
The Cry Is Going Up

A CONVERSATION WITH LORD MICHAEL DOBBS

The Fletcher Forum had the opportunity to speak with Lord Dobbs in October about global politics, leadership, and writing in an age where the spread of misinformation is rampant.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *You've mentioned that what's happened in America is what's happened in the rest of the world—establishments have got it wrong, and therefore establishments need to change and they find that hard. How would you suggest that the establishments have got it wrong and how might change come about?*

LORD MICHAEL DOBBS: The establishments and the elites, it's the bubble of the elite, which is clearly proving a real problem everywhere. They've got it wrong because electorates around the world are telling them they have got it wrong. Time and time again. Which is why you're getting the most extraordinary election results in all sorts of areas, and established parties being destroyed. Literally, disappearing. You find that in Europe a great deal, but even here. I mean, who would have guessed that the Republican Party would've been taken over by Donald Trump or that Bernie Sanders would've come so close to completely turning on its head the Democratic

Michael Dobbs, *Lord Dobbs of Wylde, is Britain's best-known political novelist and an active member of the House of Lords. He has enjoyed a ringside seat on many historic occasions. He was with Margaret Thatcher when she walked into Downing Street as Prime Minister and was with John Major when 18 years later he was kicked out. He was the UK Conservative Party's Chief-of-Staff and later its Deputy Chairman. He has also been a current affairs presenter for the BBC, a newspaper columnist, and deputy chairman of Saatchi & Saatchi. Somewhere along the way he picked up a doctorate in nuclear defense studies from the Fletcher School. In the House of Lords he concentrates on European, foreign and constitutional affairs and introduced the first EU Referendum Bill into the House. He is the author of House of Cards, the hugely popular political novel that through Netflix has become a global television sensation. He has also written four award-winning novels about Winston Churchill. He has been described as "Westminster's baby-faced hit man" and "a man who in Latin America would have been shot."*

Party's establishment? So, it's happening here too, but different political systems may have different outcomes.

But what should be done about it? Well, if you go back through history it's very clear what happens if the establishment cannot change and

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refuses to listen, and cannot modify and update itself. Then it is change from without. Electorates will throw them on the rubbish tip of history and this is happening a lot in Europe. You're finding parties like the Socialist Party in France utterly destroyed. PASOK, which dominated Greek politics ever since the end of the Greek Civil War, I think got 4 percent of the vote or something. You find new parties emerging everywhere—in Spain, in Italy, in Portugal, all over the place. So, the problem is if the establishments can't

change, won't change, then the change that will be forced upon them will be more dramatic and possibly more violent. I'm all in favor of evolution rather than revolution but as I see it, change is the only option.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What do you think the establishments have specifically gotten wrong?*

DOBBS: They have talked only to themselves, they have believed that they can carry on with the old ways of doing things, but the 21st century is a new century with new challenges. People demand more, not necessarily more economically, but they demand a different style of service and here, the Beltway elite is now notorious and much despised by many people throughout America, particularly in parts that aren't the East Coast and aren't the West Coast. I don't believe that America is more divided than it ever has been, but there are worrying divisions within the United States. And it requires leadership, the sort that Franklin Roosevelt, for instance gave, and other Presidents have given, to actually overcome that—to take people forward.

FLETCHER FORUM: *In 2004, you wrote for The Forum about Tony Blair. You said he'd "sneaked Britain towards greater involvement in the experiment to create a political union in Europe," but "the results are inconclusive and the gratitude of either history or the British electorate is far from certain."* Given

what you know now, thirteen years on, how grateful do you think the British electorate has been?

DOBBS: Wow, how wonderfully farsighted I was then. I think that was a warning shot for Tony Blair. This is establishment and elitist politics once again, that the elite could simply do what it is they thought was the right thing to do in Europe, and we are now living with the consequences of that, which have been pretty dramatic. You've not only had the vote in Britain, but you're getting situations such as in Catalonia, where the Catalonians are saying whatever the system is, we want out. You've got terrible circumstances, which were unimaginable in Greece right now and unimaginable when I wrote that article. I think it is almost criminal what has been done to Greece. You're finding it in Eastern Europe too, even those who have benefitted most economically from the new members of the European Union are turning around and saying—no, this is wrong and this is not the right way.

As far as Britain is concerned, there is a real temptation to say the electorate was misled, they were force-fed bad information, they didn't know what they were doing, and they should change their minds. Well, I'm not a defender of the campaign. The campaign on both sides was appalling in Britain. But actually, isn't it supreme arrogance to suggest they didn't know what they were doing? These are people who've lived under a system, many of them for all of their lives, and certainly for the last forty-odd years, they know what it is like for them personally. They know what it's like at the sharp end. They don't live in that bubble, which seems to be insulated from the realities of the world. That is something that's caused Angela Merkel—the most powerful, stable leader in Europe—so much trouble in Germany. But when she said *wir schaffen das* and others—we can, we will do this, we will take on a million refugees—she wasn't going to live with the consequences in urban communities of that decision. She didn't ask people whether that was the right thing to do and that's one of the key reasons why she had a really, really tough time. Even the strongest leader in Europe had a really tough time at her recent elections.

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So, I think people like Mr. Blair got it horribly wrong. They stopped listening. They thought they could just carry on as they were, regardless, and at an ever-increasing pace, even if they weren't willing to assent to the British electorate. When David Cameron went to Brussels and said—we're going to have a referendum on this, we need to show that the EU is more responsive or is flexible listening to the difficulties which people have—they treated it in contempt. They refused to listen, they refused to change and that was one of the key reasons why people turned around and said—if that is it, if that is what we have come to where we cannot get any change from the people who are making the vast majority of our laws and regulations, we want out. So, I think the warning I offered then—I'd forgotten all about that warning, I must say—has in many ways sadly come to fruition.

FLETCHER FORUM: *One of the great dangers of untruth—fake news, alternative facts, and alternative reality—is that once it takes root, it's extremely difficult to eradicate by facts and logic. How, based on your political and authorial experience, do you suggest that we counter or speak against untruth?*

DOBBS: That's a very good question. It's one that I have been pondering over a great deal. First of all, I think it's easy to exaggerate the impact of fake news. The idea that Russia somehow put out so much false news that it persuaded people to vote one way or another in the American elections—I would like to see the evidence on that, rather than just a propaganda threat.

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I suspect that there a lot of people who make up their minds without rushing to news channels 24 hours of the day, or newspapers, or whatever it happens to be. They make their minds up on a more general or long-term basis. But, I'd like to see the evidence on that.

False news is always difficult. It's one of the reasons why I am really worried about what happens increasingly on campus where you have safe spaces, which I regard as being the end of education essentially. The

only reality is the reality that I wish to insist upon. Don't let me go too far down that route yet, let me come back to your question.

There is a problem with the new ways that we are communicating—

social media essentially. I'm sitting here thinking that I may just pull the plug on my Twitter account. Why? Because I see what Twitter and other social media do. It restricts your intellectual compass to 140 characters. It makes it much easier to scream and shout and be negative and destructive, rather than set out a good coherent argument in favor of something. It's an echo chamber. It's self-selecting. You don't talk to other people. You choose only to listen to those who magnify your own prejudices. I also think there's a big problem with things like Facebook and the other apps where young people are encouraged to share too much of their lives, something that they will regret later on.

Now, what to do about this? The Chinese have a very clear idea on what to do about this, and so does Russia. They clamp down on this. They want to stop this. They want to control this. I don't think that should be our way of dealing with this issue. The first thing is to actually recognize and analyze it as an issue. Is it an issue? I think it probably is. But there are many more people who are looking into that in much greater depth. If it is an issue, then what do you do about it? I think education in the earlier stage has a huge role to play in that. When I was a kid I was taught how to write literally—you know that old thing you do with a pen—I was taught how to send messages in a letter. That was part of my education. We should be teaching kids how safely to use these new forms of communication. And that is a much better than to try and ban things and to become authoritarian about it. But I have been really impressed and strengthened in my view that there is a problem, as recent research has suggested that young people feel intimidated by social media. They feel that they have to belong on it and they feel pressured into using it in such a way that they don't actually feel very comfortable with it. There is also evidence that suggests that the way some social media are constructed is as if people are being forced to like chocolate. It is constructed to make you feel almost addicted to it. There are real problems there. Maybe we need to have a grown-up conversation about how far the constructors of these apps should be going in order to gain that sort of market share. I mean, after all we have rules and regulations for lenders, banks and people like that. Is it unreasonable that we should look at the way Twitter works for instance or Facebook? Even I feel the pressure. If I'm on Twitter, I'm supposed to tweet. I don't want to be reacting all the time to what other people are saying. There is really compelling evidence, although at its very early stages of research, that kids that get off social media actually feel released. They feel liberated because they feel that social media is a pest or put pressure on them in what are already overly pressurized lives. So, I think there is a whole area that we are

learning about, which is changing every month and every year, which we have got to explore to see if there's a problem and come up with solutions. Not simply to let it drift on.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Speaking of campuses and safe spaces, could you elaborate a little on that, perhaps contrast what you're seeing now and what your experience was when you were at Fletcher.*

DOBBS: I know students on campus today think that America is in greater chaos and more divided than it has ever been. I'll tell you, go back to campus at the time of the Vietnam war and the time I arrived in this country. They ain't seen nothing yet.

If you look at the Ken Burns documentary on Vietnam, it has some very vivid scenes which stirs so many memories with me of a time when campuses were burning or buildings around campuses were burning. This place was fire bombed. The Dean's office was fire bombed. You had the national guard, armed military personnel going on campus. You had that awful, awful Kent state tragedy where four students were murdered, shot in cold blood and others very badly injured. So, what we have today is confusing and difficult, but it's nothing like what we had then. We got through that and I'm sure that we will get through this too.

But I regard campuses as being a place where people come to learn and for that they must accept that there is something that they should be learning. They don't come with all the truth already hardwired into them. This idea that there should be safe spaces, that somebody else's opinion is so offensive to me that they should be banned from expressing it, I think has no place whatsoever on campus. An education is taking into mind and teaching how to deal with arguments that people dislike or don't accept, and not simply trying to ignore those arguments. What you're finding increasingly, which is a very worrying concern for me, is that all these pressure groups that are coming out are actually dividing us and not bringing us together. It's a bit like social media. You only listen to and only think that all righteousness is in one single group of protestors, of activists, or whatever they happen to be. Really, is truth black and white? There's always another case to be considered.

I'm afraid that right now what we need the most on campuses is leadership. Actually, leadership on campus—deans, professors and faculty—standing up and saying no. You haven't come on campus to tell the faculty and the people that are actually making this education possible for you, you haven't come here to tell them what to do. You have come here to make

your opinions known, yes of course, but also to listen. If I'm the dean of a college, anybody that comes to my door, I want to listen to them, hear their worries and concerns, but part of that deal is that they also listen in return and accept that there might be another relevant opinion on this issue. I think there is some worrying evidence on campuses that in too many cases it's simply a matter of pressure. It's easier to give in than stand up to some of this pressure. We have to get back to realizing that it is absolutely essential that campus life, college life, and university life, is all about learning and not just about protesting. I don't say that in order to diminish protesting. I remember that during the Vietnam war, campuses were totally entitled to erupt in discontent. That is not what we're having right now. It's small and often narrow interest groups demanding that they have more rights than anybody else. That is not what happened in 1968 on campus over Vietnam and they have the rights, but other people have the rights too. Those rights shouldn't be excluded.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Speaking of education and narrow interest, you mentioned previously that, among other things, Fletcher trained you to "look at problems in the round." What does that mean in the context of your life and how have you sustained that since you graduated?*

DOBBS: I've been a political operative and I fought elections—not personally, but for other people. I've never stood for election. Elections are rough and tough. Politics is war, at times. There also has to be a peace. During war, you end up making decisions and doing things that aren't always right. You make mistakes and you oversimplify. That's the nature of the game. But then you get through that and you have peace. I've always been conscious of the fact that the politicians

that I have most respected aren't those politicians who simply think that politics is defined as re-election. Politics is about much, much more than that. It is about a set of policies, principles, about a world view that you want to pursue, that you want to enable. You're

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not going to be able to achieve all that. You're going to take defeats and hopefully you can achieve some of those things that you want. So, politics is a game of give and take, essentially. It has to be. And even while I was working for that extraordinary woman, Margaret Thatcher, I always knew that. First of all, I didn't agree with her on everything. Secondly, she

would never agree with me on a great number of things. And there would be a time after Thatcher. It is an extraordinary fact—you do not have a similar system in America—almost every British Prime Minister for the

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last hundred years has been chopped, hacked, stabbed, and dragged out of office, leaving their finger nails in the carpet on Number 10. These are the most powerful people in the country. They have spent all their lives on their one ambition to become Prime Minister, knowing that they are going to end up being humiliated. Why do they do it? That's a question for them and not for me. So even in politics I've always known that there is always going to be another side. There is going to be a time when you are going to suffer defeats. That you're going to have to deal with opinions that you don't care for and events that you find upsetting. That's been enhanced for me, being a member of the House of Lords—that actually is a very collegiate place where opinions are exchanged more freely than almost any other forum, which I know of, and it's a great place of post-graduate learning.

In other aspects of my life, to go back to the question of looking at things in the round, I think it really has helped my political fiction. I'm not going to claim that I'm a great political novelist. I happened to have made a very good living out of being a political novelist and people say very nice things about it and about me. As a creative person, I have an inherent insecurity about my abilities, always knowing there was something better that could be done and knowing that I'm not going to be read in 300 years' time. I'm not Shakespeare. I'm not even Dickens. I'm a working author. But some of the things that I've had most success with I think are using my Fletcher abilities and my Fletcher education, that everything has its context to get beyond the narrow issue and put even the issues that I deal with in many of my books in context. So, I have written books about the royal family, but I put that in a context—which if you want to get more out of the book than simply entertainment, is the first requirement, but if you want to read between the lines or just read on the lines—it hopefully will lead to issues about where the monarchy is going. Is this the right direction they should be heading for?

I mean *House of Cards* itself is all about the fragility of power. It was extraordinary that the first episode of the BBC televised version of *House of*

Cards starts off with the silver frame photograph of Margaret Thatcher and Francis Urquhart looking at it, with the very opening sentence, which I didn't write, but came out of what I had written, was "nothing lasts forever" and that photograph of Margaret Thatcher being placed face down on the desk. That went on air the very week that she was forced out of office. It was extraordinary, but when I said I was writing a book about getting rid of a Prime Minister, everybody said but Margaret Thatcher is the Prime Minister. This is madness. You got it wrong. Then I said, but every Prime Minister ends up being forced out of office—but no, no, no, this is Margaret. And then it should happen that the televised version should come out on the very day that she leaves office in tears. That foresight had a lot to do with my Fletcher education. And of course, I was here during Watergate, too, which was another useful lesson.

For many, many, of my other books, my Churchill series and everything like that, it helped me bring together politics, personalities, and private lives. Because politicians are
 humans too, believe it or not, and suffer
 all the same sort of personal issues that
 the rest of the world has, often magni-
 fied because of the pressure that they
 are under. I've known a British cabinet
 minister to come into the office to do
 his job in the morning having just left
 his gravely ill wife, whose nurse had
 just walked out and he did not know
 who would be taking care of his gravely
 ill wife in two hours' time. He's supposed to do his public job, his national
 duty, and also take care of this extraordinary private dilemma too. In order
 to understand politics, you have to understand those personal issues that
 lie behind so much of politics. But then also being able to put that in a
 global context. What are the issues going on there? What are the issues
 that are going to be relevant in two or three years' time when the book
 gets published? People keep asking me how did you know this was going
 to happen. I say that if you look back, its been happening to politicians
 for 3000 years, so I always thought that there's a good chance that it'll be
 happening for the next three. And political life has a habit of repeating
 itself. The great ambitions, the noble ambitions, and then the failure. It's a
 sad story for those who believe that politics should be all about doing good,
 but sadly it's not such a sweet and innocent profession.

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FLETCHER FORUM: *One of the things that has been all over the internet over the past year and a half, is how House of Cards is possibly going to adopt anything that is happening in the real world. So, in this new era where reality is stranger than fiction, or perhaps maybe it always has been, what do you think are the implications on the craft of writing of what's happening in the world today?*

DOBBS: I've never thought that fiction should exaggerate reality. In fact, far from it. I have a very simple rule for writing political fiction. You take

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reality and then you water it down to make it credible. Because if you actually look through the political lives of—let's not even bother to talk about Donald Trump, let's take for granted—Edward Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy, and Marilyn Monroe or Bill Clinton, or whoever it happens to be. If you had said "What, cigars? Really? In the

White House? In the Oval Office?" You would say no, this couldn't possibly happen. But of course, real life has the possibility of at times being really extreme and absurd. If you're writing fiction, by and large I want my characters to act rationally, reasonably, sensibly, and in their own best interests. I think people expect this from my characters. And then you pick up the newspaper and read yet again about Anthony Weiner. So, I don't think that fiction has any role in exaggerating reality. I actually think that fiction should be trying to put all of that into context.

FLETCHER FORUM: *You also said that so much in politics is not a matter of facts nor a matter of record. So, what is it beyond the facts?*

DOBBS: Politics is all about vision. It's all about the future. It's all about creating something that hopefully will be better. This is where we come back almost full circle to establishments and elites. They have a worldview that tends to be very cautious, very self-satisfied, and often very arrogant and disconnected with the realities. There are moments of great crisis where great leaders emerge. It often takes a great crisis for a great leader to emerge, but it is very rarely the establishment view. In fact, I can't think of a single situation in a great crisis where the establishment view prevails. It is the establishment which usually caused the great crisis. Talking about leadership, I take the example of Winston Churchill. A man whose life

had so much failure. A man who came to power on the 10th of May 1940 when he was expected to be a catastrophic failure, when almost every single part of the elite and the establishment was saying “We cannot win this war, we must do a deal with Hitler.” Knowing that that deal with Hitler would involve Nazism and Fascism dominating the whole of continental Europe. That was the establishment view. The establishment caused the crisis. The establishment was carrying on to the logical conclusion of its actions. It took a maverick and a very difficult man like Winston Churchill to say “No, there is another way,” and to be forceful enough and fortunate enough—because luck is a huge part of this—to be the right man, in the right time, in the right place to change history and to lead history on to a much better place. It doesn’t make Winston Churchill perfect and he

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made many, many mistakes. He was incredibly fortunate in many things, but he made his luck too. I believe, and most people would accept, that Winston Churchill was the only man who could have done that at that time because the rest of the establishment, including the Royal family, was against him and against what he wanted to do. Sometimes history hangs from a very, very delicate thread. Yet it is a huge fortune that we had, that somehow the right person emerges at the right time to lead us on from the wreckage left by the established view, which has run out of time. It’s that which actually has made our history and, by and large, not always, but by and large, for the better.

So, are we at that moment right now when the establishment is getting itself so much into the mire that it’s going to be submerged? Possibly. We haven’t done very well over the last twenty years and it’s very difficult to see carrying on as we are where we’re going to make things better. It does require new thinking, new ideas, and new inputs. It requires more than just screaming at each other through social media or the headlines. It actually still does require listening to each other. Winston Churchill knew what the establishment was talking about, knew what they wanted. Disagreed with them, but was able to, in the end, lead them on—even those colleagues that opposed him—to lead them on to new territory.

A wonderful film that is about to come out, called *The Darkest Hour*, shows Winston just in that moment where Britain was in the hours of defeat and the hours of giving in. It could have all gone so very differently. The film doesn't quite get the cabinet government right, but it sort of alludes to it in a way that he was able to lead them on. The film makes him seem a little too shouty and perhaps not listening quite as much as he did then, but he was the man who did it, but he didn't do it by himself. He required to lead others on with them. I suppose that is what leadership is about. It's getting others to do what you think is right, getting them to accept that that is what is right. I think that we—electorates and systems everywhere in the West—are all looking for people to come up with new solutions that will then lead us forward. Whether we have found that yet is another matter. But certainly, the question is being asked. Everyone. Everywhere. The cry is going up. The establishment must change or be changed. *f*

