INTERVIEW WITH LORD KULVEER RANGER OF NORTHWOOD: THE CONVERGENCE OF POLITICS AND TECHNOLOGY

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In June 2023, it was announced that Kulveer Singh Ranger would receive a life peerage in former Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Honours list. At TechMarketView, we have known Kulveer for many years. He has had an extensive career in the technology industry, most recently at Atos, where he latterly held the position of SVP, Strategy, Marketing, Communications, & Public Affairs for the Norther Europe, APAC, and India region.

Having tackled some exciting projects at Atos, he will leave the company at the end of November after 8.5 years. However, he still has his finger in several tech pies, including as a Board Member at TechUK, where he is serving his sixth year, and as part of the West Midlands Tech & Digital Advisory Board as Chair for Digital Skills. Having spent the last couple of months 'finding his feet' in the House of Lords, we expect him to seek other opportunities in the world of tech over the coming months.

Meanwhile, this is not Kulveer's first foray into the world of politics. He was a former Director of Transport, and then Director for Digital London & the Environment, establishing the first Digital Office for London, at the Greater London Authority, while Boris Johnson was Mayor of London.

Last week, Kulveer gave his maiden speech in the House of Lords, a moment, which he states was "significant for me and my family." TechMarketView's Chief Analyst, Georgina O'Toole, caught up with Kulveer to understand his view on the worlds of politics and technology converging.

Georgina: Congratulations on your recent appointment. I believe your full title is Lord Ranger of Northwood. How do you feel about your elevation to the House of Lords?

Kulveer: I guess the first response is surprised - because it wasn't something that, through my career, I was expecting or something I had been looking to do. And I think that's one of the great things about life. Suddenly these opportunities come your way. And that's probably a pattern for a lot of my career; I've had opportunities come up and you then must decide if it's the right time for you and your family. If it is, you can grasp the opportunity and do what you want to do. And as with most things in life, particularly, I think with being in the House of Lords, I'm definitely going to learn a lot and, probably, grow into the role over a period of time.

Georgina: And you are, actually, the first British-born, turban-wearing Sikh, to sit in the House of Lords. What does that mean to you?

Kulveer: That does mean a lot, actually. Look, I've never said I am, or would consider myself to be, a voice for the Sikh community, because I think that's a quite a privilege role to have. I'm a member of the Sikh community in the UK, and very proud of family, the traditions and our culture. There are other turban-wearing Sikhs sitting in the House of Lords, three others. But yes, I am the first who was born in Britain, born in London, and I think that speaks, hopefully, a bit about how the opportunity for second generation immigrants - children of

immigrants. We have pathways. We're still evolving into broader society and, dare I say, you do become part of the establishment if you join the House of Lords. So, it's evidence that anybody can do that, and so it makes me very proud to be the first British-born Sikh, to be in the House of Lords.

Georgina: And in terms of your career experiences to date, how do you feel those will influence your time sitting in the House of Lords?

Kulveer: In my career, I feel I've been fortunate to have opportunities that have enabled me to straddle the public and private sector, tackle the challenge of delivering good quality public services, and live through an era where technology has come through to the fore. In the early part of my career, we saw an initial dollop of technology, happening in the background. Projects were seen as transport projects, or infrastructure projects. However, increasingly they were becoming technology projects, underpinned by—and in fact entirely driven by—technology. That required a shift in mindset. That was one thing. Also, I've been fortunate to see the challenges faced when trying to fund these projects, and the many mechanisms we've used over the decades, whether PPP (Public Private Partnerships), or PFI (Private Finance Initiatives), or more traditional contracting methods. There's also been shifts over that time in the way Government engages with what have become strategic suppliers. The procurement side of technology is as important as the sort of area the projects sit in. Finally, the third thing, is the political influence on projects. This is what got me into politics. I was not a student politician. Although I had a keen interest in politics, it was never really something I was heavily involved in or was looking to get heavily involved in initially. However, when my career took me into these kinds of programs, I started to wonder: OK, I understand this is a challenge of procurement. We might be able to get the right structure to deliver a project, but politics still plays a huge part in how a project proceeds: in terms of the specification, the delivery, and the pressure to deliver. That means you've really got to engage with the politics and that is what drove me into getting involved. So, all those three areas have had an influence on getting me here today.

Georgina: And perhaps thinking more generally, what do you think is the most important thing you bring to the House of Lords? Be it your values or your heritage or your life experience?

Kulveer: One thing I think probably everybody brings is their own set of values and life experience. I hope that being someone of a different background—a diverse background—you bring diversity of thought and diversity of awareness. I wouldn't say I'm young, and I wouldn't say I'm old, in comparison to my fellow peers, but I do think I'm, probably, also bringing a different generational way of thinking. As a child of the 70s, rather than maybe the 60s or 50s or before, like a number of fellow peers are, I would say I may be more in tune with some things that are going on in broader society. And then, there is the career side. That is where I've been fortunate: to have a vast number of different experiences. To be able to follow my passion. To follow the things that I felt had purpose.

Because when I graduated from university in the late 90s, everybody was taking jobs in 'something called IT', no matter what subject you were graduating in. I graduated in Architecture—pure Architecture—from University College London (UCL). So, there was a movement at that time. And, to then see what happened over the last 25 years… the birth of the digital age. And that's hopefully something I can bring in, into the deliberations and the debates in the House of Lords.

Georgina: So, it's clear that technology is, unsurprisingly, a passion of yours. What do you think are the most important actions that government can take to ensure that the UK really benefits from the latest advances in technological innovation that we're seeing?

Kulveer: I'll put my hand up. I'm not the techie in the room. I'm not the architect. I'm not the coder. But my passion has come from understanding the potential of technology. Can we define the outcomes and outputs that we are looking to achieve? And then how do we take people along with us when we're trying to deliver those things? Because you can get lost in the noise and the maze of both procurement or funding or designing—all those things—but some people must sit above that and maintain the focus on outcomes and delivery. And how do we maintain that? I think that's where government has to sit, and act as a good customer. You only really succeed if you have a good customer who already has a good understanding, or who can collaborate with you to understand the outcomes they are looking to achieve. If they all get involved in every element of design in tech—and we've seen that over the decades—that doesn't always lead to the best outcomes. Government needs to trust the people who know the technology and focus, as Government, and as the customer, on what it is trying to achieve, and make sure they achieve those outcomes. Yes, to some extent, everyone needs to understand the ins and outs of the technology. But there is a question mark over how much Government should focus on the technology itself. Now, we are probably at the top of the AI hype cycle. We've seen this with a number of other technologies over the years, whether it's been quantum computing, or even blockchain. And a number of these technologies will redefine technology driven services. I think they all have a part to play. So, when something comes to the top of the hype cycle, that's when you are probably at the peak of learning about it. After that, it's got to blend in with everything else that is happening. Whether that's 'how do we design the latest IoT services?' or 'how do we maintain cyber security?' or 'how do we maintain the challenge of ever bigger data?' or 'how do we manage the landscape of the various manifestations of cloud?'… all these elements will play alongside the AI element. So, although all the focus is on AI now, let's not forget there will always be other technology areas as well—and more—and we need to be conscious of that. In Government as well as in industry.

Georgina: Indeed, so lots of challenges. So, I guess the next and probably the most important question is how do you feel that, as Lord Ranger of Northwood, you can positively influence that agenda and make a real difference in your time in the Lords?

Kulveer Ranger: Well, I have to say it's not going to be my job alone. I think there's going to be a job for many in Parliament—in the House of Commons and in the House of Lords—over the coming years, if not decades. We see this change happening, and I've spoken a lot over the last 10 years about something called 'the digital society'. I think we're going beyond that. We can stop saying digital because we're going to be a society that is technologically driven, and it will be entwined in everything we do. I feel we're coming to a second phase where our transformation is going go to another level. So, I'd say phase one—digital society 1.0—has been about getting basic services onto websites and applications; to be able to look up information about your council tax with the local authority, or your income tax with HMRC, or your health on the NHS App. These are basic services run in a relatively basic way. But if we compare them to the customer or rather user experience, using providers like Amazon, Apple and Google – they deliver an intuitive, integrated, user experience, the frictionless ability to access those services. This next phase will be built on the back of more creativity and UX skill, coupled with more and better technologies such as AI, Quantum, and better Cyber Security. These things are going to lead to a digital society 2.0 from a citizen-centric perspective. And I think what we need to do, and hopefully people like me, will need to do, is a be aware of, and understand, what broader industry is doing because it's not going to be defined, no matter how much we like, by what we in the House of Lords and the House of Commons debates are deciding. It will be decided in conjunction with global businesses that are forging ahead in the research and the investment and the design of these things. So, we must work more closely—engage even more—with global and local businesses in the UK and across the world. And then we must understand—and you know I love the communication side of things—how we inform people about the macro changes that are coming. How do we promote specific outcomes - positive outcomes that we are confident about? We must have that conversation with citizens, but also quite rightly, we have to let them know that we are thinking about how to protect them from the unforeseen challenges and consequences that technology brings. We all know the challenge of data, or personal security, and of privacy. How do we manage that? How do we make it safe and secure? There are various Bills, including the Online Harms Bill, which achieved Royal Assent last month. But they will have to continually evolve. Because technology doesn't sit in situ. It keeps evolving. And that's why in our industry we have versions, we have updates, we have patches. The language of technology will need to come into the language of legislation as we look to become more agile and more flexible in the way legislation keeps in pace with what happens out there in the development of new tech. So, I think it's exciting. I think it will be a shift in mindset for politicians and legislators. But I also think that there's a huge opportunity for us here the next phase of transformation for public services.

Georgina: Thank you very much, Kulveer, and I really look forward to seeing the impact that you have over the years ahead as you helping government grab a big opportunity.

Kulveer: Thanks Georgina.