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LORD ALAN SUGAR SPEAKS AT THE CAMBRIDGE UNION

“Entrepreneurial spirit is within a person”

On the 26th April 2016 the Cambridge Union Society welcomed entrepreneur, author and life peer, Lord Alan Sugar. Conversation focussed on the state of Labour, the rise of Trump and young entrepreneurs in the twenty-first century. He claimed that his success came out of necessity. Even though in the 1960s things weren’t that great, Lord Sugar saw that ‘if you wanted something’ you should ‘go and get it yourself’. He realised he had an ‘affinity for sales and marketing’ and began working in those spheres. Then one day the ‘penny dropped’ that he was working for himself.

In 1987, Lord Sugar took 100 pounds out of his savings account and started his business ‘buying and selling stuff’. Reflecting on his career he saw what was vital to the growth of his business was being realistic, recognising when something was not working and getting out of that business. Lord Sugar commented on the transformation of business from when people primarily ‘physically made stuff’ to main commodity now being ‘lumps of software’.

Lord Sugar gave an account of his accent in politics. Thatcher was impressed with Sugar's entrepreneurial spirit, so would present Sugar as an example of success. At that time, he was a great supporter of the Conservative party, but John Major ‘lost the way’. From then on he supported New Labour with the ‘emphasis on new’, which was he thought was ‘the nearest thing to a conservative party’. He joined the House of Lords as Gordon Brown's business Tsar, and supported Labour until they lost the election, and the subsequent election of Ed Miliband over his brother. Lord Sugar saw this appointment as a mistake, commenting that if David Miliband was the leader of the party, Labour ‘would be in power today’. He disagreed with Ed Miliband’s Labour’s ‘policies on business and enterprise’. So he ‘told the chiefs in the house of lords he cannot trust Labour’s policies’, but he thought ‘it would be wrong for him to go against their policies in the middle of an election’. So he resigned after the election in 2015 and joined the independent bench. In hindsight Lord Sugar thought that resigning from the Labour party was a ‘stroke of genius’. While Lord Sugar praised Jeremy Corbyn’s ‘entrepreneurial’ spirit, he commented that the ‘lunatics are back in charge’ of the party – ‘a return to Old Labour’.

With a question from the floor, conversation turned to anti-Semitism within the Labour Party. Lord Sugar admitted that a ‘few stupid people’ made ‘a few stupid comments’, but asserted that there was no more racism in the labour party than that which exists in the other parties. He did however also admit that he believes Ken Livingstone has lost it’ and asserted that he was ‘definitely an anti-Semite’ and a ‘racist’, who was ‘obsessed with talking about Nazis’.

A question was then raised about entrepreneurial spirit. Lord Sugar noted that this was not something could be ‘booted’. He revealed his first ‘spark of genius’ where he created a cheap way to manufacture lids for hi-fi stereo equipment and stated ‘that is what is called an entrepreneur’.

Another question brought Lord Sugar back to the realm of politics. Asked about possible reform of the House of Lords, he observed that the chamber was made from a ‘whole spectrum of people’. Most of those people have a special expertise, but those without one he questioned ‘the reason they were appointed’. On the subject of the new Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, Lord Sugar said that the fact Khan was a ‘typical politician’ was being to show. He noted that Khan was a ‘great supporter of Corbyn’, but after the anti-Semitism ‘thing blow up’, Khan has tried ‘to divorce himself from the one he endorsed’. Lord Sugar thought it was ‘pathetic’ that Khan went to the holocaust memorial ‘the day after he was appointed, to make a point’, making sure he ‘had cameras following’.

Lord Sugar is for staying in the EU, because ‘whatever damage that might have been caused by joining the EU is done’ and it is ‘better the devil you know’. He had heard no ‘constructive arguments' for why we should leave, yet he had resonated with ‘constructive arguments for why we should stay' centred around business and trade.
The BBC, Lord Sugar stated, is ‘phenomenal value for money’, coming to its defence after critical comments were made after the BAFTAs. He did not think the government should interfere with the BBC, though he saw there were ‘too many levels of management’, so the BBC was ‘not commercial in that sense’.

Lord Sugar was even able to weigh in on the American presidential election. When asked of the difference between himself and Donal Trump, after jokingly commenting it was ‘the hair’, he said ‘I see myself as an honest and straight talking person and I’ll leave it at that’ - though he did note that Trump has ‘one hell of a rock that he has made for his own back’.

He ended with a message to the next generation. Lord Sugar did not see the same hunger in this generation of ‘iPhones’ and ‘Nike trainers’, as there was in his. ‘In order to have that hungry you need to be deprived or starved’ yet we live cushy lives.

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For footage of the event go to https://www.youtube.com/user/cambridgeunionsoc

Wednesday, 11 May 2016