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At home: Lord Browne of Madingley

By Caroline Daniel

The former chief executive of BP talks about art, energy, bonuses and the British press



Lord Browne in the library, his favourite room ©Charlie Bibby

I had never seen a man's eyes brighten so much at the mention of his elephant collection during a conversation at a cocktail party, that I felt a voyeuristic need to see them for myself.

The man in question was Lord Browne of Madingley. The first hint of the elephants comes as soon as you walk into his 1757 Cheyne Walk house, overlooking the Thames. In the small sitting room on the mantelpiece is a jaunty parade of eight elephants.

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Despite this, the first impression of the main house is not one of eccentric industrialist. Instead the ambience is more clinical, of manicured public rooms, not a private space. It is only after walking through the garden – where a wooden owl swings in a tree to ward off pigeons (“It doesn’t work,” says Stuart, his house manager) – into the former three-bedroom mews house at the

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back that has been converted into an office and library, that you feel you are entering someone's home.

Lord Browne, 63, the former chief executive of BP, is elegant in crisp suit and Richard James aquamarine tie and immediately at ease. "Most of my friends would say I bought the house to get this [the small, separate house at the back]." It

isn't true, he claims, yet his body language is entirely different in the two buildings; formal in one, informal in the other.

Ever the engineering patriot, he strokes some BMW speakers, made in Britain, before sitting on a sofa with a mere nine cushions. Everything in the house shouts "good taste"; even the lamp stands, with a base made of golden duck legs and webbed feet. Behind him are framed pictures: with his mother, with whom he lived for 20 years until she died in 2000; eating pasta; a portrait by Lord Snowdon, and a photograph with Arnold Schwarzenegger, "thanking you for your friendship". The former Californian governor envelops him like a boa constrictor, one giant arm slung over his shoulder, the other arm reaching across and consuming his hand.



The former mews house at the bottom of the garden, now an office and library

"When you are running a great big enterprise like BP, you meet some extraordinary people." But he is self-aware enough to know such friendships are ephemeral. "They are not your friend. He is very tactile, like Clinton. If a British politician hugged you, it would be ..." – he looks perturbed – "rather unusual." He admires Americans. "They create their own confidence, which is peculiar to America. We sometimes create our own lack of confidence, looking at the worst."

He spent 40 years at BP, 12 as chief executive. He resigned in May 2007 after lying about how he met his boyfriend, Jeff Chevalier, who sold his story to a newspaper. There are a few mementos of his BP career – a cartoon of him wielding a gun next to a meek Vladimir Putin offering a martini, done in the happier days of the Russian joint venture TNK-BP. There is a BP digital clock with a countdown to the Olympics (then on 175 days). Will he go? "I'm going for the first three days then I'm leaving the country."

As for the BP oil spill trial underway in the US, how does he feel watching it from afar?



"Every time I look at the company I think of all the people I know there, and the fact is they have had a very tough time. BP will experience a horrendous profile during the trial ... with the negative testimonies ... It happened with Texas City, a much smaller case compared with this. I'm very sad about it ... The brand has got

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Sculptures in the main house, including a 'St Anthony of Lost Things'

to be restored but it doesn't happen automatically. You've got to work at

it."

Lord Browne remains involved in energy through his role at Riverstone partners. It has a stake in a shale business, Cuadrilla, which has wells near Blackpool in the UK. Such businesses remain controversial. "The shale boom started in the hands of hundreds of small operators, and some didn't do a good job ... The industry is always marred by events. So it has got a bad reputation, but I think it is going to come round. It's going to happen in Europe, China, India and Argentina."

America is also experiencing a **big shift in its energy profile**. "Not only is it self-sufficient in natural gas, with the oil coming from shale, it will be self-sufficient in oil in a decade or so, or a decade and a half. It is what every president of the US has wished for since Nixon. This is the beginning of something very different in America."

An early advocate on **climate change** at BP, he laments that politically it "has gone on the back burner. Renewable energy is not interesting to people, except in China, where it is part of their industrial policy."

In person, he is watchful and open. He has an old-fashioned sense of courtesy, a seasoned statesmanship, yet also an unusual calm. We head to "the library", his favourite room.

The word "library" is not quite right. There is a grand board room-cum-dining-table for 12. On one side are shelves laden with dozens of elephants, next to shelves of books on subjects from British politics and spying to business and folklore. Presiding over the room in cornices are two 16th-century Italian busts – reliquaries (minus the morbid bones).

His designer Tim Gosling, who also worked on his flat in Venice, wanted more of them. "I thought it was too much, like a mausoleum. But these two are quite amusing. I thought they were quite benign." "They give a papal presence." I offer. "Not quite my style," he counters, perhaps leery of prompting another soubriquet (the FT once dubbed him the "Sun King" for his monarchical style at BP).



Lord Browne had a 'senior moment' regarding the painter of a multi-coloured work in the sculpture room

His management style has changed since then. "Strategy that takes too long to explain doesn't work. You need to focus on the key things and make sure you understand what you are talking about so you need to continuously brief yourself, in conversations and reading, but don't overdo it. There is no need to kill yourself. There are plenty of people who can refine the case; I'm more interested in trying to find the case."

On the other side of the room are his rarer books; many Venetian 16th to 18th century (the first Venetian print he ever bought "is in the toilet"), heavy vellum volumes and two giant Audubon bird prints. Among his most prized possessions is a complete set of Canaletto engravings from 1750. "Some of them are very well known ... That's a fantasy. It's called 'The Lantern and the Arch', naturally. His pictures are so studied ... this is a wonderfully grand book.

I love it.”

He pulls out another volume. “This is the rarest thing I have.” I move my coffee cup away. He notices. An eyebrow is raised. “It would give the first line to your piece.” The book contains woodcuts from July 1530 of Charles V’s entry into Bologna to meet the Pope. “This was a poster given to a few people and as a result it was ephemeral and disappeared. There are probably only half a dozen copies left in the world. It was coloured at the time of the print. Isn’t that beautiful? It’s so lovely.”

Although he once collected stamps, he shuns the word collector.

“There is more system in that word than I would apply. I can remember when and how I bought the object and that is as important as the object itself. I like beautiful things that are happy. My taste in visual arts is edgier, otherwise you get bored. I sell some pictures, but I’ve never sold an object.”

We return to his Grade II-listed house. He moved into it in 2007 after an extensive restoration (the whole back section was removed, floors levelled). He lives there with his partner, Nghi Nguyen, who is creating a Vietnamese restaurant in Bermondsey. “These are my pink chairs,” he says, affectionately caressing a leather dining room chair. “I saw them at Eltham Palace.”

He shows the photographer and me upstairs. “This is ... a room.” His voice tails off. “It is only used when lots of people are over.” It is pristine, but lacking a sense of soul – more of an art gallery than a living room. Five sculptures are next to each other, organised by height, from a “St Anthony of Lost Things” to a Rodin torso. In spite of the random juxtaposition, they all seem distinctive. He has a “senior moment” when he forgets the artist’s name for a streaky multicoloured painting. He poses for a portrait, accompanied by a self-conscious commentary: “I feel like a preacher like this”; “I feel like Tony Blair”; “I feel relaxed now.”

Befitting his role as chairman of the Tate Trustees, he has an impressive art collection, including a photo by Hiroshi Sugimoto of a waxwork recreation of Vermeer’s “The Music Lesson”. There are works by Alex Katz, Bridget Riley and David Hockney, his hero, who he has never met. “I’d like to ask him how he thinks about things. Every time he looks at something, he makes it different. I’d like to ask how it was being him in the 60s and 70s, when being out and gay was tricky.”

Does he think about his legacy? This question prompts the longest hesitation of the interview.

“I don’t know whether I’m prepared to admit I think about legacy. In my rational moments I think that business is very ephemeral. Few things last in business; actually, there are very few things that last. I hope I created some things that were good at BP. Some would say I also created some that were bad. I don’t agree with that myself. Why should I?” It is the only time he gets close to being defensive about his business record. “We paid vast amounts of dividends for people, created security for their future. When I was CEO we paid £1 of every £6 to pension funds in the UK.”



A Tumaco head, part of Lord Browne’s pre-Columbian collection

As for the row over bonuses, he says there is pressure to “demonstrate that you’ve earned it, which has to mean the shareholders need to get something out of it as well. Some compensation systems are so complicated and produce unusual results – stock price goes down and compensation goes up; so it needs to be explained.”

Lord Browne does not think compensation is an “everyday issue for most people. Fairness is, and so too is jealousy. It’s a natural human condition.” He cautions against a witch-hunt. “We need to make sure people aspire, and part, but only part, is to make money.”

Mindful of his own reputational mauling by the press, he has been following the [Leveson inquiry](#).

“I hated it in 2007. It is horrible when you become the focus of attention and paparazzi are following you. I became very suspicious, very cynical.” He is sceptical of real change after Leveson. “Maybe the traditional print media will change, but we have unregulated media in Facebook and Twitter.”

His attitude to his own fall from grace is stoic. “I felt hurt, absolutely, but you know it is what it is. It happens.” His former boyfriend’s actions “created an extraordinary chain of events which I didn’t handle well, the press didn’t handle well; then you say to yourself, in the words of my mother, who had real reason to say it [she was deported to Auschwitz as a child and Lord Browne’s grandparents were killed], ‘Don’t trust anybody.’ ”

Is that a good lesson to come out of it all?

“No. You have to trust people, don’t you? I think people are basically good.” I prompt him. “And then, of course, you found the elephants?” He obligingly echoes this, with a conciliatory smile. “And then I found the elephants.”

Showing us out amid the winter freeze, he admits he is ready for a warming glass of red wine. “It’s always 6 o’clock somewhere in the world.”

Caroline Daniel is editor of FT Weekend

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Favourite things

The elephants began with his partner Nghi, who loved them, so he bought him one for a birthday. “I just rather liked it, with its trunk up. One thing led to another.” The greatest pieces come from Venice.



“The most beautiful piece is without a doubt these two here, by a great sculptor of glass from the 1920s. They are just very appealing and very thoughtful shapes.” They are made of white glass coated in blue, with gold flecks. He points to another. “These are here as an example of horrible Venetian glass. They are some of the better more horrible things.” Crossing the room, “This doesn’t look very nice” he says, frowning at a piece of Opaline glass. “But it was quite hard to make.

The problem is when you start collecting something like this everyone says ‘we

have an elephant for you'. The right thing to say is there's no elephant we don't like ... but there's a garage with a very big elephant in it."

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