

Serving The Public

A Conversation between Nido R. Qubein, President, High Point University and Boris Johnson, Former Prime Minister, United Kingdom



Nido R. Qubein and Boris Johnson

EDITOR'S NOTE Nido Qubein is the longest-serving active college president in the state of North Carolina. Named HPU's seventh president in January 2005, he has led his alma mater with vision and dedication for more than 20 years. He rose to prominence as an internationally known author and consultant who has given more than 7,500 presentations worldwide. He has served on the corporate boards of

several Fortune 500 companies, including Truist, the sixth-largest bank in the nation, La-Z-Boy, and Savista Healthcare. He is also executive chairman of the Great Harvest Bread Company. During his more than two decades and counting as HPU's president, enrollment has quadrupled, the campus has expanded from 90 to 520 acres, and academic schools have grown from three to 14. Among numerous honors and recognitions

that he has received, Qubein is an inductee of the Horatio Alger Association for Distinguished Americans, along with Oprah Winfrey and Colin Powell. He converses with some of the world's most influential thought leaders and change agents, many of whom are drawn to HPU's innovative campus. Their conversations focus on leadership, life skills and values that prepare HPU students to lead lives of success and significance. Below is a transcribed excerpt, edited for clarity and brevity, of Qubein's 2025 conversation with former United Kingdom Prime Minister Boris Johnson on HPU's campus.

Qubein: You were a prime minister. You were a mayor of London. You were leader of the Conservative Party. You were foreign secretary. Which of those roles did you like the most and why?

Johnson: Well, I loved all of them. It was a massive privilege to do any job in public service. A lot of the people in the UK were ever more astonished as I got more and more positions of power, and there was a great deal of mystification. But I loved all those jobs. I think being mayor of London was perhaps not an ideal preparation for being prime minister in a weird way. I should tell you why. I mean I loved being mayor. I loved being prime minister, but the problem with being mayor of London was that it was basically monarchical. I was in charge, and I said to one go and he goeth, and another come and he cometh. And that was a bad preparation for being prime minister because the prime minister in the UK is, well, he's *primus inter pares* in his cabinet

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or her cabinet. But the crucial thing is that you serve not just at the pleasure of the people, but at the pleasure of your backbencher. I think to be a really effective prime minister you have to be a real child of the House of Commons, as Churchill said. You’ve got to sit there. You got to know all the back benches, and you’ve got to be very alert to what’s happening.

Qubein: I ask because I really don’t know the relationship between the prime minister during your tenure, and Her Majesty the Queen. In your book, you say that Queen Elizabeth at the time told you, “Leadership isn’t about being popular. It’s about being useful.”

Johnson: It’s such a good piece of advice, and it means that when you’re a leader, sometimes you have to do things that people aren’t going to like necessarily and you’re going to have to do a lot of boring stuff that you don’t really want to do, but you’ve got to do things that are really going to serve the public. I don’t think people should go into politics unless they think they can do something useful and make a difference. She was dead right about that, and she was right about most things.

One of the greatest joys of being prime minister, the greatest privileges of being prime minister, was that you got to spend an hour a week in the company of Her Majesty the Queen. And this was like a confessional, right? It was just me and Her Majesty for an hour or more because some days we rambled on. It was like you could tell her anything. It was like she’s your favorite grandmother, and you can tell her things you don’t tell your parents, right?

She was brilliant, absolutely. She knew everybody. She had known every American president since Eisenhower, from Eisenhower to Trump. She knew them all, and she had stories about them all, which sadly I can’t repeat because the Cabinet office won’t let me quite rightly and I wouldn’t. But she had a great gift of making you feel that she was on your side in trying to do the right thing, and she was very, very encouraging. I always came out of the meetings feeling buoyed and soothed.

Qubein: In this hour a week that you had with Her Majesty the Queen, did she try to influence your politics?

Johnson: No, and it’s very important that everybody understands that the role of the monarch is to advise and to consent, but in no way to interfere. And she never did. I had a pretty good idea what she thought because after a while when you’re with someone for a long time, you kind of intuit things. Maybe I was wrong, but I had a pretty good idea what she thought, but she never said, “Oh, that’s a good idea. That’s a bad idea. Do this.” Never, never, never. That wasn’t her job. Her job was to listen, to help set the context and to encourage, and she did that absolutely brilliantly.

Qubein: When you look at your own career, it’s been a celebrated career to many. But on the other hand, there were people who were in disagreement with you. You’re somewhat controversial to some. How did you deal with that, and would you ever go back into politics?

Johnson: Normally, I defeated them. That was the best thing to do with them. I just defeated them. People do disagree with you. With Brexit, we had a most enormous argument, and it took a lot of effort and energy, but we won it. It’s interesting that the U.S. does seem more polarized politically now than the U.K. Would I be right in thinking that? I think that’s a pity. I think sometimes the public love it if you can come together. If having had the argument, you can then come together for the good of the country, and I think we should all try to do that. As for whether I will ever do anything in politics again, remember what Her Majesty the Queen said: You should only do things if you think you can be useful in politics, and you know at the moment I think, as I say, the most useful single thing I can do is build that kitchen for my wife. That really is it, and that’s what I’m doing.

Qubein: Since we are on a university campus, if you were to say to these young men and women here are the two or three things you must learn and apply in your life to be extraordinary, to be “useful,” what would you say to them?

Johnson: Oh man. Just remember, people don’t have time to form a judgment about you other than the judgment that you seem to have of yourself. They don’t, and so you should be proud and you should be confident. Concentrate on what you’re doing and not how you’re doing – that’s what my grandmother used to say. I didn’t really have any better advice than that. Don’t go into politics until you’ve made some money. Definitely yes, that’s the other piece of advice I’d give. ●

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