



DOWNSIDE SCHOOL

Hymn Practice Speech – 14th October 2016

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The Downside Month of Service is now well underway and this led me to start thinking about those members of society who we describe as ‘public servants.’ I remembered a comment made by Piers Morgan when he visited Downside last year and was asked the question “*What sort of people are politicians? What are they really like?*” Perhaps surprisingly, he answered that generally they are decent people, that there are some rotten ones of course, but that by and large they enter politics with the aim of doing some good – to serve society.

Why then are we cynical about the motives of those who hold public office? The recent events surrounding the American Presidential Election perhaps speak for themselves, as candidates seek to expose the most personal and lurid details about their opponents. Yet many politicians publically state that they are motivated by a sense of higher purpose. The Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton was brought up as a Methodist and she has frequently stated that her philosophy towards public service is summed up in a well-known Methodist saying: “*Do all the good you can, for all the people you can, for as long as you can.*”

It seems that there is a risk that viewing the motives of public service through a cynical lens can inhibit positive change. As one of my Fifth Formers (of whom I was speaking to) put it: “Cynicism turns acts of service into being viewed as acts of self-interest.”

Tim Minchin the composer & comedian gave a well-received address in 2013 to the graduates of the University of Western Australia. In it he offered a humorous yet poignant ‘nine point plan for life’ the underlying messages being those of the importance of giving and of the danger of a cynical approach to life. I quote: *Point 2: Don’t seek happiness. Keep busy. We were not created to be constantly happy. Instead concentrate on making someone else happy. Point 7: Define yourself by what you love not what you hate. As a society we have a tendency to define ourselves in opposition to things, for example: “I love music but hate Coldplay” or “I like to cook but good olive oil is obnoxiously over-priced.” We should express ourselves in relation to what we love. Give standing ovations, write thank-you cards. Be pro-stuff not just anti.*

One approach could be for all of us to embrace the concept of servant leadership - a model we have adopted here at Downside - and to work together rather than in isolation. As Minchin says “*Respect people with less power than yourself. I have made decisions based on how people treat the waiting staff in restaurants. I don’t care if you are the most powerful cat in the room, I will judge you on how you treat the less powerful.*” The politicians who we view with less cynicism seem to embody this approach. Jo Cox, the MP for Batley and Spen died earlier this year after being shot and stabbed multiple times following a constituency meeting. Jo Cox famously said in her maiden speech to the House of Commons that her experience of representing a culturally diverse constituency had taught her that “*we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.*” One of her former colleagues who worked with her in International Aid remembers that she “*had a capacity to be horrified by things when other people would just*

start to think 'It's a bad world and these things happen' and be a bit more cynical about it. Jo was the opposite of that, but her approach fed into practical urgency, not just blind optimism."

The way forward then towards making a difference in serving others is to work together. As Mother (now St.) Teresa said: *"I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things."*