# Lord John Browne eyes Cambridge chancellorship while reflecting on his legacy



At 77, Lord John Browne, the former chief executive of BP and a notable figure in the energy sector, is eyeing a return to his academic roots. Browne, whose mother was liberated from Auschwitz and settled in Cambridge, where he was raised and educated at St John's College, is set to participate in the university's upcoming election to select a new chancellor. This position is notably significant, as only a select few have held it throughout Cambridge's 816-year history—currently, Lord Sainsbury of Turville is the 108th to do so.

Browne's hopes for the chancellorship are intertwined with his vision for the future of universities amidst what he describes as a profound global transition. "We are living through a great global transition, a once-or-twice-in-a-generation ‘vibe shift,’" he said. "Universities must be places where people can disagree respectfully and build resilience through reasoned debate, because that is how knowledge advances and societies grow stronger."

Reflecting on his past, Browne pointed out that it has been 25 years since he initiated BP’s “Beyond Petroleum” rebrand, a strategic pivot that highlighted the company's interest in renewable energy amidst growing concerns about climate change. When he took on this initiative, he noted that generating power through wind and solar energy was still perceived as "slightly eccentric," a stark contrast to the current understanding where such methods are widely accepted and rapidly advancing.

The transition toward green energy has faced political opposition, particularly in the United States, where former President Donald Trump has expressed strong disapproval of wind farms, labelling them as an “economic and environmental disaster.” This backdrop of political tension has also influenced BP's trajectory, as the company has most recently announced a "fundamental reset" to its green energy strategy under pressure from Elliott Management, a significant shareholder. This new direction marks a departure from the ambitious aspirations of Browne’s era, raising questions about the sustainability of his legacy.

When asked whether this reset repudiates his earlier contributions to BP’s identity, Browne was circumspect, stating he "doesn't really approve" of former executives commenting on the decisions made by their successors. Instead, he suggested that a company's viability relies on ensuring its core business functions effectively.

Having helmed BP for 12 years, Browne was once celebrated in the Financial Times as the “Sun King” for his leadership and the company’s impressive growth. However, his tenure ended controversially in 2007 when he resigned after admitting to lying in court regarding his relationship with a former partner, coinciding with the public revelation of his sexuality.

In the years following his departure from BP, Browne has remained a prominent figure, engaging in private equity, and serving various roles, including chairing the Royal Academy of Engineering and The Courtauld, as well as publishing several books that include his personal narrative and advocacy for the benefits of authenticity in business.

Browne has continued his focus on renewable energy through initiatives like the Riverstone Fund and has co-founded BeyondNetZero, a climate-focused equity fund. Although he acknowledged potential setbacks in global climate negotiations, he remains optimistic about the role of innovation in energy efficiency and public awareness regarding environmental issues.

Despite his historical ties to BP, Browne's portfolio includes contentious associations, such as his past role with L1 Energy, a fund backed by Russian investors, from which he stepped down prior to the escalating conflict surrounding Ukraine. He also briefly chaired Huawei's UK operations amid growing scrutiny from the US government regarding security concerns tied to the Chinese telecommunications firm.

Reflecting on his early career, which began with a challenging stint in Alaska, Browne articulated a deep understanding of diversity based on his personal experiences. He shared insights drawn from his mother's past, having survived Auschwitz, emphasising the lessons of vigilance against discrimination and the dangers faced by minorities during turbulent times.

As Browne prepares for the chancellorship election, he acknowledges the importance of diversity and meritocracy. He advocates for a balance that ensures all individuals receive opportunities without discrimination, highlighting the broader implications of his advocacy for a more inclusive society within the contexts of both his personal journey and professional legacy.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Browne,_Baron_Browne_of_Madingley> - This URL provides background information on Lord John Browne, including his role as the former CEO of BP and his various professional engagements.
* <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-24/bp-s-beyond-petroleum-era-is-over> - This article discusses BP's original 'Beyond Petroleum' strategy under Lord Browne, highlighting its focus on renewable energy and the current status of such initiatives.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/feb/07/bp-reduces-green-energy-investments-in-major-strategic-shift> - This article covers BP's recent strategic shift away from its ambitious green energy goals, referencing external pressures like shareholder demands.
* <https://www.courtauld.ac.uk/about-us/governance/governing-board/> - This URL supports the information about Lord Browne's role as the Chairman of the Board of Governors at The Courtauld.
* <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-59920048> - This article provides context on BP’s shifts in strategy and external pressures from shareholders, aligning with discussions on Browne’s legacy and the company's current direction.