

Interview with Cherie Blair

Aspen, CO

July 2008

Laura Liswood, Introduction: The concept we will talk about is that dominant groups exist in the world differently than non-dominant groups.

We will talk about this in terms of gender, but we can talk about it in terms of race, in terms of dominant countries, non-dominant countries, dominant companies, non-dominant companies, any place where you have this differential of power.

The parable I use is the elephant and the mouse. If you are the elephant in a room, what do you need to know about the mouse? The answer is, basically not much. But if you are the mouse in the room, what do you need to know about the elephant, and the answer, of course, is everything.

Thus, I believe that the non-dominant groups develop abilities to be sensitive to the environment, read the environment, and multitask in the environment. The best leaders actually develop the skill sets of the dominant group and the non-dominant group.

The dominant group has a tendency not to develop the non-dominant skill set and non-dominant group has a tendency not to develop dominant group skill sets. Men for example, dominance may mean their complete willingness to speak their mind, their complete, sense that "I'm entitled to have this position, I'm entitled to go wherever I want."

Cherie Blair: It's not necessarily a bad thing. It makes you single-minded.

Liswood: I read an article about women professional poker players. One of the professional poker players said, 'we can read the men poker players so easily; we have been doing it since high school.' But the men win more money because of their risk profile, because they are more prepared to bet. The best players do both.

Blair: Women can't afford to take risks in the same way, can they, because in the end they have to look after their children? Traditionally, for educated men, your job was to go out there and do the hunting. So it is necessary to take risks in order to bring home the bacon to your family. Whereas a woman's job, we are always told, is to nurture everyone else. Therefore, nurturing makes you less comfortable with risk taking.

Liswood: And yet in the business world or in the political world, I would say to you that the best would be the ones who actually develop both skills.

Blair: Yes, I absolutely agree. When you mentioned to me the mouse and the elephant, it reminded me of the same time I went to the Globe Theatre. The Globe Theatre as you know is in London, and they do Shakespearian plays the way Shakespeare did them.

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So they often do productions with all men as they would have done in Shakespeare's time. They have the girl's part played by the boys, and there is always something slightly unconvincing about men who play the women. But one year I went and they did *The Taming of the Shrew* with all women. They did it completely opposite—instead of having all-man cast, they had an all-woman cast.

And the girl who played Petruchio, I just thought she was the most fantastically convincing man. I said to Tony, 'I think the reason she was such a convincing man is that women have to observe the men the whole time.' So therefore when it came to playing a man she knew what to do, whereas when the male actors play the women, they play the women as they think the women are. Whereas I thought she played the man, as the men are perceived to be.

She was a good actress, but I did think it was what you were saying about the elephant and the mouse. She pretended to unzip her fly, and pee.

(Laughter)

It's certainly different. I have after all –

(Laughter)

Liswood: I interviewed T.D. Jakes, who has written many books, and he made the comment that a white man with a Ph.D. knows less about a black man, than a black man with a GED knows about a white man.

Blair: Because, you know, he has had to develop this sort of observational survival—

I think also it's worth picking up those nuances if you actually think you've got a chance of becoming part of the dominant group.

Liswood: Or your survival depends on it.

Blair: Yes.

Remember George Bernard Shaw's *Henry Higgins* says he's going to teach Eliza to speak as well as an upper-class lady. Yet Eliza, the flower-shop girl, in fact has a better accent. She can't afford to drop her "h" in the way that Lady Caroline Lamb can drop their "h." A real shop-girl, if she drops her "h," she is not good enough.

A while ago, when women were new to the legal profession, and only one woman was part of a big legal group, she tended to dress in suits that echoed the men. She didn't put on her makeup; she absorbed absolutely everything the men did, including oftentimes not having children. Now we find less of that as you get more women in the legal profession. Still, we have to be better at everything—better than the men.

Liswood: Because you're going to be over-scrutinized.

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Blair: Are we at a stage now when perhaps women are starting to dare to be different?

(Laughter)

Liswood: That's a good dialogue question.

Blair: I think when you get to a critical mass, you can dare. You can dare to be yourself.

Liswood: You can dare to be more of who you are, who our basic nature is versus having to take on other's style. I read about Margaret Thatcher.

Blair: Yes. She was absolutely determined not to accept any concessions [to the feminine world] whatsoever. She's famously the first woman prime minister who had no women in the cabinet, very few women at all in her government. She was not prepared to show any weakness or what was perceived to be weakness. Angela Merkel (Chancellor, Germany), I don't know what her cabinet looks like—

Actually, the thing about Angela that is interesting is that she does use her femininity well, but of course we know that Margaret Thatcher did, too. Although, I didn't particularly experience that even when I did meet her; I couldn't particularly experience that myself.

Angela Merkel certainly is more than capable of doing that. The one thing that happens at the G8 summer is the spouse programs when she was the host.

On the second morning, she insisted on coming to the spouses' breakfast, and she sat down with the women as the host, and we had a girlie chat, if you like. We talked about women's issues actually.

Liswood: She pretty open to that?

Blair: She was. January was my tenth G8, and no other person who'd ever hosted the G8 summit had ever actually come and just had a one-to-one meeting with the spouses, and she did.

I took that as an indication that she wasn't frightened to say I'm a woman, too. I think also she wasn't frightened to sometimes take a point which was specifically about women. I don't think Margaret Thatcher would have done that.

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