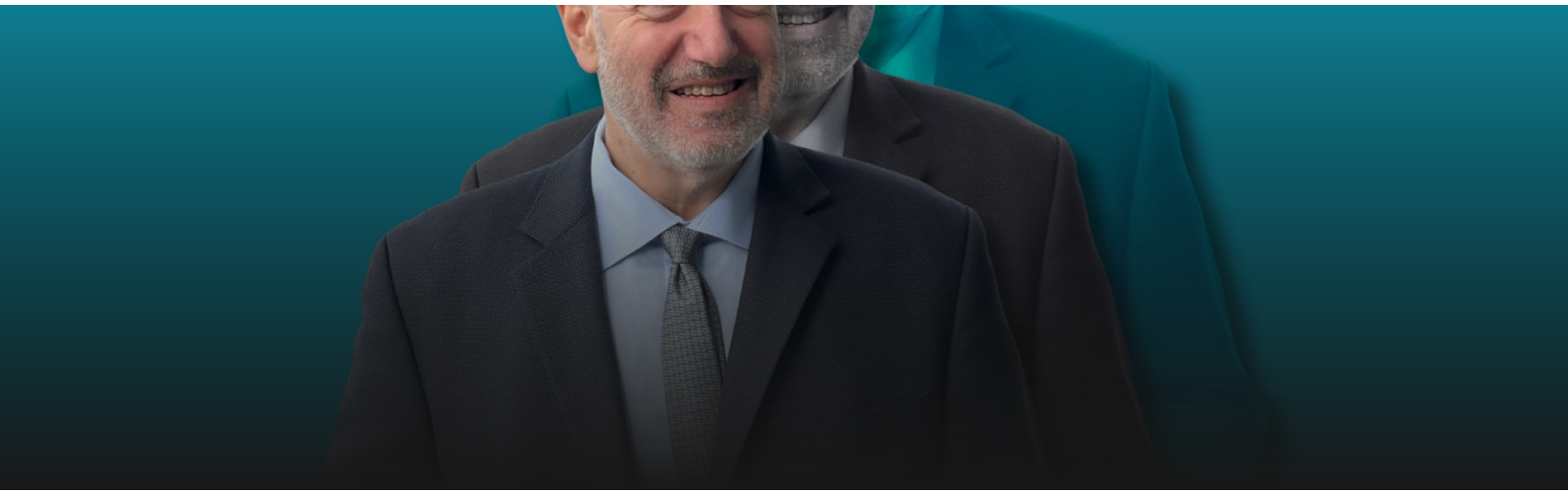

Sequeira,L November 11th, 2025

Larry Kramer: “Self-expression shouldn’t become more important than human relationships”

*In the second segment of a three-part interview, **Larry Kramer**, President and Vice-Chancellor of the LSE, discusses with Lee-Ann Sequeira, the LSE HE Blog editor, how viewpoint diversity needs to be embedded in how we teach and learn*

This is the second part of a three-part interview.
Read part one: “If it’s lawful speech, don’t ask us to condemn it”
Read part three: “I wouldn’t change any LSE position for a donor”

Lee-Ann: Looking at how one goes about creating a culture of freedom and tolerance, how does it work at the department level, at programme and course levels? It’s quite difficult when you’re in the moment: a person feels passionately about a cause, and the other committee members, who don’t feel strongly about the issue, are likely to be swayed. And that is exactly what some people are going to see, benignly, as a lack of consistency, but more seriously, as a double standard. And there is precedent at the LSE for this.

Larry: Well, our rules about not taking positions apply to sub-units as well: departments, centers, programmes also cannot issue statements. Individuals and groups of individuals can, which I suppose some people might want to say is a double standard. But I don’t see it that way. On the one hand, there is no reason the whole institution ever needs to take a position. Our mission is to create a platform for education and research. So, the first step on the slope – someone saying, ‘You need to take a position on this’ – is itself the questionable one. Even if it’s a universally held position everyone seemingly agrees with. But we do that so individuals and groups of individuals can speak freely for themselves.

So, for the institution, it’s clear. But personally, it can be quite difficult for me. Many people assume that my not taking their position means I’m taking the other side’s position, and that’s really frustrating. Or some will assume that I don’t have a position, as if I’m morally bankrupt. But of

course, I have thoughts and feelings and views, just like everybody else. But none of us on the School Management Committee can speak as individuals, because you can't separate our voice from the institution's. So it's frustrating to have people condemning you or attacking you, not just because the institution won't take a position, but personally, because they assume they know what your position is, because if you had their position, of course you'd speak. For me, that's a big personal challenge.

> *Many people assume that my not taking their position means I'm taking the other side's position, and that's really frustrating*

I'm Jewish. I lived in Israel for a time. I studied the history of the region in college and travelled through the region. I have a lot of experience and background in most of this stuff, and so people assume they know what I think. And I can promise them it's not what any of them think I think. But I have to put my thoughts in a box off to the side. They can have no bearing on what I do or say as the president of LSE.

Don't misunderstand me: I don't find doing that hard. I'm a trained lawyer and I've had a lifetime of experience separating what I personally think from my job and my professional role. What I find hard is when others assume they know what I think anyway and then read what I am doing or not doing, based on that assumption; when all I am doing is respecting my role and the role of the university.

Lee-Ann: Not what you were expecting when you took on this role. On that note, when you suddenly encounter something you're not expecting, how does one deal with it? The example given to me was: a teaching fellow has lost a family member or a friend in the Hamas attack, and a student walks in for office hours with a laptop plastered with 'Globalise the Intifada' stickers, oblivious of the academic's bereavement… It's hard as an academic in that situation as it can bring your emotions, identity, everything to the fore…

Larry: But what a terrible world it is, in which the person who lost somebody can't say, 'I understand how you feel about this issue, but that is actually really hurtful to me, because I lost my parent or

sibling or someone close…' Or when the person who feels strongly about the issue can't say, 'I feel strongly about this, but I am genuinely sorry for your loss.' The necessity of self-expression shouldn't become more important than human relationships with the people right in front of you.

> *We're losing that ability to care about issues but also care about the people in our lives who think totally differently*

I care about issues, but at the end of the day, what matters most to me are the people I live with, who are an actual part of my life. I don't think it's good to let terrible things that are nevertheless far removed from my immediate life just override that. I can still maintain my integrity by talking and being open about what I think, but I don't have to deny you in order to do that. I think that's what we're losing – that ability to care about issues, but also care about the people in our lives who think totally differently. We need to keep space for that.

Lee-Ann: But there often isn't that space. Academics are often teaching in spaces where everyone's already made their positions clear. So when something like this happens, do you grab a moment by excusing yourself: 'One sec, I've just got to get a cup of coffee,' which is a good way of dealing with it. Can you pop into your colleague's office next door and expect a sympathetic ear, knowing their position on the issue isn't aligned with yours? And it could be that that student has lost someone too. So you never know what you're getting into. But you're right, it appears we don't have much of that generosity of spirit.

Larry: As I say, that's been something that I feel has been lost over a generation. That did not happen so much when I was young. And again, it's not because we weren't divided about issues. There were wars, there were people getting killed, we cared about issues. Racism was way worse when I was growing up, and it was much more present in our lives. But I think the way we discussed and debated issues in those days was much more conducive to actually making social progress on them. We didn't get it all done, and the lack of progress and persistence of problems has contributed to many people, especially younger people, rejecting that approach for one that is more confrontational.

Lee-Ann: A number of universities offer courses on constructive disagreement or critical thinking to help students develop these skills and perspectives. Do you think making it a part of the curriculum

for all students might help?

Larry: I think we have to do that. At this point, it has to be brought into the curriculum. At the end of the day, you're basically just saying, stop, take a deep breath, try and actually listen to what the other person's saying. Try to understand how something that seems completely unreasonable to you can seem reasonable to them and learn from that. Is that really so hard? I sometimes ask people: don't you have brothers and sisters and friends? You fight all the time about things you disagree over, and yet it doesn't put you in the position where you have to deny their existence. But for whatever reason, disagreeing when people feel strongly seems to have become a lot more difficult.

We do have to make inculcating the basic value of disagreeing well something that's part of the curriculum

So the answer is, yeah, we do have to make inculcating the basic value of disagreeing well something that's part of the curriculum, and we're doing that. In addition to putting in place training for students this year, we've built a section on disagreeing well into LSE100, the course all LSE undergraduates take in their first year, and there's seed funding for other curriculum initiatives around this idea. Doing this is part of creating the cultural environment we talked about at the beginning.

Lee-Ann: Changing the subject ever so slightly, is there a difference in the approach of Larry, the Vice Chancellor and President, and Larry, the professor?

Larry: Well, I used to teach constitutional law, which can be super controversial. Over the years I have taken two approaches in teaching. In one approach, I let students know what my views are, but I do it with lots of assurances and explicit efforts to show them that it is good to disagree with me, that I welcome disagreement. My other approach was to teach so that at the end of the class, the students couldn't have told you what my politics were, unless, I suppose, they read my scholarship. From what they had seen in class, they would have no idea. And I'd say it depended on what class I was teaching and when it was. It changed over time.

I remember teaching a Supreme Court case and, after walking the students through the Court's arguments, saying in conclusion '… so is this judge lying or is he just an idiot?' Well, that wasn't good

teaching! But I could no longer help myself. And I thought, 'It's not good to make students so cynical so early in their careers.' Students this early in their careers didn't need someone as cynical as I had become, someone who would teach them that everything the Court did was a sham. So I stopped teaching Con Law and shifted to classes where I could control my views better.

> *Even if I can't take a position, I can help people become more open to conversation and compromise*

Lee-Ann: Do you miss that aspect of teaching, where you're able to build a rapport with students over weeks, you're able to model how to engage in healthy contestation – it's not about a single issue?

Larry: I miss teaching a lot. I have to travel too much to make it work, though I really want to find a way to get back into a classroom for just the reason you say. But I do still get to deal with people directly a lot, in non-public settings – students, student groups come talk to me. I still won't take positions, but I do get to develop relationships that are rewarding and have conversations that are rewarding. I've had really good, productive relationships with the LSE Students' Union officers.

So even if I can't take a position, I can help people become more open to conversation and compromise. I think that's super important. I like to say that the world has too many what I call 'no-loafers' – people for whom no loaf is better than a half-loaf. But for anybody who has responsibility in a leadership position, your goal is to make progress. It's not about you, not about demonstrating who you are and how right you are. It's about prioritising progress and making things at least a little better for the people you are supposed to be serving.

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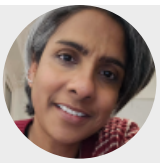
About the author



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