# Selected quotes for ‘Cultural Chameleons’

## De gustibus non est disputandum

P: I mean at one stage, I remember, apprenticeships, you know there’s no way that anybody I knew who was doing A Levels would have gone for an apprenticeship, that was for, as far as we were concerned, for manual you know, and forgive me I’m not being snobby, or you know, classist, that’s what you know that was for, manual or engineering, it wasn’t for academia or professionals, and now you know every, so even in medicine now they’re thinking about, you know apprenticeships of some kind [1:47:59.4] and the accountants, the lawyers you know, right across professions they’re considering it, and access to—so I think formally there probably is more?

P: And I still think that I mean I’ve had to I think there’s still situations where if you’re not from that background or that class or whatever or their experience it can still be daunting and challenging. For example, I’ll give you an example actually, I won’t say which organisation or not but I was at, so I was on interview panel with a couple of individuals, so there were two Lords on there [laughs] no two Sirs and one editor of a national newspaper and the two Sirs were good mates and they one of them had been a senior member of the Conservative Party and they were talking about Glyndebourne and they were talking about some other individuals, OK.

P: And I was sitting there listening to them and I had been to Glyndebourne but I’m not really into opera, I mean I’ve been but it isn’t really my thing, but I can appreciate it but I was just sitting there thinking that if I was a different kind of individual I could feel quite intimidated by that.

P: And no.1, then no.2 I, was at some posh dinner and I don’t drink alcohol, and there was this whole conversation going on about wines and wine tasting and everything else and then with with the various bits of cutlery, and I know how to use those only because I’ve learnt because you get to go to formal dinners or whatever at university.

P: But then you know, I was thinking to myself if you’re from a typical, well not typical, but if you’re from a traditional family where you don’t use all that cutlery or you just use knives and forks you don’t use anything else, how intimidating would that be?

P: And it just made me think that you still need to be fairly robust to be able to deal with situations like that without feeling intimidated and excluding [sic].

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And so, I suppose another big question - some people would consider reaching, who's who, I mean, we've talked about a few of the different organisations you're affiliated with, as a quintessential marker of joining a British elite. How does the word elite land with you?

PARTICIPANT: Well, I think it's absolutely true. I think it is a quintessential marker of elite status. I was only invited to be in who's who when I got, amusingly, when I got the chair in Cambridge. So, the worst bit of my academic career was really what led to my getting an entry to who's who.

And then, of course, it's the British establishment, isn't it? I mean, that is one of that. That is what who's who really is, it's the sort of, I mean, I remember being on committees in Oxford colleges, committees to elect heads of college.

And the instructions to potential heads of college were always send us your CV, or, if applicable direct us to your entry in who's who. So that, so people who were in who’s who, that was enough for them to just say, look me up in who's who.

INTERVIEWER: It had real currency.

PARTICIPANT: Oh, yeah, absolutely. And there was always a copy of who's who in the senior common room of every Oxford College.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that's interesting. Yeah.

PARTICIPANT: Well, and I mean the implicit question that the British people always ask is, a certain type of British person always ask is, is he a good chap?

I mean, that's the fundamental question. And one piece of evidence of whether you were a good chap was what your who's who entry said about you.

INTERVIEWER: And have you felt that shaped your career, that sense of having to perform as a good chap?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, I mean, sure. It happens all the time, and everything happens on high table; when you have dinner on high table as a fellow for college, you are playing a role, and it's not a role that very natural to me, but it's the role of a certain kind of an English person.

And even socially, I mean, lots of our neighbours in East Sussex are what used to be called QCs, but I think they're not called KCs, and they're sort of very highly cultured, and they go to Glyndebourne, and they go to choral music recitals.

They’re very wealthy and have big houses in London, and they have big houses in the country. And there is a certain sort of, I don't know, there's a certain sort of stereotypical member of that social group, and they are all in who's who.

And that's the one thing that all of us, chaps in particular, have in common in that group, whether they're barristers or academics or something else, is that we're all in who's who.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And when you mentioned the elitism of others. Could you expand on that?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, I mean, certainly, a lot of the barristers that I come across, have come from a much narrower background, and as a result, I think have a much narrower worldview, and life experiences.

And that tends, that tends to make some of them a lot more arrogant, some of them much less easy to identify with and understand other people's points of view. It does also have the effect that, to some extent, even now I still think a lot of them are all speaking the same language that I don't necessarily have quite the same level of fluency in.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that's interesting. And could you think of an example of where that might have happened?

PARTICIPANT: Oh, God. Well, yeah, I suppose. So, one thing is, I never learned Latin because, you know, because I went to a comprehensive school, whoever's gonna learn Latin? And so, from time to time I'm in court, and someone will start coming up, talking about some classical illusion, and I'm thinking, what the fuck? I don't understand this.

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PARTICIPANT 1: It’s horrible. The legal profession is one of the worst areas to be non-white. Perhaps it's me being slightly single-minded and not caring what people think, which meant that I perhaps didn’t notice as much as I should have, but there’s – the things that you get – people don’t accept your advice. People think – a white person giving the same advice you’re giving, they’ll accept that.

I got that a lot, this whole, “Are you sure about this?” as opposed to “You know what you’re talking about.” And that then is reflected in your submissions in court, and I remember going to court as a solicitor, I took a lot of advocates to the magistrate’s court, and you’d hear all the pompous white people with their plummy voices address the court and giving the most ludicrous argument, which you knew to be wrong, but which the magistrates accepted without blinking.

And you’d think “That’s just absolute nonsense,” and then you’d have those who were educated in the subcontinent who are lawyers and who are probably single practitioner – I remember many of them in East London actually, in Wandsworth and in Ealing actually, because there were lots of single practitioners from the Asian community, who didn’t get partnerships, and they would have an Asian accent and simply by having that, you could see the magistrates looking down their noses and not listening to them, it was a sense of “I can’t hear what you’re saying, because you’ve got the accent,” so the content completely disappeared.

And early on, I realised that I had to have this plummy accent. I actually developed it without thinking. I remember sitting on a panel one day, with my sister in the audience, and she told me afterwards, and she’s got a very Cockney accent – she was born here – and her friend said “Is that really your brother? You don’t speak the same.” We grew up with the same accent – but you imbibe and you become something.

So I had to become this person who could speak in this way and my friends tell me that when I'm at home I speak completely differently to when I'm speaking to you. So the reason I like the silk outfit is because it’s the uniform, it’s your – you become that person. You have all the affectations. The grand- the theatre of it, you have that. So I’m – I think I developed quite early how I needed to behave, conduct myself and speak in that environment.

And I find that terrible that I have to do that. Because it means that the way in which my colleagues with the Asian accents – they’re doing it wrong that somehow, you need to move away from that, and I don’t think that’s how it should be. So I became, certainly in my mind, a very good advocate in court, and to be able to speak and all the rest of it, but even beyond that game of crown court was made worse, everyone would talk about going to the opera, and what it’s like in Oxford now, and you’re out of the conversation.

P: By any stretch of the imagination. And they, you know, they’ve done well, but it’s interesting because two of my school friends who I was at school with, who are part of the very posh brigade, just are, couldn’t get my heads around the fact that I wasn’t sending my children to private schools.

P: And for a while it was, you know, we would meet up and we would meet up the three of us, and they would be talking about their children at very exclusive schools, and I would just feel totally alien, totally out of this conversation, and so when my girls, this is awful, but when my girls had done really well at A Level, you know, ''a little update'', ''by the way'', [laughs] and now we met up this summer, my kids are all older, all my girls are older than their children, and when we met up this summer—because we all celebrated our 50th birthdays this year, so we all celebrated, and they finally said, “I know you’ve done so well to get the kids through school and all those results without having to pay for it all.”

P: And I said, “Yeah, I know!” [laughs] But there is a real inverse snobbery about it, amongst, in law particularly.