



Barack Obama and his anger translator at 2015 White House Correspondents' Dinner.

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University of Salford psychologist Ashley Weinberg:

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In politics, we can't keep emotions out of the picture

EXCLUSIVE



Ashley Weinberg is a chartered psychologist and senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Salford, UK. Working on the psychology of politics and politicians during his career, he has published several books, most recently an edited collection of papers, 'Psychology of Democracy: Of the People, By the People, For the People', published by Cambridge University Press in 2022.

Sure! Now, next question. In our interactions with politicians, we see many of the emotions that common people express. We see them in their statements, addresses, or actions. But there are certain things that are usually missing. For example, fear, regret, hesitation, or vulnerability. We do not usually see them expressed by politicians. How often do you notice those kinds of emotions in politicians?

Well, I think it is an important point. Because politicians feel they have to behave in certain ways, what we often see is the absence of expressing doubt, fear, and regret. The reason is that such emotions suggest that they have had doubts about what they've done in the past or about what they're doing now. Politically, that's often a very difficult path to tread, because the reason you have power is that people have confidence that you know what you're doing and that you don't have doubts about it. So, expressing doubts can be a challenging thing to do. It can be a very brave thing to do if that actually leads to more progress.

If I may give you a very quick example in terms of

mental health, a Norwegian prime minister about 20 years ago, Kjell Magne Bondevik, was suffering from depression. Nobody else knew this at the time. But he took it upon himself to say, "I can't carry on doing my job as prime minister. I'm going to let people know that I'm not well. I'm going to get the help and treatment I need." And he did that. It became a very powerful story because people in the wider population of Norway felt, well, "If the prime minister can talk about this vulnerability in terms of his mental health, then maybe we can too," and this is a good thing. The good bit of news is that he got well and he ran for office and he was re-elected as the prime minister of Norway.

So, sometimes showing that vulnerability can be a very positively powerful thing. But in terms of everyday political life, yes, there are challenges about expressing doubt. Certainly in recent times in the U.K., for example, many mistakes have been made, but they were expressed without regret. We even have a deputy prime minister, saying sorry for the way he treated students, but obviously at the time

he didn't do that. It would have been much more meaningful had he done so at the time and perhaps changed his policy.

So it can be a very powerful thing depending on the timing and the topic. But generally, I think if we're moving to a position where people can talk about these vulnerabilities, perhaps there's some strength in that.

And, people are entitled to their privacy, obviously. I've spoken to a politician who has expressed regret about things in private, which surely they won't say in public. Again, part of the emotional distance people generally feel from politicians, is they don't seem to show emotions that we all experience, and we probably need more of that.

There is this idea introduced by Kant, the philosopher, which is called professional transformation. You are probably familiar with it. By that, he means that the profession a person chooses for themselves changes them into something else in certain regards. For example, a doctor who might see viruses and microbes everywhere, or an economist

who sees everything in terms of money. From your perspective, how does a career in politics change a person?

Well, politicians may have other careers before they come into politics. But in terms of the system we have in the UK as in many other countries, increasingly it's becoming a career in itself, as you're saying: People will finish their education and then move straight into politics, becoming an advisor or a spokesperson and then joining a political party and so on.

In terms of the profession changing people, I think there is an identity that we all experience in relation to our work, and the longer one stays in a particular job, the greater a status one achieves. You come to be known by a particular label and a particular personal appearance. I imagine, over a period of time, there can be challenges in retaining the person that you essentially are and feeling what's often called "grounded" in oneself. When other people meet you, they'll go, "Oh, yes, that person seems very ordinary and just like the rest of us." And that's perhaps the sense of someone who

