderful. Well, you've done such a good job with that response. You've actually answered a few of my follow-up questions in that. And so I guess to sort of really hammer home what the purpose of Conference of Colleges is and where does it fit, could you perhaps explain how it interacts with and what the, you know, how it's separate from the university proper and how those, you know, two streams of governance actually interact in practice?

Ernest Ryder

So let's start with the university level. Conference of Colleges is represented on every main university committee working group. and all the ad hoc informal bodies that look at task and finish problems. But when you say represented, you've got to be really careful because at least two of us, sometimes more, are trustees of the university and have to be to sit on council. And so you are an independent trustee of the university. So when I sit there, I can't say conference thinks, or even that I'm mandated by conference. you have to have an entirely different mindset and go into that and say, I think the answer to this as an independent trustee is, I declare an interest, this is what the majority of colleges or all of them think about this, and I tell you that for information, but my view is my own view and I'm telling you this as a trustee. That starts to describe the dysfunction as well as the difference that there is in the way things work. So on some committees you're a trustee, on other committees you are a delegate and you have to in your own mind get that governance right. But on all of these bodies you get all of the papers, certainly as Chair of Conference or Deputy Chair and one or two of our other colleagues. And so you're reading, as you will be in the Students' Union, a vast amount of paper overnight. There couldn't be a better training ground for being a judge or any of those other professions that get, digitally or otherwise, thousands of pages to read overnight. You're still doing it. At 68, I'm still doing it overnight for the next day. I'm working out what I think my position would be, what my colleges would think about that, what my students would think about that. And sometimes I can't talk to them. Sometimes Trusteeship involves confidential information, usually financial, and you can't really share it with anybody who isn't a trustee. So I and my deputy will frequently talk because we're both trustees and haven't then got the ability to cross-check that with many other people in the university. But we do have lots of informal ways of working. And so, for example, the Vice Chancellor has what is known as her Thursday

Club. So we have an informal debate, usually every other Thursday, dependent of where she is in the world. And we talk about things that we or the heads of division or her PVCs or departmental heads think are the bubbling issues of the day, where we can actually break down those technical barriers of what we're actually doing when we make a decision and debate, which is what you should be able to do in a place like this. And we do that at conference colleges level. So I have a steering committee. It has independent academics on it. You come and see me and the whole purpose of that is that we can share things that we think are bubbling around and actually have a debate somewhere which is relatively protected so people can express their opinion and then we can work out what to do about it and hopefully then have a more public debate that people can take positions in, agree, disagree. and come to a decision. But all of that is in a very diffuse and very delegated governance structure in Oxford. And almost everything you come across has a bespoke arrangement. Every issue you come across will end up with something new that's popped up from somewhere, usually with a bit of history behind it. And you've got to go and ask, where did that come from? And is that the usual way of doing it? Because there's no way even, what have I been here, I've been here six years now, even after six years, there's still so much about Oxford to learn that even when I leave at the end of my tenure, there'll still be a vast amount less unknown.

Shermar Pryce

Yeah, well, that's as captivating as it is a bit scary.

Ernest Ryder

It is a bit scary, in a very nice way, because there's always someone to go and ask.

Shermar Pryce

Hopefully, well, Hopefully, students outside of their studies, read up on this to do a bit of research, because often it is quite difficult to know where decisions are made, who, beyond the sort of university-college split. But then, within the colleges, is this, where does this originate from? Is this a bespoke solution by a single college, or is it the joint effort and that sort of thing? And I think it's very helpful to get a bit of an overview from you there. especially if you are, for example, a student leader who you say you often interact with, whether it be the SU or the Common Rooms.

Ernest Ryder

Well, I think the role of student leaders is hugely important for all sorts of reasons. I was one myself long ago. It's frightening, it's 50 years ago. But 50 years ago, I was a JCR president and unsuccessfully stood to be one of the very first student union presidents in Cambridge. I think I lost by a handful of votes, but there you go. That's history. What you learn in the process of being a leader as a student can fashion the way you do things for the rest of your days. Sorry to put it in that way, but it will, and already will

have done. Because, I mean, I see my common room presidents every week. Absolutely standard, whoever else they see in college, where whatever they agree with others, and they do. They come and cross-check what they'd like to do and where they are, including the confidential things about things that are going to be really difficult for them or for the college. And we talk that through and it becomes a very positive one-to-one. It's like a leadership tutorial. You're going through, have we ever done this before? If we have, what was a good way of doing it? How are we going to keep people who are not going to be happy on side? Who are we going to, how are we going to stop those who think they've won from being triumphalist about it so that the community can carry on? And also, how do you build consensus? How do you do that influencing job with people so that things run smoothly enough that we don't actually forget we're supposed to be doing a tutorial, writing an essay, doing some research, being in the lab? Things that are far more important to individuals, but actually we're doing it in the context of giving somebody some skills. We've even done this last year some pilot leadership training for colleges and for students. And I hope out of that pilot will come more. I don't know how quickly or we can build it. But I want to build it because coming out of that were a large number of people, both in common room execs and out of them, who said, that's interesting. Nobody had ever made me think that way about what I'm doing with my teaching, my research, what I'm doing for interest and indeed for my potential career. And if you can get that thought process at the age of 18 through to 28, is a good block to think about. It's amazing what you can do to actually make people think about how they're going to run their lives later on.

Shermar Pryce

Following on from that and the type of skills and what you can get out of engaging as a student leader, often when speaking to whether it be JCR, MCR, SU or even student society leaders, they find this one of their major difficulties is not only getting what they need to do from their constituents, through meetings or mandates. But being able to translate that sort of, kindly, respectfully, for lack of a better alternative, to university authority college staff in a way that's actually constructive. Being able to manage those two at the same time is often a very, very difficult task in practice. And so what's maybe examples or or strategies do you think, or have you seen to be more successful than others?

Ernest Ryder

I think leaders learn very quickly how to separate out their personal opinions, which they've still got to be true to. They've got their values and we've all got different values and we have to learn how to articulate that and respect and therefore synthesise to the extent that you should in the way in which you approach people with how do you advocate a decision that is corporate, which you may personally disagree with, so that you've got that problem, probably relatively rarely, but nevertheless that problem does

occur. And in any event, how do you articulate the decision in the best possible way? To that extent, it's very similar to being in a court or tribunal. Putting somebody's best case forward is the art of advocacy. And I would teach that to young barristers, not so young silks, and indeed to judges through the Judicial College and the Judicial Institute in Scotland. We spent a lot of time looking at how you present issues, how you identify them first, how you present them, both orally and in writing, and become the most effective communicator for your decision to get that across. And it's a science and an art. There's a structure to it, just like writing a judgment for the benefit of people hearing and reading that judgment and the language you use. And the way in which you do it and the way you prepare people for it by way of influencing skilled representation and taking views from different quarters first. So the political skill with a small P, sometimes with a capital P, I do accept, and there are big ticket issues around in universities just as there are in government. That style of dialogue and how student leaders, for that matter academic leaders, interact with each other and with the corporate whole, is a fascinating microcosm of what happens in a state. It's really no different. I spend part of my time still advising Parliament. I do, for my sins, standards and privileges committee representation. So I did the Boris Johnson inquiry. That was my committee, I'm afraid, for those who like Boris. We were very firm about his contempt. And we would have done the Starmer inquiry had the vote gone the other way in Parliament a couple of days ago.

Shermar Pryce

So you get all the interesting stuff.

Ernest Ryder

You get some very interesting stuff. And we're now he's doing Boris and we were listening to the final debate, which was itself theatre of the most extraordinary kind, as was the hearing that involved him. Sitting to my right was Sir Ian McKellen, the actor, who was sitting in the clerk's box, which is as near as you can get to the dispatch boxes so that you can see and feel the environment of Parliament, which is much smaller when you're in there than you think from television or films. And I saw I asked him, I don't know him, although he went to my school curiously enough. I used to act in the McKellen Theatre, which it turns out friends of his had paid for long ago. I asked him what he was doing there on a late night in the middle of the week with Penny Morden proposing a motion that would have got rid of her former Prime Minister, or at least caused a long suspension. And he said, my boy, what other theatre could you possibly come and watch that is better than this on a midweek afternoon? And he's right. It was absolutely extraordinary. But what were we all doing? We were watching persuasive advocacy at a very high level because that night and indeed in the hearing that preceded it in the privileges committee, that's what you had. It was high quality. Very, very careful use of words, very, very careful use of evidence, all of which had been

collated and disclosed and properly dealt with as if it had been a court, which was my function to make sure nobody made a procedural error and that the questions were all asked at the end of the day. And then people make their decision. This time it was the committee and then the whole of the House. And that's entirely for them. They could have decided whatever they wanted. Interestingly, they decided that Boris shouldn't have done what he did.

Shermar Pryce

Well, I think in a way you've given actually a quite a good advertisement for taking up, JCR and MCR roles because you can learn and learn these sort of skills. And I loved it.

Ernest Ryder

I make no bones about it. I absolutely love the role. And long, longer, many years later when I was sitting on the bench when that judge was being sworn in and you sit there and then your ridiculous long wigs and gold and whatever. And a friend of mine, Neil Garnum, was being made a High Court judge. He came from the same college that I went to in Cambridge. The Lord Chief at the time, Lord Thomas, actually exemplified the fact that we'd both been JCR presidents of the same college in Cambridge. And he said, what is it either about that college or JCR presidents that might make a difference? And we could both have given him some interesting answers to that question. because it does actually start you thinking about how you want to run your life and use your skills.

Shermar Pryce

Yeah. Okay. And so as we move towards the end of this, I think it might be good to, in some sense, look ahead, looking towards the future. What do you believe are, well, are currently or perhaps more interesting, what will be the biggest challenges to Oxford as an institution and its various colleges as a result, you could say, in as broad terms or as specific terms as you'd like.

Ernest Ryder

I think the big challenge is facing all of us at the moment. It doesn't matter whether you're in the central part of the university looking at the divisions, for example, and the big staff employers like professional services and so on, or whether you're in colleges, including right down to the smallest level. We're all concerned about size and shape. How many people of talent are we able to take? Where are they coming from? Who can afford to be here and why? And what can we do to make that equitable? Because it isn't always equitable. And can we afford to do what we want to do to be the world's greatest university? across all of our disciplines so that things don't drop off the end of the plank because they become too expensive or too niche, because in 10 years time you would wish that had never happened and you want that skill back again. So thinking really long term and strategically, but also very, very personally, how do I keep that best student

who is otherwise going to leave me because they can't afford to stay or they couldn't afford to be here in the 1st place? These things are real questions and they're They're very personally felt when you're trying to raise money, for example. You know why you're doing it, because you know what you want to do with it. This week among other weeks, one of the key questions that's in the front of every Heads of House mind is mental health services. We have to be, and rightly are very, very supportive of each other when tragedies occur. but we've got to prevent those tragedies occurring in the 1st place. It is everybody's worst case that something happens to a student and sometimes to members of staff. These things are broader than just the student community. And so trying to get acute services to match need in a world where out there the NHS doesn't have enough money, private services are not readily available, and when you need it quickly, you can't afford to be arguing about this, even overnight sometimes. Those are things that we all feel, frankly, viscerally. You really do have to do something about it and do it quickly in order to make a positive impact and prevent a tragedy. So that is a dominant theme at the moment. And then for most of us, whether it's historic buildings or in St. Catherine's case and others, the poor quality of concrete that was used however many years ago it was, ageing fabric. It's not just the ageing institution that is Oxford, it's the buildings we're working in. Would you want to be in a place that's got asbestos and a leaking roof, electricity that's arcing and a dangerous fire safety regime? Answer no, and nobody should be put in that position, be it academic or student or indeed the staff helping us to run those resources. And yet, finding enough money to sort those problems out is a real task. It doesn't just happen overnight. And programmes take a long time to implement. So I think if you put those 3 imperatives together, whilst at the same time raising money to do really interesting things, really innovative things, and every college is doing it and every division is doing it, where do you get the next 5 to 20 million from to do something that makes a difference somewhere in the world. And you can't let any one of those things slip.

Shermar Pryce

So I guess there's much cause for concern. However, at least from me and I hope from you, there's some optimism that if anyone can tackle these problems, it'd be awesome because of its personnel, the people.

Ernest Ryder

It is a place like this. I absolutely agree. As long as we acknowledge that out there in the world are plenty of people like us doing the same things and doing them extraordinarily well. And collaboration, whether it's internationally or domestically, especially within Oxford, is usually the route to finding a better solution. Interdisciplinary collaboration is what colleges do fabulously well. And if we end on anything at all, it is please let us not lose sight of what it is you get in a college, which is interdisciplinary debate, discussion

and thinking, because that helps the knowledge base to expand. It is what Oxford's all about.

Shermar Pryce

Wonderful. And just the final thing I'll be asking you is whether you have any bit of advice to the students, I guess, the object of both my work and your work and the the one thing we're all working towards, the empowerment, betterment, whatever term you want to use for students, what advice would you give to them?

Ernest Ryder

In one sense, it's easy. What would you wish of all of the students you've met? And in a place like Pembroke, I know most of them on the first name terms. It's be true to yourself. You've got your own values. They may change over time, but that's for you and it's an education process and that's great. But whilst being true to your own values, be challenging of what you think and be innovative in what you're doing. After all, most people only get one opportunity in life to be in a place like this. sometimes, if you're very fortunate, you can extend that time in life when you get other opportunities along the line. But this is a fabulous place to learn from other people, from colleagues and friends, and to achieve more by working with them. If you take that away and think about working with other people, you will leave this place, or indeed leave and come back to this place, with an attitude of mind that will help people generally, wherever and in whatever way you go out and do your thing in the world.

Shermar Pryce

Wonderful. I hope everyone who's listening and writes that down. You can end up as Master of Pembroke College as well if you take it.

Ernest Ryder

You can. I never thought I would, but here we are. And in 2030, they'll be looking for another one.

Shermar Pryce

Wow. Well, sir, Ernest, thank you very much for joining us and giving up your time to be here and for helping us a bit more helping us understand a bit more how this bumblebee flies. And to all those listening, thank you for listening to the podcast. You can find more information about the Students' Union and Sir Ernest, you know, on the internet, Pembroke website, SU website, et cetera. And well, I'll see you in the next episode. Thank you.

Ernest Ryder

Thank you all very much indeed.

