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Robert Peston explains what motivated him to set up Speakers for Schools

“For better or ill, in 2007 people started noticing me - I became more conspicuous - largely thanks to my journalism on the banking crisis for the BBC. One manifestation of my visibility is that I began to receive invitations from schools to give talks to their students.

What I found odd - and, to be honest, a bit depressing - is that most of the invitations came from leading fee-paying schools, and not from the kind of state comprehensive school that educated me.

Some of the invitations came directly from the students themselves, those who ran assorted clubs and societies at the prominent independent school. And to my amazement, these incredibly confident kids rather implied that they were doing me a favour by inviting me. It was plain to me that the boys of Eton, for example, took for granted that the most powerful, interesting and brainy people would talk to them.

If you look at Eton's annual yearbook , which is online, you will see how the school persuades astonishing numbers of inspirational speakers to share their knowledge and experience with students. Here is an extract from the 2010 yearbook:

“Boys were able to hear speakers offering a range of perspectives: from Lord Heseltine to Ken Livingstone; from Chairman of the London Buddhist centre to the Anglican Vicar of Baghdad; from the Communist Party of Great Britain’s National Organiser, Mark Fischer, to the Financial Times’s ‘Undercover Economist’ Tim Harford.

“Other speakers to societies have included the Chairman of the Bar Council, the Dean of the Royal Society of Medicine, the President of the Royal Society of Chemistry, the Head of the FCO’s Middle East and North African desk, the former commander of British forces in Afghanistan, the Director of Liberty, the Master of the Rolls, adventurers and explorers, the Chairman of the African Union Commission, Lord Lamont, Lady Antonia Fraser, Miss Gail Trimble, Sir Christopher Meyer, Fields medallist and musician Professor Tim Gowers, Shakespeare scholar Professor Jonathan Bate, the CEO of Hitachi Europe, the Chairman of Microsoft Africa, the Head of Policy at Facebook, the Deputy Editor of *The Sun* and the Musical Director of the English National Opera.”

This is not what I experienced in the 1970s at the comp I attended, Highgate Wood School in Crouch End, north London. I can’t remember anyone like that ever coming to my school. Maybe that did not do us any harm – but, as a passionate believer in comprehensive education, it seems to me that what’s good enough for Eton is good enough for what Alastair Campbell once styled as bog-standard comprehensives.

I support comprehensives in much the same way as I support Arsenal Football Club, with intense

passion and a desire for comprehensives to be seen as winners. Not only do I feel that I derived enormous benefit from my comprehensive-school years, in that they gave me an understanding of the world that no selective school would have been able to do (or so I believe), but my wife Sian and I never dreamed that either of our boys would be educated anywhere but at a comprehensive.

For me it really matters that those who go to comprehensives should have the same advantages as those who go to Eton, Westminster and Harrow. Why should not comp kids hear me blathering on about economic mess we are in, if my thoughts about this are regarded as worth hearing by public schools?

I did a bit of research, and unsurprisingly learned that comprehensives rarely ask prominent individuals to give talks to their kids for the obvious reasons that they lack the contacts and confidence of fee-paying schools.

A light bulb went on in my head. It occurred to me that in a career of 25 years in journalism, I have got to know thousands of fascinating people who are capable of inspiring young people. So for schools lacking the resources to approach such prominent individuals, perhaps I could play the role of matchmaker. And of course the internet would make the matchmaking easier and cheaper.

I came up with the name Speakers for Schools, and then had a number of lucky breaks. One old friend, Andrew Campbell, put me in touch with a brilliant online design house, Miura, which did most of the work on creating our website for free.

Another pal, Sir Richard Lambert – who was my boss as editor of the FT for many years, before he came director-general of the CBI – put me in touch with the charity, the Education and Employers Taskforce. It has very generously helped me to turn an idea into a practical reality. The Taskforce provides administration for Speakers for Schools, which sits under its charitable umbrella.

We've now recruited around 700 speakers, all of them leaders in their fields, and all of whom are committed to give at least one talk each year to a state secondary school (they can of course give as many as they like). I have been amazed by the generosity of those who have signed up to speak, in the sense that many of them have helped us obtain additional speakers from their own networks of friends and contacts.

If you go to website, www.speakers4schools.org, you will see the incredible range of talent we can offer to state schools. There are great thinkers, writers, business leaders, politicians, actors, sports stars, entertainers, journalists and so on. I am not going to name them, because that would be to create some kind of false hierarchy. Suffice to say that as a kid, I would have loved the opportunity to hear from all of them.

By the way, Nick Chambers, Director of the Education and Employers Taskforce, recently told me something really depressing – which is that although schools like Eton and Westminster take it for

granted that they don't have to pay a bean for great talks, comprehensive schools frequently have to pay prominent people to talk to their kids."

For the avoidance of doubt, what Speakers for Schools offers is absolutely free. All our speakers have agreed to give talks for nothing, including paying for their own travel expenses.

"What I hope we can achieve is just a bit of leveling of the playing field between state schools and public schools. And to be clear, this is not about giving careers advice to students (although the Education and Employers Taskforce is setting up a free service to give careers help, www.inspiringthefuture.org). That said, it is possible that some of the visits will foster fruitful relationships between schools and employers - and create work-experience opportunities."

I have never for a moment been in any doubt about my own good fortune in having grown up in a family which encouraged ambition, and which surrounded me with books and the example of what can be achieved through study and effort. My dad grew up in the East End of London, went to Hackney Downs School and ended up in the House of Lords.

Speakers for Schools is about exciting students in a way that encourages them to aim high in a career sense or an academic sense. It is about delivering a message that with hard work and application, they can achieve great things. It is about giving state school students access to big ideas that are not on the curriculum.

More than anything else, Speakers for Schools is about telling students – especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds – that they are highly valued by individuals who (rightly or wrongly) are viewed as successful. Right now, after the summer's riots, with the cost of university education rising sharply and with unemployment high, this surely matters more than ever.

As a country, in the face of intensifying competition from China, India, Brazil and the rest of the developing world, we can only expect to prosper if our children are as ambitious for themselves as they can possibly be."

Robert Peston
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