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As part of the Café Insights series of conversations with insightful speakers, The Insight Bureau was recently in conversation with Sharanjit Leyl, former BBC news anchor, now an event host and moderator. We talked about her transition from being in front of a camera to being in front of audiences, and the important role of being an event moderator.



Andrew Vine: Hello and welcome to another in the series of Café Insights. I'm Andrew Vine, the founder and CEO of the Insight Bureau, and today it's my great pleasure to be in conversation with Sharanjit Lai. Sharanjit, how are you?

Sharanjit Leyl: I'm great, Andrew. Thank you so much for speaking to me.

AV: Well, thanks for inviting me here at the Tanglin Club here in Singapore. Sharanjit is an international broadcast journalist. She worked for many years at the BBC until quite recently, and we've worked together, of course, on moderating events together.

SL: That's right, for many years as well.

AV: So, tell us a little bit about what keeps you busy. I know you've got a new role as well.

SL: I do have a new role. In May of 2024, I made history as the first Singaporean Chancellor of a British university, and this is Bath Spa University. I spent half my year in Bath now. What was extraordinary about this role was that I succeeded the Oscar winner, Jeremy Irons... which is still a bit of a shock to me, but I'm really enjoying the role, and it's really about inspiring and motivating to young students at Bath Spa. There's a very good journalism programme there, and that's how I got involved, by mentoring some of the students there.

AV: And of course, we work together in conferences and events. It's about moderating, chairing, and emceeing business conferences around the world -- many of them in Singapore but not necessarily. So, what keeps you busy these days with those kinds of events? Where do you go?

SL: Gosh, everywhere, really. I mean, the last quarter of 2024 was just I was literally always on the road -- well on a plane -- you know I went to Baku for COP29. Again, I was in the UK quite a bit doing various things in Bath -- I'm on several boards there as well, and as Chancellor, I'm also involved with the National Centre for Fashion and Sustainability, which is going to be set up by Bath Spa University. So, that's just kept me so busy.

I spoke to Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Malala Yousafzai in September in Singapore; this was at the MedTech Forum, and she was speaking about the importance of women's health. We know that she's been a big campaigner for women's education. It was her first time in Singapore. Everyone thinks of her as a young teenager, and of course she obviously captured the world's attention, uh, when the Taliban shot her, and then she recovered, became this woman. She's a

very famous, crucially important voice, but she's also an incredible voice for women's rights. She's now in her late 20s, and what an inspiration it was to speak to her for an hour on stage here in Singapore. I truly enjoyed that conversation.

I also had amazing conversations with various other people last year, the likes of Roger Federer. I mean, he's extraordinary -- he was such an inspiration, and such a lovely, lovely man. We did a whole series of events with him, including a whole interaction with school children. And you'd be surprised, school kids ask the best questions!

AV: Really? Naturally curious.

SL: Yes, absolutely naturally curious. And that is the, I think the fundamental thing about this role is, and as a journalist as well, that curiosity is crucial.

AV: You spent so many years getting up very early in the morning to work for the BBC. Do you miss the place?

SL: Yes, I do miss it. I mean, not the early mornings, but it was great being a journalist. And again, you know when I look back at my journalism career, it was 25 years. I started with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Canada, in Vancouver. I moved to Singapore to cover the Asian Financial Crisis for them. So, I've always been, you know, at heart a business journalist. Then I moved on to Bloomberg Television in Tokyo, which was their Asia Pacific headquarters at the time. And then I moved to the BBC. So, 18 years in all for the BBC, working for the business programs. But I was a jack-of-all-trades, you know. Towards the end, I was covering all sorts of breaking news -- disasters, plane crashes. And it was such a responsibility broadcasting, first of all, to millions of viewers around the world, but also broadcasting and speaking on behalf of people who are grieving, who were the bereaved. So, you sense this importance and responsibility of your role to tell their stories well, and to tell it with as much empathy as possible to, to millions of viewers. So, that is a skill I think I shall always be grateful for, what I learnt at the BBC, and I truly loved my days there. Not, the 3am starts so much! [Laughter]

AV: But now you're kind of unshackled, you have the freedom to do a whole number of very interesting things, some with multilateral organizations, some with banking institutions and regular businesses around the world. So, it's quite a diverse range of activities. We talked a lot about the conference business, and one minute we're working on big conferences, big summits that take place, or regional or global industry events, especially ones that come to Singapore. And being a Singaporean, as well as an international name, really carries some weight, doesn't it? And then, lots of organisations very quietly themselves need to bring their leadership teams together and that's where we've worked as well, with internal events. So, it is quite varied work.

SL: Yes, and it sort of echoes what I did as a journalist for 25 years, you know; obviously, as a business journalist, grilling a corporate CEOs was my main bread-and-butter, but then I also did a whole host of different things with the BBC. You'd go off and do the disaster stories; you'd go off and do all the breaking news happening around the region, but you'd also do things that were a bit softer. I was also very good with celebrities, so after a while, every time there was a celebrity in town, I'd do the interview, because I was able to make them feel comfortable, you know, relaxed. They'd share a bit more with me, and I loved that. I loved the interaction with these amazing people, who are incredibly talented but also have such a lot to them. They

worked so hard to get where they are, and my sense of curiosity, I'm always curious to know what makes them tick. You know, you're trying to show them in a nice light.

AV: You have to be tough and soft at the same time...

SL: Yes, exactly.

AV: ... it's being tough in a nice kind of way, but nice in a tough kind of way!

SL: Yes. But the celebrities I enjoyed, and also some of the softer stories around fashion, around art, you know, I was always love doing those things. I'm a jack-of-all-trades; I can do the business, I can do the politics. and I can do the softer elements as well.

AV: Sometimes I feel, personally, that the role of a conference chairperson or conference moderator is undervalued. Lots of people get it do it very well. But I think it is an opportunity for you to really work with someone whose objective it is to really make the event *work* and to be success. Because all too often you get brilliant people coming onto an agenda, but it's no instant guarantee that it's going to work out. You can't always guarantee that someone giving a speech is going to say the kind of things that you hoped that they would. Whereas a moderated session, you can kind of tease this out, and make sure that certain things are covered.

SL: Absolutely. No, I totally agree, and that is such a crucial thing, isn't it? You want something that is a successful event and that invariably entails also managing the timing, because there's only so much attention that people in the audience are going to have. And it's the same as being on TV. Essentially what I say to people is that I haven't really stopped being a journalist -- I've stopped being on television, but I'm still interviewing the same sort of folks, except now I don't do it on telly, I do it on a stage at a conference! And you've got a live audience watching you and interacting with you while you're doing it, so I quite enjoy that actually. You know, I didn't quite enjoy it when doing it on TV when you only had a camera -- an inanimate object -- staring at you and filming you. Maybe you might see the person you're interviewing, but that was the only person you could sort of have a sense of camaraderie with.

AV: Whereas at conferences, you've got a whole audience watching.

SHL: Absolutely. So, you've got to make sure they're interested. They're paying attention, so what I often do at these conferences is engage the audience; It's not just watching!

AV: Yes. It's actually participating in the process.

SHL: So, it's almost like being a stage actor, where you're kind of performing on stage, but you have to make sure that the audience is engaged. And there's a few tips and tricks you can do to make sure that they are.

AV: Yes. And I think, you know, we've just come through a period, it's been quite a rocky period through COVID where the industry was kind of turned upside down and we did things virtually. I like to say that 'necessity is the mother of invention' and we just had to do it. And then we did it so many times that we got quite good at virtual events. But honestly, for the kind of things that you get involved in, it's all about creating the experience. And you just can't do that really unless you bring people together. I mean, I think we did a good job, during the COVID time ...

SHL: We did! And a lot of those events went hybrid. But it just goes to show how resilient we are, you know, uh, whether it's, it's individuals, whether it's corporations, companies, we were so resilient, we were able to adapt so quickly to something like that, and still be able to deliver, what is ultimately the human experience, being able to talk to each other, being able to share knowledge, and being able to ask those questions and have that sense of curiosity. It continued, despite the fact that we didn't have the live audiences, it still managed to continue.

AV: Yes, I like to think of the moderator role as being the 'safe pair of hands' that you entrust your event to, because first of all, things *can* go wrong. When you were broadcasting, things would wobble, I'm sure! But it looks all very calm on the surface! And so, there's that aspect of making sure *mechanically* it still works. But I go back to what I said earlier about being a *partner* with the organiser, to say, 'what do we really need to achieve here?' and so let's make sure we engineer this such that it *does* achieve what we set out to achieve.

SL: Yes, and that's why those briefings with the organisers are so crucial. And one of the key questions I often ask is, *who's* the audience? You know, what are their interests? And I would make sure that the questions, the content on stage, is really geared towards engaging the audience and their particular interests, and what they're there to find out during the day. That is crucial.

AV: I'm just thinking ahead as well; how do we think conferences and events are going to evolve from here? You know, we've had that 'bump in the road' when we now reaffirmed that it is about the human connection. But it's certainly the case that I think organizations are not just rolling events out like they used to. It used to be this automatic thing: "Oh, it's September, time to do the annual conference" and so let's just roll it out. I think, from my perspective of running a bureau and talking to clients that there's a higher sense of trying to do something *meaningful*.

SH: Sure. And the whole ESG agenda is so crucial right now. You know, being able to show that you're doing the right thing. You're ticking the right boxes when it comes to things like the environment and society and the governmental aspects. It's so crucial with the governance as well. And those are the conferences I like getting involved in as well because I see myself as a sort of ESG champion. You know, one of the first things I did when I left the BBC was go and sit for the board exams and make sure that I was board-certified because for years I'd interviewed these CEOs and I just thought, you know, how can I make a difference? And ultimately, the difference you can make is getting involved in companies and trying to influence the way they think and the way you can do that is by getting on a board. And there was a big need for more diversity on boards and, and lots of studies that show the more diversity you have on boards, the better. So, I did those exams and one of the key, crucial aspects of those exams was, was the ESG aspect. Being involved in the conferences that have that as an aspect and have that as a theme, I think is so important and that's why I love working with a lot of those multilateral development organisations -- the ADB, the World Bank, the International Labour Organisation and a lot of UN agencies --- will emphasize those aspects and I love doing that because I feel like it does actually make a difference.

AV: And the other trend I think I've seen is just the way the world has become more complex for senior business people to understand: it's economics, it's geopolitics, it's about the environment, sustainability, it's about diversity, and it's about, technology. I mean, this is the big

one! So many moving parts for people to consider. And so, you know, for a conference as well, all those things have to be kind of drawn together.

SL: Oh, absolutely. I mean, I don't know how many conferences I did over the last year and a half where AI was the chief theme. So, you know, is AI going to come after our jobs? Is AI going to transform what we do? And, you know, undoubtedly it *is* transforming society right now. How can you justify that a machine is able to do a *better* job – yes they're doing a much faster and efficient job – but they don't have that sense of moral guidance or that fundamental set of principles that ultimately is vested in all of us, in humanity, so I am always interested in those conversations and they always make for interesting debate on stage.

AV: Well, I'm sure that the human element isn't going to disappear from the way we run businesses. Hopefully, AI does a lot of the heavy lifting in terms of intelligence and efficiencies and everything else. I also kind of wonder or worry – well, I don't really *worry* about it, but I do *wonder* -- the degree to which AI can transform the events business. I mean, can you be replaced by an AI avatar?

SHL: ... only if the person being interviewed happens to be an AI avatar. I think the person being interviewed, unless, you know, somebody quite far out who's a big innovator, someone like Elon Musk or something, I think most people would like to be interviewed by another human being. They're going to not quite enjoy the interaction with a machine or with AI as much as they would with somebody who's fundamentally human. I mean, I'm just talking from my own perspective; do I want to be speaking to a machine every day? Probably not! And certainly not on stage in an important conversation that's going to be heard by hundreds of people in the audience. But I don't think I'd like to be asked by a machine.

AV: No. Well, I hope not too, because it's so much nicer to interact with a human like yourself!

SL: Yes, absolutely.

AV: Sharanjit, thanks very much for spending a little time with me over lunch.

SL: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Andrew.

Sharanjit Leyl is one of Asia's most experienced conference moderators and hosts, following a 25-year career in broadcast journalism, most notably with BBC news. She is also Chancellor of Bath Spa University in the United Kingdom and splits her time between her home in Singapore and the UK.

To learn more about Sharanjit Leyl please visit:
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