

John Casson has had the unenviable task of guiding l'Arche forward in the aftermath of the revelations about its founder, Jean Vanier. In this recent *Tablet* interview, he opens up about what continues to inspire him about the international organization – with a community here in East Edinburgh – devoted to the care of people with learning disabilities.

Where the light comes in

by Maggie Fergusson

WHEN JOHN Casson became CEO at the beginning of 2021, L'Arche UK was being battered by a triple tsunami. Following Brexit, the flow of assistants coming from Europe had dried to a trickle, leaving skeleton staffs caring for the “core members”, or men and women with learning disabilities, in 11 communities from Inverness to Bognor. Lockdown meant that there were no family visits or visits between community houses, assistants were forced to wear face masks even at meals, and people with learning disabilities had been forgotten in the vaccine rollout. And troubling revelations were emerging that Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, regarded by many as a saint, had been involved, over many decades, in deliberately and systematically manipulating his spiritual authority to sexually abuse women.

So had Casson made a terrible mistake? No: “Part of the reason I came to L'Arche was that I was impressed by how the organisation was facing up to the Vanier revelations.” His move was the result of years of heart-searching, and what he feels now is a sense of “homecoming”.

But if you were to look at Casson's CV, you might think that, since he came to L'Arche, his career has fallen off a cliff. A fast-track diplomat, he was, from 2010 to 2014, David Cameron's senior foreign policy adviser. Then in 2014, aged just 43, he became the UK's youngest-ever ambassador to Egypt. He was determined to use his position to effect radical change.

“I tried to take an approach that said, ‘This is not your grandfather's British government any more’. Colonialism took power away from Egyptians, but I wanted it to be about giving power, sharing power.” He initiated “Empower Egypt”, focusing on the rights of women, young people, people with disabilities. “I started to believe that if you really want to change the world profoundly, then life is not at the centres of power; life is at the margins. That's where the light comes in.”

OVER TIME Casson felt a growing sense of “freedom and grace” at the idea of leaving the Foreign Office. “I took it as an invitation from the Holy Spirit to find out who I would be without all that scaffolding.” Did he feel able to talk about the Holy Spirit to his colleagues in Whitehall? “I used different language with different people. But I did try to be honest and authentic. There was a lot of surprise. Some people said, ‘What on earth are you doing? You could clamber up to the top of the tree in



John Casson with l'Arche core member Lou

Whitehall and change the world from there.' But some people understood completely.”

Casson's career trajectory perhaps makes more sense if one understands that he comes from a long line of Anglican vicars and missionaries. Since he was a boy, his Christian faith has been central. In his twenties, he wondered about ordination – “but I didn't get a sense of vocation”. In Egypt, he formed “deep friendships with Coptic priests and monks; also people in the Muslim world. My British colleagues would be a bit embarrassed if I tried to talk about what I believed, but one of the wonderful things about living in the Arab world is that people are hungry to talk to you about your faith.”

In these conversations it gradually became clear to him “that where I've been put is on the boundary of faith and the world: one foot firmly planted on each side. So, if L'Arche had been just a secular care organisation, it wouldn't have been interesting to me. And if it had been just a church confessional organisation, it wouldn't have been interesting to me.” As it is, “L'Arche is an organisation that invites people to both real human depth and real spiritual depth.”

Deepening his spiritual life remains vital to Casson: “I have a rhythm of prayer I established in Downing Street: I always start the day that way. During lockdown, I invited people to join me on Zoom, and that continues. So I have a bit of my own time and then time with others.”

“Prayer,” he says, “opens your eyes to see things God's way,” and it is essential in lead-

ership. When he was working for David Cameron, he attended frequent meetings with world leaders – Angela Merkel, Barak Obama, Vladimir Putin. “Putin was using power in a very zero-sum way: the more he took power away from you, whoever you were, the more power he felt he had. His purpose seemed to be the accumulation of power for its own sake. He was very masked: you never felt you were dealing with an authentic human being.”

Casson went to Cairo determined he “wouldn't be a Putinesque sort of leader – clearly. Then I realised it was easier said than done. I had these strong instincts that had got me where I was: I was ambitious, I wanted to have the best ideas. So I really had to attend to my inner life: how could I be full of compassion and hope, and not just smart-ass competitive.”

Today, Casson believes there are three “P”s leaders need to keep in mind: “Purpose: what do you pay attention to – beyond getting a promotion or winning the next election; what are we really here for? People: what's the story of those around you; how are you

helping them grow? Presence: do you communicate passion and joy and hope, and what nourishes you to do that?” We tend to think of spirituality as being in a separate compartment from leadership. But for Casson “the business of leading is a spiritual exercise”.

So who, I ask, might be his role model, alive or dead, as a leader? He answers with a question, “Would Jesus be too trite?” If Casson were po-faced pious, Jesus might seem a bit

‘I have a rhythm of prayer I established in Downing Street. I invited people to join me on Zoom and that continues’

trite. But he is quick to smile, humorous in his humility, so Jesus sounds just fine. "I do very honestly see myself as following Jesus, paying close attention to the way he was in the world. And I'm interested in how the way Jesus was in the world is very similar to how people with disabilities are."

What does he mean? People tend to look to the obvious leaders, Casson says – Mandela, Gandhi, Martin Luther King. But some leaders are hidden, and there are some of them among the core members at L'Arche.

RECENTLY he attended a Christian seminar and took with him Martin, a man of few words, in a wheelchair, unable to move or wash himself. Martin's two great loves are Luke's Gospel and Abba. "So we acted out the story of the woman with the issue of blood, and Martin was Jesus. As people tried to touch his garment, they had to pay attention to what they were desperate for; they had to slow down and get in touch with their deepest desires."

Once they'd done this, Casson suggested they sing together, and Martin suggested "Super Trouper". "I particularly noticed the lines, 'But I won't feel blue/ Like I always do/ Cause somewhere in the crowd there's you.' Simply by being himself, Casson says, "Martin was leading the tone in the room and allowing everyone to take their masks off. I admire that. I'd love to have that sense of authentic

being that's liberating for everyone around me." There are 1,400 people – core members and assistants – living in L'Arche UK, and in the UK as a whole there are 1.5 million people with learning disabilities – the vast majority of them "out of sight, out of mind" in the hands of "social care", of which Casson paints a dismal picture. There's an acute shortage of money, but, worse than this, it's a system governed by "dehumanising dynamics", full of "resource rationing" and "risk management", fragmenting the lives of "service users" into little chunks referred to as "packages of care": "The language is Orwellian." People with learning disabilities, says Casson, are "suffering an epidemic of loneliness", and many live in fear.

Four out of 10 of them told Mencap last year that they were reluctant to leave their homes because of hate crime: of being called names, or abused in the street. "They haven't had their civil rights moment, their 'MeToo' moment, or their 'I can't breathe' moment. So it's still possible for someone like Richard Dawkins to say that if you've got Down's syndrome you could increase the sum of human happiness by not being born. You wouldn't be able to utter such a sentiment about someone in another marginalised group."

Against such desolation, Casson hopes, L'Arche communities are a "beacon of hope", leading a "joyful rebellion", gradually altering perceptions of the role people with learning disabilities can play in society. "I'm excited

and relieved to find that the things I hoped were true about L'Arche are true. There's something special about the way people are with each other in L'Arche houses: a presence that's called out by people with learning disabilities. I'm proud of the quality of exuberance and joy when you're with people in L'Arche."

But for L'Arche assistants, working long hours for low pay, isn't it a big ask? "Yes, it's a big ask. But assistants who come to L'Arche – even people who came in the darkest depths of lockdown – emerge saying, 'This has changed the course of my life for ever', in a good way. And that's because it's hard, it makes you confront what your real self is. Being hard is what makes it a transformational experience. But, for L'Arche to be a beacon, we have to have a both/and mindset: we have to be a beautiful community and a really good employer. We try to make the culture for people who come to work for us as life-giving as possible. We don't want to burn them out. We want to offer a masterclass in human maturity. We made a huge effort last year to move to a real living wage. So we're trying to make it an ask in the right way, not the wrong way."

YOUNG PEOPLE who "want to change the world" are finding their way to L'Arche undeterred by the revelations about Jean Vanier, says Casson. "If Jean Vanier was now on the road to canonisation, there's a danger L'Arche would have become an ossified reliquary, preserving the memory of a particular brand of twentieth-century French mysticism."

So is there a sense in which the shocking truths about Vanier have been a blessing in disguise? "I don't think I could ever say that because so much damage has been done. There were people who gave their whole lives to L'Arche because of Jean Vanier. It's produced so much grief. But it is making us rediscover for ourselves what makes L'Arche life-giving and radical and profound. Jean Vanier doesn't define L'Arche. L'Arche is not just one man." He quotes Acts 1:11: "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?" Things have moved on.

I have read that in Iceland now there is not a single person with Down's syndrome. Is it possible that in 50 years' time L'Arche will no longer exist because there will be no more people with learning disabilities?

"That's very sad for Iceland. We're all the poorer for it. But I have more hope than fear. While there's a current in society that pursues a particular kind of perfection, there's also a current listening to the voices of those who have been traditionally excluded. That's what the upswell in L'Arche is about. The window our core members offer on to buried treasure is full of hope for me."

Casson is, by his own admission, a workaholic. It would be easy for him to stay chained to his desk. Realistically, how much time does he actually spend out in the communities with the assistants and core members?

"In the beginning, I spent time with them because I needed to get to know them. Now they're my friends and I just want to be with them. We belong together."

The First Creed

(a reflection on the Resurrection by Fr Ronald Rolheiser)

The earliest Christians used to have only a single line to their creed:

"Jesus is Lord." For them, that said enough. It said everything.

It said that at the centre of all things there is a gracious, personal God, and that this God is powerful enough and loving enough to underwrite everything. Jesus believed this. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when everything was crumpling into chaos and darkness and his whole life and message seemed a lie, he prayed: "Father, all things are possible for you."

We believe in the Resurrection of Christ, precisely, to the degree that we believe we can, in any circumstance of life, say, and mean,

"Lord, all things are possible for you."

In the end, this is not a theoretical thing.

Faith in the Resurrection of Jesus is a practical thing, an everyday trust and sense that there is a deep anchor that is holding everything together. We, for our part, can get on with the business of living, knowing that our inadequacies, failings, and even our deaths, are not the final answer.

Faith in the Resurrection is a lived sense that God is still in charge.

"Lord, all things are possible for you."

To be able to say that, especially when everything seems to be in contradiction to it, is to truly pray the Creed.