



**CONVERSATIONS**  
A Global Forum

# Sir Michael Barber

in conversation with  
Ann Bernstein

**Democracy | Markets | Development**

A South African resource influencing policy for over 25 years

To mark 25 years since its establishment, in November 2020 CDE initiated a series of discussions with leading global and local experts to discuss important questions on democracy, business, markets, and development. The series was relaunched in 2022 as CDE Conversations. This was the first event in the new series

**Mike Teke**, CEO of Seriti and CDE board member, opened the event: "Thank you for this opportunity to introduce tonight's conversation. I've seen the positive contribution that CDE has played in influencing the policy environment in South Africa and this conversation about delivery is especially critical at this juncture. We are at a stage where we desperately need action and implementation. If we can get that right I know that as a country we have all the resources and the people to take us to a bright future."

**Ann Bernstein:** Welcome to CDE virtual, and our first event in 2022. It is my very great privilege and pleasure to welcome Sir Michael Barber back to South Africa. Michael is a long-standing friend of CDE and one of the world's experts on how to manage public sector reform. His focus is on how to make things happen in government, how to turn words and promises into results. In 2001, he founded the Prime Minister's delivery unit at Number 10 Downing Street, which he ran until 2005. Since then, he has worked with governments across the globe in both rich and poor countries, from Canada to Peru to Pakistan. He has worked with Prime Ministers and Presidents, with heads of large provinces, and with executive mayors to help them deliver

Why does government matter? Some people in business tend to think it doesn't matter much. And what is the difference between getting results in the private sector and getting results in the public sector?

**Sir Michael Barber:** There are quite a lot of similarities, but a big difference is that governments are under enormous pressure to respond to the constantly changing circumstances the world throws at them. The modern media also puts huge pressure on politicians, both in terms of time and emotionally. And then they have usually made many commitments, which raises expectations amongst the public.

There is now a lack of trust in government around the world, which creates new pressures. It is one thing if the public loses trust in a particular government. In a democracy they can elect a different one in the next election. But if they have lost trust in government institutions, in parliaments and politicians as a group, turning that around will be an uphill struggle. One thing that will help is if they deliver on their commitments in a way that allows people to feel the difference.

For government, if your organisation is failing, you cannot simply decide to stop delivering children's health, or education, or critical services; you have to fix it. A company, by contrast, can cut its losses if something is not working, and get out of failing parts of the business.

**Ann Bernstein:** So, just putting a private sector CEO in charge of, for example, South Africa's police force might not produce the results one could expect?

**Sir Michael Barber:** Yes. I have seen businesspeople brought into government in Britain, Canada, and elsewhere. Some of them managed well and some struggled. Those who succeeded learned how government works and understood the importance of building relationships and getting people within government to buy into their vision. It is wrong to assume that the private sector is good and the public sector bad. Evidence from around the world shows that there are great public sector organisations, great private sector organisations, and bad ones in both.

**Ann Bernstein:** What are delivery units exactly? And what is your advice to presidents and prime ministers who want to set them up?

**Sir Michael Barber:** Do not start with building the unit, start with the change you want to make and what your priorities are. After each election the government in power needs to reset. What do they want to get done? What are their ambitions? How will they know if they are on track to achieving them?

Once the tasks are defined, then the government machine needs to be geared to deliver them in the face of many competing pressures. To achieve that you need part of your organisation to be wholly focused on delivering the identified priorities.

The original delivery unit I set up for Tony Blair started in 2001. Within a few months, the attacks on the World Trade Centre happened on the 11th of September, which had massive consequences for Britain, while at the same time new challenges were regularly generated by Britain's membership of the European Union. I promised Blair that whatever happens, I would focus on delivering on the promises he had made with respect to health, education, crime reduction, and the public transport system. My slogan was "delivery never sleeps".

I remember the chaos in the Prime Minister's office on September the 11th. He was surrounded by dozens of people offering advice. People were talking to him about transport, policing, foreign relations, security and the budget implications of everything. My first instinct was to go and help, but I realised that he had all the help he needed and more. He just needed me to keep the show on the road.

When I left four years later, Blair told me that that was the most important thing I ever did. Whatever he was busy with, he knew that there was one bit of the government just focusing on delivery.

I have seen governments set up a thing called a delivery unit, but it does absolutely nothing. Last year, I set up a delivery unit for Boris Johnson. He has been through a few crises of his own recently, but for an hour or two a week he meets with the delivery unit. The media does not write about it, but behind the scenes the unit is focused on delivering on his promises.

The delivery unit also needs to present the data and make sure everyone is on the same page, so that when the Prime Minister and Ministers meet they don't argue about whether the data is true. Instead, they discuss how to solve problems using data, thus facilitating an honest, focused, practical conversation that isn't about who is to blame but about how to solve the problem.

**Ann Bernstein:** I want to zoom into education, an area where you've spent a considerable amount of time. Many people tell me that fixing basic schooling so that the majority of children get a decent education will take a generation. You disagree. How can you deliver results in a massive system like education within three to six years?

**Sir Michael Barber:** Too often, when people say something will take a generation what they actually mean is: seeing as it will take a generation, we don't need to start yet. That is a terrible mistake. Once you start, it is possible to get visible change within two to three years. It is also a mistake to think that the job of improving education will ever be finished. The world changes all the time and children must be able to change with it.

Many education reforms around the world fail because they do not influence what teachers do. Unless you change how teachers teach reading, writing and arithmetic, unless your reforms get inside the classroom, then you are just window dressing.

To change what a large group of people do all day you need two things simultaneously. First of all, they need to feel some pressure to make the change, some reason why they should change. As human beings we are very attached to the status quo, and we need a bit of shove or an incentive to move from what we do, to something different. Even if the status quo is mediocre, we fear change. Making teachers more accountable will help with that. At the same time, you need to enable the person to do things differently, so they need the support to change. It is no good berating teachers for not teaching mathematics better unless you show them, through good training, good materials, and so on, how they could teach. The best approach is a combination of pressure and support.

**Ann Bernstein:** One country where you were part of designing a really important education initiative was in the Punjab province of Pakistan, home to about 110 million people. What was the initiative and what did you achieve?

**Sir Michael Barber:** I first went to Pakistan in 2009 and in the ensuing decade I visited 54 times. I started by setting up a delivery system to make sure children were enrolled and teachers showed up every day and did their job. We had very clear education reform priorities. The system was answerable to the chief minister, Muhammad Shahbaz Sharif, not just the department.

After three or four years, we were making progress on education, so we applied the same thing to health, particularly the vaccination of young children against basic diseases. What resulted was the fastest ever build-up of children's immunity from childhood diseases. We went from 55 percent of children vaccinated to 90 percent within two years; education enrolment reached 93 percent; daily teacher attendance was over 90 percent when it had been below 80 percent; buildings were fixed; water ran from the taps; the girls' toilets were reliable and sensible; and then after about three years, the performances of children began to improve on two or three different indicators.

The chief minister was absolutely decisive in this. At the beginning, there were maybe four or five people in the province who thought this was sensible and he was one of them. He stuck with it. By the end, there were hundreds of thousands of people seeing that this approach was making a real difference.

To improve the quality of teaching and learning we intervened from a number of directions. We made sure the textbooks were rewritten with our ambitious learning objectives in mind; we trained the teachers to use the new textbooks; we checked that the teachers were using the textbooks and learning the new methods; we tested the children on the new learning objectives. We then reviewed what was working and what we had learned and ploughed that back into teacher training.

In the beginning, most teachers were sceptical, even overtly critical, but by the end most of them really appreciated it. A big change was recruiting all teachers on merit. The chief minister had to fight with his own MPs for that, but he was determined to move from the politics of patronage to the politics of performance.

That was the public system. In parallel, we set up the Punjab Education Fund, which funded low-cost private schools to provide education for poor children. We built a voucher scheme aimed solely at very poor parent whose children were in school. The voucher could only be taken to a private school that was registered, and that would test the children and show if the children were making progress, which proved to be very, very effective.

A significant proportion of poor parents were already sending their children to private schools. They saw that government schools were closed, or teachers were not there, so they scraped together a small number of rupees to send their child to a local private school because these private schools appeared to care more about education. By having both strands at once you generated a sense of competition. As the government system improved, some parents drifted back to the government system.

**Ann Bernstein:** How did the political head in the Punjab deal with vested interests and succeed? What were the key characteristics of his political leadership?

**Sir Michael Barber:** The key characteristics were passion and frustration, and anger. Every morning he would bang the table. I remember one very vivid meeting, where the officials were saying that he was going wrong. He banged the table and said: "Remember that, in 1947, when Pakistan gained independence, Germany and Japan had been flattened by bombing, but look at them now and look at us. Are you telling me that the people in Pakistan are less talented than Germans and Japanese? I don't think so. So, why aren't we able to match them?"

He was always focused on reforming the system, and officials sometimes felt the pressure, but they recognised his integrity and his determination to succeed. He did not get distracted when things went wrong, and he never gave up. He was a very impressive leader.

There was pushback from teachers and their unions initially, but they were defending the indefensible. There were 35,000 teachers who didn't turn up on any given day to work. They were getting paid and not working. Some wanted that to continue, but of course they could not defend that in the face of public pressure, so the minister prevailed.

He also built a group of effective people around the reform programme, and they stuck with it. It was common then for officials to move all the time, across the bureaucracy. It was normal to have four secretaries of education in one year. I said to the Chief Minister that it is impossible to reform anything under such circumstances. So, he focussed on appointing hardworking, honest people, and they stayed for three to four years in the same position. That made an enormous difference.

**Ann Bernstein:** What has happened since he left? Have the reforms continued? Is performance still going up or was it transitory?

**Sir Michael Barber:** It definitely was not transitory, it was a nine-year programme. The pandemic has obviously had a damaging effect across the board. I have not personally been back to the Punjab but I know they are still working on reforms. Implementing test scores and monitoring children and teachers have all made a huge difference, even though the pandemic has been such a setback.

**Ann Bernstein:** A few years ago you wrote a book with a wonderful title, *How to Run a Government so that Citizens Benefit and Taxpayers Don't Go Crazy*. What are some of the key insights from this book?

**Sir Michael Barber:** That book was an attempt to distil what I learned, both in Britain and in the Punjab. I was trying to write a practical guide for government leaders who want to achieve success. The basic pattern is set the priorities, build your organisation to achieve those, drive through the necessary reforms, build routines. Building routines is crucial. The reason I went to see the Chief Minister of the Punjab every two months was to review progress, because governments are endlessly having to respond to crises, so most politicians are running from one crisis to the next. Unless you build those routines in, you cannot get things done and you will not solve deep challenges.

There was a Russian Prime Minister in the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union and before Putin, called Victor Chernomyrdin. As far as I know, he is the only funny Prime Minister in Russian history. He said, "We kept inventing new organisations and they all turned out to be the Communist Party." He went on to say, "We tried to do better, but everything turned out as usual." I wanted to show in *How to Run a Government* that things do not have to be as they usually are. You can deliver results.

**Ann Bernstein:** You once said that many governments are "run by spasm rather than routine". What did you mean?

**Sir Michael Barber:** Government by spasm is reacting to the latest crisis, massaging the data, making loads of announcements, pretending bad things are not happening, panicking and rushing from one challenge to another. Most Ministers and Prime Ministers will recognise that instantly. Government by routine is setting your priorities, collecting data, checking whether it is working, building routines to review progress, solving problems as they arise, not making random announcements, but regularly updating people on the progress you are making, and making sure that when you do review progress with officials you have a proper, honest conversation, not a shouting match.

My Russian friends taught me when I started learning Russian that there are only two phrases you need in the Russian government: "who's to blame" and Lenin's phrase: "what is to be done". In fact, in Russia, "who's to blame" is the first question whenever something goes wrong, and that also happens too often in other parts of the world.



But then nobody tells the truth anymore because they are all trying to mind their backs. "What is to be done" is a much better question. However, in Russian, if accompanied by certain types of body language – a shrug of the shoulders for example - the question can also imply there is nothing that can really be done, as in: "what can you do?"

**Ann Bernstein:** I think a lot of officials give up hope that reform is even possible. They see every challenge as too difficult to overcome, that the systems is too big to tackle, and so on. How does one inject hope so that people become inspired to initiate and believe that change is indeed possible?

**Sir Michael Barber:** Start small. Take one thing and do it well. Assemble effective people and focus on the delivery chain for a particular thing in a particular city or province.

It is understandable that officials get ground down and become cynical. Many politicians who start with idealism can easily begin to see the process as a grind and a burden. They are under such enormous pressure that they become cynical, but cynicism is never good. Scepticism is sometimes helpful, but cynicism is corrosive and damaging.

You have to find ways of bringing people together who really want to get something done. Start with an action that is small and then constantly and consciously build your reform coalition. In that way you can go from half a dozen people to a thousand, and eventually you have a real movement for change.

You also need early demonstrations of success – they sometimes get called quick wins. That way you can convince the doubters by letting them see for themselves that progress is possible.

**Ann Bernstein:** What is your advice to reformers regarding the media? Should they talk a lot about their reform intentions and routines? How should they communicate their successes and what can they do to instil more confidence in the political process?

**Sir Michael Barber:** It is a difficult challenge. I'm personally not an expert on it, but insofar as it relates to delivery, I think the first thing is not to go around endlessly overpromising without getting the job done. That will ensure that people turn on you. You have to enter this with some cognisance that this is a long game, it is not about whether you get headlines tomorrow. Many of today's headlines will have consequences five years from now.

I like to contrast Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, where Pip is introduced on page one in a terrifying scene in a graveyard where he meets Magwitch. So, on page one, you are drawn straight into the story of these two characters who will be central. If you read *Moby Dick*, by contrast, Captain Ahab, who is the main character, is not introduced until page 217. There are rumours about him, but he does not actually appear until then. When you are embarking on a new strategy, you can announce it at the beginning and spell it all out, or you can start more cautiously by teaching people about whaling and then bring your character in later when your audience is primed. I think it is tempting to have a big launch at the beginning of a government programme. But maybe it is better to get on with the job behind the scenes relatively quietly and then say, "Look what we have done."

Even when you do that, you have to craft your message carefully. The message must have integrity, explain what and why you did it, and what you expect if it works, and how you will update people regularly about it. To win people over you need to change the facts on the ground. I will become a supporter when my school works better or crime in my community drops, when real, meaningful change happens.

Even then it is important not to overclaim or try to score too many political points from successes. When I was advising Justin Trudeau in Canada, his party, the Liberals, had done well during their first term and had won re-election. A lot of cabinet members said we should claim these achievements and use them to strengthen the party's position, but Trudeau disagreed. He said, "we are not going to say the Liberals have done this and that. Instead, we are going to say over the last four years Canadians have achieved all these things".

In your neighbouring country, Mozambique, the Prime Minister during the early 2000s, Louisa Diogo, had a similar laudable approach. In one of the years she was in power the Mozambiquan economy grew by an unheard of rate of 15%. I asked her: "How did you do that?" She replied: "I didn't do it all, Michael. The people of Mozambique did it." She told me that the job of government is to create the circumstances in which people can start singing. "Our job is to unlock the music in people," she said. That is a lovely image.

**Ann Bernstein:** Hypothetically, and not with any particular country in mind, if you were asked to advise a country in deep trouble, with crises on every front, what advice would you give them?

**Sir Michael Barber:** There are many things I would say about prioritising and communicating and focussing. But I would also say try not to get too caught up in the current crisis situation and take time to think about a better, different future.

My favourite example of this from British history comes from 1940, after Germany had conquered the rest of western Europe, and Britain had to face German aggression alone. This was probably the biggest crisis in our history. When the battle of Britain ensued, and the Germans started bombing London every night for 40 nights, the British board of education was asked to focus on evacuating children out of the big cities, to safer, less built-up places. Despite the urgency and the horror of all this, the Permanent Secretary of Education decided to call together a group of six top officials and tell them that we can manage the evacuation without you. He then said he would book them into a hotel well out of London, in a safe place, where he wanted them to spend the next three or four months designing the education system for after the war. There was a very good chance that Britain would not survive the war and be over-run by Germany. But the Permanent Secretary had the confidence to think positively about the future, and the six man team he chose ended up writing what became the first Green Paper for education reform in Britain, which eventually took the form of the 1944 Education Act. That Act created the primary school system in which I was educated.

**Ann Bernstein:** You have a new book, *Accomplishment: How to Achieve Ambitious and Challenging Things*, where you have applied many of your insights beyond government.

**Sir Michael Barber:** When I wrote *How to Run a Government* I identified a pattern behind instances of effective government delivery. Then I read lots of history books and I am an avid follower of sports and I saw the same pattern behind success stories in many fields. You can even see it behind great scientific experiments, like Galileo successfully proving that Copernicus was right. This is actually a classic story of delivery. Similarly, when you look at how Picasso succeeded in painting *Guernica*, you will find most of the same elements that you find behind so many other successes.

The point is that if you take all the massive challenges facing individual countries and the globe today, whether it is the economy, or climate change, or war and peace and conflict resolution, there is a pattern of accomplishment that one could apply, which might lead to the resolution of these massive challenges. You can apply this pattern whether you are running a school or a business or a government or a sports team.

I do not say the solution is easy because doing all these things is difficult. But there is a pattern, and if you follow the pattern, it will work.

**Ann Bernstein:** How does a country move from the politics of patronage to the politics of performance? I understand that this is the focus of your new work in Pakistan.

**Sir Michael Barber:** For the past two years I have been working with Dr Sania Nishtar, whom the Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan, has appointed to head up Pakistan's poverty reduction and alleviation programme, Ehsaas.

She has taken my idea of the importance of moving from the politics of patronage to the politics of performance very seriously. She has effectively taken patronage out the system. She has eliminated large chunks of corruption that had grown around government cash transfers. She is generally doing a phenomenal job.

My sense is that she is driving the most ambitious and comprehensive anti-poverty program that has ever been attempted.

**Ann Bernstein:** How does she deal with the pushback one would imagine is inevitable when many officials are implicated in corruption? This seems to overwhelm so many leaders across the world. What makes her so successful?

**Sir Michael Barber:** One part of it is that she is prepared to take risks, and she follows her agenda despite the possibility that she might fail, and her opponents might win. She is absolutely committed. She is also not a party political person. She is very loyal to Prime Minister Kahn, and this loyalty is reciprocated. The Prime Minister is very supportive of her, and although she refuses to draw on that support on a regular basis and rather seeks to resolve issues herself, she can call on the Prime Minister's support when she needs it.

If the top leadership has got your back, you can take on a lot of challenges. I remember benefitting from that when I worked for Tony Blair.

**Ann Bernstein:** Michael, thank you very much, this has been a fascinating hour. Your insights are directly relevant for South Africans, and hopefully we can learn from them. Everyone should read your new book, *Accomplishment*, which deals with successful delivery in sport, business, art, and science as well as government.

**Sir Michael Barber:** Thanks, Ann. Pleasure to be with you.



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