

Andrew Pierce

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by the political journalist Andrew Pierce. Feared and respected in equal measure, Andrew's developed a reputation for ferreting out political scandals. Starting out as a local reporter, he has over the years held editorial positions at the Times, the Telegraph, the Daily Mail, and recently celebrated three decades in newspapers. Known for his considered, if sometimes contrary, political views, he's a regular TV and radio pundit, appearing on such shows as question time, Sky News, Daily Politics and Nick Ferrari's breakfast show. Currently a consultant editor and columnist at the Daily Mail, he also presents on LBC and is fittingly co-author of Great Parliamentary Scandals: Four Centuries of Calumny, Smear and Innuendo.

Andrew, thank you for joining me.

Thank you.

What is 'calumny'? I didn't know how to pronounce that! I don't even know what it is.

I wrote that book so long ago, I can't remember! But it's something to do with bedrooms and dodgy behaviour, which is what you expect from our politicians.

So like myself, you're from a humble background. You grew up on a council estate in Swindon. Did you think that going out to Osterley and broadcasting from Sky News almost nightly was your destiny?

No. And you see, I went to... because I was a Catholic, so there weren't many Catholics on our council estate, so I went to a different junior school to other people on the estate, and a different comprehensive school, and I had no idea what I was going to do when I left school, nobody in my family did A-levels – they didn't do

terribly well in their O-levels either, frankly – and a school teacher called Mrs Bennett said, “You’ve got the gift of the gab – you’re very cheeky, you’re very cheeky in school, in class, and you write very well.” And ironically, I did the school newspaper, writing reports about football matches. I can’t bear football now, and I thought then I wanted to be a sports reporter, but on my first paper – my local paper was the *Gloucestershire Echo* in Cheltenham – having covered two rugby matches of the Cheltenham Seconds with about 14 people at the ground in pouring rain, I thought, “This isn’t me, really, sport journalism,’ so I deviated. But growing up, honestly I never really thought it would happen, but what I did, I used to bombard newspapers with letters. I would have opinions on everything, and I might change my opinion the next day just do I could get published, so I would have a view on who should be the England football manager, who should not be the England football manager, whether Mrs Thatcher should be leader of the Tory party or whether they should stay with the ghastly Edward Heath, and I had quite a collection published by the time I was 17, and then applying to local newspapers for jobs. My family weren’t keen on the idea of going to university, I was the youngest of four, dad worked on the assembly line at British Leyland, mum worked for WH Smiths, because they would have had to contribute to my grant, so it was academic anyway because I got a job on a local paper 40 miles away in Cheltenham. The *Swindon Evening Advertiser* didn’t want me; they didn’t even give me an interview!

The rogues!

The rogues. I was very disappointed about that, but actually it was much better to move away from home completely because all my mates were going off to university and I didn’t want to be stuck in Swindon on my own. The only thing I regretted was they didn’t go to university until October, so they had a lovely, long hot summer in 1979.

Relaxing, doing whatever they wanted.

Exactly. Working at Sainsbury’s, wherever the student jobs were, where I used to work, putting money in the bank and having a nice time, whereas I was slogging away on the *Gloucestershire Echo* in my cheap suit and cheap shoes, catching the bus to work.

It still sounds like an adventure! You knew that it was the start of something. Did you always know that you would be an opinionated and outspoken type of journalist, that your editorial line would be woven into your reportage?

I never did really, because I was brought up in the old-fashioned way. We were trained by... the *Gloucestershire Echo* was a Northcliffe newspaper, part of the Daily Mail Group, and we were just told not to have opinions, so you just wrote the story for what the best news like was. It wasn’t really until after I was at the Times – I went

back to the Times having had a brief spell on the Express, which ended in tears when we outed Peter Mandelson's boyfriend, that's a story for perhaps another day – and then I became more politicised, and it was the advent that Sky News was getting bigger and bigger, News 24 was getting bigger and bigger, there were more and more outlets for people to express an opinion, and I discovered I had quite strong opinions, and wasn't shy at expressing them. And also, of course, in the glory days of Tony Blair, it was very unusual to get a journalist who might contemplate voting Conservative, because the Tories were away with the fairies back then – and I'm not referring to William Hague's leadership of the Tory party, if you pardon the pun. But there were very few of us that were willing to be outspoken and right wing.

They had three really bad leaders back to back, didn't they? There was Hague, IDS and then the Right Hon. Member for Transylvania, as Private Eye used to call him.

Yes, who sued me shortly before the general election of 2005 because I had written a story saying a man called Lynton Crosby, who wasn't terribly well-known then but was advising the Tories on their election campaign, that he had told Michael Howard, there were two other people in the room I think, one of them might have been the billionaire Michael Ashcroft, that the Tories were flatlining on 31 points and couldn't win the general election. They sued, they never pursued the writ, and guess what? They flatlined on 31.5% under Michael Howard, so the story was proved correct – but it did cause a lot of flak. Basically, it was a device by which the Conservative Party stopped other newspapers writing the same story.

We've had Lynton on the podcast.

He's a very good man. Big fan. *Sir* Lynton now, of course. And I don't have any difficulty whatsoever with him getting a knighthood, I'd have given him the freedom of London or a peerage, because he saved the country from Ed Miliband, which would have been a disaster.

Well, speaking as a card-carrying member of the Labour Party, I agree with you. I only carried on my membership because I thought it couldn't get any worse.

And then it did.

Yes... it's got a bit nightmarish beyond all... I mean, you must be loving this in terms of the misery we're going through.

I'm adoring it. And I was in the Labour conference hall in Manchester when that result came through back in 2010, that Ed Miliband had won the leadership, and I had a hunch that he just might – I had interviewed him for the Daily Mail actually,

probably the last Labour leader to be interviewed by the Daily Mail, probably the last for a very long time in the future – and I quite liked him but he was clearly weird. And I said to him, “It’s the Daily Mail wot won it.” Because some Labour Party members would have bought the Daily Mail, believe it or not, and they have been the ones who nudged him just over the finishing line. But when that result came through I was standing next to two Labour MPs, one of whom was Chris Bryant of underpants fame, and I said, “Congratulations, you’ve just lost the next general election.” I was cock-a-hoop.

I know you shouldn’t betray a confidence, but what was Chris’s reaction? I imagine he wouldn’t have been best chuffed either, even though his public persona would have been welcoming.

He said to me in a radio discussion on LBC or Five Live, I can’t remember which one, he would bet the clothes on his back – I said, “But not the underpants, please, Chris, because I never thought much to them.” Sorry to go on about this but they were truly awful – that David Miliband would not just win, he would win big. So he was *mortified*.

I always feel a little sorry for when HIGNFY always churn out that same picture of him in his underpants. I mean...

It happens.

It was ill advised for him to make that picture.

It was ill-advised, but if he had been on a website procuring sex with women, the sisterhood of the Labour Party would have laid into him in a way you would have never heard before – he would have been in big trouble. They apply double standards to we gays, because apparently it’s okay for us to be promiscuous and jump up and down on a bed in front of a mirror in your horrible old underpants, taking selfies. You know I’ve never taken a selfie?

Really?

Of myself? No.

Why not?

In fact, I have never taken a photograph with my phone.

Well, there you are.

Because I’m not very technical.

So there's no kind of public policy position, no reason for that, no deep philosophical reason?

No.

Do you not feel a little bit sorry for these politicians? I mean, there's Chris Bryant in his underpants, but I always remember David Miliband and the banana. You know, do you feel a little bit sorry for them? They're walking down the street, they're carrying a banana, someone just catches them off guard and says, "Show us the banana," and he thinks, "Okay," and then suddenly he's defined by that picture.

It's the modern world we're in. That's the world now. The world is a camera, everywhere you look people are taking photographs, you've just got to be very self-aware the whole time. My advice to politicians is always: do not eat in public. Look at Ed Miliband and the bacon sandwich! What a car crash that was.

Terrible.

And even the BBC were featuring that, and I thought as a good Jewish boy he wouldn't be eating a bacon sandwich anyway, but nevertheless he did, and in the end, Stuart... what was his name, his chief policy advisor, Lord Stuart – it will come to me in a second – took the bacon roll off him.

Too late by then.

Too late – damage was done. He also took the bacon roll off him I view of people with cameras. It was almost like a parent taking a sweet off an errant child; it was a disaster.

Do you not find though, you've clearly got to cover these politicians as a journalist, but then you're speaking to them after the interview as a human being, and you must be able to say to them, "Look, your media team are terrible." I mean, we could easily name the politician that might have been effective behind the scenes in some ways but were terrible in the media, people like Gordon Brown, Ed Miliband – they just didn't get it, didn't they? They considered the media as a kind of inconvenience.

And yet, when people like... Gordon Brown was a disaster in Number 10, and he had some good people around him, people like Damian McBride, who I know has sat in this chair.

I really liked Damian McBride.

He is very charming, he's very nice.

He's a very nice man.

Completely at odds with that image of the rough, tough spin doctor, and after he'd gone, of course, from Number 10, he went to work for a Catholic children's society, or an overseas aid team.

He went to work for Cafod.

Cafod, that's right. For very little money. But the trouble is with some of these politicians, they don't listen. Look at the mess the Prime Minister got himself into, Cameron.

Over the Panama Papers?

I was on the College Green on the BBC, pointing out that the surprising thing about the Panama Papers, before he became a politician, David Cameron was in public relations! He was obviously useless, because he conducted himself that week in... it was textbook how *not* to spin your way out of a problem. He was in a hole, and he didn't just keep digging, he got the whole JCB to work on it. It was a catastrophe and I knew exactly where it was going to end – with a mea culpa interview, which he did on ITV. Disastrous. I don't care if he's got money, if he's got £300,000 or £500,000 – just don't mislead.

It's not that there was a kind of cover-up, but I agree with you; he failed to cooperate fully and openly, and I found that with my own clients, that sometimes in a crisis, the biggest problem is the client. And Alistair Campbell sat in that chair, and I think where Tony Blair had a very good relationship with Alistair is that he took Alistair's advice. You wouldn't have had Tony Blair being told by Alistair Campbell on day one to do something, and then not done it – and I can clearly see the Prime Minister's advisors would have said, look, let's do this completely openly, textbook, on day one, and he's overruled them – I mean, he took personal responsibility, and rightly so, because I actually think he personally was at fault for this.

I saw one of his officials during the great debacle over his finances, and that official said, he looked at me as we were going into a studio, and I said, "I'll give you one little piece of encouragement – I'm going to point out he's done nothing illegal, but that he's been a complete fool and an idiot, and why on earth did you not sit him down and force him to come clean straight away." Eyes rolling to heaven, and I thought, "Ah – they tried, and he wouldn't have it." And they get like that, politicians, sometimes. They decide, "I'm not doing that, I'm not giving into the media, I'm not

sacking so-and-so, I've got full confidence in them," and you know when a prime minister says he's got 'full confidence' in a prime minister...

It's the kiss of death.

Curtains. Gone in 48 hours.

Do you ever feel a kind of duality though, that as a journalist, you like the story, you know, the Prime Minister making a few mis-steps increases the duration and the longevity of the story, but is there also a slight feeling at the back of your mind where you feel sorry for them, that they have been an idiot and they are going to come a cropper for this, and you kind of feel a little bit sorry for them, or is it all, "We're going for the kill."?

I don't feel sorry for politicians. Ever. Well, I felt very sorry for Gordon Brown when his child died, that was a terrible business. When there is a genuine sadness like that. But politicians are nearly always authors of their own misfortune, and they just know the first rule in politics: tell the truth. I always say to them, "How do you think it's going to look like on the front page of your local paper?" Always have that in the back of your mind, and the truth eventually comes out. If it's going to look like you're involved in a cover-up and a smear, get it out of the way. Just get it over and done with – because people respect you more for that.

What about the fact that the prime minister of the day often gets briefings from their civil servants about how much a pint of milk is and who's just won *X Factor* and things like this so that they can appear to be normal... I mean, I'm personally not offended that the prime minister wouldn't watch *X Factor* or *Britain's Got Talent* or whatever, but the public seem to want to have a prime minister that's in touch with this kind of thing. Isn't that in a way misleading the public, where they say, "Oh, yes, pop star x is doing really well," and they've just read it off a briefing sheet?

I think you're right, and I can always remember Mrs Thatcher was told she had to get 'down and cool' so they told her – it was about 1989, about a year before she imploded – so she announced that she was very fond of this record or this band, I can't remember what the band was – and it was very popular, and then shock horror, the interviewer asked her, "What other favourite music have you got, Prime Minister?" and her aides were just appalled, and she quoted something that her and Denis used to dance to in 1954.

She should have led with that, actually.

Yes, because that was the real Mrs T. And she was a completely driven woman who never had time for the radio, never had time for television, and never understood humour or jokes.

That's terrible. I always say to clients, "Never make any statement that you can't be prepared for any follow-up questions." Because there will be follow-up questions.

Of course there will. And they all do it. Didn't Gordon Brown tell us his favourite band was Arctic Monkeys? I didn't believe it.

No, neither did I.

I'm afraid.

It's quite sad really, isn't it?

Yes, and Cameron is a classic – he's a very rich man from a very privileged background, then he releases a photograph of him getting on an EasyJet plane to wherever he went on his most recent holiday, Lanzarote. You'd think he'd just go British Airways.

There's also photo guidelines, I've learnt, over the years, where he can't be pictured in anywhere like in front of a mantelpiece where it's too ornate and things like this, anything that could imply that he's a bit of a toff. I don't care whether he's a toff or not really, I care whether he's a good prime minister.

I quite like the fact he went to Eton actually, I can't bear all this class war stuff, especially from the background I'm from because if he went to Eton I assume it was a pretty good education; I quite like my prime minister to be very educated. Nobody went on about Tony Blair's school, Fettes in Scotland. Scotland's Eton!

I mean, most of the far left, the people I don't get on with – I'm a Blairite – but I think they just kept their gobs shut, at least in the early years of Blair, because they thought, "At least we're in power, doing something." I think we've just lost our collective mind now.

I think the Labour Party is in a very bad place, and I think it's going to be like 1990. So back in 1990, in May, Ken Baker, he was the Tory chairman, very cleverly spun that if Thatcher, the Tories, won Westminster and Wandsworth, the flagship London boroughs, her premiership was safe, there would be no threats to her leadership – they duly won those two boroughs, but in the rest of the country the Conservative Party was annihilated in the district council elections, but she clung on. By November, she was finished.

In terms of this, you've obviously got some really strongly held beliefs there, how do you find is the best way to express it? Because you do radio, television and copy at the *Mail*, as it were. Do you like the mix of all three?

I do. I'm always going to be a print man first and foremost; if I had to choose it would always be the newspaper, apart from the fact that they pay me the most money, which helps. I mean, I've been doing it since I was 18; two weeks after I did my A-levels I was a trainee reporter on the Gloucestershire Echo, and that's now... I think I've been doing it for 35 years now, 36 years, something like that – and I love it. Radio I enjoy too, and particularly if you can get into – it's better if there's a discussion, so if I'm on with my old sparring partner Kevin McGrath from the Mirror, it's better, rather than just having a one to one with a presenter, because you can spark of each other.

Kevin's a good guy though, he's personable...

Yes. We started in the Houses of Parliament within a few weeks of each other, I was a gallery reporter for the *Times*, writing up debates – nobody read a word of it – and Kevin was doing it for the Press Association, and if you can believe back in 1988-1989, when I started on the *Times*, we did at least a full broadsheet page every day of parliamentary proceedings – now you would be lucky to see... what you get from Parliament now is just the Sketch; it's a measure of how low Parliament has plummeted in public esteem, and how people think they're just a bunch of... they're in it for themselves, the Commons Chamber is always empty – that's partly because of television, of course.

People like Ann Treneman and yourself really bring the Commons alive. I mean, I only read the Sketch, but I hugely enjoy it. She's absolutely fantastic.

Of course, it's fantastic. She's brilliant. And Quentin Letts likewise.

Absolutely.

And it's scabrous wit. And actually, I always say to those MPs when they complain, "You're never going to get written about any other time, frankly." And all publicity is good publicity for MPs, ultimately, and the Sketch writer... I nearly did it for a while on the *Times*, there was a consideration that I would become the Sketch writer, but we backed off because the editor thought I was too important to do... well, a) I might not have been any good, but there were many other jobs he wanted me to do on the paper. But it would have been interesting.

Why have newspapers got this hold on you, then? Because television and radio is a much bigger profile, you've got the chance to connect with a much

larger audience, going on *Question Time*, hosting an LBC show, doing the punditry on Sky and all over the place, you're building up a visibility. Don't you get recognised and engaged with more as a result of that?

I do.

So isn't that aspect of your journalism more impactful, I suppose is the question.

I like to think, because I get letters every week from readers who like my column or hate my column, and you get the green ink letters, of course, you get plenty of those, and I just still get a kick out of seeing a full page in the Mail where I've completely turned over somebody or exposed something, and you've got the depth to do it, you've got the space to do it. The Mail really do things well if they decide to do something, so for instance in 2010 I said that the Tories treasurer-elect, a man called David Rowland, was a wrong 'un. And three months after I got stuck in, he stood down. Unspeakable language about me, of course, but I was right about that – and I don't think you could have done that on the radio or television.

And you might not have been able to do that in other newspapers as well.

And you can campaign in newspapers like the Daily Mail. My regret about newspapers now is that Lord Leveson has inhibited some reports, I suspect, some things don't ever even see the light of day now because people think, "What's the public interest in that?" Because Lord Leveson didn't understand there's a difference between the public interest and the fact the public are interested, and if we can't write stories where the public are interested, they won't buy our papers. And of course it's not in the public interest if Wayne Rooney has sex with a prostitute, but boy, when the *Sun* ran that story, didn't people buy it in their droves! Of course they did. It was a terribly sophisticated operation by the *Sun*. Do you know how they found out? Wayne Rooney, being the brain of Britain, left signed photographs of himself with all the girls. Amazing.

Unbelievable.

He's good at football. That's his strength.

I suppose it does come to light though, when you've got John Whittingdale being exposed for having a former relationship with someone who turns out to be a sex worker, I mean, that happened quite recently. My first thought on that was, "Are we still in the 50s, where being a sex worker is something to be ashamed of?" I actually felt quite sorry for the lady involved.

Well, you see, the BBC and Hacked Off – I can't stand Hacked Off, they were set up to try and campaign for the media to be regulated by the state, which would make us

on the same lines as North Korea – suggesting there has been some great conspiracy and cover-up. Hang on – John Whittingdale is divorced, he’s a single man, his relationship with his wife is fine, because she still works for him, he has a relationship with a woman who he later discovers happens to have worked in the sex industry. What’s the story? So the BBC did it on Newsnight because it was in *Private Eye*, and they had Cathcart and Hacked Off... so Hacked Off was there to stop victims of the terrible behaviour of the press, and they go and shove this story on TV about a cabinet minister’s relationship from many years ago? He took this woman to functions, to engagements – there was no secret about her. They weren’t having covert liaisons; she was his girlfriend.

I’ve been to a few events with John as well when he has been my guest, prior to his appointment as secretary of state, and he did have a lady companion. To be honest, I didn’t really ask any questions. You don’t, do you? You don’t go up to someone and say, “Are you a sex worker?”

Well, no – exactly. And how would you know? You can’t tell to look at them, unless she was carrying whips in her handbag, and I don’t think that she was, and the other thing, he wasn’t even a minister at the time of the relationship.

No, he was chair of the Culture, media and Sport select committee.

So the question would be, “John who?”

Exactly.

But the idea that the press laid off him because of regulation...

They showed admirable restraint.

Yes! And I think, “Aren’t we meant to be getting our house in order?” And also the BBC, of course, it suits them to do down the secretary of state because he’s the first one to say, “Get your act together, and you’re having your budget cut, and we’ve got charter renewal coming up too.” So I think they’ve got more of an axe to grind, as has Mr Cathcart.

What’s your view on charter renewal? I’m a leftie, I think a state broadcaster is great, we should over-resource it hugely, and pour buckets of money into it, and we shouldn’t have any commercial rivals because, you know, how dare they cheapen themselves by wanting money as well, whereas I imagine – I’m paraphrasing here now – but as a reactionary, you just want to close the thing down and...

No, I want to make it smaller, it's too big, it's far too big, they've done irreparable damage to local papers up and down the country with those websites and all of those Radio Gloucestershires, and I think local newspapers – of course, I'm hugely attached to them because that's where I started – but I think they're too big; I'm glad they got rid of BBC3, I'd get rid of BBC4...

No, not BBC4!

Yes, I would put the radical campaigning and innovative stuff on BBC2, that's what it's for, and do you need a rolling news channel?

Of course, you might have a selfish agenda there, because then more eyeballs would turn to your show on Sky News!

No, because I think actually, it's good competition for Sky, and Sky would say the same – but I just asked the question, do you need it 24/7? It's very expensive. I always remember interviewing...

Well, there's a lot of criticism of news channels at the moment, that they don't actually do rolling news any more now, it's constantly interrupted by scheduled book reviews, film reviews, etc.

I know. It's quite boring actually, it's quite bland – that's why I wonder if they do need it in that form. But I always remember interviewing Mark Thompson on the *Telegraph* when he was director general of the BBC. The BBC had had a Middle East correspondent who'd been a hostage for some years, he'd been freed. Sky called him twice to fix up the interview...

Alan Johnson?

Yes. It was Alan Johnson. How many calls did he get from BBC outlets? 38. Radio Wales, Radio 5, Radio 4, BBC2, *The World at One*... ridiculous! You do not need that many reporters to do one story! You need your flagship programme in the morning, perhaps *The World at One*, do you really need another 34 journalists to ask the same questions of the same man, director general? Absurd.

In defence of the BBC, and I'm just playing devil's advocate here, they would say they've got a lot of content, a lot of shows to produce, so in a sense they are going to need separate interviews, and if you want to hear the guy interviewed by *Five Live*, you're going to expect him to be interviewed slightly differently to the *Today* programme or *Newsnight* or the six or the 10 or whatever. It's horses for courses – they've got different programmes for

different audiences, and each programme needs a ton of producers and a presenter etc.

No. You've been in media long enough, you've heard of a pooled interview. You just do a pooled interview, you do two or three and that's your lot. It just shows how completely unwieldy and how big... it's like a monster that's got out of control – and even Mark Thompson accepted it was ridiculous. And he didn't tell me how many of those interviews he did.

How do you think social media has changed how journalists go about their business? Because you're very active on Twitter. Is it a help, or is it a hindrance?

I used to think it was a pain, and I joined it very late, and I am very jealous of the fact Kevin Maguire's got 90,000 followers on Twitter and I've only got 19,000 – but he did start at the beginning. And of course, he spends his whole time on Twitter because he's not doing his real job on the Daily Mirror, as far as I can see. But it is advantageous, it's a good way of breaking news and it's a good way of flagging up things, so I use it a lot for my radio programme, I tweet my column now... I'm not very good at tweeting actually, I still haven't learnt how to tweet a photograph, so there you are.

You've never taken a photograph.

I've never taken a photograph. And Kevin Maguire did show me a train, I had to take a photograph in the newspaper and tweet it, I couldn't follow it. You're either technical or you're not. but it is extraordinary. I mean, I do think there's a lot of drive on Twitter, and I don't care...

Just unfollow me and you'll get less!

Very good! And it's vicious, too.

That was my next question, which you pre-empted, which is do you get the tweeting equivalent of the green ink letters?

Yes, I get loads of them! And they often begin with... the C-word is banded about a lot, I get quite a lot of homophobic abuse... I couldn't care less. Couldn't care less. I've heard it all before.

We've had different views on this, because I've asked a few guests, like Jeremy Vine for example, he doesn't block any of his abusers, he just mutes them because he says if you block them it gives them a sense of satisfaction.

That's exactly what I do.

Whereas Alistair, he said, “I just literally ignore them – I’m not even going to mute them.” He just couldn’t care less. And you can see it in his eyes as well – he genuinely doesn’t care. I mean, even I’m stung a little bit, I get a bit of criticism from time to time, and even though I block them and I move on, you also think, “Oh, how beastly.”

Well, I remember when I was quite new to Twitter, somebody was incredibly homophobic, and people then tweeted saying, “I hope this isn’t going to put you off social media.” I said, “Why do the ravings of a bigoted lunatic...” They’re not going to put me off – it goes with the territory. You’re in journalism, you’re out there, you’ve got a media profile, I’m not just a hack now, I have opinions and I’m paid to express them, so people are allowed to be vulgar and rude about me if they want to – I’d rather they were horrible about me than others.

I’m sure you’re like me – I couldn’t give a damn what anyone’s gender, ethnicity, sexuality... it’s none of my business.

No. No.

You know, I might challenge you on... the most appalling thing you’ve said so far is that you want to close BBC4! I fundamentally disagree with that.

Think of the money we could save.

Well, think of the money we’ve invested in science education. I mean, I love their science documentaries.

Nobody’s missing BBC3.

Well, it’s aimed at... well, you see, you’re old like me, or you’re older.

Older.

We’re not their target market. BBC3’s youngsters.

I’d also put ads on Radio 1 because the whole station is promoting very overpaid artistes, records, so Madonna’s new single is played on Radio 1 – why not put commercials on it?

The problem I have with Radio 1, and I said this to Ben Cooper recently, who is the controller, is, they’re all old guys that are running a youth station.

Yes.

Yes, they've got the focus groups and they know that Tinie Tempah might be big, but they don't *live it*. They're not in touch. But then again, his argument is that they've got a budget of million, and you can't put someone who's 19 years old in charge of the station, because although that sounds good on paper, it doesn't work.

Well, I haven't listened to Radio 1 since the days of Dave Lee Travis! I'm showing my age, aren't I?

He might still be on air as far as I know.

Yes... and I was very sorry to see Tony Blackburn get the push recently too, that was just a diversion, because he's an institution, isn't he? Some people say he should be in one, but... you can do so much with the BBC where you can cut the licence fee. I mean, the licence fee has to go; it is not fair when so many people don't watch a television any more. It has to go, and it has to be some form of subscription service, I think. I mean, I watch the BBC so I would be paying for my subscription, but I think it's a ridiculous system now, it's got to go.

It's very difficult of course, because I agree with you – I don't like the poll tax element of it, that a poorer family has to pay the same as a millionaire. But you do get the advantage though, of having a state-funded broadcaster, and I always say this, I mentioned this on the podcast a while ago, which is when John Humphrys challenging George Entwistle as director-general, it was great radio, and you knew he was dead in the interview. And in fact, John was sat in that chair as well, and he agreed. But my point is, you wouldn't get Tom Bradby criticising the chief exec of ITV News on ITN in the same way.

That's a very good point. That's what I mean – I want the BBC to be state-owned, I don't want anything to change in that respect, but I just think there are bits you could hive off and make it smaller, and Radio 4 has to stay completely as it is, no commercials, nothing – I might put an ad in for some cider or something on *The Archers* or something like that – I mean, John Humphrys is a national treasure, and the *Today* programme is... sometimes the sanctimonious tone drives me insane, so I'll flick over to Nick Fry, but you still have to listen to the big interview, because that's where they still go. And they've got some very good people on the *Today* programme. I think Sarah Montague's very good.

She's a fantastic radio presenter.

Justin Webb's very good – Justin Webb completely skewered Amber Rudd, the energy secretary, about the cost of Brexit on our fuel bills. He *completely* skewered her.

Nick Robinson is a fantastic presenter.

I love him. I miss him being political editor of the BBC, but the new political editor is doing a good job, I think. Well, I think probably the best interviewer now on TV and radio has got to be Andrew Neil.

I wouldn't want to cross Andrew. I used to have a Tory MP client in the last election who shall remain nameless, but he got completely skewered by Andrew Neil.

Andrew Neil has got a forensic brain. He's from a similar background to me, brought up in a council estate, I think.

So would you be the next Andrew Neil? How ambitious are you? Let's pretend it's a job interview.

No, because I don't have the economic brain. He's got a Rolls-Royce brain, I don't have a Rolls-Royce brain!

But if you're asking the questions... I know very little about anything and I can sit here and ask questions!

No, I'm the classic journalist who is the jack-of-all-trades master of none, whereas Andrew is the master of economics, because he is an economist. I mean, he worked on *The Economist* and he's run businesses, and so he is so good.

Do you think there's a slight Paxmanesque, gladiatorial tinge to his interviews? Why is this lying bastard lying to me, type thing?

I like that. And I think politicians should be put through their paces, particularly when they're misleading us, which they often do. You want people like Paxman and Neil to do just that, to expose the cant and hypocrisy.

How do you balance being friends with some politicians and also having to skewer them from time to time? Because you want a good relationship where they're going to open up to you and tell you things off the record, but on the other hand, as you've just said, if you want to challenge them, then you have to be able to do that as well. Do you sometimes find you have to be quite beastly to them on your LBC show, and then when you go off mic it's like, "Hi, how are the kids?"

It can be difficult. I'll give you a classic example. During the great *Telegraph* expenses scandal, when I was on the *Telegraph* and I had to do a lot of the public

face of it on the radio and television, I'd gone away for the weekend and I wasn't going to do my column, which was due the next day, it was a Notebook, but the phone went and I'd just literally got up in this house I was staying in Italy with some friends, and the comment editor said, "About your column..." I said, "Well, I'm off this week, I'm not doing a column." "Well, actually the editor wants you to do something." I said, "Oh, really?" Alan Duncan, who was a Tory MP, had been secretly taped saying that MPs live on a pittance and it was all to do with the expenses scandal. I said, "What do you want me to write about that?" He said, "Well, he wants you to do him over." I said, "Alan Duncan is one of the best mates I've got in the Tory party." "That's why you've got to do it." 1,500 words. So I had to write it. It was tricky, but Alan is an old pro, and he knew he'd screwed up with his remarks, because although he does think MPs should be paid more money, it was the way he phrased it, and the mood was febrile at the time about MPS, because... no, actually I think you should pay MPs more than £74,000 a year but have fewer of them.

I agree with that. You pay peanuts, you get monkeys.

Yes. But his partner, I was at her 40th birthday party about a week later, and his partner harangued me and it was pretty tricky, but – over the top of my head – he was entitled to have a go because he was being protective of his partner, and he felt I had exploited their friendship and relationship... well, that's my job. And we're great mates now, and I go to stay with them often.

It sounds like Alan is a pro.

He is. Yes.

And presumably you declared the friendship with him in the copy.

I did, yes. I said I had known him for 20 years and we had been mates for 20 years, and every now and again he puts his foot in it, and here was a classic example. And he in fact made a speech at my Civil Partnership.

Are there clear delineations of politicians who are your friends and then people who think you're Tory scum, or trouble, and then just would blank you in the corridor, as it were?

Well, I think the gift is not to have too many friends, so the odd thing is, one of my best mates in the Tory party is Ann Widdecombe – how weird is that? You know, her view on same sex relationships is 73, with grandmother's approval.

In fairness I'm with you, but it's religiously inspired with her, isn't it/ Not to defend her, but...

Yes.

... at least it's a deeply held, sincerely held belief, even though she's wrong.

Yes. And this is a woman who converted to the Roman Catholic Church because she was objecting to the fact that the Anglicans were going to have women priests. But she and I are great mates, and I went to see her in pantomime in Windsor – we had a hoot.

Do you agree not to discuss the issues that you disagree on? Clearly you must have debated them at some point, but do you kind of agree to disagree and then never mention them, or do you occasionally say, "Oh, come on, Ann."

Well, the things where we obviously can never agree, like sexuality, there's no point. But politically, we often agree. She's on my side of the argument on the referendum, she's for Brexit, she's for out, and I went to see her in *Strictly Come Dancing*, and I had a great time, and she is very entertaining and very good company, she's highly intelligent, she's incredibly clever. And she was clever enough to be Tory prime minister and Tory leader, but she didn't look or sound the part.

Do you think political parties per se are in trouble? Because you've just highlighted there the exact fissure, that although you are aligned on so many issues, you are also very vocally in disagreement on other issues – and that whole rigidity of holding the party line, that there's this pretence that the Labour party are united and the Tory Party are united; no one believes that any more. If there's a veneer of unity, it's because some people have been told to shut up, and for whatever reason, are going along with it. But the public are in on that as well – they know. Why shouldn't we have a plurality of different parties in parliament and let them argue it out, like they do in the continent?

Well, I think it is changing here anyway, I think the old dividing lines are breaking down. People wrote off UKIP at the last election, but they got four million votes!

And one MP.

Yes, because the voting system is crackers. But four million votes, and they, a lot of those, were working class, local voters who switched to UKIP because they didn't think the Labour Party under Ed Miliband, very metropolitan, spoke for them any more – and I'm not sure that Corbyn's going to speak for them either. But there is that feeling of disenfranchisement, which you also see in America of course, which is why Bernie Sanders – ridiculous character in my view, socialist and left-wing – is doing much better than he really should have done. And look what's happening with the Republican Party. The Grand Old Party – how can they call it that any more? I mean, Donald Trump's deranged, isn't he?

You won't get any argument from me! Do you not think though, that there's a huge disconnect with normal people in terms of...

Yes.

... they just object to the way politics is done per se, and it's not about any party; it's all of them.

Yes.

And a lot of people who voted for independence in Scotland, they did so because they said, "We need something to fundamentally shake everything up, because the whole system is rotten." And maybe they've got some merit to that argument.

Well, I think there is a real problem, when you look at the House of Lords now, stuffed full of people who've bought their peerages. I mean, they were buying peerages back in the days of...

And Spencer Livermore got his peerage. I mean, no disrespect to Spencer, but he absolutely lost the election big-time and got every major call wrong, and now he's a Peer of the Realm.

And 13 Liberal Democrats went to the House of Lords, even though their numbers were reduced from 57 to eight, including Lynne Featherstone, whose majority went... she had a majority of about 6,000 and lost by about 10,000 – why is she in the Lords? What did she ever do?

Not that I'm a big fan of Richard Desmond, but you know, he is a big UKIP supporter, they got four million votes, he's very active on that... I mean, if we're going to have a plurality of peers, and UKIP be adequately represented, then surely someone like Richard Desmond should be in the upper chamber.

It is outrageous the way UKIP are being treated, because there are a couple of UKIP peers, but they've defected. The way that Cameron is stuffing that chamber full of cronies, it's just awful. I mean, why is the lingerie entrepreneur Michelle Mone in the House of Lords? What's she ever done?

Good headline.

Yes. So there are some peers, you know, who have been there for 20 years, never made a speech.

In a sense, and I am kind of slightly playing devil's advocate here, but isn't the media to blame here, because they say they want conviction politicians that have deeply held beliefs like Corbyn, that are authentic and unreconstructed and not overly polished, and then they kind of... they never succeed in the media, and whilst it's terrible to have completely on-message clone politicians that never put a foot wrong, but they are so insipid that they don't engender any kind of excitement or engagement anyway. We condemned that, because that's what the media have almost created; that's only the kind of clone politician that can succeed. So aren't you to blame?

I think there's some merit in what you say, but... because we don't want the homogenised politicians that we've got, but you see people like Chuka Umunna, who I thought would have run for the leadership last time but backed off because he said he wasn't prepared for that public scrutiny. Well, why not? He's been an MP for a long time, he knows it goes with the territory, we are entitled to ask about who his family are, his background... are we entitled to know who he sleeps with? We are, because he wheeled out his girlfriend the day he was declaring he was going to run for the labour leadership. And I've talked to him about it privately about what spooked him, but he just got spooked by it. It's extraordinary.

Where do you think journalism's going? I mean, is it going to hell in a handcart? You've got fewer journalists than ever in the newsroom – we had Jeremy Vine sitting in that chair a year or so ago, and he said that when he started in the Leicester Mercury there were 80 people on the floor, but when he went back there recently there was like, four. I mean, it was unbelievable. And the newspaper had its own pension scheme, and now you'd just be laughed at. Are there more options for people, aspiring journalists who are ambitious, in terms of social media and blogging and Twitter where you can gain a reputation very quickly? Is it a kind of... is it much harder, or is it easier?

Well, there's no doubt newspaper print journalism is in decline, and newsrooms are smaller. The Gloucestershire echo, where I started, only has three or four journalists now and there were about 16 of us, and there were district offices, and we ran a separate operation from the Gloucester citizen, and they're all being combined now. So it's tougher out there, it's tougher to get the revenue, because a lot of the revenue's migrated online, but I do say to young people who are thinking of a career in journalism, just don't expect to be on a newspaper in 40 years' time. You might be writing for a really interesting blog. Huffington Post, I read it all the time, I read Guido Fawkes all the time, even though he quite regularly had a go at me, though he hasn't done for a while...

We had Paul in that chair a few weeks ago, he's very mischievous as you would expect.

Yes, he is – and it's a very mischievous blog.

That's why you read it.

Exactly. And each morning now, not only do I read certain newspapers, but I read about six or seven blogs – I read *Lib Dem Voice*, *Politics Home*, *Guido Fawkes*, I read John Redwood's blog, I read *Political Scrapbook*, which is written from the left perspective –

You mentioned the *Huffington Post* there. I'll declare an interest, I also write for *Huffington Post*, but I'm unpaid, and Stephen Hull recently said a few months ago that that's what made the site great, that you've got this army of people that don't get any money at all, but that doesn't seem to be... I mean, journalism at it's very least has to be a job that allows you to have a mortgage, surely.

I think he's just being mean, and I think that you should demand some pay. Because how do you pay your bills? And journalism is a noble profession for which people should be paid. So I see a great future for journalism, we're still exposing wrongdoings and there are still great stories coming out. I mean, I look at Mail Online, it's expanding all around the world and it's brilliant – it has no peers. It's extraordinary successful.

What do you think to the criticism though in terms of journalism having fewer resources, that we've got into this paradigm? Someone said recently that it's about covering, not uncovering. You know, there's a lot of journalists that kind of check the PA newswire, look on the BBC news website, and then they're writing their pieces around that. But they're covering, not uncovering.

There are still people uncovering though. We still break stories, we still uncover stuff, and we still do great campaigns. I mean, the *Mail's* done some great campaigns, The *Mail* was in the forefront... we're often criticised, aren't we, for being 'conservative with a small c', but it was the mail which led the way on getting rid of carrier bags from shops... I mean, a series of very high-profile campaigns, stuff on pensions... I mean, our personal finance pages are doing some brilliant campaigns, and I think campaigning journalism is really important. The *Guardian* have done some great campaigning – I don't necessarily include WikiLeaks in that, that's a conversation for another time – but I think there's a great history of campaign journalism in Britain particularly, which we should cherish and relish and encourage.

What's life like at the *Mail*? Tell us some gossip. I mean, we've tried to get Paul Dacre sitting in that chair...

He won't come to this. He won't.

In a sense, you're there, you're the *Mail's* representative on earth.

Yes.

We had Isabel Oakeshott in recently.

Yes.

She was very, very good.

Yes, she's great fun.

She is. So we've got no hope of ever getting Paul sitting there.

No. He doesn't do interviews, and I do quite a lot of media for the *Mail*...

So are you the *Daily Mail's* ambassador to Earth?

Um... the paper is its own ambassador. I just occasionally go in to bat for it because I think, sometimes unfairly, we get a tough time on radio and television, and it's good to put our position. But the *Mail* is a very civilised paper; I spent 17 years on the *Times* under four different editors, five or six years on the *Telegraph*, and I have been on the *Mail* five or six years now, and Paul Dacre is a man you see very rarely in public, he can go out in the daylight, I can confirm, but he allows the paper to speak for itself. He gets in really early, and he leaves really late – he's an old-fashioned editor in that he...

Ever been hit by a stapler?

No. No. I've never seen him throw anything, actually! It is true, I have heard him roar, there is a loud roar that emanates from his lungs, and when he interviewed me for the job, we just met in a little café bar somewhere near Harrods, and I said, "I've been in Fleet Street about 28..." – well, I'd been in journalism about 29 years and I started in Fleet Street in 1988, and I joined the *Mail* in 2010 – I said, "And I've seen you in the flesh four or five times, and I can count on one hand where they were." (Makes irate noises) Once was a party for Sir Christopher May, who was standing down from the Press Complaints Commission, Paul Dacre stayed for an hour, then he went back to the *Mail* to carry on editing the paper...

So he's a grafter then, I suppose.

He's a real grafter.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of...

Yes. And he's hugely engaged about the leaders, the comment pages... if my stuff's going in the paper – because it's often a full page and by-lined, and quite high profile – he's all over it, and he edits with a fountain pen.

Old school!

Hmm.

How does he edit? Because people have different styles, of course. Some of them will give strategic feedback about tone or whatever, and some will almost sub it and like you said take a fountain pen to it.

Well, he's very engaged with the comment pages in particular, and the polemic pages and the features, and it's just very hands on, people know what the boss wants. You are very rarely in any doubt what Paul Dacre wants in his paper, and the tone the paper's going to take. We had an editor at the *Times* – I won't say which one – he sometimes spoke in convoluted sentences and there'd be a little gaggle of us afterwards thinking, "What did he mean?" So one of us would go up and say, "Is this what you wanted?" "Yes." and it would be that. So there is never the lack of clarity, can I say, on what Paul Dacre wants. You're left in no doubt what he wants. He's a big man, with big strong views, and I think he is the most inspired editor of his generation, and if they still gave knighthoods out for editors, he should have got his a long time ago.

Last question then, because we're running out of metaphorical tape. Again, it's a kind of interview-style question, but where do you see yourself five or 10 years from now? I kind of asked it earlier... you could carry on in the same vein, but would you anticipate being editor yourself?

No.

So is Geordie going to take over when...

I'm never going to be editor of a national newspaper now; my time has been and gone, and I don't think I actually have the intellectual firepower for that job, because I do think you need to be very, very clever. Paul Dacre, for instance, is Cambridge-educated, Simon Jenkins and Peter Stothard, who were my editors at the *Times*, were Oxbridge educated...

Simon has been in that chair as well. I seem to be naming lots of people today!

Yes... Sir Simon, of course, too... so I don't have that intellectual stature, so I suspect... hopefully I'll still have my column, causing mischief, and I hope I'll still...

Do you need that kind of fierce intellect? I think you'd be a great editor. I'm not just flattering you, but it is actually about deeply held beliefs, force of personality and opinion... you clearly know what you're doing.

Yes, but still – it won't happen, and I have no regrets over that because it just didn't happen.

What about your own TV show, then? You're already on Sky all the time, you've got LBC...

Yes, and we feel we can review... so we've got a couple of things... I've still got my LBC show... I just... I'm quite content, you know? I've got a pretty full life, and I've never lost my job. I've never been fired, which is quite unusual for people of my generation who have been in newspapers that long at fairly high levels, not to have been fired even once.

These *Media Masters* podcasts are constant tales of the litany of being fired!

Yes! But it means I've never had a payoff! I'm not encouraging anyone to fire me, but of course, Paul Dacre won't go on forever, and whoever succeeds him, there's lots of speculation, I've no idea who will be his successor, there's a lot of speculation it will be Geordie Greig, he did very well at the *Mail on Sunday*, Jon Steafel is the deputy editor of the *Daily Mail*, he would be very good... it's not my call, thank God, I don't have to make that call, but often, new editors, when they come in, they are a new broom and they sweep clean – so it could be bye-bye, Andrew Pierce.

And then what would you do? Would you try something completely different?

I'm not going to go into public relations, because I have been approached a few times, and I'm not sure I'd be very good at it, although you can make a lot of money. There's public affairs and lobbying, I could do that possibly... I probably would see if I could make a fist of being full time in radio and television.

I think you'd be good at it. I agree with you as well about journalists in terms of moving into PR. I'm in PR, and I've seen some journalists that have floundered when they've turned to poacher, rather. But I've also worked with people like Phil Hall, who used to be editor of the...

I know Phil, bumped into him earlier today.

I've worked with Phil for many years, and he's a good friend of mine – and he's a fantastic PR guy. His agency, PHA Media, is very successful.

Yes. Really successful.

But I think it's more the sheer brute force of his personality as well – he's a fantastic PR guy but he's also a very good businessman. It's about your temperament, isn't it?

Yes.

Because it's very difficult – if you're a journalist, you're used to PR people pitching things to you, and you saying yes or no – usually no – but it's difficult to be on the other end of the phone and pitch in.

Some people said I would be good at PR because I think I radiate a natural charm...

You would be great at it...

... he says modestly.

If you wanted it.

Yes. And if I made a go at it. But I would probably try and see, but then of course, your maximum time for getting a big job would be when you left the paper because your contacts book would still be red hot, you would still have access to the upper echelons of newspapers, and of course I have been around for so long, I know a lot of people.

It is worth something. It's interesting that though, because the clients perceive that your contacts are worth something, but... now, I can email Tony Gallagher as well and say, "Hi, Tony," and he might read my email or take my call, but if I'm going to give him a crap story or something that's uninteresting, a) he's going to be much less likely to take my call...

Of course.

So there's a perception amongst clients that your contacts book is important, whereas actually there's a kind of intermediate stage of actually, this story that you think is interesting *isn't* – and we need to work on that before we ring Tony Gallagher.

I know, and that's why, of course, being in... I could do that element of the job because, as I said, I've been doing it since... man and boy, since I was 18, or even since I was writing the school newspaper in St Joseph's Comprehensive second year. She actually said, my English teacher, Mrs Bennett, "Where did you copy that

school football report from?" Blooming cheek. So even then I was being accused of all sorts of underhand things. I had written it myself!

We are running out of metaphorical tape, Andrew – but thank you ever so much.

Thank you very much for having me, and any time.