**Dyslexia in the House of Parliament**

This spring, I met four dyslexic MPs either via Zoom or in person at Portcullis House. I heard some amazing life stories about ability, hard work, timely support, and tenacity, from four brave MPs who shared some of their hidden selves, with insights that many of their constituents and fellow parliamentarians will never have heard before.

Talking to MPs -Tom Hun, Sir Mike Penning, Peter Kyle, and Matt Hancock, we went back in time to when a teacher laughed at one of them in front of their classmates; how another just “didn’t know what was going on” at his school; and how another “just hid” at school.

Coming from both sides of the house, they are all keen to share their lived experience of working as dyslexic MPs, at a time when many ideas to develop the way dyslexia could be addressed in the future, are being considered by all the political parties.

What was apparent when talking to all four MPs about their assessment and support, was that the two who came from schools with fewer resources had had a much more negative experience, in terms both recognising their condition and encouraging them. Sir Mike Penning admitted that he, “was horrendous at school...I was always scraping and getting the cane”. With his dyslexia undiagnosed he felt lost at school, “I didn’t know what was going on”. It is a shared experience for many dyslexic pupils today and explains why many are excluded by their school, or why they self exclude/truant.

Similarly, Peter Kyle’s school experience was far from ideal. He can recount the exact moment when he decided that his school was not for him, and he was definitely not for school. His English teacher had asked him to read aloud in front of his fellow pupils, and like most dyslexics he did not perform this task well. This affront to his self esteem was compounded by his teacher laughing hysterically at him. He told me that his Local Authority was the last in the country to recognise dyslexia as a learning condition, and he was put in the remedial class, where he gave up on his education until he was 25.

Late diagnosis, of their dyslexia, is a common thread for most of the MPs. As Matt says “I just thought I was bad with words”. It was only when he was at Oxford University that he was sent for a dyslexia assessment by his tutor, who told him, “You can talk, but you can’t write."

For Sir Mike Penning, his dyslexia was only recognized by his Education Officer in the army. He was also latter diagnosed as being dyscalculic (difficulty with numbers), after he had joined the fire service. No wonder Mike had a tough time at school. Similarly, Peter Kyle did not get a diagnosis until he was at Sussex University aged 25. Peter is very proud of the fact that he was, “the first severely dyslexic student at Sussex University to get a doctorate.”

Tom Hunt also talked about some tricky moments during his education, especially during the transition phases. Tom was a boy who could not tie his shoe laces until 14 (not unusual for a dyslexic/dyspraxic person), but managed to get a first from the University of Manchester, and a Masters from Oxford University. Intelligence has never been in question for our four contributors.

Like most dyslexic individuals (diagnosed/undiagnosed) Matt Hancock did not share his difference, “I kept my dyslexia private for 20 years, across my career in business and as a politician, he says when I spoke about my dyslexia, it was a huge relief for me.”

All four MPs have worked hard to overcome their challenges and their natural empathy, oratory skills, and ability to see the bigger picture – typical dyslexia traits – have helped them in Parliament and with their constituents. All, however, are quick to point out that they have good support teams around them, who pick up some of the slack in areas in which they know they are not strong. As Tom Hunt says, “I have a team that supports me with the skills I don’t have, and I have found that very liberating.”

Similarly, Matt Hancock shared that, “I have always asked (as MP and Minister) my officials to write a crisp one-page note on the top of all the long submissions, so I can prioritise the most important decisions.”

It was clear that all four are keen to see a culture change in the way we perceive dyslexia in all elements of our lives. Consequently, they will be focused on the Schools White Paper; the SEND Green Paper; and Matt Hancock’s call for legislation around universal screening for dyslexia in primary schools, which are all going before Parliament over the next six months.

One of the more striking aspects of dyslexia in Britain today is the numbers that make up our prison population. As Matt Hancock comments, “It is a shocking fact that 50% of prisoners are dyslexic...and that 57% have literacy levels below those expected of an 11-year-old.”; Sir Mike Penning also expressed frustration with the situation, describing the fact that we “don’t use the opportunity” to help work with offender’s literacy skills in prison as, “a massive problem.” Other topics discussed included the benefit of one-to-one study support, the digital disconnect, and the range of excellent learning software that can be used to help struggling readers, the costs of which would be outweighed by the life choices that would open up to someone who could now write for jobs or consider getting back into education.

Another key area was the situation of dyslexics in the workplace. All four agreed that there is still too much negativity around dyslexia at work, and this is too often expressed as prejudice against the dyslexic individual. We need to “help businesses understand the huge talents that dyslexic people bring to the workplace”, Matt Hancock, adding that, “If we invest in our dyslexic children from an early age, we can unleash their potential.”

When dyslexic individuals find their niche they can thrive – we only need to look at these MPs to see that. And we can also look to other successful dyslexics to see how they can help businesses thrive from:-Steve Jobs to Bill Gates, Richard Branson, and thousands of other entrepreneurial business owners up and down the country.

My Bio: Roger Broadbent

I am a director of both the Dyslexia Institute UK and also the Empowerment Passport Ltd.

My dyslexia was not diagnosed until I was in my forties, most annoying. It has spurred me to be a passionate advocate for fellow dyslexics, and other people who are neuroatypical, or are faced with extra challenges around mental health and/or physical handicap. This is why I got involved with the Empowerment Passport. I met the inspirational Mandy Whalley, whose brainchild the Empowerment Passport was, three years ago, and I just knew it was something that would help so many people. The individual can explain what their unique difference means to them, and how any negative aspects can be constructively addressed. This is then stored electronically, to be shared with whoever the user would like to.

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