

Talks at GS

Ruth Davidson, Baroness of Lundin Links

Adam Crook, Moderator

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Ruth Davidson: Politics still matters. Public service still matters. The decisions that we take on behalf of the country are important.

Adam Crook: Good afternoon and welcome to today's Talks at GS. My name is Adam Crook. I'm a partner in global markets and co-sponsor of the EMEA Veterans Network. And I am delighted to welcome Ruth Davidson, you know, Baroness Davidson of Lundin Links, to GS today. Ruth needs very little introduction, so I'll be brief. Ruth is a distinguished career politician, having joined the Scottish Conservatives back in 2009 after an early career in the media. Just two years later, Ruth was elected leader of the Scottish Conservatives, a role she held until earlier this year.

Throughout her career, Ruth has been an advocate for mental well being, as a member of both the LGBTQ+ and veterans communities, areas we'll get into later. Ruth,

thank you for joining us and being here today.

Ruth Davidson: Thank you very much, Adam, yeah.

Adam Crook: And we'll talk a little bit in a moment about military experience and leadership. But on the politics side now, first of all, you joined the Conservative Party back in 2009 and first ran for office that year. Can you tell us a little bit about your journey into politics and how this came about for you?

Ruth Davidson: Yeah. So I had always been conservative, which was quite unusual in the bit of Scotland that I grew up in, in sort of '90s. But because I was a journalist and I believed very strongly that my job was not just to be impartial but to be seen to be impartial, I didn't join a political party, I wasn't active, I didn't campaign while I was a journalist because I thought that that was incompatible with the job that I was doing. And I was really serious about my job and my work.

So I applied to join the Scottish Conservative Party on the same day as I put in my voluntary redundancy application to the BBC, which was the 31st of October, 2008. And then as things happened, in the bit of Glasgow that I was living in at the time and working on and there was a by-election just before the 2010 general election. So it was supposedly happening in the summer of 2009. It ended

up, [UNINTEL] didn't get moved until November. So it was a 5-month bi-election. And it was wild. I think we had 13 candidates in all, three of whom had been on either *Big Brother* or *Celebrity Big Brother*. We had the BMP decided they were going to try and make this their big push. Honestly, it was an absolute circus, and I loved it. I absolutely loved it and thought, yeah, you know, I want to do more of this.

And I think what led me into it, to be honest, was I was incredibly privileged to spend just over a decade as a journalist, being able to grab politicians by the lapels and ask them all the questions that I wanted to and I thought the people at home wanted to listen to. But it was frustrating for me because the job was to tell the story of what was happening in Scotland; it wasn't to change the story.

In fact, you weren't doing your job if you actually tried to change events and get involved. And I'm a doer. You know, I've always been a doer. So I decided that it would be an incredibly good idea to give up a well-paid, four-day-a-week job at the BBC to try and get elected as a Tory in Glasgow in the 2010s. And it took me a couple years. I'm

not going to lie. It was not the most well-trodden path, but I got there in the end.

Adam Crook: In the social media age, it seems that the pressures of scrutiny and abusive behavior placed on our politicians are at unprecedented levels. How do you cope with this? What's your advice to those entering politics? And do you feel that this problem is preventing quality candidates from entering the fray?

Ruth Davidson: Well, you see, I've been involved kind of in the front line for ten years, and this is immeasurably worse now than it was when I started. Immeasurably worse. And something like Twitter, while it can be a very useful tool in terms of keeping up with a moving story, in terms of being able to connect with people, it is also a [UNINTEL] when people decide they want to do a pile-on. And the tone and tenor of our political debate can be really, really tough.

And when you're in the eye of a kind of a social media storm or a media storm, you feel hunted. The pressures, I understand why kind of that sort of element -- I don't really want to call it cyberbullying, but you know what I mean? -

- can feel every bit as oppressive and constricting as that happening in the real world. So it is tough. And having spent an entire lifetime telling people that you want to get involved, get involved. We need good people. We need people from every single background. If you're committed to your local community, I don't care what age you are or where you went to school or what your background is or what your job is, you've got something to give. Get up there and give it.

Now, I would tell people to be aware of how that impacts on you and how that impacts on those around you and on your family. And that's a horrible thing to have to do, but people have to go in with their eyes open. However, and this is a big however, politics still matters. Public service still matters. The decisions that we take on behalf of the country are important, and it needs good people with the right values, the right standards to go into politics to complete it.

And we will be a wrong country indeed if we let cyberbullies win.

Adam Crook: You contributed early to the growing

national conversation around mental health, and you've been very open about your own personal experiences. Could you maybe sort of tell us a little bit about why you chose to be open about this? And perhaps your experience of sharing this?

Ruth Davidson: Yeah, I mean, I think that when I -- so I was first diagnosed with clinical depression when I was 18 and I was at university. And I mean, that was well over 20 years ago now, and we weren't as advanced or as good at talking about it then as we are now. And I came away from the doctor's surgery wondering if my life was effectively over, if any ambitions I had for a future career were done. I wouldn't be able to do it. I was left questioning whether what I just heard meant that I was mad. Is that what madness was? I didn't know. And I came away feeling all sorts of feelings of guilt and shame and whether I should crawl under a rock and die.

I think what would have helped me is if I had seen people operating in jobs that I might have aspired to be involved in and talking about this. And I think when you look at people like Prince Harry that's spoken out about this, people like Richard Branson. You know, you've got the

former prime minister of Denmark having spoken about it. In fact, having taken time off while he was in the premiership to make sure that he was looking after his mental well being. I think it's important.

And one of the things that I'd always wanted to do was to talk about it so that people knew while I was still in [UNINTEL], while I was still leading a political party, but to be able to do it in a way that I had control of because one of the things that is really tough when you're a politician is you can say something that you say in a paragraph or two paragraphs but only a line or half a sentence gets taken out of that and run in the newspapers. And then somebody else writes the headline, and it can mean something completely different. So I wanted to be able to have ownership of it and explain it properly.

So the way I did that was that I was writing a book about other women that had had difficulties of stuff in their life and was able to write about it that way. And that kind of opened the door to be able to talk about it at greater length and with the context that I felt it was important that it had.

And since then, it's something that I've done a lot of work

on. So yesterday, I spent quite a lot of the day chairing ICD's mental health advisory group, which is looking at how they look after sort of people that are on [UNINTEL], how they look after their own workforce, including all the freelance community that works in broadcasting because it's quite insecure employment. How they look after contributors to reality shows. We know some of the problems that have been involved in there.

But also how they can use their platform as a broadcaster to help people more widely. So for example, things like the Britain Get Talking campaign. Earlier this year, we raised 1.3 million to help with mental health phone advice lines because we know the difficulties that people have been having through COVID and also difficulties accessing. You know, the waiting lists were massive before. They're even more massive now. And sometimes when people present, tell them to go away for a year or 18 months is no good at all.

So, yeah, so we've been doing our best. So it's something that I continue to talk about. And I think the greater understanding that we have and the destigmatizing we have, maybe somebody else out there won't feel the same

feelings of guilt and shame that I have.

I think that we need to keep going with the kind of education and awareness programs that we have. The way in which we're talking about it, I think language is really important, about the way we use that. But I actually think that we're ready to go to the next level, and that involves people that are involved in policymaking. And if governments, both the SNP government in Scotland, the UK government in Westminster, say that they want mental health to have a parity of esteem with physical well being. Actually, they need to step up and play to make that happen. So that involves services.

But it also involves taking things into account when you're making policy. So in things like the transition of people in the military to civilian life, we start looking at things like veterans' health and well being. When people have suffered physical injury and when they've been on tour or in theater, how do we make sure that we're looking at areas around that? And in terms of house building, things like that, we know that crap housing that is damp and dreary and ugly and in estates that feel like there's no facilities impacts people's health, their respiratory health, but also

impacts people's mental health. So what are the building controls that we can do to make sure that there's green space in places that we're developing? To make sure we've got warm, dry homes? To make sure that we've got -- god forbid we look for beauty in some of the things that we build.

So I think we, in some areas, we're beginning to factor mental well being and health into the decision-making process, but it needs to go a lot further than it has. Miles further.

Adam Crook: And to pivot slightly here again, there are relatively few out LGBTQ+ politicians in the UK. What's it like coming out in parliament and politics?

Ruth Davidson: Well, I came out before. In fact, I came out quite late. I was in my sort of mid-20s. I was working at the BBC at the time. And then when I became a bi-election candidate, one of the papers had fallen to the kind of the Scottish Tory, then-Tory kind of press officer guy, and said, "Are we allowed to say that Ruth's gay?" because it was relatively known in media circles. And he was, like, "Yeah, no problem." Didn't actually check me or no, which

was fine.

So the next day when it was on the front page of the *Scotsman* that lesbian kickboxer Ruth Davidson was running, I had a teary phone call from my mother who hates the word “lesbian.” I think she's just at that age where she can almost kind of cope with “gay” but really hates the word “lesbian.” And nobody wants to have their mom crying on the phone to them. It's not brilliant.

And I think what was annoying for me during that campaign was there was four people that were running for the leadership. And the other three were all referred to by their job titles, and I was not. So it was Deputy Leader X. Transport Spokesman Y. Justice Convener Zed. And Lesbian Kickboxer Ruth Davidson. And it was being used as a pejorative. It wasn't being used to be like, “Oh, here's somebody exciting and new.” It was definitely, particularly in the mail, being used as pejorative.

And it made me decide very early that I wanted to kind of own the adjectives in front of my name. An early success for me if I won and if I went on to lead would be when the papers started referring to me as Tory Leader Ruth

Davidson, just by my job. And we did get there. We got there in the end.

But the other half of that was that I was very clear that I would never run from it either. You know, I was not about to not answer questions or say in interviews you can't ask me X or Y. I might choose not to answer you and I'll tell you why I'm not answering you, but you can absolutely ask the question.

And one of the things that was lovely was, when I did win, I got quite a lot of emails and postal mail back in the day, mostly from young gay men but a couple young gay women, saying that "I always wanted to be a politician, but I thought I couldn't because I was gay." Most of them started with, "I'm not a Tory but," but this was then, you know, 2010s in Scotland, so not many people were Tories back then. But all of them talking about the fact that it mattered to them, that they'd seen somebody be successful doing that. And that really made me thinking because my own background, I'm quite a dogged individual. I'm quite sort of -- if somebody tells me I can't do it or it's never been done before, it makes me want to try twice as hard. But the fact that it seemed to matter to people, not that it was

me but the fact that any gay person was leading a political party, a major political party for the first time in the UK as it happened, that it mattered to them made me think that I had a duty to not run from it. And to wear it lightly as well. As well as trying to be good at my job because the worst thing in the world would be to be awful and people to think that gay people were crap at politics and couldn't do it and to spoil it for the next generation that came after. Hopefully I did okay.

And even if people don't share my politics, hopefully they can see that I was trying to do the job to the best of my abilities. But, I mean, the journey has never been even paced. It's never been straight. There have been plenty of twists and turns. But if you look at the long term, we've come a very long way.

So I'm 42 years old. When I was born, it was still illegal to be in a consensual and loving relationship with somebody of the same sex in Scotland. We had what was then called anti-homosexuality laws much later than England and Wales. And now you can -- you could be arrested just for being in a loving relationship. Now, you can marry that same person. So we actually have come a long way.

But I do think that it's not always a linear journey. I mean, we do face problems and perhaps going backwards. And I think some of the heat that's in the current debates about trans rights, how that impacts on women-only spaces, is really unhelpful. And the idea that the people that are shouting loudest have no wish to try and meet each other in the middle, have no recognition that, even while disagreeing, you can accept that the other person's fears or demands come from a kind of virtuous and noble place, I think is really dangerous and damaging.

And I think that there are an awful lot of trans people who are some of the most marginalized people in our society, people who are most likely to be subject to attack, who have some of the highest figures in terms of self-harming or suicide, who are being fought over in public by people who are paying scant attention to their needs. And I think that that's a tragedy.

Adam Crook: Ruth, how do you see the current political landscape on matters of LGBTQ+ equity?

Ruth Davidson: Well, I think in terms of what I spoke

about before of just how poisonous the debate has become, how heated it has become, actually we need somebody to pause us and walk back and to start finding ways to meet in the middle. To make sure that the language that we use is moderate. To make sure that we give other people the benefit of the doubt of why they think what they think. Of making sure that -- actually, some of the real issues -- so a lot of the debate particularly about spaces is focusing people's attention -- whereas actually I think we should be focusing attention on how few services are available. How long you have to wait for them in terms of giving people the actual support in their life that they need.

And I think that these are more pressing concerns. So, yeah, I think that politicians aren't exactly covering themselves in glory right now. And the sort of Twitter hate mobs are pitched against each other and only getting evermore entrenched. We need to see people show a bit of leadership in this space.

Adam Crook: Ruth, thank you ever so much for joining us today. It's been a fascinating conversation. I'd just like to wish you a good day and wish all our audience as well a good day. And thank you.

Ruth Davidson: Thank you very much, Adam.
Appreciate it.

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