
Adam Roberts

Professor Sir Adam Roberts FBA is Senior Research Fellow, Department of Politics and International Relations, in the University of Oxford. He was President of the British Academy in 2009-2013. A video of extracts from this interview can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/prosperingwisely/roberts

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What was the initial spark that made you want to study and work in international relations?

Adam Roberts

It was at school. The most eccentric teacher at my school was a history teacher. He allowed you to study almost whatever you liked in the field of history, provided you did it well. The first essay I wrote in his class at the age of 16 was on the Crusades. I always had the feeling that international history and international events were what would interest me.

Q
Who would have thought that the Crusades would still be such a live issue?

Adam Roberts

It is one of those eternal issues. One of the greatest problems in the contemporary era is the widespread belief that we are in a completely new age, and we do not need to understand the past, because we are above that. In fact, we seem to be particularly good at repeating many of the mistakes of the past, precisely because of our ignorance of it.

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Did the 20th century – and the Cold War – represent something of a hiatus in Christian-Muslim conflict?

Adam Roberts

I am not completely persuaded by that. From the start, the twentieth century witnessed much Christian-Muslim conflict, not least in the wake of the Italian annexation of Tripoli in 1911, which was widely perceived as yet another case of Christian interference in Muslim lands. During the Cold War there were a many conflicts that had little or nothing to do with the US–Soviet rivalry. There were conflicts over colonial rule and particularly conflicts within new post-colonial states – over such issues as secession, contested borders, and constitutions – and some of these conflicts involved religious rivalries, including Christian-Muslim ones.

If you had asked people in the 18th century, they might well have accepted that relations with Mahometans, or at least with Mahometan sovereigns, were a problem. In fact, some of the first proposals for a European Union, made by Abbé de Saint Pierre in the early years of the 18th century, were marked by deep uncertainty as to whether a predominantly Muslim state, the Ottoman Empire, could be a potential member the European Union or not. We still have that question today, in the long-drawn out and unresolved negotiation about possible Turkish membership of the EU.

However, I do not think that in the 20th century, even well before the Cold War, people would have felt that



Christian-Muslim relations were the deepest problem we faced. They were a problem in certain parts of the world. Now this issue has more of a global character. But of course today we have reason to be particularly cautious about grand generalisations about Christian-Muslim conflict. Muslims today constitute a very heterogeneous community, characterised by deep divisions of which the Sunni-Shi'a divide is the most notable. So-called Islamic fundamentalism is a small heresy; and for some of its adherents today the main enemy is not Christianity but Western secularism.

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As your career progressed, how did you see yourself making a contribution in international relations?

Adam Roberts

The main way I saw myself making a contribution was through understanding particular different perspectives on international relations, each of which had their own national and intellectual roots, and were based on different experiences. It was always my approach to argue that we are not at a stage where everybody sees the world alike. There are fundamental differences, and it is important to be aware of them. Otherwise, we get specious explanations of why there are differences, which do not get to the roots of the matter.

Q
What did you envisage your career path being?

Adam Roberts

My career path was odd. I left university on a Friday, and on the following Monday I started a job on a weekly newspaper called *Peace News*, which had once been pacifist and still had a pacifist editor. I was not a complete pacifist – I never have been. But it was a paper concerned, above all, with the anti-nuclear movement. I worked for it for

two years. Only by a slow process did it dawn on me that it is not much use opposing a policy such as reliance on nuclear weapons if you do not know what you are going to put in its place. I felt that I needed to go back to do graduate studies to think more about what might be put in the place of nuclear deterrence. That is how I ended up at the London School of Economics (LSE) doing graduate studies. It was from that point onwards that I began to think of an academic career.

It was far from a direct career. I wrote a doctoral thesis, but in those far-off days it did not matter whether you had a doctorate. My supervisor was a sort of reverse snob, who liked you to work hard and to produce good work, but had no interest in you submitting the work for examination. I published it as a book,¹ but never submitted it for examination. So I do not have a doctorate. By today's standards, it is a really weird career path.

I applied for a lectureship at the London School of Economics, and was lucky enough to get that. Since then, I have jobs in the academic world, but not at all a steady progression. I was a lecturer for a long time at the London School of Economics, and only left there to come to Oxford because they were introducing a degree I did not agree with. I thought it was not a sensible way of occupying one's teaching time. I do not believe in grumbling, so I started to look for jobs elsewhere. That is how I then got a job in Oxford. It is all happenstance.

Q

What aspect of your work are you most proud of?

Adam Roberts

The thing I am most proud of in my work is having been ahead of the game on a number of issues. I produced a book about non-violent forms of resistance against foreign occupation regimes in 1967,² one year before the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia, which was a very interesting case of just that: popular resistance against the Soviet-led invasion. I produced a book of documents on the laws of war in 1982, which has since had many editions,³ but it came out just before the hugely increased public interest which we have witnessed in the last 30 years or so in such issues as the treatment of detainees and protection of civilians, and respect for human rights in occupied territories.

Then in the late '80s I produced a book on the United Nations, called *United Nations, Divided World*.⁴ Again, it was just the time when there was beginning to be interest in the UN – it actually preceded it by a year or two. So what I am probably proudest of is having identified important areas before they were widely considered important.

¹ Adam Roberts, *Nations in Arms: The Theory and Practice of Territorial Defence* (1976; 2nd edition 1986).

² Adam Roberts (ed.), *The Strategy of Civilian Defence: Non-violent Resistance to Aggression* (1967).

³ Adam Roberts & Richard Guelff (eds), *Documents on the Laws of War*

Q

Would it be fair to say that, in spite of academic research into past examples of popular resistance (you mentioned Czechoslovakia), no one predicted the Arab Spring?

Adam Roberts

Some people saw that something was happening in the Arab world. There was an interesting book that came out two years before the Arab Spring, edited by an American author whom I know quite well, entitled *Civilian Jihad*, about the tendency towards civil resistance in the Arab world.⁵ So it was not a total surprise. But I have never believed that one should equate knowledge of international relations with a capacity to predict specific events. There are too many unknowns that go into the causation of events, and we are fooling ourselves if we think we can achieve any certainty in predictions.

The Arab Spring has been an extremely important phenomenon, and it is having repercussions around the world. Look at what has been happening recently in Turkey and Brazil, to name just two such cases. They seem, in some respects, to have some similarity at least with what has been going on in the Arab Spring.

But humans can suffer from hubris in all sorts of different forms. There was an element of hubris in the belief in some Arab Spring uprisings – that if they resisted non-violently on a wide enough scale and could undermine some of the sources of power of the adversary, many existing regimes would simply fall. That did happen in Tunisia, and it did appear to happen in Egypt, but it was never going to be the pattern everywhere. There was a lack of willingness to do the boring, mundane things – for example, to understand the different circumstances of different countries, and to build up a leadership structure able to negotiate over the future constitutional order of the state – all of which are necessary if one is to achieve political change.

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Can you identify ways in which your work has been influential?

Adam Roberts

Proving direct impact of ideas of that kind is extremely difficult. I had an intimation of impact once when I was at a conference in Poland, and an accusation was made against me – it is the accusation I am proudest of – that I had essentially organised the Prague Spring, and was a very dangerous person. It was an East

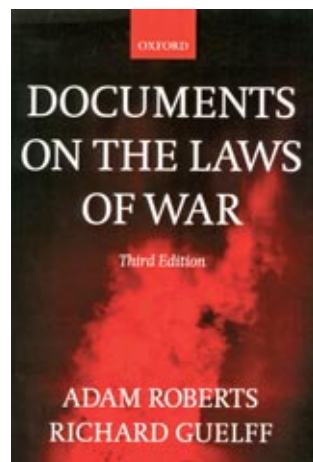
German telling a Russian, and overheard by a close colleague. I suppose that is evidence of impact of a kind, although I hasten to add that I think the East German's story was greatly exaggerated.

The book on the laws of war has been very widely used, and I have frequently had officers who have been serving

(1982; 3rd edition 2000).

⁴ Adam Roberts & Benedict Kingsbury (eds), *United Nations, Divided World: The UN's Roles in International Relations* (1988; 2nd edition 1993).

⁵ Maria J. Stephan, *Civilian Jihad: Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization, and Governance in the Middle East* (2009).



in Afghanistan or elsewhere say to me that they had a copy with them on operations. Indeed, on one occasion, an officer told me that he and two colleagues had been faced with a problem, and they all got the same book out to consult about what to do about it. So there is evidence of impact of that kind.

Q
Have former students of yours gone on to reach positions of influence in the world?

Adam Roberts

Many of our former students – whether at the LSE or here at Oxford University – have gone on to important positions. Currently, for example, the US National Security Advisor, Dr Susan Rice, is one of our former graduate students in international relations here at Oxford. Ditto the European Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs, Dr Olli Rehn, who had previously dealt with EU expansion. In such cases, I often ask them point blank, ‘Tell me, was what you studied here useful to you? Was it relevant to your later work?’ I do not think it is just out of politeness that they all say, ‘Yes, it was extremely useful.’ When you are in a busy job like that, you do not have time to do new thinking. The body of ideas that they took on board as graduate students has to serve them, and they have generally found it has served them well.

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So, social sciences scholarship translates into students who end up in positions of power, who are directly able to influence the quality of people’s lives and decisions made?

Adam Roberts

Absolutely. It is also true that many of the people we taught go into non-governmental jobs of one kind or another. Many of them, for example, have taken up senior positions in the International Committee of the Red Cross or Amnesty International. So it is not just positions of power, in the conventional sense. It is also other positions of influence. Again, they find that what they learned was useful.

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Of course, people who get into positions of power may be responsible for decisions that are highly controversial. So, is it a slightly subtler story than simply saying that social science education has helped government by supplying personnel?

Adam Roberts

It is absolutely true that those who go into positions of importance, be it in government or other types of body, may be part of a story that, overall, one can regard as tragedy. They may not make perfect decisions. One has to live with the knowledge that perfection, or even sensible policy-making, is not something one can guarantee just because somebody has studied the subject with reasonable diligence and care and a certain amount of flair when they were graduate students. There are risks attached to this, and sometimes there may even be the risk of people knowing too much and being too self-confident.

Sometimes having studied a subject gives the individual sufficient independence that they can stand out against the current. A very good example of that is a former student of Oxford University, Senator Fulbright, who became a dissident in the United States on the subject of the Vietnam War. He always saw that there was a connection between his confidence in being a heretic and his having studied at Oxford.

It is inevitably a complex and nuanced picture, and one cannot simply state that social science education is a good thing and leads to wise policies. It is not like that.

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In March 2013 you visited India and Pakistan. What was the trip about, and what were you hoping to achieve?

Adam Roberts

I visited India and Pakistan with a group from the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, which was inquiring into the possibilities of arms control and of reduction of tension between India and Pakistan. This was the first such trip that had been done with those two powers, both of which are nuclear powers that are outside the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Neither of them has ever been a party to the treaty.

We felt that on this first mission – there may be follow-ups later – the important thing to do was to listen carefully to both sides separately – we went first to India and then subsequently to Pakistan – to find out what the security concerns and worries are, and to find out what they thought about various possibilities for a reduction of tension between the two states, and for an increase in what one might call normalisation – increasing trade, and so on. That was the nature of the visit. The purpose of it was not to come up with a single set of proposals there and then, but to initiate a dialogue, which is likely to carry on. We made clear our concerns on a range of issues relating to security doctrines and practices.

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Who initiated that, and how successful was the mission?

Adam Roberts

The International Institute for Strategic Studies asked to do that. I think it had approval from a number of foundations and from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

It is for others to decide whether it was a success or not. All I can say is that those who were involved and those who

Adam Roberts (centre), together with Salman Khurshid (External Affairs Minister, India; far left), at a reception in New Delhi during the March 2013 visit to India and Pakistan by members of the International Institute for Strategic Studies.



have been studying the question of India-Pakistan nuclear relations all seem to see it as a success, precisely because we did see top-level people and we did hear from the horse's mouth what their concerns are and how they see the world. We had some interestingly different views from the two sides.

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So, if you work in international relations, you have to spend time in the field?

Adam Roberts

I have always positively believed in the value of understanding what it is like out there at the rough end. I have often visited conflict areas – be they in Guatemala, Kosovo or Bosnia – precisely because of the need to understand first-hand how the situations feel and what the possibilities look like to those directly involved. I am positively a believer in a degree of engagement. But at the same time I do respect, and indeed share, the view that it is also necessary to have a real historical perspective and depth in understanding international relations.

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When you witness awful conditions in the field, how do you maintain a balanced perspective?

Adam Roberts

I have worked in the West Bank and Gaza. I have been to institutions that have suffered a great deal under the Israeli occupation. But I am an absolutely firm believer that one needs to understand the different perspectives on the Middle East conflict, including the Israeli ones. I think they do reflect understandable security concerns. There are security concerns on both sides of that dispute.

People often treat international relations as an area in which they can take moralistic condemnatory stances.

People often treat international relations as an area in which they can take moralistic, condemnatory stances. There is a long tradition of intellectuals viewing international politics as a subject on which you can produce prescriptions that will solve all problems in one go. I don't believe it is like that. I believe that one should see the rough end, but one should not necessarily thereby conclude that one side is purely in the right and another side wholly in the wrong.

Q

Don't conflicts need to be resolved by everyone sitting down and talking?

Adam Roberts

There have been some conflicts that have been ended without talks with the people who have been originally in charge. People did try talking to Adolf Hitler, and it wasn't

very successful. After a war with the aim of unconditional surrender, there was a rather successful reconstruction of Germany and Japan. I would not say it is a universal rule, but it is a pretty good general rule that it is worth talking.

What one needs to bear in mind is that talking is not a sign of weakness or softness. Take, for example, a guy I knew very well, Lakshman Kadirgamar, a distinguished Tamil from Sri Lanka who was assassinated by the Tamil Tigers; I have recently done a book about him.⁶ He was a student at Balliol College, Oxford many years ago. He later became Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka, and was assassinated. I had known him for 35 years. He was as tough as anybody I know in the struggle against the Tamil Tigers. He succeeded in getting the British government to proscribe them so they could not raise money here for the cause, and so on. Yet he

also believed in negotiating with them.

I think that combination of toughness with willingness to talk can be very valuable. It is a sign of intellectual toughness that you are able to talk. You are not afraid of going into a room with somebody and exploring both the differences and the possible areas of agreement.

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This is a live issue in terms of talks with the Taliban. Do you think those could have started earlier under President Bush?

Adam Roberts

I think Bush might ultimately have been forced into the same position. He no more wanted to stay in Afghanistan than his successor does. If you are going to leave, then it is obvious that at some point there may need to be talks with the main adversary.

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What is the most important quality that the study of international relations can bring to policy-making?

Adam Roberts

The quality that, in my view, is most required, and has been largely lacking in western policy-making, is an awareness of how complex and difficult it is to change the fundamentals of a society. In the 1990s we, as well as the Americans, were guilty of thinking that globalisation

We simply underestimated the complexity of rebuilding fractured societies, be it in Afghanistan or Iraq. That was largely because of a lack of knowledge of those societies, and their longstanding internal divisions.

⁶ Adam Roberts (ed.), *Democracy, Sovereignty and Terror: Lakshman Kadirgamar on the Foundations of International Order* (2012).

sweeps all before it, and thinking that the English language was becoming a universal language. We simply underestimated the complexity of the task of rebuilding fractured societies, be it in Afghanistan or Iraq. That was largely because of a lack of interest in and knowledge of those societies, and their longstanding internal divisions.

We have instead a mania for having lots of very up-to-date information, whether it comes from news agencies, television or intelligence agencies. It is a mania for up-to-date information without a sense of where a society is coming from and what its collective experience has been. It is that sense that we have deprived ourselves of, with the dire consequences we see every day. The attempts to modernise Afghanistan and to democratise Iraq were, in both cases, simply too sudden and too extreme, and inevitably produced antibodies in the society concerned.

I do not know of a single major problem that we face which does not require attention both from the physical sciences and from the social sciences and the humanities.

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Is it the nature of scholarship to show that things are more complicated, and therefore to make the task of government – in this case in the areas of diplomacy and security – more difficult?

Adam Roberts

I think making government more cautious is not the same as making government more difficult. If one influences policy in the direction of saying, ‘Look, this is a really, seriously difficult project. You need to put your minds to it, and you need to commit our forces to it for a generation’, that would induce a more cautious mindset than one that thinks there are reasonably quick fixes to be had. A great deal of trouble can be saved that way. What may appear to be making the policy environment more complex and difficult may in fact save us from serious difficulty and even tragedy.

In the case of Iraq, for example, there were academics who clearly warned that it would be a very, very difficult enterprise, and would require, if it was to be done, a lot of extremely careful planning, etc. I think those academics were right.

Q
Ultimately, a well-informed government will not make expensive mistakes?

Adam Roberts

I think it is the case that quite significant lessons have been learned from these failures. The present Foreign Secretary, William Hague, may have at times appeared to be a little bit gung-ho in respect of the extremely difficult problem of the war in Syria, but he is also a historian with considerable knowledge of various past conflicts. He wrote an interesting book on Pitt the Younger, and another very

good one about William Wilberforce and the abolition of slavery.⁷ Within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, there has been a revived attention on the study of history and the study of languages. That has to be a good thing.

Q
What is the case for the public funding of the humanities and social sciences?

Adam Roberts

I do not know of a single major problem that we face – be it the environment, be it how to get economic growth started again in our country, be it how to reconstruct business in an era where we are past the stage of heavy reliance on industrial manufacture, one could go on with a list of international problems – which does not require attention both from the physical sciences and from the social sciences and the humanities.

For example, the environment case. Whatever we do about the environment is going to require in some measure individuals, companies and even governments taking actions that are not obviously in their short-term interests. There has to be some notion of looking to the long term and looking to a broader public interest, not just the individual interest, if we are to be able to tackle these exceptionally tricky problems. The social science aspects of the environmental problem are the most challenging and difficult. We certainly need to be looking at them very hard. Among other things, we need to see how it is that problems are successfully tackled, so we have some successful models to go on.

Q
In 2009 you took over as the President of the British Academy. How do you think the Academy has moved forward since then?

Adam Roberts

When I took over at the British Academy, I set a number of objectives. One of them was to enlarge our premises with an auditorium. We have done that. Another was to get the Academy more active in public meetings and generally to have a higher profile. We have done that. Finally, I was concerned to establish policy involvement by getting the best of academic opinion on specific issues, preparing short, succinct reports, then feeding that in to whoever was concerned with addressing those issues – be it in government or outside government. We have made a very good start there too.

I don’t want to sound complacent. Among other things, the British Academy does need to establish itself better in the public mind as a body that can speak for the humanities and the social sciences, and can speak relevantly in a way that the public, not just government, can understand. The plans of my successor, Lord Stern, in that regard are excellent, and I think he will be able to continue on the path of making the British Academy a national institution that distils the best from the world of scholarship.

⁷ William Hague, *William Pitt the Younger* (2004); William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (2007).