



# Robert Elgie: an excellent human, and a fabulous French politics scholar

Ben Clift<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 5 April 2022 / Published online: 22 April 2022  
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited 2022

## Abstract

This article reflects on the working life, and disciplinary contribution to the study of French and comparative politics, of the late lamented Professor Robert Elgie.

**Keywords** French Politics · Comparative Politics · Methodological pluralism · Semi-presidentialism

Professor Robert Elgie was a warm, generous, funny, and engaging colleague and collaborator, with a tremendous dry sense of humour. He was a brilliant scholar with an incredibly sharp mind. Erik Jones once said of Robert ‘It is hard to imagine a more generous or thoughtful scholar of comparative politics’. I quite agree. He was perhaps the most incisive and insightful editor I have had the pleasure of working with in my long career. His was a devastatingly sharp mind, combined with such a mild, kind manner. When he offered feedback on your work—he could slice through to some fundamental analysis weakness or limitation like an accomplished surgeon, and then point it out in such a kind way as to anaesthetise the intellectual pain.

One aspect of Robert’s personality and his approach to academia that I carry with me was his generosity with his time and advice. Robert helped many French and comparative politics scholars make their way in the academic world—consistently offering tremendously sage counsel on publishing and all other aspects of career development. Many scholars, at all career stages, benefited hugely from his wisdom, insights, friendship, and his unstinting spirit of collegiality. For many years, Robert and I co-organised the PSA French Politics specialist group. His dedication to nurturing early career scholars in particular shone through in that context. This admirable characteristic informed all his work, as an editor, as a senior departmental colleague, as a pedagogue, and as a researcher. I have certainly taken inspiration from Robert’s mentoring/nurturing example and skills in my own approach to academic leadership roles.

---

✉ Ben Clift  
B.M.Clift@warwick.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, England



At the core of Robert's intellectual journey was a passion for the study of French politics, situated in a broader comparative analytical framework. From its inception until his untimely death in the summer of 2019, Robert was an animating intelligence and heart of the journal *French Politics*. He was integral to its formation, development and maturation. Getting the journal established in a competitive and relatively crowded 'marketplace' was not easy. It required forbearance, commitment, and dedication. Robert saw the process through with all of those, but also with great good humour. His vision was for the rigorous and systematic analysis of French politics. Robert had a certain frustration with some of the more inward-looking work in the French exceptionalism vein. This rather went against the grain of his commitment to situating French politics scholarship within wider political science debates and analytical frameworks.

Robert shared with the other founding editors a commitment to situating the study of French politics in systematic comparative context, and the broader framework of political science research. He was less convinced by the merits of French studies as an introspective field operating in isolation from comparative politics, European politics, and political science more broadly. One testament to Robert's achievements as a scholar of French politics, illustrated through his work on *French Politics*, and also by the landmark *Oxford Handbook of French Politics* he co-edited, was to firmly enshrine the study of French politics within broader disciplinary debates and themes. This commitment helped many a French politics academic establish their publication profile at the intersection of French politics and broader disciplinary debates in an era where country case specialism on its own was a less attractive trait on the academic job market. A number of French politics and comparative politics scholars owe much to Robert in terms of their early career development.

Whilst passionately interested in French politics, Robert's own work was also anchored to broader political and analytical questions with extended beyond the horizons of France and its politics and institutions. He explored a range of compelling research questions, and avenues of inquiry—offering political science the concept of semi-presidentialism, denoting a 'dual-executive' regime type combining parliamentary and presidential elements where a constitution provides for both a directly elected president and a prime minister and cabinet responsible to the legislature. He also analysed the politics of central banking and the role of non-majoritarian independent agencies within governance regimes. He made important contributions in all these spheres, although his bequeathing political science with the concept of semi-presidentialism was perhaps his most discipline-defining work.

An open and inclusive approach to the study of French politics pervaded *French Politics* with Robert at the helm. The founding editors and their successor remained very open to a wide array of different political science research focused on France, embracing a variety of approaches and styles of scholarship. *French Politics* was managed by him with such good humour and sage judgement. As all journal editors know, some delicate and thorny issues can arise and require resolving within the peer review process and the general management of the journal. These were always handled *so* deftly, adeptly by Robert. His judgement was always *superb*.

This was one reason why *French Politics* became such a vibrant and energising forum for wide-ranging French political analysis in all its hues. This commitment



to methodological and intellectual pluralism, which owes a great deal to Robert, has done much to secure and enhance the place of France in the canon of comparative politics.

Without his journal editor's hat on, Robert could express some quite forthright views on what he thought 'proper' political science should look like. He was personally inclined towards a more positivist approach, characteristic of what one might term mainstream US-style political science. In this vein, Robert's was a spirited commitment to particular forms of analytical rigour, and systematic approaches to social scientific inquiry. Yet he had clearly signed some kind of internal self-denying ordinance in the spirit of methodological pluralism. Robert did not permit his personal proclivities about what he thought constituted the best kind of politics research interfere with his editorial decision-making and practice. Nor did it dampen his enthusiasm for encouraging scholarship and scholars adopting all different kinds of approaches. One thing Robert Elgie brought to the journal was his immense enthusiasm for encouraging others to refine their understanding of French Politics. He actively solicited submissions from right across the methodological and epistemological spectrum—as demonstrated by the rich tapestry of works published in the journal.

He bore a large administrative burden at Dublin City University where his influence was foundational in shaping the teaching of politics in that institution. Yet this was always worn very lightly. I had the pleasure of working with him as external examiner for DCU got a sense of what an excellent and committed pedagogue he was. It came across what fabulous care he took with his students, and also how he challenged them. I fondly remember lunches on exam board days. In addition to the study of French politics, Robert and I also shared a passion for ornithology, football, cricket, and we both revelled in an eclectic taste in music, and searching out obscure bands. There was always lots to talk about.

Robert Elgie was a brilliant scholar, who published pioneering and discipline-shaping work. Many of those who worked with him benefited hugely from his generosity, wisdom, and his unstinting spirit of collegiality. Through his work on *French Politics* and other activities in the profession, Robert helped a generation of emerging French politics scholars in the new vein (comparativists with a particular interest in the French case) develop their research careers. Robert's was an admirable commitment to rigour, and systematic social scientific analysis. One of his legacies, it seems to me, is deeper engagement with forward-looking trends in comparative politics amongst many French politics scholars. Robert was also fabulous company, and we always had a great time dining out at conferences and so forth. He was a joy to work with, and I miss him very much.

