

From the East Midlands to the Middle East

Gordon Campbell talks to the *British Academy Review* about supporting higher education in Iraq and Syria



Professor Gordon Campbell is Fellow in Renaissance Studies at the University of Leicester. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2011.

‘The first thing they teach you is first aid,’ says Professor Gordon Campbell, a Fellow of the British Academy. ‘I remember reaching into my trauma pack and pulling out a tampon. I said, “I must have a woman’s pack by mistake,” but the instructor told me, “No, that’s for bullet wounds. It absorbs the blood.” The second part is weapons training. If you’re kidnapped by people with AK47s, you need to know how to use them in case you get your hands on one. The third part is what to do if you’re travelling in convoy and gunmen attack. Then there’s the kidnap training...’

Professor Campbell is Fellow in Renaissance Studies at the University of Leicester. He is a general editor of Oxford University Press’s *The Complete Works of John Milton*, and is editor of *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Renaissance* (to be published in 2018). So, at first glance, his name isn’t exactly one you’d think of putting forward for hostile environment training. Except it ought to be, because Campbell has spent the last 30 years flying in and out of the Middle East to help support and improve the region’s higher education sector.

Between 2009 and 2011, he worked on the Development Partnerships in Higher Education scheme for Iraq, during which time he started and became the first chairman of the British Universities Iraq Consortium (BUIC). The scheme, which was funded by the

Department for International Development (DFID), sought to support Iraqi academics who were in post in Iraqi universities. ‘I was interested in infrastructure and keeping people in place,’ Campbell explains. ‘The gist of the scheme was that the Iraqi universities would send senior administrators, typically deputy registrars, to the UK and we would embed them for a couple of weeks with their British opposite numbers to help them understand how British universities worked, and then they’d return to Iraq.’

How did someone lecturing in Renaissance Studies wind up doing this kind of work? ‘By accident!’ he says. ‘I initially travelled for the University of Leicester to the Far East, the Indian sub-continent and sub-Saharan Africa to conduct recruitment and contract negotiation. I helped to start a campus in Malaysia in the mid ’80s, I’ve travelled for the British Council, and I’ve also worked for the Foreign Office for a unit called Engaging with the Islamic World (EIW). So, it all just sort of happened. There was no plan. I think careers are only planned in retrospect.’

Professor Campbell first travelled to the Middle East 30 years ago, and has since witnessed some of the most violent periods in the region’s history, including in Lebanon, where he went to establish a distance learning programme for teachers during the Lebanese Civil War in the late 1980s, and in the Palestinian territories. ‘I worked in East Jerusalem and the West Bank during the First Intifada, trying to provide education for Palestinians at a time when the Israelis had shut down the schools and universities in the occupied territories. I was

there when it started in December 1987. That was my first experience of tear gas and small arms fire, though I wasn't in any danger.'

Clearly, the turbulence of the Middle East does little to dissuade Campbell from working there, but what about the politics? 'It's hard to keep absolutely clean hands in many parts of the world, not just the Middle East, and I've worked with tyrannical regimes in the past. The principle in diplomacy is that with countries like that you support the good guys and just deal with the bad guys when you have to. Supporting democratic impulses is a good thing, even if it's in the context of a dictatorship.'

In fact, Campbell says, academics have a special role to play. 'I've worked in Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, and British academics can be useful in such places, partly because we can talk. When governments fall out with each other, the two groups of people who can keep conversations going are sportspeople and academics. We can talk to anyone and we do. I'm eager that government take advantage of that willingness for academics to be – not so much a hidden channel – rather a channel that remains open when things are tough on the diplomatic front.'

As an example of how academics can help open up dialogue, Campbell cites his work in the 1990s in Saudi Arabia, where he and colleagues from other British universities started a women's PhD programme at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah. The women, he explains, would visit British universities to complete their PhD and then return to Saudi Arabia to implement their learning. 'Some of them did marvellous things,' he says. 'For instance, one of the graduates in psychology went back and put on a conference on child abuse in Saudi Arabia. This was an absolutely forbidden topic – in fact, the official line was that it didn't exist. But these women were able to start a conversation about it.' He adds, 'I'm particularly keen on women's programmes because the evidence is that women are the most likely force for change. Empowering women is also the best antidote to radicalisation.'

Professor Campbell is passionate about the role academia has to play not just in supporting higher education abroad, but also in helping to tackle the many challenges facing the world today, such as Islamic extremism. 'The treatment of any problem can only begin when you understand it, and academics are the ones who are best placed to understand. Social scientists have extraordinarily profound understandings of behaviour, not least of radicalism – while the humanities can help with the history of Islam and radicalisation. We have huge amounts to contribute, not just by issuing public reports – although those are helpful – but by actually engaging with government and offering advice.'

It is evident when speaking to Campbell that his interest in the Middle East is not simply based on a desire to improve higher education in the region. There is also a genuine affection for what he regards as 'a misrepresented part of the world'.

'I'm often struck by the hospitality, by the kindness of strangers, when travelling,' he says. 'For example, you could be travelling on a bus – and this has happened to me – in Iran or the Gulf or wherever and people will just insist on giving you food. I've even had to fend off invitations to have dinner with people in their homes. And when you break down by the side of the road with a puncture or whatever, people immediately stop to offer assistance.'

'There really is something about the sheer embracing warmth of the Islamic world. It sounds like a trivial thing but it's not. It's a generosity of spirit that I continue to value.'

As for the future, Campbell wants to go to Syria, where he hopes the British government will establish a scheme similar to the one he worked on in Iraq, though the logistics – as you might expect – are currently making things difficult. 'Unfortunately,' he says, 'the infrastructure just isn't there. In Syria the problem is in finding an organisation that represents the whole country and, so far, I haven't been able to do it.'

When would he like to go? 'I'd be happy to go now, but I may not be the best person for the job. You can go to Damascus and Latakia – they're safe enough. I mean, you have to have close protection but that's alright. What you can't do though is get to the North, so my view is that it's probably too soon to go right now. The timing will be determined by Foreign Office advice. But I'd like to see some sort of plan that is already in place and take advice from people on the ground on whether anything can be done.'

'It was different in Iraq because we had the convenience of having an army there. I went in with the army and stayed in a safe and comfortable freight container in the embassy. But, at present, we have no embassy in Damascus and we're without a diplomatic presence or a military presence – at least one on the ground – so there isn't the infrastructure to act now. But there will be eventually, and I want to be ready.' ■



Professor Gordon Campbell in Baghdad, 2009.

Gordon Campbell was speaking to Joe Christmas.