

## **Talks at GS**

**Lord Simon Woolley, Co-Founder, Operation Black Vote**

**Iain Drayton, Moderator**

**Recorded: June 21, 2022**

**Lord Simon Woolley:** We celebrate Black excellence and what our parents and our parents' generation did for us.

[MUSIC INTRO]

**Iain Drayton:** Good morning, everyone. Welcome to Talks at GS. My name is Iain Drayton. I co-head the Investment Banking Division in Asia ex-Japan. I'm actually based in Hong Kong. I also sit on the EMEA and Asia Pacific Diversity and Inclusion committees. It's my great pleasure today to welcome my good friend Lord Simon Woolley, someone with whom I've had the privilege to collaborate on with respect to an initiative for Cambridge University. And this initiative really is to increase the number of students from underrepresented communities at Cambridge.

You're probably quite familiar with Simon's background.

But for those of you who are not, maybe just a minute with the formal introduction. Then we can get into the conversation.

So, Simon has spent nearly 30 years dedicating his life to improve social and racial justice in the United Kingdom. In 1996, he co-founded Operation Black Vote, which was geared to encouraging people from Black, from Asian, from minority ethnic communities to vote. And in so doing, really has changed the complexion, I would argue, literally and figuratively, of the UK electorate. But also, you know, for Parliament as well. And arguably, forever. And it's Windrush Day tomorrow as well. So, how lucky are we to have Simon Woolley with us. Thank you so much for taking the time.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** No, thank you. And we've known each other for some time now. And for me, it's a pleasure to be having the conversation. Tomorrow's Windrush Day. We celebrate Black excellence and what our parents and our parents' generation did for us so we might but be best we can be.

**Iain Drayton:** Yes. We might be the best we can be. But

we can be role models for the next generation who can be even better.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** I think so. I mean, I think that's something that I'm proud about. That it's really not about me, it's about what I, we, can do. Both within these institutions, Goldman Sachs, Cambridge University. But Iain, as I came in today, I saw this year's interns for Goldman Sachs. What I was struck by, the level of diversity. Lots of Black and brown kids all looking very smart and eager. But, you know, I want to be a role model. We want to be role models for them to say this is your space and to own it. Excel within it. And that's a good feeling that you can wake up in the morning thinking-- you know, I've been an activist. And I would argue a disciple of Martin Luther King in many ways. But waking up every morning thinking, how can I change our world? How can I inspire? How can I transform?

It's not arrogance. It's just a feeling that I can. We can. You know? With hard work and endeavor and a plan. A plan, if you like. And so, for me, this is part of that. It's a conversation that we hope will educate, inform, and hopefully, inspire.

**Iain Drayton:** Let's start at the beginning.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** Okay.

**Iain Drayton:** Okay? So, in my mind there are kind of three buckets of conversation here. One is what I'll term the early years. And I've just read your autobiography, *Soar*, which I thought was incredibly uplifting. Highly recommend it to our audience.

I want to talk about the early years. But then, really, spend more of the conversation around social, political, racial justice. And then education, as well. So, you know, having read your book, you were born to a nurse, Lolita, who was from the Windrush generation herself. Came to the United Kingdom. And then you were adopted by two white, working class--

**Lord Simon Woolley:** First fostered.

**Iain Drayton:** Fostered.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** Then adopted.

**Iain Drayton:** Then adopted. Which is, obviously, in and of itself quite challenging, one would imagine, particularly as a person of color. So, kind of out of the gate, can you explain to us how your upbringing helped to shape you?

**Lord Simon Woolley:** I look back now and think I was incredibly lucky. I had two mothers. One Black. One white. One who had to give me up. Traumatic for both of us. I was only two, so I didn't remember much about it. But I got lucky. I got lucky because my mother from the Welsh [UNINTEL] chose me, my Irish father. And gave me a house of love.

It was a council house in Leicester. But full of love, nonetheless. And I guess wrapped up in that love, I was told that I could do anything.

**Iain Drayton:** And you did.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** And, you know, I guess I believed it. I believed it spiritually. But, you know, there were no special schools. There was no silver spoon. But I think that

I always saw barriers as something you had to knock down or climb over. And so, she gave me the spirit to believe, if you like.

And, you know, I'm not afraid to say that I think that in many ways that I'm here because of her. And my father. And so, I often talk about council house kids, you know, like me. And I want them to have pathways because when I entered-- I know I'm going a bit forward, but when I entered the House of Lords, I said, "Look, I think there's talent in every street, in every city, in every corner of the country. There's potential talent. And it's our job to make pathways for that talent." And I particularly say that to council house kids because often their vision is shut down very early on.

**Iain Drayton:** Goldman Sachs has its own business principles. And in our kind of traditional business principles, I'm going to say it's number seven, but I may be off. I'll paraphrase. And basically, it says that our people are our greatest talent. We want to draw from the broadest possible pool of talent, also known as diversity, because we want to be the best institution.

So, if we can bring the best people from whatever walks of life into Goldman Sachs, we're harnessing the best talent to provide the best service to the most clients, which will make us the best investment bank, if you will.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** The best company.

**Iain Drayton:** The best company.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** The best company.

**Iain Drayton:** Cambridge is the same, isn't it?

**Lord Simon Woolley:** Well, yes.

**Iain Drayton:** Or aspiring to be the same.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** We all aspire to that. But actually, if you look at the detail, often their processes are rigged to exclude a wealth of talent because the metrics for identifying talent is often so limited. You know, we think we can only choose from the public schools or the best universities. And then the best universities have the same thing too.

And so, I think it was in 2018, 2018, the Oxford and Cambridge intake for that year, more than 50 percent was pulled from five public schools. Five. As opposed to 2,700 state schools. I mean, what does that say about some people are locked in and most people are locked out?

And are we saying creativity doesn't reside in those 2,700 schools? Ambition. Passion.

**Iain Drayton:** One of your quotes, you said in this vein, "It doesn't matter where you start. It's about where you go. But not just where you go, but how you go." So, if we take all of that. And then we think about your path after secondary school, it was, shall we say, non-linear, you didn't go straight to university. You were a ticket out amongst other sales roles, shall we say. And then you went back to university as a mature student. You spent a significant period in Latin America. And then you went from there to becoming an activist for social justice in the UK. So, explain to us, then, how you went.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** Well, I have to think that life is full of crossroads. Junctures. And the trick is to not be a



passenger, be a driver at those junctures so you can make a call.

I remember working for Rank Films, around the corner here in London's West End. And I was a salesman selling dodgy-- the crummy films like [UNINTEL]. And I was a good salesman. And I said to my boss, "I want to go back to education." I felt a bit of an impostor.

**Iain Drayton:** How old were you at this stage?

**Lord Simon Woolley:** About 25, 26. 26. By 26 I owned two homes. A company car. Why would I give it all up to go back to education? For education? But I just felt that I was less than alongside people that had been to university. So, I said to my boss, "I'm done. I'm done." I said, "I can do the job part time. But let me go back to school and get an A-level," I said. And he went, "You're mad. You're our top salesman. Choose your flight of fantasy. Being a high flyer at Rank or--." And I gave him the keys to the car. Said, "I'm done."

But I think going there, I felt that that would be a good string for my bow. You know? I made the call is the point

I'm trying to make. I drove.

And then going to university. And you had to do a language. And so, I chose Spanish. But then going to Latin America. Well, Latin America was on fire. Civil wars. I saw people willing to die for what they believed in. And, you know, putting their lives on the line. For me, it was a game changer because I said to myself, I won't be kidnapped. I won't be shot if I want to change the world.

So, when I came back after--

**Iain Drayton:** Sorry. Come again? You said you won't be kidnapped or shot?

**Lord Simon Woolley:** I won't be kidnapped. I won't be shot.

**Iain Drayton:** If you want to change the world?

**Lord Simon Woolley:** If I want to change the world.

**Iain Drayton:** So, again, just to take issue with that. Martin Luther King. What happened there?

**Lord Simon Woolley:** And I use King's example. I use the African American civil rights. I won't be hosed down by the police. I won't be hung from a tree or shot by the assassin's bullet. I won't. It's unlikely.

**Iain Drayton:** In this country.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** In this country. So, what excuse do I have to not want to change the world?

And so, when I came back, we started Operation Black Vote. Actually, we did know people who were dying in police custody. Going in fit and healthy. Coming out in body bags.

**Iain Drayton:** And so, the Latin American experience.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** Transformative.

**Iain Drayton:** That was the genesis of Operation Black Vote.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** Well, it was the genesis of

politicization to say I need to do something.

**Iain Drayton:** So, how old were you then?

**Lord Simon Woolley:** 28. 28, 29. And I met Lee Jasper who was like Britain's Reverend Al Sharpton. Firebrand. And he saw me, and he said, "Listen, I need you on my team." And so, we did the research. And now I've done my education. So, I can read the books. I can do the analysis. I can do the research. And I did the research that was transformative for this country, as a matter of fact. Because many African, Asians, Caribbeans, and other minority and ethnic communities, had often felt that we were powerless, politically powerless. Things were done to us. And all we would do is bemoan and sometimes march on the streets.

I did this analysis that said, actually, politically, we can be extremely powerful. Elections are won and lost in the margins, often small margins. One seat, 20 votes. 50 votes. 500 votes. And we're there 20,000. Do the maths. Lay in that there. Having a rallying call was a game changer.

In 1997, John Major had a working majority of 24 seats. I

said, we said we could decade over 70 seats in that election. And so, just people went to the churches. We went to the mosque. We went to the gurdwaras. And they all registered to vote. The other smart move we did, which I think is different to African Americans, we decided to be nonpartisan. We decided not to put our eggs in the Labor party basket.

A majority of people voted Labor, Black people. And we said, "No, we need the conservatives to beat a path to our door and want our vote."

**Iain Drayton:** You were getting the people, if I understand correctly, the people in power to recognize the value of you as a collective, which by the way, at the same time will then force Labor to be doing the same thing. So, you made yourselves relevant to the debates.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** We said, think about this. Look, let's say this is the Black vote. And the Black vote will go to the highest bidder. The Black vote will go to the political party that delivers best for us. Here's our drop-down menu. Racial, social justice, education, housing, health. Who's going to deliver for us? We'll vote for you.

**Iain Drayton:** So, looking back then over the last 25 - 26 years since the finding of Operation Black Vote, would you say you're most proud of?

**Lord Simon Woolley:** I've been a decent dad. Yeah. I mean, I was a late dad. But I love being a dad. And that I get so much out of it. Watching this kid do his stuff. Do his little hustles. Buying and selling training shoes.

**Iain Drayton:** He's a footballer as well, isn't he?

**Lord Simon Woolley:** And a footballer. And just giving me a hug. But beyond that, seeing individuals that have gone from A to B to success is extremely rewarding. Mayors, such as Marvin Rees in Bristol. And MPs in all the parties, becoming ministers. Over 150 magistrates.

There's one anecdote about the magistrates. We started nurturing magistrates. We knew about injustice. Right? In the courts. We said we've got to start dispensing justice. So, we had this scheme where we tell the people, "You want to become a magistrate? Come with us and we'll teach you. We'll twin you with a magistrate. And then you can sit on

Her Majesty's benches." And we did this first in Bristol. And this woman, Sharon Wallace [PH], she became a magistrate. So, she goes into the court. First day in the court. She goes in where all the staff are. And she gets a tap on the shoulder. And a woman says to her, "Excuse me, madam, the public should be outside. Not inside." And Sharon showed her her badge that says that she was part of the court. No more. No less.

And then Sharon went with the other magistrates to the back of the court. And as they come in with all their files and stuff. And the doors open. And then the well of the court has to stand up as the magistrates come in. And this woman who told her to get out looked at her, her jaw dropped, and she had to bow. And Sharon said that she was completely impassive. But inside she went, "Yes. Yes."

And I think those moments become transformative for the court, this is what dispensing justice looks like. And for the Black and white people who are in the dock--

**Iain Drayton:** They can also see it.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** They can also see it. That this is

what dispensing justice looks like.

**Iain Drayton:** My father was also a magistrate in the '80s. And so, he was, like, one of one. And one of the questions that I have, so, you look at yourself now heading Cambridge College, you're one of one. Right? You can say I'm one of one in certain respects at Goldman Sachs. How do you think about representation, and specifically, the symbolism of representation? You know, the cynic could say, okay, we have one now. Box ticked. Let's move on. And that one could be gender. Could be ethnic minority. Could be LGBTQ. How do we scale that to make a difference? How do we avoid the symbolism, if you will, and actually make it worth everyone's while?

**Lord Simon Woolley:** Right. Let me tell you about the symbols first because that's really important. And sometimes we don't appreciate it enough. But it was brought to me in the most beautiful way.

I'm in the college. We'd had a dinner, a matriculation dinner. It's about 10:00 and I'm tired. I need to go home. Need to go home. And I'm just walking through the corridor. And an Asian woman stopped me in my tracks,



and she said, "Simon," she said, "You have no idea what you being here means to me." She said, "I've been here three years. And I've never seen someone like you. I've never seen someone sound like you. It just fills me with pride," she said. And she cried. And we hugged.

But I thought to myself, that's it. That's it. That's it right there in terms of her and other people's sense of belonging in institutions like this. Symbolism. But it's not just about symbolism. You know that and I know that.

**Iain Drayton:** Of course.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** It's about us-- I mean, us being there is just step one. Right? Our role is to say there are people like us over there. Over there. Over there. There are working class white kids that come from my background over there. Over there. Over there. There are women who haven't had the access.

And so, I know the drawbridge is down. I've got to go out there and bring them in. Bring them in. And I look them in the eye. And we have, you know, the formal dinner, the high table. Right? At these colleges, they love a high table.

And I get to speak to hundreds of kids on a regular basis. And I say, "You belong. You belong. I'm not asking for your success," I say to them. "I'm demanding it. And I will help you."

And you can see them. You can see Black and white. You can see them glowing. That's my gift. Because if I don't say it, who's going to say it? I don't know.

**Iain Drayton:** But then don't you feel the weight of the world on your shoulders? Presumably, it's tiring. At points.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** Yes, it's tiring. But there's no weight. That's a gift. To say to a stronger that-- I say to them, I'm in the hall, and I say, "Education is wonderful. And I hope you do well. But it's more than just your good education. I want you to be a good citizen. Good citizen. To do extraordinary things."

And you can see them thinking. It's not just about the big house or the big car. No, it's about making a difference in the world. About making a difference in our world.

**Iain Drayton:** So, on that basis then, you know, how

does it feel to be on the one hand, at least your background was, one of social activism. Now you're a member of the establishment. How do you reconcile that? And how do you remain authentic?

**Lord Simon Woolley:** There's no tension. There's no tension because your roots are deeply embedded in social and racial justice values. So, when I sit in-- I'm privileged enough to sit in, literally, a gilded chamber. But I'm not there like this, "Oh, this is good." No point in that.

You know, I was in the House once and I try not to have a set script. But they were talking about identification cards. And I was saying, "No, no, no, no, no. Because the police will use them, particularly against Black kids." And they went, "No, they won't. No, they won't." I went, "Stop, stop, stop, stop." I'm in the Lords. Right? And you know, people are quite polite. I said, "Stop. Hands up here, members, my Lords and Ladies, how many of you have been stopped and searched by the police?" I put my hand up like this. No one's moving. I put my hand down. "How many of you have been stopped and strip searched by the police?" Hand goes up again. And I heard somebody laugh.

I said, "You think it's funny? Ask Lady Q, a young girl, if it's funny to be stopped and strip searched. No."

**Iain Drayton:** And how did they react then to that?

**Lord Simon Woolley:** Head down. Head down. So, I'm not there to make up the numbers. Theresa May empowered me, ennobled me to speak to that lived experience in places where that voice isn't heard.

**Iain Drayton:** So, I'd be remiss not to talk about Windrush Day. Your mother. My father. They both came to England from the Caribbean. Not, I may hasten to add, together. But they both came to England.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** They might have done. You don't I know.

**Iain Drayton:** You never know. And actually, my grandfather was from Barbados. So, you never know.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** There you go. There you go.

**Iain Drayton:** You previously said, quote, "The most

important thing about Windrush is celebratory. A generation changed this country, these institutions." So, what more do we need to do to educate people on the impact of the Windrush generation and what they've achieved?

**Lord Simon Woolley:** Well, I'm really pleased that we're here because it's Windrush and it allows us to say our parents' generation came to this country with this view that England was the mother country. And they gave their lives to this country. I mean, they literally did. Many worked on the buses. My mother worked in hospitals. She had a bad back because back then you put the patients over your back when you wash them. And you gave and you gave and you gave. And you bow to the Queen. That was our parents' generation. And they took a lot of BS. Right? A lot. And yet, they still held their heads high.

For me, all children, Black and white, need to know about that generation, who were stronger than us.

**Iain Drayton:** Much.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** As a matter of fact. And yet, they

sought to give us hope. And dignity. And so, these moments are important. Important for us. Because it was tough. It was really, really tough. And we all need to know our history. The history of the British Empire is the good, the bad, and the very, very ugly. You can't take away that history so it didn't happen. So, lay it bare. Understand it. How do we learn from it? How do we become better citizens? How do we come to ensure that our interaction with the Caribbean and other countries is more equitable? These moments allow us to have that conversation.

**Iain Drayton:** Yes. How would you like your legacy to influence, to inspire future generations?

**Lord Simon Woolley:** My question is how brave can you be? How bold? How courageous can you really be? Because I suspect that you are hitting here when I believe you can hit way up here. And that's on you. That's on you.

**Iain Drayton:** Simon, thank you. This has been an enriching conversation. I think that everyone at Goldman Sachs is all the better for having witnessed you speak today. And personally, thank you once again for coming in to talk to us.

**Lord Simon Woolley:** Thank you. Thank you, Iain.

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