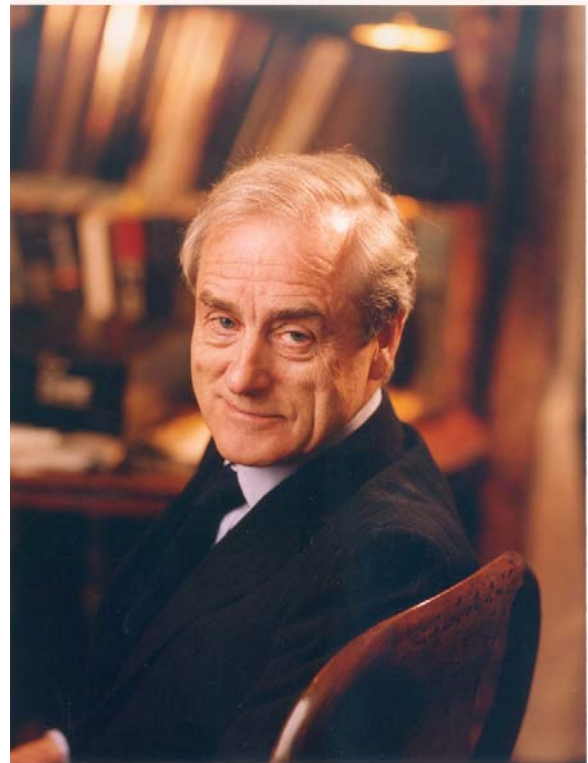


Driving the Spirit of Innovation

For many of us at the Royal Society of Arts a few days ago, Sir Harold Evans is best remembered as the pioneering and crusading editor of the Sunday Times in its 1970s heyday. He made Sundays a joy for me: that almost fevered anticipation of new revelations from his *Insight* team – well, not a lot used to happen in Bedford in the 1970s. But this evening, not only was I going to listen to the great man – how small and frail he looks now! – but I had actually held the door open for him. And those of us in his audience who were fellow Durham graduates had an even greater sense of fellowship.

It was my first RSA event – many are free to the public – and it was almost overwhelming to be sitting in the very same room that Alexander Graham Bell demonstrated his new invention: the telephone. And it was about inventions that Harold Evans had come to talk to us about, or rather when an invention (that ‘eureka’ moment as he called it) turns into an innovation.

We were invited to consider what makes an innovation rather than an invention and to discuss, why, historically, in the UK we have been highly inventive, but less highly innovative. You can guess which country beats us there – the US of course! But who would have guessed that it is Israel who is the second most innovative country – as Plato said *Necessity is the mother of invention* – and what greater necessity than being in a constant state of war. Anyway, like Harold Evans, I digress...



One of the key differentiators between an inventor and an innovator might well be personality type. He had identified one common theme amongst innovators, one that we might call emotional resilience or mental toughness, which coupled with a proactivity preference, or ‘can-do’ attitude seemed to be the driving force. Not only do innovators need to remain positive in the face of adversity, they also need to be able to take personal criticism and knock-backs. Think back to your *Ladybird* reading days and the story of Robert the Bruce and the spider...And, boy, as Harold Evans explained, do people get some knock-backs in the UK. Not only do they need to deal with the sceptical and negative attitude of the press, they also find it nigh-on impossible to get funding from both the banking and public sectors. As Sir Harold said, there needs to be a support infrastructure to drive the spirit of innovation. A good idea and emotional toughness are, of themselves, not enough.

Because innovators are more than just inventors. They bring their invention (or it could indeed be someone else’s) to the market. An innovation has to be useful, relevant and helpful for people and needs to be sold at a price they can afford. And for that they need support, in terms of sufficient education, finance through venture capitalists and long-term funding of Research and Development by the public (academic) and private sector. Sir Harold was convinced that the success of the USA in terms of taking UK product inventions and turning them into product innovations was due to these factors, coupled with a cultural openness to new ideas and products, a large, accessible (and, to be frank, tariff-protected) market and a celebration of technological and business achievement. But, as an American in the audience pointed out, this is not a future given. America seems to be declining, but can the UK step back in?

Sir Harold is dubious. The UK has a history of producing inventors of genius, but can a society fuelled by instant gratification, blessed with a cynical media that feeds on bad news, help our local inventors become the technological and business innovators of the future? We need to think hard about our cultural attitudes to innovation success, but we also need to tell our innovators that mental toughness and perseverance will be equally as critical as all the creative juices they can muster.

If you want to follow the podcast of this presentation or know more about the RSA’s free programme of events follow this link: www.thersa.org/