

'THERE'S A REAL NEED TO BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER TO TRY AND UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER'S POSITIONS'

Meet Professor James Raven, the new Chair of the ESU

It's Brexit day – Friday, 31 January – when I meet the ESU's new chairman, Professor James Raven, to talk about his experiences with and vision for the charity as it enters its second century. *The Telegraph's* front page declares our departure from the EU as 'not an end but a beginning'. *The i* bills it as the 'UK's leap into the unknown'. *The Frankfurter Allgemeine* insists 'We remain partners'. *Rzeczpospolita*, Poland's oldest newspaper, leads with 'Europe abandoned'. *The Daily Star*, in its inimitable fashion, proclaims an 'Historic moment for our great nation... the end of dry January.'

Given the English-Speaking Union was founded on ideals of interpersonal and international understanding and collaboration what, I wonder, does James make of Brexit and the fault lines it has exposed?

'Today is a good day to think about the challenge that we face in what has become a very polarised society,' he says. 'There has been so much passion involved, passion that has coalesced around rather entrenched positions, and I think there's a real need to bring people together to try and >

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INTERVIEW



The ESU's competitions and programmes such as Discover Debating, pictured, help young people engage with the world and to understand other points of view

understand each other's points of view. Families have been divided, institutions have been divided, relations between neighbours and friends have suffered. There's a lot of healing to do.'

It's not only Britain's relationship with the EU that concerns him. 'The ongoing debate about the Middle East, about the basis for democratic discussion in the US, there are so many different aspects of current society which have brought not just fracture but very opposed reactions,' he says. 'The real challenge now, particularly for young people, is not just to have the confidence and ability to communicate but to be able to understand how you agree to disagree and how you come to a common understanding – or at least an appreciation of each other's positions. I think we need to raise the ESU's profile in this debate about how we can best conduct ourselves in public discussion – how we envisage or reenvision a civil society and how we operate within that. It's all about understanding – understanding the origins of conflict between people and how that might be resolved, and that applies on an international level and within countries as well.'

Of course, understanding begins with communication and James is proud of the charity's oracy programmes and competitions which he sees as a 'very real expression of our founding principles'. Indeed, he has intimate knowledge of them, having been Chair of the Education Committee since 2018, having organised and judged countless ESU public speaking competitions ever since he joined 40 years ago and, most saliently perhaps, having won Best Speaker as part of the Best Team at the Public Speaking Competition in 1976 when he was a pupil at the Gilbert School, a state grammar in Colchester.

'I'd never done anything like that before and I remember the enormous enjoyment of it,' says James. 'I don't think I really knew what a private school was before the competition, the *Jennings* books aside,' he laughs. 'I came from a very supportive family but a family who worked on the land in north Essex and south Suffolk and none of whom had taken A levels, so the PSC really opened my eyes to a whole

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range of different life experiences and understanding.'

Those experiences included coming to Dartmouth House, meeting the Duke of Edinburgh, then the charity's President, and travelling to America on the Colchester-New Brunswick NJ US Exchange scholarship (a month-long biennial exchange established between the two ESU branches in 1973), an experience he describes as 'truly extraordinary'. 'I'd never been abroad before; never flown – I remember I was armed with notes from the ESU about "what to do at an airport". I saw automatic garage doors for the first time, shopping malls – it was a very foreign country, much more foreign than it is now.'

The branch members who welcomed and hosted James were mainly academics, educators and fundraisers, many of whom had been the founders of the New Jersey College for Women, later renamed Douglass College, now part of Rutgers University. Though he couldn't have known it at the time, the friendships he made, with both his hosts and his contemporaries, have been enormously helpful throughout his subsequent career. A past and present Fellow of two colleges in Cambridge (currently at

Magdalene) and one in Oxford, James is an international authority on literary culture and credits his time in the US as giving him the 'stepping-stone' he needed to allow him to pursue his academic work. 'The ESU gave me a boost at an absolutely pivotal early stage,' he says. 'It gave me the confidence to travel; without it I probably wouldn't have undertaken my historical research.' His contacts and knowledge of the

American university system have had other benefits too, allowing him to foster early careers in academia among his own students. 'It's left a very practical legacy,' he says.

What, then, does James see as the priorities for the charity today, given his knowledge of education and his long experience of the ESU?

'The ESU is an educational charity that sets out to transform lives and that transformation is about giving people an opportunity to think for themselves, to explore the world through communication – and sometimes in person – and to give them opportunities which they might not otherwise have access to,' he says. 'Sadly, despite the national rhetoric and all the political initiatives over the last 20-30 years, we live in a more divided and more unequal society than we did and there has been a real closure of access to opportunity, a limitation of horizons, for many young people. I'd like to see us going forward in partnership as part of a coalition of people working in schools, particularly in disadvantaged communities, to make a very powerful and sustainable contribution.'

James sees this idea of partnership and collaboration as being as important at branch level as it is at national and international level. 'We have a keen and committed volunteer membership and I'm very much in favour of branches saying in their local communities, "We are the ESU."



A life in the ESU

1976
Won Best Speaker and Best Team at the PSC

1980
Joined ESU

1985 onwards
While a Fellow of Cambridge and Oxford colleges invited ESU to hold summer schools there

1990
President of Colchester (now Colchester and North Essex) branch

2000-2006
Appointed Governor of the ESU

2012 onwards
Elected Governor of the ESU

2014-2017
Deputy Chair

2018
Chair, Education Committee

2020
Chair, ESU

This is what we do. Would you like to join or support us?" Involvement from parents and support from schools was always a strong aspect of our competitions and I would like to see a return to that.'

In tandem, James is also keen to promote the charity's profile, particularly with a view to contributing to the debate on the nature of civic discourse. 'We have a wonderful history in terms of our contribution to past debates through the Churchill Lecture and other high-profile events and I hope we can continue and refresh that,' he says. He's also eager to consider how communication intersects with technology, something he's all too aware of through his two young children (William, 14 and Rupert, 12). 'Teenagers are in an entirely new world of communication,' he says. 'They have been brought up with the internet, Instagram, Facebook etc and now they have someone, notably in the White House, who is tweeting all the time, which they see as a model for how to conduct political debate. Messaging as a form of communication presents an important challenge, and one I think we can engage with.'

As someone who has benefitted so much from international links himself, James also intends to extend cross-cultural collaboration wherever possible, especially between the UK and America. It's amusing to note that the topic for James's speech in the final of the PSC in 1976 was 'the future of US/UK relations bilaterally and multilaterally'. Back then, he pronounced them rosy and that's an opinion he continues to hold. 'Britain outside the EU is going to have a new relationship with the US, as with every other country, and how that relationship is fostered is very important,' he says. 'An organisation like the ESU is in an unrivalled position to contribute to that, particularly through its branches. As Sir Evelyn Wrench said, "international relations should not be left to governments alone".' ●