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A MODERATED CONVERSATION WITH PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

September 28th, 2018

Ben Tiggelaar: Welcome mister President. It is a great honor to have you here.

Barack Obama: Thank you. This is a little extra special, being here. I love Amsterdam. I love the Netherlands. The people are so friendly and so tall. They can look me right in the eye. Michelle feels very at home here too.

I would like to start with a question about personal leadership. When you entered the White House, even your best friends called you 'mister President'. Many people say that it is very difficult to maintain a good character under such circumstances. How did you?

Well, first of all, my best friend still called me Barack. But I do think that one of the things that Michelle and I are proud of, is that we came through the White House with our souls intact. When you are placed in such an artificial situation, and your office has great importance, there is a tendency for people to want to please you. To not be as honest with you. We fought against that.

How?

Number one: we invited my mother-in-law to live with us. She came from a working-class background. She raised Michelle and her brother in very modest circumstances. Having her there was important, also for our children.

It was also helpful that Michelle and I were not famous

until we were in our forties. I often think of how difficult it must be for people who are successful at a very young age, like athletes or musicians. Handling that, I suspect, is harder than it was for us. Because we had lived normal lives. We had taken our children to school ourselves and washed our cars ourselves and had to go to the grocery store and then cook diner. We had gone through the stresses and strains and the great joys of a more ordinary live. That, I think, was helpful.

But probably the most important thing for me as president was always reminding myself that I was in this job temporarily. I used to describe it as being like a relay runner: you take the baton, you run your race and you pass it on.

I often say that the most important office in a democracy is the office of citizen. Not the office of president, or mayor, or prime minister, or parliamentarian, but the office of citizen. It was very important for me to constantly recognize that your job was to do the best work you could during that time, but not to somehow think that this had lifted you above your fellow citizens.

I also learned that you had some daily routines that helped you in that. While you were in office you read ten letters by citizens every day.

I did. So every night I would get a packet of things to read. There was a lot of things on my plate. But one of the things I instituted very early on, was that the office that handles the 40.000 e-mails and letters that the White House would receive a day, selected ten letters that were representative of the voices of the people. And to include those in the packet of the things I would have to read. So in the evenings after I had dinner with the girls and I would go into my office to do my homework for the next day, I would end every night reading these ten letters.

Partly, it was a reminder that we were not dealing with abstractions. Some of the letters were very simple. You might have an elderly woman write, who was concerned about her pension. And she would list her expenses. 'Here is how much I spend on food, here is how much I spend on heat, I don't have much left. So, I can't afford to lose that.'

Sometimes the letters would be much more eloquent and complicated. A gentleman wrote to me and said: 'I didn't vote for you, I disagree with your policies, I consider myself very conservative, but my son befriended a young man at school who I discovered was an illegal immigrant. I found that he is a wonderful young man who deserves support. So he has changed my mind on that issue and I appreciate the work you are trying to do to give him a chance at a better life in our country.'

You still remember those letters?

Yes. You would hear these voices like a Greek chorus. And it made the numbers and the policies very concrete and very specific. You were reminded that the choices you were making were affecting millions of people, billions of people. All those people had their own hopes, their own dreams, their own fears.

Every organization needs to have some feedback mechanism to break through the bubble. The White House is an exaggerated version of it, but I think all of us occupy a bubble in some way. All of us tend to be with people who agree with us and we read things that reinforce our assumptions and our biases. One of the things that I found consistently the most valuable, both in how I organized the White House and how I took in information, was to make sure I got voices outside of that bubble.

Some people argue that you only can be a good leader if you have a healthy sense of humor. What would be your reaction to that?

Well, look, I don't know...

Let me add to that: you are a funny guy.

Well there is no doubt about that. *(Laughter in the audience)* I think a sense of humor is an expression of perspective. And in stressful, challenging situations, in which you are making big decisions, being able to have some perspective and not take yourself too seriously, even while you take your work very seriously, is very useful. It is important. The danger of you taking yourself seriously is that you begin to think that what's important is you. Whereas in fact what is important is the work. What is important is

that elderly woman who wrote me the letter. And so having an ability to laugh at yourself keeps the focus where it should be.

When you ran for office the world still seemed pretty normal. But then September 2008, exactly ten years ago now, Lehman Brothers went bankrupt and we entered the biggest economic and financial crisis since the 1930's. So you had all these plans, this agenda you wanted to work on, but you arrived in a big crisis. How do you stay on course?

I don't know that there is a single formula. You're right, when I came into office the United States was losing 800.000 jobs a month. The equivalent of the entire city of Amsterdam being unemployed each month. We were contracting faster than we had at the beginning of the Great Depression. In those circumstances there is no short-term versus long-term. There is a fire blazing in your house and you have to put it out. So we had to take a series of emergency measures. And you stay entirely focused on making sure that the situation doesn't spiral further.

Because of the steps we took fairly quickly, in the first six months of my presidency, we laid the foundation for the recovery. Our economy stopped contracting about six months after I took office. And it has grown ever since. It took longer to put people back to work, because unemployment tends to lag. Even after the economy starts growing, companies are slower to begin hiring again. But about a year after that, we stopped losing jobs and we continued gaining jobs since then. I noticed that my successor takes credit for that. Which is fine.

But after the emergency, and this is true in any organization, or in your own family: if you have a heart attack, your first job is to stabilize. And then you can start thinking about, 'I need to lose weight', 'I need to quit smoking', whatever it is. But first make sure your heart actually still beats.

Any organization is going to have certain situations that are so drastic, so dire, you just have to focus on that singularly until you get the job done. After that, once the major crisis is over, then the danger is that the day-to-day issues that pop up lead you to lose focus on your broader goals and objectives. And in that situation I followed some basic rules.

Can you extend on that a little bit?

The first is to build organizations and systems that are effective in doing the basics. That requires building systems in place, and putting in people place, you are confident will get the job done. And that you don't have to micromanage.

I will give you a very specific example. Early on in my presidency I hired a gentleman named Craig Fugate. Craig had been the emergency management system director in Florida and had dealt with three or four major hurricanes in the past. And that's all he did and that is what he was really good at. I put him in charge of FEMA, the organization that responds when you have natural disasters. Because he was so good at his job and because he built a team in place, when natural disaster occurred, and it happened frequently in a country the size of the United States, we had hurricanes, we had tornadoes, we had floods, we had all kinds of issues. I had to be responsive to make sure that we were doing what we needed to do, but I had confidence that the basic team was in place to execute. I didn't have to build something from scratch. I knew I had people that could do the job.

And you did that beforehand.

Yes. You did that beforehand. That allowed you to focus on things that are more important and that are going to require your attention. Which is strategic decisions and setting a course and a direction.

The second things was building a culture in the organization that avoids self-inflicted wounds. Again, this is true in every organization, but it is certainly true with the presidency.

Self-inflicted wounds like?

Like people in your administration who aren't honest and create scandals. We didn't have those people.

(Laughter and applause in the audience)

I was the first president in a very long time that didn't have a scandal and didn't have somebody in my administration who got indicted and sent to prison. Very early in my presidency I was talking to Bob Gates, the Secretary of Defense. He had been in Washington for a long time. And I asked him, 'What advice do you have for me as a new president? He said: 'Mister President, you have 2 million or more employees that work for you, you have a 1.5 trillion dollar budget. The one thing I can guarantee you is that this very moment somebody somewhere is screwing up.'

And that has to be true. Even if 99 per cent of people were doing the right thing, that 1 percent is like 10.000 people that are just making a mess of things. So it was really important from my perspective to build a basic set of values and principles, rules about what you do and don't do.

Can you expand on one of these rules?

I will give you one good example. We set up an Ethics Office so that when people wanted to do certain things, they had to check. One of the rules in the ethics office was: 'If it is fun you can't do it'.

(Laughter in the audience)

People would come and say, 'Look there is this conference being sponsored by such and such and it is in Hawaii, and can we go?' 'No, that's too much fun, you can't go.'

(Laughter in the audience)

Now, if it's in some cold place in the middle of winter, go ahead. Feel free. What that did is that it orients the entire organization around 'this is how we operate, this is who we are, this is what we stand for'. And that eliminates a lot of the distractions you described. Most of the day-to-day fires that you need to put out, were set by somebody inside your organization who didn't do things well.

It also requires setting up a good feedback operation. I would say to my team: 'I will not be angry at you for making a mistake. I will get angry if you don't tell me that you have made a mistake. So that we can all figure out how to fix it. I need to know immediately if something is not working.'

And did that work?

Not every time. When it didn't, I would end up being distracted from things that I needed to do. Now, once you have these basics in place and you have core culture in place, then, from a personal perspective, I would like to refer to a famous writer and professor on management, named Peter Drucker. He had a very useful saying: 'Worry less about doing things right and worry more about doing the right thing.'

What he meant was: sometimes we do the equivalent of building this beautiful road, all this manpower, and perfect asphalt, great engineering. Except that it is in the wrong direction. My job as a president was setting the direction, and make sure we were doing the right things. I had to trust that I had put in place excellent people. That could execute in building the road. But the first job I had, was making sure that the road was being built in the right direction.

Which brings me to my last point: I consider the most important job I had, aside from setting the right direction, was to make sure I was constantly figuring out how the people around me were succeeding. My job was to help them be excellent, putting them in the right positions, coaching them in terms of how they could accomplish their goals. That was particularly important because I was a strong believer in cultivating young talent. Over the course of my presidency you had young people who were in their early twenties when they started with me, or 30 years old.

You had one of the youngest teams ever in the White House.

Yes. For example, the Paris Accords, ultimately were organized by a young man named Brian Deese, who was 30 at the time that he started with me. He continued because he was so talented and focused and proved himself over and over. And he eventually brokered the deal with the Chinese, that in short, led the two largest emitters of greenhouse gasses to set high enough standards that we then could leverage the Indians, the Brazilians and others. And that is how the Paris Accords came about. But if I had not invested in him, and trusted him to do excellent work, then we might not have succeeded.

Would you also argue as a leader that you have to have a purpose that goes beyond economics and finance, just hitting the numbers?

Well let me step back and describe the moment I think we are in. Because it will help answer your question. I gave a speech in commemoration of Mandela's hundredth birthday in South Africa that touched on some of these themes. We live in this remarkable time, in which a combination of globalization and technology has stitched the world together in global supply chains. You have the internet, global markets, global capital, global workforces. This has accelerated unmatched wealth in human history.

But that combination of globalization and technology has also been hugely disruptive. And has been disruptive in a couple of ways. One, it's made redundant a lot of occupations that used to be very stable and solid for a lot of people. Number two, it has greatly accelerated inequality within countries. Because if you have a specific skill or talent, that is unique, whether it is writing the best algorithm or being the best basketball player or soccer player, you make more money than you could ever have dreamed of before. But if you are doing fairly repetitive skills, then those are being replaced quickly.

We are seeing transitions that may be in the transition from agriculture to industrial production occurred over the course of a 100 years. Those are now happening over the course of a decade or two. That is making people unsettled. And fearful. Even in places like the United States, and I think it is true in parts of Europe, even if people aren't in absolute poverty, even when they are doing very well relative to the rest of the world, they feel as if their relative position has changed. And when people's relative position, their status, their security feels as if it is declining, or at least not keeping up, they can feel frustrated.

What we are seeing in terms of the rise of far-right parties in Europe, what we saw with Brexit, or in my own country in terms of the turmoil in politics, is in part a response to that. And what happens, unfortunately, when people are fearful and unsettled, is a tendency to look back at old ways of organizing ourselves. After World War II, and certainly after the end of the Cold War, we enjoyed this uninterrupted process of liberal market-based, rules-based, rights-based, pluralistic tolerant social orders spreading around the world. And we started feeling very confident that this is inevitable. But now we are seeing that there has always been this counteracting force, that says 'no, we should organize ourselves around tribes, or religion, or ethnicity, or nation states'. A very hardcore nationalism.

Actually a longing for safety again?

We look for what is familiar to us. And we say, 'They are the problem, people who do not look like us, sound like us, or do the things like we do'. That is a natural impulse that has come back up. Then you get strongmen and authoritarian leaders who appeal to those mindsets.

Because they promise to take you back to the old days?

They say: 'We will solve the problem by keeping these people out or by keeping them in their place, and returning to the old order, where you are the person with the highest status.' I make that point because you now have a battle for two fundamental ideas about how we should organize ourselves. And if we do not pay attention to our civic lives and our politics, if we just leave it to politicians, as opposed to business leaders and civic leaders and non-profit leaders, all speaking strongly on behalf of the values that frankly have made Europe peaceful and prosperous for the lifetimes of most of the people here, that can go away. And the platform on which all our progress is built can wither away.

It is vulnerable you say?

It is very vulnerable. So yes, there has to be a sense even among businesses that are driven by profit, they have a stake in making sure that basic rules and systems that allow a free and fair market to thrive still exist. You are seeing in certain countries in Europe, like Poland, like Hungary, what happens when those rules weaken. Suddenly if I am the big boss, the leader, and I control all the machinery of government, and now I start saying to somebody who is a businessman or a businesswoman in that country, 'You know what, unless you hire my cousin you might find yourself investigated and lose your business'. 'Unless you pay such and such you will not be able to get the supplies that you need to continue.' The corrupting process that occurs, and the devolution of our economic system, can happen fairly quickly.

You see that happening in many places in the world? What can we do against it? What should for instance business leaders and civic leaders do against this?

Well, I think we are at the moment where we have to think about 'how do we answer those people who feel frightened and frustrated by globalization'. Part of what happens here is, is that we did not, and global elites did not do a good enough job being responsive. They must not have been reading enough letters.

So for example, if Brussels or Washington or any world capital isn't paying attention to inequality in your country and figuring out how to make sure that people are able to effectively participate in this new global economy. We are not investing enough in education, to make sure our young people are getting the training they need to succeed. If you are not thinking in terms of geography, and saying, if all the wealth is concentrated in New York and San Francisco, but the middle of the country feels left behind, what can we do in order to reinvest in those places? If you are not asking those questions, that have implications about taxation, public spending, then the other narrative will win.

It's very important for us at every level of government to engage and say: our economies work best when they are making sure that everybody feels as if they are part of the system. And we haven't done a good enough job. And that is a task for people in whatever field or industry that you are in.

Let's talk about hope and change. Ten years ago when you ran your first presidential campaign, those were the main topics. Many leaders have the feeling 'I know it is important to change things in my organization or in my community'. And in most cases that also involves that people give up short term individual interests for long term futures together. How do you persuade people to follow you in these kinds of changes? What are some of the secrets you learned about winning the hearts and the brains of people?

Change is scary. It's hard in our own individual lives and it is certainly hard societally. Part of the job of a good leader is to tell a good story. Part of what separates us from the other creatures on earth is that we make up stories. We are story tellers. And we can tell bad stories and we can tell good stories. We can tell stories that lead to division and hate and war. Or we can tell stories that lead to cooperation and peace and progress.

When I first spoke to the nation in the United States in 2004 at the Convention, this was when I was running for the US Senate, I wasn't yet president, but it catapulted me, I think, into a position where ultimately I ran for president. Really all I did was, I told people 'here is my story and here how it connects to story of America. And the story of America is one of change and progress. And that is scary but look how far it has brought us.'

We started with a document which said, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal'. But we had slavery and women weren't allowed to vote and men without property weren't allowed to vote. Over the course of 150 years of struggle, then 200 years of struggle, we expanded the meaning of those words, to include the end slavery and to the right of women to vote and the right of property owners to vote. And we continually made progress. So what you are doing is telling people not to be afraid of change. Because that in fact is how we always made progress.

Change has always been the story of the United States.

Yes. Now, each country, each community, each organization has its own story. But you have to be able to ground whatever changes you think your organization, your community, your country needs in a longer story of where we have been and where we are and where we are going.

So a little history lesson every now and then would help?

Almost every speech I wrote, I would essentially provide a history lesson. I would try to say, this is where we have been travelling and this is the direction that completes our journey, or is at least the next phase of our journey. Then people at least can picture it. People are not moved by facts and data. They are certainly not moved by facts.

(Laughter in the audience)

Now, I do think that governing requires a belief in facts. And one of the deep concerns I have is the erosion of truth, a sense of an objective truth. Partly driven by the internet, we now have the ability to only get our news from places that completely confirm what we already think. And it is so splintered that we can occupy different realities.

The bubbles you just talked about.

Yes. We thought the Internet would break them down, but in some way the internet has accelerated them. But what is true though, is what moves people most, are their values and the sense 'what gives my life meaning'. How do I explain everything around me? How do I explain my fears, how do I explain my disappointments, how do I explain my position in the world? And one of the failures sometimes of leadership, even of well-intentioned leadership, is they are so focused on the technical aspects of solving a problem, that they forget to explain to people why or what this particular problem means in their life.

That, by the way, is one of the reasons why it is so important to listen. When we were running in 2008, one of the reasons why people didn't expect us to win, is that I had all these young volunteers. They said, 'well, they are kids, they are not professional politicians, they are not going to know how to turn out the vote'.

Partly because I had been an organizer in communities, before I got into politics, I had confidence that you could train young people to be leaders. But the first thing I would train them to do, was to, if you are coming into a community, don't spend all your time suddenly telling people what they should be thinking. Spend the first month just keeping your mouth shut and listening. And finding out what people really care about. What are their stories? How do they describe their own lives? How do they understand their history?

Because if you do that, if people feel as if you understand their views, their vision of their own lives and their own world, then you can now create a story that links them to you and they trust you and you form relationships. And that is what ultimately gives a movement power.

You need that connection. Would you mind if I ask you a bit more of a delicate question on that matter?

Please do. How delicate is this? I mean, we have a lot of people here.

(Laughter in the audience)

I have been wondering about this ever since I read the book by Ben Rhodes, your friend and advisor. 'The World As It Is' it is called. 'My Years With Obama' is the title here in Holland. If you try to bring about change, sometimes it backfires, because sometimes you push it too far, or you go too fast. And there is this specific part in the book when you and Ben Rhodes together reflect on the election of Donald Trump. And then he quotes you and you said 'Maybe we pushed too far. Sometimes I wonder if I was 10 or 20 years too early'. Can you explain what you mend by that specific comment? Did you push it too far, the progressive agenda?

Well, I think... Bens book, by the way, is a wonderful book. So I strongly recommend the book. I think he was capturing accurately a moment in time where

you say to yourself 'huh, I did not expect that to happen...'

Well, you put it mildly.

So I was still processing it. And I think there is no doubt that part of what we saw in the United States, but also in here in Europe, was a backlash of people pushing back against what they considered to be very rapid change. I think in particular what I was referring to when I said 'maybe I was ten, twenty years ahead of time', some of these things get blended together, I was being very specific about the fact that the United States is going through significant demographic changes. The majority of six- and seven-years-old's in the United States, are not white. That is a pretty significant demographic change. And in some ways my election reflected Americas future, in which people are all mixed up and they are coming from different places.

You once said, I believe, that your extended family looks like the United Nations.

It does. If you lined them all up on a stage, every continent is represented. And that is disruptive to people. Somebody like me was going to be elected the president of the United States. If you charted a graph and predicted back in the year 2000, when is that going to happen? People would probably have said around 2020 or 2025, that's when somebody named Barack Obama or something like that, might become the president, but not before then. So in some ways, just my election embodied changes that were happening fairly quickly.

But it's not just demographic changes. Also changes in gender roles. Part of what you see in the United States is, as women enter into the work force, as they are in universities and in medical schools and are shown to be at least as, but probably more competent than men...

(Applause in the audience)

... then suddenly men get a little unsettled. They say 'oh, I thought just by virtue of my maleness that I occupied a pretty important position. Now I got to work for it.' And that is unsettling to people.

So it is not actually what you did as a president that unsettles people, but the change that has been going on structurally?

By definition my presidency reflected the values that are required for us to have a multicultural, gender equal society. Gay and lesbian people could not serve in our military when I came into office.

That was one of the first things you made possible.

I did. My idea was that if you have outstanding people who are prepared to sacrifice their lives to keep the country save, the idea that you would restrict them from doing so, or allow them to sacrifice themselves but live a lie and not be honest about who they loved, that was unacceptable. Now, from the point of view of let's say 35 per cent of the population of the United States, that was going too fast.

And later of course you introduced same sex marriage. Probably also went too fast for the same group.

For similar reasons. Obviously issues of gender roles and attitudes about the LGBT-community are connected. Because they disrupt the clear lines of this is what father does and this is what mom does. So...

But did that open the door for this backlash that we are seeing now?

This is the nature of life. It is the nature of progress. History does not move in a straight line. You take two steps forward and there is a step back.

At the moment we are experiencing a step back in your opinion?

Well, that would be my view, obviously. But that does not leave me less optimistic about our ability to move forward.

How do you stay hopeful? When you see things that you erected are being demolished?

Well, but they are not being demolished. Let me put it this way. Whenever I talk to young people. I always say to them, 'If you could choose any time in history

to be born, but you didn't know ahead of time who you were. You didn't know whether you were going to be from the Netherlands of from Cameroon. You didn't know whether you were going to be male, female, rich, poor. When would you choose?'

You choose now. Because the world has never been wealthier, healthier, more tolerant, less violent. Opportunities for women, minorities, have never been greater than today. And the reason for that is because ordinary people fought for those things. Union workers fought for those things. And women said 'why should I get paid less than a man for doing the same work?' And in the United States civil rights leaders insisted on a seat at the table. So that makes me optimistic.

And the other thing that makes me optimistic is young people. I was very deliberate during my presidency of meeting young people in every country that I visited. And I would have round table discussions. If I was going to be in a country for two or three days, one of the events that I would always do was with college students or young people. That always made you hopeful and optimistic.

What's fascinating is the common views that you find among young people on every continent and in every country. They are far more comfortable with the differences between people, because they take music and food and dress and culture from everywhere. They sample it. They are far more comfortable with the fact that they are probably not going to have one job that they keep for 30 or 40 years. That the economy requires innovation and critical thinking and entrepreneurship. And they are not fearful of that. You find that in Africa, you find that in Asia, you find that in Latin America, Europe, everywhere.

So the question is whether the old people can get out of the way. And not screw things up so badly before we hand off responsibility to the young people, that it is too hard for them to fix. Because there are some things that need to be fixed now. Climate change is an example of something that, if we are waiting too long for a very environmentally conscious generation to come to power, it may be too late. I think the issues that I raised earlier about inequality, if those get too severe, not only do they carry the seeds of a future economic crisis, it also starts breaking down our political systems in ways that are very hard to put back together.

So I am cautiously optimistic. I am not blindly optimistic. I don't think things will work out just because we want them to. Things work out because we work to make sure that they get better.

One of the things everybody wants to know is about your communication skills. You are regarded as one of the big communicators of your time. What did you do to train and get better at this? Because it is a matter that many leaders have to face and it is difficult for many leaders.

Here is one thing that I would say has been most important to me: you have to believe what you say. That you have taken the time to think through what it is that is important and you say it as truthfully and as clearly as you can. And so, part of the reason that the big speeches that I have given have gone relatively well, is because I wrote them myself. And I sat there and I thought about, 'What is it that I believe?'. So that by the time I spoke, people sensed conviction, even if they didn't agree with every particular thing I said. So much of our communications today is sound bites, just disposable. We say whatever we think the immediate moment requires. Opposed to really digging in and thinking 'Is that what I think?'. I think, if you do that effectively, the tricks of charisma, and speaking with a certain style and tone, all that stuff is overrated.

There are relatively quiet people, but when they speak, you listen to them. We all have people in our lives who we admire and value and whose conversations are important to us, even though they are not loud, or fancy. They don't use big words where a small word is sufficient. But they sound true. And I think that it is particularly true at this moment, and it is particularly true among young people.

Young people are very attuned to phoniness. Partly because they have grown up in an age where everything is on high definition. And it is hard if you are artificial to keep that up at every moment. Eventually people will see through the mask.

So young people, part of the reason why they have very little patience for politicians, is because so often they can sense, 'The politician doesn't really believe that, they are just saying that'. Given the nature of today's communication, that sense of authenticity, that sense of 'This is who I am', I think is very important.

(Applause from the audience)

Would you allow me one brief last question? One of the problems that many leaders are facing is trying to get some harmony between work and life. And when you entered the White House, your daughters Malia and Sasha, were still very young, 10 and 7 years old at that moment. How did a young family survive eight years of continuous 'no privacy'? What did you do to keep your family together, keep your marriage intact and still saw your children growing up?

Well, the first thing was to marry a spectacular woman.

(Laughter and cheers from the audience)

Michelle deserves the lion's share of the credit for our girls turning out to be amazing young women. Actually, one of the unanticipated benefits of being in the White House, was that I was able to spend a lot of time with the girls. Because I was work at home dad. I lived above the store.

So, I could be in the office, as long as I was in Washington, and at six thirty I was at the dinner table. I would have an hour with the girls and with Michelle and then I would read to them after they did their homework and I would tuck them in. Because if I had to go back to the office, I could.

I think people in Amsterdam understand, but sometimes Americans do not as much: do not waste time commuting. It is much better to have a smaller apartment closer to work. Because the two hours that I was able to save, from not having to drive someplace

and drive back, or take the train back and forth, was enormously helpful to me being a good father, being a present father.

In terms of my partnership, my marriage with Michelle. It was hard. It put strains... Michelle doesn't like politics very much. She doesn't trust politicians.

Except for one maybe.

She thinks people are mean and they lie. So in some ways she was trusted into the public eye in a way she would not have preferred. I think it was difficult for the girls as they got older. Being a teenager and people knowing who they were, was a sacrifice for them. What we tried to do was to create zones of normalcy.

Zones of normalcy?

Yes, as I said, I used one example, bringing my mother-in-law into the house. She is very normal. And if she saw people acting not normal she'd be like 'Malia, what are you doing, why are you acting as if you're special?' So I think the girls learned quickly that we would judge them based on, were the kind, were they useful, polite? Did they treat people with respect? And they internalized those lessons, I think, at a pretty young age. Which is why they are such wonderful young people.

But in terms of finding that balance: it's always a challenge. I have a lot of young staff now who are starting families. And what I say to them is 'Look, you have to invest in this, what is probably your most important project, at least as much as you do in whatever it is that you get paid to do'.

One thing I am absolutely certain of: When I am on my deathbed, and I am thinking back on my life, I will be thinking about holding my daughters' hands and taking them to the park. It will not be some speech I gave or some legislation that I passed. I am positive about that. And so if you keep that in mind, then you have to invest accordingly.

Impressive.

(Applause from the audience)

You promised to spend an hour with us and you overdelivered. Thank you for that. We need to end the conversation. What words would you like to leave us with?

I want to thank all of you for taking the time to be here. I hope this has been mildly interesting. I would encourage people to find ways in which they can make a small contribution in some way to the issues that matter to you. And not be fearful that whatever you do won't turn out perfectly. Progress is not made because what we do is perfect. If we make the effort, over time, things will get a little bit better. And if enough people are making things a little bit better, over time, things will get a lot better. But it requires taking that first step. So I hope all of you in your own ways are taking that first step. Thank you.