Q&A

Michael McKay

From interviewing fascinating personalities on his eponymous radio show to chairing hard-hitting debates at Over-Seas House, the Geneva-based ROSL member has a talent for drawing out three-dimensional perspectives and insights, finds Samantha Whitaker



Q. ***How long have you been a ROSL member?***
A. Around 20 years. I've lived in Switzerland since 1984, but my children all studied at universities in and around London, so I used to treat them to lunch at Over-Seas House. Nowadays, when I'm visiting from Geneva, I often use the restaurant for business entertaining and sometimes stay overnight. I've also attended some of the events organised by the Switzerland Branch in Lausanne, and when I was chairman of the British-Swiss Chamber of Commerce (BSCC) Geneva, I often invited ROSL members in Switzerland to join us for events.

Q. ***You worked for 25 years in the tobacco industry. How did you get into that?***
A. A lucky break. After completing my studies in Leeds, I started my professional life as a PE teacher in Jamaica. Then, in 1972, just as I was about to begin a masters degree at the University of Houston, I bumped into a friend who was head of PR at Rothmans, a British tobacco manufacturer. They were looking for young executives to help expand the company and she introduced me to the MD. He hired me after 10 minutes. I wasn't even looking for a job. So, I abandoned the master's idea, joined Rothmans and was promptly sent to London to work at their HQ on Baker Street. My life took a different way.

Q. ***Now you run your own consulting firm?***
A. Yes, but it's just me. When I look at the common thread that runs through my career over the past 40 years, it's always been essentially talking, communicating and persuading. Now, as an independent advisor, I still work with tobacco companies, but also with banks, insurance companies and other businesses. They're all complex industries with complicated communication issues where there are few black-and-white answers, so I have to listen carefully to the arguments on every side in order to find and implement solutions.

Q. ***How did you come to have your own radio show,* The McKay Interview?**
A. I pitched the idea to an English-language radio station in Geneva five years ago. I host the speakers and events programme at the BSCC, and people there had told me they liked the sound of my voice and the way I deal with people. So I said to the station: 'Why don't I go out and interview some interesting people, and we'll just see what happens?' So they gave me two microphones and a recorder, and off I went.

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Now I have a 25-minute slot three times a week. It provides some (mostly) serious and intelligent conversation in the style of BBC's Radio 4, and so far I've interviewed 85 guests – two every month. The deal is that I only interview people who interest me. I've spoken to some fascinating people, such as Kate Adie, Ian Paisley MP, Claire Fox and Sir Jackie Stewart, and covered all kinds of interesting topics, from climate change and the economic crisis to how an international airport is run.

The broadcasts are pre-recorded, but I usually do it in one take, as if it were live. It helps the people I interview to have confidence in me, because they're not worried that I'll edit their responses to make them appear to say something they didn't mean. I've even recorded a few at Over-Seas House.

Q. ***How did you become involved in the Evelyn Wrench Lecture Series?***
A. Roddy Porter invited me to chair the debate on Brexit last October. I was both surprised and honoured, so I immediately agreed. As well as the events I host at BSCC, I also act as MC/moderator at other private events, so I have plenty of experience in refereeing debates.

How do you prepare for a debate?
A. It's important to be conversant with the current issues, so I try to keep up with the British media. I browse the *Financial Times, Daily Telegraph* and the BBC online – but that's just one slice of the UK and it's not really enough. When you live in a country, you're surrounded by chit-chat and banter that often references current affairs, so you get a more three-dimensional perspective. I also read up about the panellists. In October, we had a very interesting mix, so I'm excited to see who'll be on the line-up when I host in July for the lecture on the Trump presidency.

Q. ***Do the discussions ever get heated?***
A. The Brexit debate was good-tempered, generally. The secret is to allow questioners enough time to speak, but also to ensure their question doesn't turn into a speech of their own. I also keep things moving along and make sure the panellists answer the question being asked, rather than the question they would like to be asked. Plus, I'm there to inject a little humour if tensions start to rise.

Q. ***Why would you recommend the Evelyn Wrench Lecture Series to members?***
A. I think it's great that lectures are being revived. There's a real value in being part of a town hall-style meeting, especially nowadays. When I was young, particularly during general elections, there were hustings and people went along to listen to politicians and debate. I get the impression this happens less in the UK now. People tend to get most of their information from the television, press and social media – even older people. And the debate, therefore, is often quite narrow. When I read things on Facebook or Twitter, everything seems too condensed, and usually seen down a narrow tube of self-interest.

The beauty of the lecture series is that there's a diversity of views expressed live in the flesh. You can feel the emotion and tension, if there is any, in the room. It's like the difference between cinema and live theatre. And it's fun, of course. Public debates on topical issues such as the arts, politics and international affairs bring new faces to Over-Seas House and show that ROSL provides a high-quality and unbiased platform for debate and knowledge-sharing about important issues.

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