

LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE

By Professor Richard Rose
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I have never believed in telling other people what to do, and since young political scientists are people, I have applied this principle professionally as well as in private life. However, various Readers of my newly published memoir urged me to do more than simply give an account of conducting research and to draw lessons that younger political scientists might benefit from. My preference is to lead by example. Thus, when writing the first edition of *Politics in England* I did not make it a manifesto telling other people how to do political science. Instead, I tried to demonstrate that there was a better way of doing so than what was then the practice of Oxford and the LSE. After being reminded that I had once broken my rule about giving advice in an ECPR bulletin, I gave in to pressures and added the following to my memoir:

1. *Do what interests you.* The PhD is the start of an education, not its end. Don't begin writing a thesis if you are not interested enough in its subject matter to give it several years of your life. And you should continue learning after you get your doctorate.
2. *Go for bear rather than budgerigars.* Pursue a subject that is important. Don't waste time writing a conference paper if all you will get is one more line for your curriculum vitae, and the pebble it adds to the beach of knowledge is well back from the foreshore. After getting my doctorate, I published relatively little for more than half a dozen years because I was busy learning more.
3. *If you criticise, be constructive.* Peer reviewers of papers for journals are too often me-ers; that is, they criticise authors who do not think like themselves. Such arrogance may boost a reviewer's ego but it doesn't help an author. A reviewer ought to consider the intent of the author before identifying shortcomings in the achievement of that purpose. If I can't think of anything constructive to say about a paper, I say nothing. I once heard this maxim applied to the paper that an internationally known American political scientist presented to an international conference. When the discussant was asked whether he had ignored the paper because he hadn't read it, the reply was, 'it was because I had'.
4. *Learn to put yourself in other people's shoes.* Don't reduce the people you study to the one-dimensional actors found in abstract theories. A self-aware social scientist should try to be a mind-reader, understanding other people well enough to know how to think as they do. You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes in order to notice small details that can be telling or to see significance in what people avoid saying as well as what they talk about.
5. *Recognise that there is a difference between lesser evils and greater evils .* People who think that a loss of trust in government is the worst thing that can happen to their country are substituting hyperbole for history. You don't have to know people who have endured racial discrimination, civil war, being a political refugee, or a Holocaust survivor, as is my case, to realize that a loss of political trust is not the worst way in which politics can go wrong.
6. *The hardest part of statistical analysis is saying what statistics mean.* As computers make it increasingly easy to produce high-level inferential statistical analyses, it becomes increasingly difficult to connect what is shown on a computer screen with what can be observed by walking down a street. Even if there is no language requirement in a PhD programme, to communicate the results of research you need to be able to translate into understandable words the quantitative output that

computers produce.

7. *Don't think in career terms.* There are plenty of other occupations where being a careerist is normal and they usually pay better than being a scholar. When writing the first draft of *Politics in England* a half-century ago I realized that this might make me the author of a profitable textbook if I fit it into a conventional marketing formula. I decided against this because it would remove what was original in the text and wrote the book to suit myself. In various editions it has now sold upwards of 200,000 copies--and in 2014 a fiftieth anniversary edition will come out under the title *Politics in Britain*. Although the sales of my subsequent books have not been so big, I still write books to suit myself, including my memoir and the website, www.profrose.eu, added for lagniappe.

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Image: Richard Rose with some of the books he has written.

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