

An Interview with JCR President Charles Lawrence

When thinking of a JCR President, one could be forgiven for imagining an overly confident, authoritative, and prideful character. If that's what you were expecting, Charles Lawrence is as far from that image of a JCR President as you could get. We'll go further into detail as we run through the interview itself, but suffice to say that Charles has a type of humility and self-consciousness that isn't pitiful. Rather his humility displays a type of purposeful introspection that invites conversation and debate, rather than shutting it down with an authoritarian stamp of self-assurance.

Having done our homework before the interview, we discovered that Charles' degree was Ancient History, a not-so-common degree, but one that, upon reflection, seems fitting for a President. Such a deep knowledge of historic leaders must surely influence a person's leadership style, with them ultimately deciding whether to take inspiration from the likes of Antonius Pius or Nero, for better or worse.

Having competed with two other candidates in his first election, the second was a lot easier, running unopposed. We asked what that experience was like and the response was typically humble. The decision to run again, he explains, was made during Freshers' week 2021, as he had enjoyed co-ordinating that week, and the atmosphere surrounding it. However, had there been opposition in the form of another candidate, Charles revealed that he would have bowed out, due to a desire to not deprive anyone else of the experience of being President. This was surprising to us, that someone would sacrifice a position they loved just so someone else could have a shot, but it seemed perfectly natural to Charles, the logical and correct thing to do.

Moving on from elections, we decided to ask about policy, past, present, and future. We noticed a barely visible change in Charles' demeanour, the personal questions before had not suited him well, he'd seemed mildly nervous, hesitant to take the limelight; with the introduction of policy questions, he became more confident, more prepared. Every answer given about policy was laced with references to the idea that he as President on his own had not changed anything, more it had been the teams he headed that had done so, and that he could not have done anything without them. He did say he was proud of how events had gotten back up and running after the moratorium placed on them due to the pandemic, and how he'd learned to be more trusting of the events team, micromanaging less, which seems now to be a core aspect of his Presidential style.

We decided to try and be a bit more targeted, and asked about any regrets Charles had about his time as President, perhaps a premature question, considering he has two terms left to go, something Charles did point out. The answer came back that he had no regrets, as he has full faith in whoever replaces him to do a good job. Anything he thinks should get done, that maybe doesn't under his successor, he notes, perhaps wouldn't be worth worrying about or having regrets about. This trust in an as-yet-undecided successor was charming, and suggested that Charles had completed, or was in the process of completing, everything he'd set out to do, and was now prepared and ready to hand over the role to the next person.

Despite saying he had no regrets, Charles did mention that there was one manifesto promise he had made from his first election that he had not been able to uphold, a referendum on the non-gowned status of Stevo. This promise, he explained, was made before he fully understood the reasons behind a non-gowned status, and at a time where he was perhaps a bit overambitious

in what he believed the student body could demand. For those reasons, he states, he decided not to go ahead with that referendum.

Something the JCR did go ahead with under Charles' Presidency, and something he was keen to explain, was the increase in accessibility, both democratic and financial, of the JCR. In terms of financial accessibility, Charles was quick to defend events prices, which some have said are too high, by stating that no profits are made from these events, and that the ticket price is as close to breaking even as possible, most of the time being heavily subsidised by the JCR. This suggests that perhaps the JCR makes a slight to significant loss on each event, making it difficult to lower the ticket price any more.. On top of this, he described a new participation fund in conjunction with the college that was there to substitute, if not pay, costs surrounding extracurricular activities such as JCR events, sports subs, sports kits etc., or, as Charles put it, "Pretty much everything within the University.

On democratic accessibility, Charles insinuated that there is a minority of people genuinely interested in the ins and outs of how the JCR functions. Whilst everyone wants to attend events, he explained, far fewer people want to help plan them and attend committee meetings. On the topic of committee meetings, however, he acknowledged that there could be improvements made in terms of transparency, such as the publishing of minutes from the Executive Committee meetings. This was interesting, and showed a true desire to get more students involved in the committee running of the JCR, something he did advise his successor to take up, which lead us to ask about other advice he may have for whoever the next President is.

His reply to this had his signature essence of humility, admitting that he had felt overwhelmed when he had first entered the role, advising anyone that wanted to succeed him to arrange a meeting where he would explain just how much the job entails. This was not meant as a brag, he wanted no thanks for the overwhelming workload he'd taken on, but simply wanted to make sure the next President was prepared to do so. He mentioned that he had struck a good work-life balance, saying that he completely separates the two. His flat at Stevo, he explained, was not an extension of his office, and despite it being on site, was where he relaxed and could find time to do things he enjoyed, rather than work. This was something he couldn't recommend enough, and he stressed the importance of switching off, finding time for friends, and taking your lunch break.

His final piece of advice for his successor was to have realistic goals, to consider the time it takes policy changes to get from conception to implementation, and to think about whether the goal would be actually achievable through the student body. This seemed to be in reference to his ill-fated gown referendum, and, again, it seemed to us that this was genuine thought-about advice, not quick politician's answers, showing his obvious passion for the role and desire to see his successor succeed.

And with that, we concluded our interview. We'd been pleasantly surprised by just how approachable and open to discussion Charles was. He didn't shy away from criticism, and seemed to have a real drive to do the best job he can. We realised that this wasn't just a job for Charles' CV, it was a job that he genuinely enjoyed and had a hunger to do well in. This drive, it seemed to us, doesn't come from a desire for praise or recognition, but for the betterment of the student community he is a part of. In our post-interview discussions, we spent hours discussing the effect of Charles' humility, and we've settled on that it makes us feel we belong in the room with him. We'd like to finish by summing up Charles' Presidency in three words: Humility, Passion, Consideration.

By The Chronicle Executive Team