



We Must Help People Live Peacefully With Themselves

*Exclusive Interview with Sir Anthony Seldon
Conducted by Bardia Garshasbi in London- February 2016*

Sir Anthony Seldon is a prominent British headmaster, historian, and author. Mr. Seldon was the 13th headmaster of the famous "Wellington College" for almost a decade, and prior to that he headed "Brighton College", which is considered to be one of the most expensive private schools in the UK.

Anthony Seldon is a prolific writer and has written over 35 books on politics, contemporary history, and education. He has also co-founded "Center for Contemporary British History", and "Action for Happiness". Mr. Seldon is currently Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buckingham in England.

Sir Anthony Seldon is an extremely busy person, and I was very lucky I could meet him for this interview on a chilly February night. We met in front the famous Big Ben in Central London and walked along the Palace of Westminster for over half an hour where I could record the interview. He is an exceptionally amicable and soft-speaking man and despite being late for an evening meeting in the Parliament, he answered all my questions patiently.

Bardia: *Mr. Seldon! Everybody loves to know more about the life story of successful people. As a successful man, would you please introduce yourself to our readers?*

Seldon: Well, for a start, I should say that I am not very successful at all. My father's parents were Jewish immigrants who had come to the UK from Ukraine and they had both died in the influenza plague at the end of the First World War. So my father was brought up an orphan in London. But he made his own way up and went to the London School of Economics. He profoundly believed in self-help, free market, and market economics. He later helped found a think tank called the Institute of Economic Affairs in London that had a big influence on Margaret Thatcher. So our home was always full of conservative politicians and free market economists, and this was particularly difficult and depressive for my mother who had come from a communist background, and her views were the complete opposite to my father's.

I wasn't very successful at school. I failed most of the ways through, but then in my final year, I put on a great spurt, and I suddenly did very well. I don't know how I managed to pull that out of the hat, but I got good enough A levels to get me to Oxford. But then I lost my focus again, because at Oxford I was reading politics, philosophy, and economics, but sadly, I didn't spend my time working on course subjects. I spent most of my time directing plays, because it was a lot more fun and stimulating. I mean I enjoyed some parts of my degree but I didn't get very well at it. And then I felt rather bad about that. So I came down to London School of Economics, and decided I had to write a doctorate to get academic credibility. So I wrote a doctorate on Churchill, and that was then published as a book in 1981, and it managed to sell quite well, not because it was necessarily a good book but because anything about Churchill sells.

Then I became very interested in writing books, and spend my life both teaching in schools and writing books and working on contemporary history and setting up the Institute of Contemporary British History, then setting Action for Happiness, and writing articles. I don't know how I can manage to do it. I think I am quite lucky because I can dictate my books and articles, I never write anything. I mean, I just dictate and somebody writes it for me. I simply speak to a phone or a recorder, like I am doing here with you, and then somebody types it up and it comes back to me and then I rework or edit it.

I think in various points in my life I could well have failed, and I was just very lucky. I mean, I think everybody who is successful in life has been very lucky because there is nothing like success to build more success. There were so many times in my life when I could have slipped down, lost my way and become disillusioned, but I just had a lucky break. So for example, I was very lucky to have written my first book, and once you write your first book, it's much easier to write your second one, and then it becomes easier and easier, because people will know you. You are not much better than anyone else in writing, but you have a name and that helps you.

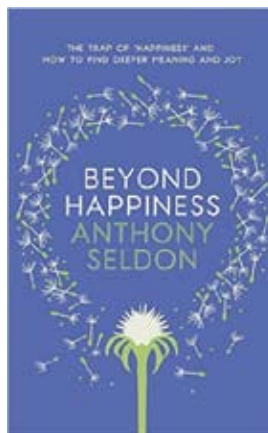
As a headmaster, I was lucky because I took over a school which was in need of

change. So I was able to change it, and then everybody said, oh my goodness, he is tremendous because he's made big changes! You know, as a leader, you're not very lucky if you take over mostly successful organizations, because there's not very much you can do. But you are very lucky if you can take over an organization which is underperforming and then you get it performing well, and everybody thinks you're marvelous because you've made a change. But you're not marvelous, you're just very lucky. Anybody could have done it.

Bardia: *What is the central theme in your life and work? Is it happiness?*

Seldon: No. I think spirituality is. I think we become happy when we are well aligned with ourselves and other people and that is a spiritual position. So we are searching for harmony, within ourselves and with ourselves and others.

In my book 'Beyond Happiness' I explain how many people get lost in pleasure, and they spend their life pursuing pleasure, and pleasure never satisfies; a nice house in the country, a big log fire, a Ferrari, a house in London or Buenos Aires or Rome or other places... never satisfies people. People don't seem to understand, they just go on and on and on. They think that the more they consume, the happier they become but actually, happiness does not come through consumption. It is not how happiness comes.



Bardia: *Now let's talk about education. Some recent reports are claiming that in numeracy and literacy British children are ranking the lowest among the developed countries of the world. What do you think of that?*

Seldon: I don't accept that Britain is below other countries. I think the tests used in these reports are foolish, and are measuring a very narrow range of capabilities. I think they are manipulated and cheated at. So I don't think that the tests are meaningful. And I'm talking about the PISA test. That doesn't mean that the British schools couldn't be a lot better. British schools could be a lot better if they were better led and better resourced and had a more imaginative approach. We have a very dull approach to education, which is not about education. It is about training. It's about training people to pass the tests rather than to really civilize and educate people.

The world is full of highly successful people who didn't do well at school or university. Many of the most successful people never went to university. What's that saying about universities and schools? Schools fail to get the best out of people.

Bardia: *Do you think government's interference in education is inevitable?*

Seldon: Well of course it is inevitable.

Bardia: *So you think government has a role in educating people.*

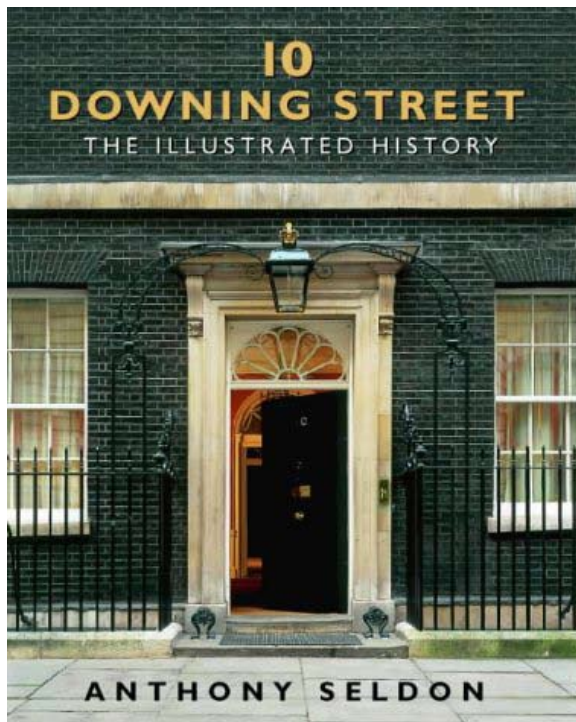
Seldon: Yes, I think it does. It has the money and many people can't afford any kind of education. So the government should certainly be involved in educating and providing a safety net of quality education where people can't afford it by themselves.

Bardia: *You are the vice-chancellor of Buckingham University, which is a famous independent university in the UK, what does this 'independence' mean to you?*

Seldon: Well, it doesn't really mean very much to me, because we're still very much constrained by the government regulations, but also by societal expectations about what an educated person is. In reality, we have very little freedom in our lives. But you know, maybe a little bit of more freedom and an independent university is preferable, and I think ideally every university should be free from the state. But realistically, in the majority of cases, state money is needed to fund the universities and keep them running. I think Buckingham is a magnificent university, and I think we may be having a bit more freedom in our university, but I don't think that it's a very significant factor.

Bardia: *The 'House System' is a very traditional system in British colleges and universities. Do you think Iranian schools and universities can benefit from this system?*

Seldon: The Iranians have a big sense of extended family and the house system is just an institutional representation of an extended family. So in British boarding schools, to break up a large unit of maybe a thousand students, you may break it up into 20 units of 50. That means that every person can feel part of a smaller unit with which they can identify and it means that the leader of that unit can know



50 people rather than 1000 people. And it's very much based on the tradition of extended families, or a tribe like-minded people who wear the same uniform and have the same rituals and eat together and live together and so on. So I think it goes with the grain of nature and I think those schools and universities which don't have house system would do much better if they did have it.

Bardia: *So you recommend this system in Iran's schools, right?*

Seldon: Well, definitely. I think Iran should stop everything for one year, and rebuild all schools and universities around this concept of housing system.

Bardia: *As a contemporary British historian and the founder of IBCH, where do you think Britain stands in the world today?*

Seldon: Well, I think as it is the case with many countries, Britain is searching for a role, as is America, as is China, as is Japan, as is Iran. Most countries recognize that they cannot be independent. You asked me about independent universities, the idea of an independent country is absurd. No country is independent. They're locked into a system of interdependent, international trade. And we all are worried about the same things: about the supply of raw materials, supply of water and food, we are worried about security, global warming...etc.

You can't make yourself independent from geopolitical and natural phenomena. Britain's position in the world is changing. Britain sees itself as having had a 30- year decline from the end of the Second World War to the 1980s, when Ms. Thatcher became Prime Minister. It's seen itself on a rise since the 1980s. It's unsure quite what role it's going to play; is it in Europe or is it out of Europe, and the answer is both half in and half out. We're not on continental Europe, we're not part of Europe in the way that France, or Italy or Germany is. Equally, we're not a separate state, separated from Europe. We are closely allied to the United States but United States is increasingly looking for new partners, though it doesn't know who to partner with. It doesn't know who its best friend is. The answer is, it will likely remain to be Britain; its best friend for the next 50 years. I can't see that changing, because of the closeness of the ties, particularly on the east coast of America and because of the common language, the common history, and the common families. So I do not believe that that will change, that Britain is both in Europe and out of Europe; America's closest ally but not America's closest ally. Britain is the head of the commonwealth but the commonwealth is declining in importance. Britain was once the world's biggest empire. It wants to go alone and be trading with China, with India, and with the Gulf States. The UK sees itself as a significant global player and global power, but internally it's worried about kind of keeping its own cohesion: will Scotland break away from it? What will that mean? and so on. It's a time of transition but on a slowly increasing trajectory in terms of global influence and economic power.



Bardia: *Do you want Britain in or out of EU?*

Seldon: I think Britain must remain in the EU. Britain, if it comes out, would be

profoundly affected by Europe.

Bardia: *We have an overinflated body of university graduates in Iran for whom employability is a real challenge. How do you think can check this problem?*

Seldon: Are computers liberating us or are they enslaving us? Will computers drive us to war with each other, because people are bored and have nothing to do, or will they make our lives simpler? Bardia, I can't provide you with any quick answers. I think that human dignity is very important and human dignity comes in part from work. Work is essential for human dignity, and if machines take away not only more functional jobs such as works in factories and serving in shops and driving taxis, but also take substantially over service industries such as banking, law, insurance, accountancy, and teaching, what would be left? Human beings, unless they feel they've been challenged and tested, and their minds are tired at the end of the day for having done something difficult and challenging, they very rapidly get depressed, and disillusioned. Some turn outward with their anger and get aggressive, some turn inward with their anger and get depressed.

This is a problem and I think the United Nations should be truly looking at these problems in a far more urgent way, and the countries should be looking far more to the happiness of their populations and be concerned with their wellbeing and their true education, not the kind of absurd education we have with passing the tests, but the deep profound inner education of the whole human being which will lead to satisfaction and pleasure for the teacher and for the student. We need to be thinking about how to help people live peacefully with themselves, rather than people who want to impose their creed on other people by violence, and think that as if anybody is going to want to adopt another system because of violence. And we have to learn to be more tolerant, more loving, more accepting of ourselves and other people. It's a wonderful world, and mankind is at a real crossroad here, now.

Bardia: *You've been the headmaster of the Wellington College and have helped creating carbon copies of this college in the UK and elsewhere. What is so important about this college? What would you say about the possibility of opening a Wellington in Iran?*

Seldon: As you know, I am no longer the headmaster of Wellington but I worked hard to try and encourage schools to set up branches in other countries, and I worked with the government and with Prince Andrew, who is the youngest son of the Queen, and we hosted a number of conferences at Wellington to encourage schools to set up elsewhere. We were looking at China in particular and the Far East, but also Russia, and South America and in the Arabic speaking world the activity was principally in the Gulf States and above all UAE. It will be tremendously exciting to set up schools in Iran and I think it will do a great deal to build good relations between Britain and Iran. After all, Britain and Iran were close in the relatively recent past, and damage was caused to that relationship and I think Britain behaved far from admirably, and I think it's a time now to look for new relations between Britain and Iran. Having British schools setting up in Iran, as long as they could be guaranteed safety and security, then I think that would be an excellent idea.

Bardia: *Can education play a role in building a bridge between nations and bringing them close over the political divide?*

Seldon: Of course education can play a role. A great argument for having Iranian students coming to Britain to study in our universities is that it helps them get the knowledge and respect for Britain, and the command of English language, to make friends here and maybe to work here, and this is how we humans build friendship. Relations in countries are built on personal relationships, they are not build upon the leaders getting on well, although that could help. You build relations between countries from the ground up. Travel and exchange of students, and cultural exchanges, all are of enormous importance. So I would welcome that.

Bardia: *Do you have anything to say to Iranian headmasters or people in charge of education in Iran?*

Seldon: I would say that it's the best job in the world to be a headmaster or headmistress. That's a wonderful, wonderful job, because of your ability to transfer the lives of young people, the community, the parents in the community, and the teaching staff.

Head-teachers have a duty to be happy, energetic, full of life, full of optimism, and full of belief, and not to be overwhelmed by the difficulties of finance and affordability and the difficulties of employment. I think if people do their best to develop all the inner talents of young people, all their multiple intelligences, they are most likely to go on to get good jobs. So I would tell headmasters to take heart and celebrate the fact that they are doing the best job in the world. As far as Iran goes, I always had a big sympathy for Iran. During my years at Oxford one of my closest friends was a very brilliant young Iranian who sadly died. I have never been to Iran but I have huge love of the whole Muslim world. I have had holidays in Muslim Arab countries and I loved it; and who knows, one day, I may have the opportunity to visit Iran too.

Bardia: *Dr. Seldon, I am very grateful that despite all your engagements you accepted to see me for this interview.*

Seldon: It was a pleasure Bardia, and I wish you and your magazine the very best.

