



## Robert Elgie’s research trajectory: some personal reflections

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My first memory of Robert was seeing him from afar at LSE when I started my PhD under Brendan O’Leary in 1990. He looked determined, intimidating, distinguished and like a man on a mission. When I eventually was introduced to him by our friends Steve Griggs (and to Helen Thompson) he was far from the aloof figure I had seen from afar. He was intently interested in Ireland, had a better knowledge of Irish history than I and was very interested in my Ph.D. In one of our first conversations in the LSE’s Three Tuns bar, he asked why did I never talk about my PhD like the other PhDs and when I then spent 10 min waxing lyrical about neo-functionalism and cross-border cooperation, with customary humour, he said ‘Sorry-what’s neo-functionalism again?’! I was captivated and in awe of Robert from the start. He was a rising star in his cohort at LSE and despite his background, with his trade mark determination he received a scholarship to Nottingham High School and later an Exhibition to Oriel College, Oxford. He was fluent in French, had conversational Italian, could follow conversations in Portuguese after a few days on honeymoon in Lisbon and also was a superb artist and tipped to be a professional cricketer until an eye injury while playing for the Nottinghamshire under 19 s. I quickly learnt too that he was an excellent mimic, with a range of fictional characters who frequented our house for nearly our entire marriage. He was extremely funny and very witty.

He became quickly not only my fiancé and then husband, but a mentor intellectually and my deepest friend for the next 26 years. I have many memories of his mentoring. He sat with me at an Amstrad computer belonging to his Oriel friend Simon Towler, our flat mate in West Hampstead, and went through the first chapter of my Ph.D. for my transfer viva, explaining paragraph by paragraph what ‘O’Leary’<sup>1</sup> meant by ‘sign-posting’, and formatting the text (a task he performed

<sup>1</sup> My supervisor was Professor Brendan O’Leary.

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until soon before his passing). Throughout most of our marriage, he helped clarify my thoughts by asking piercing questions and he advised on work issues and decisions. His judgement and perception were faultless and indeed my concentration on diplomatic relations in the Brexit period is also partially because of his advice—'make it your niche'. His damning perceptions of little England and English Toryism continue to ring in my ears!

His own work was firmly institutionalist. His PhD was on the role of the French prime minister during co-habitation, examining the French prime minister's influence in the French presidential system using core executive models (Elgie 1993, p. 2). Reading these books now Robert's beautiful and precise writing style stand out as he seeks to analyse the 'black box' of policy process. From the late 1990s he gradually moved away from French politics, with his usual ambition, having heard the late Brian Barry say that country specialisms were on the way out in political science. When he began his 1995 book, 'Political Leadership in Liberal Democracies', while at Loughborough University, I, like many of his students (so he told me) was drawn to issues of charisma and personality-based reasons for effective leaders. However, he was slightly dismissive of the psychological explanations for leadership or charisma and explained to me the institutionalist arguments that underpinned much of his work. His book showed that what leaders 'can and cannot do is primarily determined by the institutional structures of their countries' (Elgie 1995, p. 210). Soon after Robert was diagnosed with a serious form of cancer during my first pregnancy. Happily, and under the care of the late Professor Dónal Hollywood, he lived to see and know our eldest son Matthew, and later he was an admirable father and favourite parent to our son with Downs Syndrome, Michael. As always, he never complained, but worked through his illness and radiation treatment that summer of 97, stopping only to watch 'The Ashes'.

He began to carve a niche in semi-presidentialism, a logical extension of his leadership research and reflecting his interest in Ireland. He bemoaned the weakness of methodology training in his undergraduate degree and as was the norm for those with a first from Oxford, skipped a Masters and went straight to Ph.D., so always felt at a methodological disadvantage. As political science became increasingly quantitative, he sought to train himself and did so effectively. However, he regretted very much not being part of a generation that made such training integral to a social science education. Despite that he forged an international reputation in his new chosen field and, by the time he died, had a devoted academic following. His blog on semi-presidentialism and presidentialism was impeccable, but it exhausted him.

Although he remained as editor of French Politics and was co-editor of the *Oxford Handbook of French Politics*, his framework became predominantly semi-presidentialism in comparative perspective and he sought to modernise the study of French politics by using rigorous political science approaches. He increasingly separated from French politics in the traditional sense.

From 2015 to 2018 he worked on his two last leadership books, *Studying Political Leadership: Foundations and Contending Accounts* (Palgrave, 2015) and *Political Leadership: a pragmatic institutionalist approach* (Palgrave, 2018). The 2015 volume focussed far more on the psychological arguments he had previously



under-played, though he still showed the predominance of institutional causes: ‘there is an answer to the fundamental personality vs context question, but...very few people actually ask this question...’. (Elgie 2015, p. 172).

During this period in conversation at home he became increasingly preoccupied by the psychological approaches he had once dismissed. He particularly was interested in ‘twin studies’ seeking to identify the role of nature versus nurture and read genetics research. He sometimes recounted things he read -for example, he became very engaged by the thought that schizophrenia could be caused by trauma and in his book mentions it: ‘True these findings may not be as informative as equivalent results in behavioural genetics about the degree of inheritability of schizophrenia, for example’ (Elgie 2015, p. 174). In hindsight, while institutionalist, his first book on epistemology of leadership studies had moved towards a far more sympathetic approach to psychology and to constructivism than before.

Although Robert had a loyal following and was delighted to be made a member of the Royal Irish Academy in 2017, I think his exceptional intelligence and ability to overcome adverse circumstances, not just his childhood and socioeconomic background, but his illness in 1997 and other shocks in our married life—was never fully appreciated until his death. In 1995 he wrote that he hoped to provide ‘a modest contribution to contemporary leadership studies’ (Elgie 1995, p. 210). Robert, your contribution to political science, to me, to your children and to your family and friends, was far from modest. It was an honour to have met you all those years ago in LSE and an honour to have been your wife. We will not see Robert Elgie’s like again.

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