Advisory Board Meeting November 2012

The year’s Annual Advisory Board Guest Lecture was given by Anji Hunter, former Director of Government Relations and “gatekeeper” to Tony Blair, and her husband Adam Boulton, Political Editor of Sky News. Their talk, entitled “Murdoch Marries Blair”, was introduced by Lord Digby Jones, who did not hold back in conveying the gravitas of the two speakers. During her time based at No.10 working directly for the Prime Minister, Anji Hunter was described as “the most influential non-elected person in Downing Street”. While Adam Boulton is described as “TV’s Heavyweight” by The Sunday Times, and is the only TV reporter ever to have door-stepped the Queen on political matters live on camera.

Whilst the humorous title provided a platform for Anji and Adam to reference how the media has responded to their own unique partnership, forged so close to the echelons of power, the subtitle: “why Politics, the Media and Business misunderstand each other and what should be done about it”, provided the real subject matter. Anji began by referencing how business operates in a context regulated and sometimes controlled by the government, and that most media companies are businesses themselves with commercial interests to protect. “This triangular relationship can be both a virtuous and a vicious triangle.” Anji and Adam spoke in turn throughout the talk, both drawing upon their vast media experience. Adam demonstrated his own methods of challenging his subjects through film footage of his interviews with Barak Obama and Gordon Brown, and gave a sober warning on how even the most experienced media moguls can be wrong-footed, as evidenced by his infamous spat with Alastair Campbell, live on-air, when Adam himself was the interviewee. Anji, in turn, spoke on how best to control the message you strive to get across via the media, drawing upon her unparalleled experience of managing Tony Blair’s media relations whilst in government, and that of Lord Browne whilst he was at the helm of BP, and of Cynthia Carroll the CEO of Anglo American, one of the world’s largest mining corporations.

“If you can control it, the media can be useful. I now am in charge of the Queen Elizabeth Prize for Engineering, which needs publicity. To achieve this, I have done something I’ve not done before – put myself centre-stage in a seven page spread in the Sunday Times Magazine. But I carefully negotiated the trade-off first: agreeing to an interview that would allow some insight into my political past and some old photos of me with Tony, as long as the main focus of the article was on engineering and what we seek to achieve through the new prize”.

At the Board meeting the following day, Lord Digby Jones welcomed four new Board members, including Andrew Lezala, CEO of Metro Trains Melbourne, who flew in especially from Australia. The meeting allowed Professor Simon Collinson, new Dean of the Business School, to present his vision for the School six weeks into post. This led on to a robust discussion as to how to ensure the profitability of the School’s activity to allow for reinvestment to grow areas such as external relations, the MBA programme and ensuring excellence for our undergraduates. This was followed by an in-depth presentation on the re-modelling of Professional Services to ensure the delivery of the new School strategy 2013 to 2017. It was also agreed that this would be reviewed mid-term in 2015, to ensure it still aligned with the aims and objectives of the University’s Strategic Framework. Due to the urgent requirement to secure the necessary changes and investment to set the strategy on course over the next six months, it was agreed that the Advisory Board would meet again in February, and take the opportunity to meet with the EQUIS panel, and again in April to review the implementation.