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As part of the *Café Insights* series of interviews with inspiring speakers, The Insight Bureau recently caught up with Robert Guest, the Foreign Editor of *The Economist*. Based in London, he has reported from nearly 70 countries has lived in six, and constantly travels around the world to talk to leaders in government and business.



[\[link to the audio\]](#)

AV: Well hello and welcome to another in the series of Café Insights. I am Andrew Vine, CEO of the Insight Bureau and today it's my pleasure to be in conversation with Robert Guest from *The Economist*. How are you?

RG: Very well

AV: Now, Robert is the Foreign Editor of *The Economist*, responsible for the front end, as they call it, the newspaper, and what I think must be the greatest job at *The Economist* group really.

RG: It's terrific fun because you have an excuse to go anywhere you like in the world, anytime and talk to anybody. And there's so much going on in the world and it's my job to keep abreast of it.

AV: Well, this is why I wanted to get in touch with you being in Singapore here today and speaker at one of the events we have arranged; what's top of the agenda for *The Economist* at the moment?

RG: Well there are several things: there is always the question of China - are we looking at a hard landing or a soft landing? I'm inclined to think soft landing, but we cannot be complacent about that. There's what's going on in the United States, you know; who's the next President going to be and what does that mean for the global economy, what does that mean for different industries. Very concerned about what's going on in Russia at the moment, which seems to be the big wild card in the globe at the moment. You simply don't know what Vladimir Putin is going to do next, and obviously we are looking at what's going on in the Middle East because there's intractable problems there which in the case of Syria are spilling out into Europe and causing a great deal of disruption.

AV: One of the things, strategically, from a company point of view is where they should be investing for the future, and so they have to take into account many of the big shifts that have taken place in the world. People are quite nervous about China, at the same time as realising it's their future. How is the West's relationship with China going to pan-out, is China a place that we can trust to be there to drive our fortunes for the future or should we be wary of China?

RG: I think you have to be optimistic about China while at the same time being wary about specific things there; clearly the economy is going to be enormous, influential, continue to grow, lots of amazing opportunities there. But as you are balancing away from heavy industry and towards services, the import component of the Chinese economy is likely to fall and so the effect of China on global growth is not going to be as enormous as it has been in the past. I mean, we've really had a big free ride from China and it's going to be a more mature relationship in the future.

AV: And China's growing up in the world, it's becoming more assertive, is that something we should be concerned about?

RG: Certainly. If you're one of China's neighbours and you've got a territorial dispute with China, the chances are China is much bigger than you are, and you've got to be worried about that! Do I believe the worst case scenarios? Do we see a shooting war between China and Japan? No, I really don't think that's going to happen but again, this is not something you can be complacent about, something that you have to make sure that you have an America that is engaged, that other countries, you need to make sure they are aware of the problem, you have got to make sure that the two sides are talking to each other.

AV: A country that you mentioned a minute ago, Russia is another one asserting itself, but all for the wrong reasons!

RG: Yes, that's a completely different case. You know, China is run by a committee of reasonably far-sighted people. I disagree with them on a lot of things but you know they are reasonably predictable. Russia is run by one man; it's run by a very dangerous regime of people around him and completely unpredictable; one minute he is annexing Crimea, and there is this sort of invasion which he denied in Ukraine, and now he's sent fighter planes to Syria, which I suspect is going to prolong that war rather than solve it. This is a very unpredictable and dangerous nation and that's because it's weaker. In Russia, the Putin regime's legitimacy has depended upon the myth that he was responsible for rising living standards since he took over, which was mostly down to higher oil price and economic reforms that pre-dated him but which didn't bear fruit until he was in charge. Now that the economy is in recession there, he is having to find other stories to give people, and banging the patriotic drum is the thing that he has decided to do, and that's very worrying if you live anywhere near Russia.

AV: Yes, and with oil prices not bouncing back anytime soon so this is a prolonged problem for him to face.

RG: Yes. It's a mug's game predicting oil prices but, the idea that the fracking revolution in America was a flash in the pan, no, this technology is here to stay, it's going to get better, it's going to get cheaper and it's going to spread. So, I think the oil prices, they are not going to go back up to \$100, would be my guess.

AV: We're now in the lead-up to the election in the United States and of course we are always concerned about the relationship that the West -- in particular America -- has with China and Asia. What do you see? What do you think is likely to come out of the US elections next year?

RG: The Chinese are not very keen on the idea of Hillary Clinton as President. A lot of them will see her as being anti-Chinese, and during any election campaign you will hear quite a lot of China bashing that takes place on the stump. Bill Clinton, you remember, did that when he was running for office; it's normal, it happens. But I would be reasonably optimistic about this because I don't think any of the 'crazy' candidates are going to win. I think it's going to be either Hillary or one of the more grown-up Republicans such as Marco Rubio, and I think Hillary is terribly engaged with the world; she has been to a hundred-odd countries as Secretary of State, she has done her homework, she knows who the leaders are, what the issues are and she's engaged, she cares. I think that's definitely the best that the outside world can hope for from an American president. I think actually the serious Republicans are pretty engaged as well, and I would hope that they would be more interested in what's going on in the rest of the world than Barack Obama has been, because I think there has been a bit of a power vacuum.

AV: Right. Well unless we look into the future as well, I mean it is one thing to be looking at the conflicts in the areas of tension and troubles today but it is the unknown unknowns that we have to

worry about as well, the things that are going to come and hit us from left field, which with hindsight would've been quite hard to see. I mean people in the past have looked at the Arab spring as something that, well was it predictable, was it not? But it did catch people quite quickly unawares. What can we do to kind of stay one step ahead of that?

RG: Well, very hard to stay one step ahead of unpredictable news! Some of the bad shocks we're not going to see coming and we'll have to react to them, but there's a lot of things that matter a lot where they are kind of predictable; any kind of demographic change, you get a lot of warning that that's happening, you know it's not a secret that societies are ageing and you need to do something about that. Lots of technological change is also more predictable than you might think because a lot of the technologies that are going to transform the world tomorrow already exist today, just aren't terribly widespread because they are still too expensive. Driverless cars would be an example of that. Right now it's in the experimental stage, Google are putting their employees in them to drive to work to test them -- I mean, those are not the employees they're trying to get rid of! *[laughter]*. This is a technology that will get cheaper and will spread and will just change the way people spend their money, it would change the way people design cities; you know right now a car is the second biggest asset that many families buy and yet it's idle most of the time, 96% of the time. If you move to a society where you're summoning a driverless car via your mobile phone, you get in it, it takes you where you want to go, then it goes away and picks someone else up. Much more efficient use of resources, you won't have to have so much parking spaces in cities, you'll find that old people can continue driving forever because they're not actually driving. You'll find that people can commute for longer distances because it's not so painful, there'll be less congestion. I mean given that cities today are built around the motor car -- the old fashioned motor car -- you've got to assume that this is going to transform the cities of tomorrow and people are not thinking hard enough about that. And it's a lot closer than you think.

AV: hmm ... so the future is really dependent on a combination of power, demographics and technology.

RG: Those are things that we try to, you know, stay one step ahead of the game, and figure out what's going on in different parts of the world, and hopefully we can tell audiences about this stuff and engage them in a conversation afterwards. I find that people very often find this stuff fascinating.

AV: Well I do too! Thank you very much, Robert, for spending some time with me today.

RG: My pleasure.

AV: And you fly back to the UK today so all the best.