

The 1st Runner Up of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner: Cheng Wai Ho

Name of School : Queen's College

Book Title : First Among Equals

Author : Jeffrey Archer

Publisher : Simon & Schuster

Politics is, undeniably, an intriguing subject. Some consider it to be an art, an exercise of oratory skill and critical thinking, using logic and reason to bring out the best in government. Some see it as a way to bring about change, to reform society and change it for the better. Others see it as a playground for the self-entitled, a battlefield where politicians sling insults and abuse, not because they want to see positive change in the law, but because they sit under the fluttering flags of opposing parties. But as mere citizens and outsiders, we rarely get to see the inner workings of government, the silent battles and struggles, the light and darkness that lurks within everyday politics.

Or... perhaps, there is a way in?

Authored by a former Member of the British Parliament, Jeffrey Archer, *First Among Equals* is a thrilling and eventful journey detailing not one, but four young men's race to become the most powerful man in the United Kingdom. The book's title, derived from the Latin phrase *primus inter pares*, is used as an honorary title for a person who, despite being equal with his peers, is given more respect due to his seniority in office. In this case, it is a reference to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and a symbol of the four's pursuit of the coveted office at 10 Downing Street.

Like many of Archer's other novels, the book focuses on not just one person's point of view, but alternates between the perspectives of the four aspiring Members of Parliament, assisting the reader in developing an all-rounded view and detailed understanding of their respective paths from insignificance to prominence. It also provides insight into the two major parties in Parliament, the conservative Tory Party, and the blue-collar, middle-class Labour Party. Fighting for the blue rosette of the Tories is Charles Seymour, second-born of the wealthy and powerful Seymour family. Despite his superior intellect

and character, Charles is deprived of the riches and power bestowed upon his older brother, Rupert, solely because of the order in which they were born. There is also Simon Kerslake, an Oxford-educated family man who has to find other sources of income to supplement his meager politician's salary. Due to their differences in upbringing, the two become natural rivals as they grapple their way up the political ladder. The Labour Party is headlined by Raymond Gould, a born-and-bred Leeds native who lives above his parents' butcher shop; and Andrew Fraser, a Scot who defied the wishes of his father, a Conservative Member of Parliament, and crossed the floor to don the red rosette of Labour. Unlike Seymour and Kerslake, Gould and Fraser develop a grudging respect for each other, and become temporary allies during the infancy of their careers.

Throughout the book, the reader trails behind the massive footsteps of the quartet of budding lawmakers as they strive to cement their place in the House of Commons, and take down anyone or anything that seeks to topple their legacy. Seymour, abusing his power as the chairman of his family's bank, attempts to put Kerslake into financial ruin by staging a devious coup. In turn, Kerslake

retaliates by threatening to air Seymour's complicated and convoluted romance in public. As prominent public figures, and under the constant scrutiny of the public eye, their private lives inevitably come to the fore. Gould's one-night stand with a prostitute almost crushes his fledgling career, and Fraser's family is torn apart when his five-year-old son is killed in a motor accident. Even while combating these private matters, they prevail and maintain their pristine images, mounting great peaks while shaking off adversaries and setbacks alike.

From the very first chapter, it is clear that Archer has masterfully recreated the Parliamentary atmosphere he experienced while serving his country. The hustle and bustle of the House of Commons is accentuated in every paragraph, giving the book a sense of authenticity and genuinity. In fact, you could glance behind you and almost expect a rattled minister at your elbow, asking you for an opinion on yesterday's astonishing ten o'clock vote. Archer's mastery over his literature also pumps the book full of emotion and feeling, allowing the reader to sympathize with or despise its cleverly crafted characters. Even though the reader is only glancing at printed words

on a yellowed page, Archer's writing makes it almost seem as if the reader has been transported to the United Kingdom. You can feel the cries of the backbenchers crowding your ears, blocking out the droning of the minister at the speaker's box, as Andrew Fraser prepares to fight for the privileges of his beloved Scotland. You can sense the malice, cunning and malevolence oozing from every orifice of Charles Seymour, as he sits at his expensive mahogany desk contemplating his next scheme to defeat Simon Kerslake. You can almost smell the desperation coming from a harried Raymond Gould, as he struggles to conceal his adultery from his wife and more importantly, the newspapers. It is a quintessential Archer novel, one jam-packed with intensity and vehemence, warmth and iciness, struggle and triumph.

However, I believe the book's greatest achievement lies in its ability to peel back the curtain, and show us a side of politicians we don't get to see very often - their family lives. While the majority are laser-focused on their every word at the dispatch box, hoping to berate them for the slightest slip-up, Archer delves deeper into what goes on when the politics dies down and the leaders of society go home.

Kerslake and Fraser, the book's exemplary examples of this, both enjoy the warmth and love surrounding their homes, and the support system they have helps them forget the insults and arguments thrown their way daily. Kerslake, husband to a loving wife and father to two ambitious sons, is able to bounce back from his financial woes thanks to the unwavering support from his family. Fraser, who has to deal with a deceased son and multiple election losses, pushes forward nevertheless, safe in the knowledge that his father has his back. Despite appearing to be insignificant bits of the story, I think that they show a softer side of the characters, and hammer home the fact that politicians are, after all, human. The sentiments and devotion displayed in the book shape them not just as lawmakers, but people as well, which makes the story more relatable and moving,

First Among Equals is no ordinary political drama. It is an adventure set in a foreign and unexplored land, yet simultaneously down to earth. The dialogue is sharp and bone-chilling, and their impact reverberates far beyond the debate floor. Archer has expertly crafted a masterpiece, a marriage of conflict and comfort, a battle of intellect and guile, of four intertwined storylines, each as compelling

and unexpected as the next. But above all, it is a doorway, a path into the previously obscured comings-and-goings of the political world. Pick it up, and you will be transported into a new realm, one that is not shaped by society, but shapes society instead.

In the end... who will become First Among Equals?

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