

## **Sir Trevor McDonald** Journalist and News Anchor

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**Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the top of the media game.**

**We're here in a hotel in leafy Surrey, and today I'm joined by the journalist and broadcaster Sir Trevor McDonald. Perhaps best known for presenting News at Ten, Sir Trevor got his start in journalism as a reporter in Trinidad, moving to London after joining the BBC. He later worked for ITN and Channel 4, reporting from some of the harshest places in the world including Baghdad and Beirut, and interviewing leading figures such as Nelson Mandela to Saddam Hussein.**

**Knighthood for services to journalism in 1999, as well as presenting Tonight with Trevor McDonald, he has recently fronted a string of successful documentaries investigating topics such as life on death row, and the inside workings of the mafia.**

**Sir Trevor, thank you for joining me.**

Pleasure.

**Well, going through that, it's obviously an incredibly impressive biography. Did you always want to be a journalist? What did you want to be when you were when you were little?**

I always wanted to be a journalist, and I think... I'm never quite sure where this interest actually began, but if I am to guess – and I've done this myself frequently – I would think it has to do with living in a small island 4,000 miles away from London, being part of the British Empire. I mean, you know, we were a colony. So willy-nilly, one had a great deal of information about what was going on in the rest of the world through the connection with Britain. And I was fascinated by what was going on in the world. And I also cultivated from very early in my life a belief in the importance of the sharing of information. Information is key. It's important to life in whatever society you live; we need to know what's going on. And added to that, I developed an

interest in actually being part of this communication process. I wanted to do it and I... I say this because I think it's quite important. I'm not too sure that to my view... I'm not too sure you can treat journalism as merely a job, something that you drift into and think, "Okay, I'll get this job, I'll get the pay I'll pay the mortgage." I don't think it quite works like that. I think you have to have a real interest in the business of communication. I developed that, for the reasons I've explained, and I also had to drift away from my parents' wishes. In the West Indies of my generation, you had to be a lawyer or a doctor or an engineer or an accountant. None of those things appealed to me, and they were probably all above my station anyway, I probably couldn't have done any of them.

### **Was journalism seen as a kind of lower order career choice, then?**

Well, not so much a low order as something that nobody ever thought of. I mean, my father was quite shocked and had no idea about what this involved, and I remember him saying to me that he had consulted an Englishman with whom he worked and the Englishman said to him, one of his colleagues said to him, he said, "Well that's not quite as disreputable of the profession as you might think it is. There's something good about being a journalist, it's a proper profession." And I think my father relented, but in any event I don't think I would have been stopped in any way. It is what I wanted to do and I was determined to do it.

### **And what was the first rung on the ladder then in terms of your journalism career?**

The first rung of the ladder was getting away from a long maths class in secondary school and convincing the principal that we could have, on this school public address system, a 15-minute news broadcast in on Friday afternoons. I listened to the BBC and copied everything they said, and then went on this school network and did it, but then I tried... I mean, that was just a bit of a laugh. But my intention was – I think there were only two radio stations, or in my day probably only one – my intention was to get a job at Radio Trinidad, that was it. And I did everything; I mean, I went up there on Saturday mornings took part in teen programmes, phoned people up, made a thorough nuisance of myself until they couldn't shut the door in my face any more.

### **And how ambitious were you in those early days? Because before we started recording, you and I spoke about Alastair Campbell, our mutual friend, and when he started out at the Mirror as a cub reporter he always wanted to be editor; that was the first rung on the ladder to him inevitably, from his point of view, being editor. Was a career with the BBC always in the forefront of your mind?**

I think Alistair Campbell, you mentioned, had probably greater ambition than me; he saw what he could do. I had no idea where the journalism business would take you.

And also in places like the civil service, there is an order, there's a structure; you start as a junior civil servant and then you go up the one rung and then you become something else, a grade two officer, and then you become grade three, and then you become a sort of undersecretary, and then you become a permanent secretary – there is a proper structure. I don't think there's anything like that in TV journalism; you start off as a reporter and hope you survive! So I think some aspects of it had a greater structure than me. You asked if I had ambition. I was always ambitious. It is a kind of none specified ambition. I wanted to do well, and I wanted to be thought of as one of the best, I must confess that. I wanted not to be seen as part of the common mass. I wanted to... I wanted to stand out. I wanted I wanted to succeed, and that's also part of my West Indian upbringing. We were... it was drummed into us that success was the only way to make anything of life, and for that you had to have an education, but you had to have this drive – you couldn't let up. My father used to say, "Reach for the stars and if you're lucky you might get to the top of the trees, but reach for the stars." My mother, much more frighteningly, used to say – quoting something I think from Robert Louis Stevenson – used to say, "Lives of great men all remind us we can make all lives sublime and departing leave behind us footprints on the sands of time." I was supposed to leave a footprint on the sands of time. At that point in my life, I must confess, I thought if I got a sort of fingerprint on anything it would be a success for me, but those were the kind of aspirations to which you were driven. And I must say I did my best to shut it out and not to listen. But it must have had an effect on me.

**I remember many years ago reading John Major's autobiography, and he said that one of the biggest lessons he ever learned was that drive was just as important as ability. And some of his colleagues who hadn't progressed as well as they ought to have done either had the ability but lacked the drive, or had the drive and didn't have the ability. Do you think it's that combination of both that has got you where you are?**

I think I think he's right. I think John Major's right. I think drive is important. You have to aspire. You have to want to do it. And I think that is especially true in journalism. If you're making cars you turn up every day and fix the bolts on – and I'm not demeaning anywhere making cars it's a highly professional thing – but you turn up and do it, and it's very routine and you have to turn up you have to fix the bolts in the right place otherwise your car company gets sued and so on and all that. So the job has to be professionally done; I'm not in any way trying to pretend that it's the lesser status. But in journalism you have to want to do it you have to want to be able to communicate what's going on. And I think it's even more than that; you have to be sufficiently interested in it to want to make it count. To do it accurately, to do it professionally, to give people some comprehension, some understanding, of what's going on in the world. And many of these things as you know are very complicated; the issues which dominate world politics today are not easy. So you have to really, really want to do it. It can't be casual. I always used to say, for example, when I was

doing *News at Ten*, people always laughed at how much time one put into the job, and thought you could turn up at 9.30 in the evening and do it and I had to point out that I was there for most of the day and trying to shape what we did, and to kind of make a judgment about how you did what we were going to do. But the other point is, if you were working as a journalist Monday to Friday, say that's your shift, you can't shut out the weekend if Assad forces attack the Syrian rebels on a Sunday. You can't pretend that because I'm working on Monday, I ignore what's happening on Saturday and Sunday – it's a continuous process. You can't be uninvolved. So it's backbreaking, time consuming and you can't do it any other way.

**Just before we go back to talking through your career I like to do a kind of few interesting asides, as it were, and one of the questions that sprung to mind as you were saying that is, do you think aspiring journalists today have it harder or do you think it's... in terms of rolling news agenda, there's 24 hours to kill, there's a plethora of blogs and so on, or is that actually more opportunity for them?**

Yes... very difficult question, and I'm not too sure I really know the answer. Yes, there are more opportunities. Yes, but the competition is tougher. The multiplicity of channels means that there are more people who you are fighting against. But I don't think in any instance that the hard work and the drive can be put aside. It requires just the same amount of drive, just the same amount of hard work, just the same desire to do the job. You can't do it part time. And I think all this is based on the fact that, as I said earlier, you must also have a deep, profound interest in what's going on in the world, and you have to have this desire to explain to people what's going on in the world. As I hinted earlier, a lot of these issues are terribly, terribly complicated. How do you explain ISIS to people? How do you explain why these guys destroy these ancient temples at Palmyra? How do you explain why they chop people's heads off? And I'm not saying that one can ever reach to a point where you justify any of these things, but how do you... it's more than common criminality isn't it? These guys are not just burglars; there is something greater going on there.

**And surely by finding out what motivates them, how they think, leaves us better prepared to try and prevent in the future.**

I think there's also that, that's the... governments particularly want to do that. But I think just purely as a journalist, what one has to try to get behind the stories. I see so many instances in recent times; there was an Asian guy who was a Muslim who was killed, I think in Scotland somewhere, some time ago and the headlines, immediate headlines, were that he was killed for sending Easter cards to Christians. And in fact, the story was much more complicated than that. He was part of a Muslim sect which had always been at war with another part of the sect, and they had always been fighting, and this was just... the fact that he sent some Christmas cards to Christians at Easter almost had nothing to do with the story at all. So you have to want to get to

the back of what's really going on, you have to want to explain it. And all journalistic stories are complicated; the moment you get it wrong is the moment you think, "Oh, this is all terribly simple. This is a one liner, I can do this, I can dismiss this fairly quickly." That's the start of the slippery slope. There are complications behind almost everything.

**Speaking as a news viewer sometimes I'm quite frustrated really, because the newscaster will present one view and then present the opposing view, and you're kind of left none the wiser. And having been involved in politics for many years, I have often found that the more you know about something, the fewer answers you have. Because with every level of complexity you delve into, there are fewer and fewer answers. Do you find that that's frustrated you over the years?**

I think that is one of the biggest problems today, and it's one about which... I call it almost that the sort of the tyranny of wanting to be balanced. Let's take the arguments one hears today about the EU and whether we should stay in or whether we should leave. What happens generally – and I'm not making a harsh criticism about this, because I know what motivates this – but as you said, somebody says, "We pay £350m every day into the EU," and somebody says, "That's rubbish. We do not." What are the facts? How am I to know? Somebody says, "If we exit from the EU, we could have an arrangement about joining the single market." The other people said, "No, that's not true." What are the facts? How difficult will it be to do this? I think sometimes we can get too exercised about giving both views, and forgetting that maybe at some stage you have to try to guide the listener into what is really happening. I'm not pretending that this is easy, especially on an issue which is as controversial as whether we should go stay in or leave the EU. All difficult. But you are absolutely right – you have to have a responsibility to the audience to try to say, "Well, I'm not quite sure about this £350m a day, I don't know where that comes from," or something. But if you just give both views, then we're no further. But in giving both values by the way, you're doing a very noble thing. You're doing what the BBC calls balance, or what news people call balance. I think sometimes you need somebody to say, "Well, this is not true," or, "President Assad said he doesn't barrow bomb people; from the evidence we have seen this is not true." You have at some stage, just giving both sides, you have at some stage to come down and say, "That's my view." Again, I emphasise – and I think this is the challenge for journalists – none of this is easy, and there are contravening views about how this should be done than whether it can be properly done. But damn, it's difficult.

**You must be aware of the kind of awesome burden of responsibility that you have though, as the interviewer, as the newscaster, because you engender a lot of trust in you personally. Your unconscious biases might come through for example, if you if you like someone, or if you think that a certain case is**

**persuasive, that might come through subconsciously in the way that you're even asking the question.**

Yes. I found that the easiest bit to do; I just put my own feelings aside. The easiest thing. I found that, of all the difficulties in the profession, I found that the easiest. I was always aware that this is not my television company. This is not my news. I am just the presenter. And at times, I would go out of my way to make sure that I didn't let my views obtrude into the subject. I found it terribly, terribly easy not to be personally biased. I think in a way it's the cheapest form of things. Now, newspaper columnists and so on have a different view about this; they're supposed to give their biased view. But in doing the news, I found it very, very easy to present as factually as one could, and even then, when we did the Bosnian war, you got a call from the Serbs saying, "You were unfair to us," and then you got a call from the Croats the same night saying, "You were unfair to us." We used to joke about the fact that if they both criticise us, then maybe we were getting it slightly right! But I'm sure that's not the complete answer. They're really very difficult. But I found keeping my own personal views out of it not very difficult. There were times when it was impossible not to let your emotion show, and I have been guilty of that occasionally. I know...

**You mentioned recently about me crying at the sight of the stream of refugees coming from Macedonia, for example.**

Well, I find it... I would find that, if I were doing that now, I would find that very difficult to do without... expressing a personal view. I am as I suppose I am at heart a kind of bleeding heart liberal, really. And I am horrified at the lack of dignity, the lack of humanity, the lack of basic decency with which the world in general confronts this refugee question. And I do shrink and almost switch the television off when I see people putting up barbed wire and electrified fences to keep people out; I find that... I read, as most of us did, that these things happened in Europe in the 1930s, and we all boasted about the fact that we have become so much better, and these things will never happen again. It must not ever happen again. And we're doing it over, and over, and over again. I would find it very difficult to be impartial about that. I am horrified at the whole way we declaim refugees and bunch them all together as a lump of humanity who were just coming to take the services in our country, without realising the depth of the human condition, and also without realising our involvement in the genesis of this thing in the first place. People might forget that we were in Iraq and we were in Afghanistan, and we bombed Libya from 20,000 feet. We are not uninvolved.

**Absolutely. I agree with you. And many economists agree that immigration is a very good thing for society economically, and in every other way. My personal view just very briefly, is I couldn't care less where anyone from; I don't understand why it's an issue. If someone is suffering and then from Macedonia**

**whether they're from Brighton, it doesn't feel it's our duty to help our fellow human beings.**

Yes. I don't think that any of these problems are... it's easy to say these things, and I don't I don't think these things are easy to deal with. I think governments are under pressure about how to deal with this, and they have their own populations to consider. And no country can exist without some kind of border control; I'm not mad enough to think that we can just open the borders up. But I think that to believe that there can't be political... ways in which you can handle crises like these is just not a viable option, you have to be able to do it. There's a huge institution called the EU which apparently, according to some people, has ambitions to be a supranational state and so on. Well, we have a chance to do something here, this big powerful institution, then do something to help! But it's we just can't wish it away, that that's my view. It's not easy but we can't turn our backs on it.

**It must be an incredible privilege though surely to actually speak with some of these change makers at the heart of it. You've spoken with some people like Saddam Hussein and Gadhafi, leaders of countries, prime ministers and presidents and so on. Do you ever get a kind of personal insight, quite apart from what you get on the record as it were, a sense of them as men and as women?**

Oh, I mean, I think that's the... that's the thing you do get and sometimes that's much, much, much better than the interviews themselves. I mean, interviews with Saddam Hussein, I was very pleased to do it because it had taken a lot of work to get to get there and to get them to agree and so on, and so journalists love to recount stories about how difficult it all was, and how you finally got there and so on... what I learned from being in that situation was much, much more important than anything he said. What he said was quite predictable; he had invaded Kuwait and was justifying it, didn't like the Kuwaitis, thought the west was against him, thought they were all interested in his oil and so on, you know, all that was fairly predictable. What I did get, which you couldn't buy, was an insight into how that system worked. And I'll just give you one example of it. When we sat down to do the interview, there were about six or seven members of his sort of inner cabinet, crowding round the room – and it made the interview situation rather chaotic. And I for the first time, I lost my temper and I said to one of the guys, “What the hell you guys doing here? Don't you have anything else to do in the evening?” And one of the guys took me apart and he said, “You don't understand what's going on here,” and I said, “Of course I understand, I've come to interview your president, what's there to understand?” And he said, “No, no – you have no understanding of it at all,” he said. “We never see him being made to answer questions.” That told me much, much more about the way Saddam ran Iraq. Nobody questioned him. But in a real sense, nobody challenged him, nobody challenged his decisions in a governmental way. There is a recorded case of somebody during the war between Iran and Iraq, when

one minister challenged something he said and he took this man out shot him and came back and continued the meeting. Nobody challenged him. And so their fascination with my interviewing Saddam Hussein was that I was asking questions of their president which he felt... not compelled, but he was he willingly agreed to answer. And for that for them that was a new experience. But that was fascinating to me. And it told you that that was how Iraq was run. You didn't question what Saddam Hussein did or said. For me, that was much more important than... at the end of this interview I went back to my hotel room and there were about half a dozen people from the Ministry of Information who were in my hotel room ahead of me, and they all came in and said, "What was it like? How was it?" And I had been so obsessed by this interview that I kept saying, "Well, you know..." about the questions and all that, and what they were really asking me was, "What was he like?" I had got closer to him than they would ever in their lives. It was not a democracy. Saddam Hussein didn't go around the offices and shake hands with people. So I learned much, much more about the way that place was run from those two instances, and I learnt much more than I actually found out with the interview. The interview was long, and it was exclusive interview, and I was the only person in Britain to get one so all that was great, but I learnt much more on the side.

**Did you feel personally in danger, though? Because you mentioned earlier about how he shot one of his cabinet ministers? I mean, he was already at war in effect with the west. It would have been nothing to have shot you because he didn't like your question; it would have angered the west even more. And I'm thinking of like ISIS for example, nowadays, where they wouldn't think twice about shooting any journalist.**

I wouldn't go to Syria today, I wouldn't have gone to Syria today. I must confess, I wouldn't... nothing would have got me to Syria today. But let's not also forget the things... that there's a great tradition of hospitality there. Having invited you... I felt reasonably... when I thought of it in a sober way nothing like that would happen to me. Although I must confess I was not terribly, terribly comfortable and I couldn't wait to get the hell out of there. I was very anxious to get it done and to leave. The security apparatus around Saddam Hussein was fairly oppressive. The security apparatus didn't trust any anybody.

**Well, you could have been an assassin.**

Precisely. Well, they kind of made pretty sure that that wasn't going to happen, by taking away my watch and my pen and by very carefully examining our shoes – we hadn't seen that before. Of course, we all now know why that's done.



**Incredible. Well, that wasn't a first kind of foray into hostile territory, as it were. Just going back to your career, one of your first outside assignments was with ITN reporting the troubles in Northern Ireland. How was that?**

I was very surprised by how bad things were in Northern Ireland, and it was my first assignment, one of my first assignments, for ITN, and in a curiously paradoxical way it did me well because it got me noticed. It's difficult to remember now that Northern Ireland was once the top of the news every evening during the so-called Troubles, and I was there reporting then. I was really shocked by that. Nothing in West Indian life prepared me for the violence of the hatred and the hostility that I saw in Northern Ireland. Nothing, you know... in the West Indies people got drunk on a Friday evening and threw stones at each other or probably cut each other up with machetes and so on. I think things have got much worse now, there are more guns and the problem about drugs and so on, but I'm talking about in my day, it was a relatively peaceful place, you know, there were village fights and so on, and disputes about land and family disputes and so on, but nothing like anything I saw in Northern Ireland. And the fact that people would go into a pub and kill people because of a sectarian divide, I was never less than absolutely shocked and horrified by that. And I was terrified. I was absolutely terrified. It was just a strange environment. I'd never heard a bomb go off in real life before. We didn't have bombs in Trinidad, I don't think people knew how to make them!

**I've never heard a bomb go off in real life either.**

So yes, that that was very challenging. I found that extremely, extremely difficult.

**And obviously were terrified for your own safety and that of your colleagues, but were you kind of terrified in an existential way about the sheer depth to which this situation seemed then? Intractable?**

Oh, I was terrified in every way, in an existential way, but in a very real... I did think that you could get accidentally shot. Having said that, looking back at it now and having survived it all, I worked with people who knew the scene well and they always knew the best way to do escape. And I relied a lot of my colleagues for that, because I didn't know. I don't think there was ever any calculated attempt to kill journalists; quite the contrary. They rarely bombed the Europa Hotel where we used to stay several times, because they knew we were there and that it would be reported, and above anything else they wanted their deeds to be reported. They were fighting a civil war – so they thought, the nationalists and the Protestants – and they wanted the British public to know, so I don't think there was any attempt to... well, certainly no attempts on my life.

**It must be difficult from their point of view that they want to place the bomb sufficiently near to the journalists...**

Oh, absolutely. Precisely. We were always given time enough to leave. One evening I actually saw the guys arrive and threaten the man at the gate, who just took 10 seconds to run like hell and get out of there. And we were always given time to get out. So there was never any desire to... we were useful to the project.

**And again, what were your learning outcomes there as you moved on from Northern Ireland? Did you kind of leave it thinking, “Oh, I’ve got these profound insights to the human condition,” or was it more like, “Wow. On to the next thing.”? Almost trying to make sense of something that can be made sense of.**

Well again, that’s a very interesting question because you go to Northern Ireland and after 10 minutes you think you have understood it thoroughly, and you start boring people who have lived there. You say, “I know what’s going on here, and I can read this, and I...” and then after 10 years you think, “My goodness, this is really a puzzle, I don’t get it.” I still think I understand how some of it can be solved, for example, just as one example, I was shocked about the way people were separated in the society. I mean, if somebody said to you, “I went to school A,” you would know whether he was a Protestant or a Catholic. I thought the fact that the schools were segregated along religious lines was a catastrophe. I still believe that. If there were kids of 10, 12, 15 who had never met or never socialised with somebody of the other religion... well, that’s crazy.

**So it’s almost like systemic conditioning to keep these two young people apart.**

Yes. That’s just crazy. Society... that’s not the way life is. We meet, we rub up against each other, we... and of course I had come from a society where nobody asked me what I believed, and nobody knew what my religion was. Nobody cared! I didn’t certainly begin a conversation by trying to discover what you believed; if we could meet and talk and have a drink it was irrelevant. Not so in Northern Ireland. So that’s... I did think that that was, and that remains, too great a wedge between peoples. Peoples have to live as communities; we have to get on together. We’ll casually rub each other the wrong way, but at base we have to get on together. That’s life. That’s the way the world works.

**Did you encounter any racism when you were in Northern Ireland or did they only really care whether you were Protestant or Catholic?**

There was racism in Northern Ireland, there was a black British soldier who – I’m not too sure this story’s made up, but it’s too good to be dismissed altogether – who was walking through the streets with his uniform and his gun, and somebody shouted to him, “Why don’t you go back to the jungle where you came from?” and he said, “Ma’am, this is the jungle.” And in many respects I had... but I don’t know, I think

people were surprised that this young West Indian, you know, doing this stuff, but I've always found that people get so involved in the process of the broadcast and what television is all about, after a while they forget who you are and they're more interested in putting their point across. People were always interested in how I came to get involved in this crazy business of television in Britain. I found that all over the world. I mean, the people in Iraq asked me, "How on earth did you become this?" When I saw Gadhafi he said, after the interview, he said, "Tell me, how did you come to be working in the..."

### **To be the kind of nation's iconic newscaster.**

Well, I mean, you know... and I said to him, I remember saying to him, I said, "Well, it all has to do with the fact that Trinidad was a British colony, and we all aspired to find some kind of niche in the metropolitan centre, which was London." I said, "It's a product of colonialism." And he said, "Oh, I know I know all about colonialism," he said. So people would always express an interest in how I came to be doing what I... but it was relatively free in my case of anything which I identified as racism. Some people didn't like the fact that a black man was appearing on the television sets, but I was, and I continued to do it, so...

### **Did you used to get the kind of green ink letters?**

I didn't see many of them, but there were, long after I joined... my editors said that there were, but they were not sufficiently turned off by them to take me off, so I've had a very lucky ride.

### **You previously mentioned that you don't think positive discrimination is a solution to the issue of getting more black and minority ethnic faces on screen, if I can call it that. Is that something that you still agree with?**

Yes, I mean, I know this is a highly controversial subject and I'm fascinated by it. What I would say is that. I would like there to be more meritocracy. In other words, if somebody is black or brown or green or yellow don't discriminate about him or her on the grounds of colour; give them a chance to succeed. What I worry about is taking somebody and putting in a job because he's black or brown or green or yellow, and allowing the perception to go around that the only reason this guy's here is that because he's black or brown. However, there are circumstances when people must take positive action. I mean, my friend Lenny Henry talks about this, and people in Hollywood talk about the need for greater diversity. You can't have a film industry in a country like America where the people who appear on screen are not sufficiently representative of the people in the country – that's just bizarre, it's crazy.

### **It's completely unrepresentative.**

I do think there's a need there's a need for diversity, but I would hope that its roots come and begin, the genesis of it all, should be in meritocracy. Get people jobs because of their merit. In other words, don't discriminate against people because of their colour. That's what I think. So it's a very confused answer, but I give you one example of what I mean. I worked a lot in South Africa where basically the national party represented less than 10% of the population, but 80% of the population was black. When apartheid was dissolved, when apartheid was abolished, something had to be done pretty drastically to get more of the 80% into the mainstream of life in South Africa. If you waited for this to happen in time over a period of years, it'll take half a century, so you had to put people into jobs. But I would have thought that what you should do, really, is to create the ground, create the atmosphere, where there is more recognition of merit. I like to see people being given jobs on merit and not be discriminated against for any other reasons.

**Tell us about what came next after Northern Ireland within your career at ITN.**

Oh well, I got very, very lucky that one of the editors said, "I think you should travel for a bit and read the news for a bit," and I thought this was just fantastic, so I started reading the news and... I don't think I had any particularly great talent for it but I hung on in there. And the other thing I wanted to do, because I had, as I mentioned to you earlier, this view of the world as a much, much larger place than the little corner of the world in which I was born, I wanted to travel. I had listened to the BBC World Service and listened to all these correspondents covering conferences in Moscow and Delhi and Johannesburg and Beijing and Washington, and I thought, "That's what I want to do." I had no knowledge of these places and I found it fascinating – and when I got there I found the stories fascinating, but I must confess I was fascinated by the idea of travel. Anybody who is born in a little corner of the world or looks outside, you know, you're not introspective, you look out, you look outwards and you want to be out there.

**So you never wanted to sit in the newscasters chair in Gray's Inn Road heard 30 years reading the autocue, you wanted to get out into the real world.**

More than that, I regarded getting out into the world as the real basis of what good journalism is about. I used to annoy some of my colleagues by saying, and I think this was really too much hyperbole, that you can train monkeys to read the news. I withdraw that statement, I wouldn't say it now to people who do it because I think they're brilliant, and I think you do need some qualities to be able to do it, but I think the real... what journalism is all about is about trying to explain to people what's happening in various countries about various issues; I think good going out and doing that is the real business.

**It's interesting what you say, because you can see the people that read the news now that have that journalism heritage, that have that background in the way that when they throw to an interview, the questions they ask, the depth... like you say, it is perhaps a little easy solely to read the news. But do you think that you can't blame news managers now, given the prevalence of kind of 24 hour news media, you know, when you presented News at Ten in both sessions as it were, both instances, it was an iconic broadcast, even every day, you know, you stayed up for it, you watched News at Ten with Trevor McDonald, and then you went to bed. Now, it's rolling news 24/7.**

Yes, it's become much more difficult. And to do that now is not as easy, so I was lucky, I was lucky though to be able to do that. But I always thought too, it gave you credibility. It gave you that word which is used very often but people don't really understand what it means; it gave you a kind of gravitas. When you saw Sandy Gall in the mountains of Afghanistan and then you saw him reading the news, you thought, "This guy knows what he's talking about. He's been there, he's had his boots on the ground." I think, without any criticism at all about people who read the news now because I think they are all brilliant at what they do and they wouldn't be there if they weren't, but I think you did get a bit of an added bonus if you were seen to be somebody who was reporting from around the world. I maintain that view that it gave you greater credibility.

**You mentioned earlier about this neutrality though that you had, this impartiality. Nowadays modern newscasters – and I am thinking of Tom Bradby with the current *News at Ten* – there's a move to it being slightly more opinionated, chatty, conversational. Is that something you welcome? And can you blame editors for kind of moving news programs down that line given that they're competing against hundreds of hours of rolling news?**

Exactly. I think you put your finger on it. You have to try to be different to stand out because there's a wash of it out there, and you could easily get submerged in the under the waves as it were. So I would find it very difficult to criticise people for trying to find a different style. I'm glad that what I did was fairly straight. I'm not sure how capable or comfortable I'd be about expressing too much of my own view. I always felt that the news was the thing, the story was the thing, you were just the guy who brought it in. What was interesting was what was in the bag. But I don't at all blame people for trying to get a new individualistic style, it's absolutely for the reason you said. There is a huge amount of it out there. It's rolling, so people try to stand out to be different, to mark themselves out with some kind of distinction, but by doing some things a little differently, I think that's totally understandable, almost inevitable really that people should do that.

**How much of your interviewing style came from your own personality as it were? Because you would watch Paxman on *Newsnight* and it would be**

**slightly more, shall we say, aggressive, or slightly hostile or cynical, should we say, questioning, whereas some interviewing styles were slightly more kind of Parkinson-esque as it were. Were you ever given any guidance, or did you ever put any thought into your own tone, or did it just emerge?**

It was something I thought a very very, very, very deeply. In the end, all media, all journalism has to do with your getting facts from people, so I thought really deeply about how you did it. I never quite saw the point about being overtly hostile; I always thought you could use language. I mean, the English language is enormously rich and I always thought you could sharpen your questions by the words you used without making too much of a fuss about being hostile. I thought in some cases it was counterproductive, and there were some cases where, to sit back and just let people talk helped me not so much in the news business, but the documentaries I've recently done in prisons and with the mafia – these are guys who have killed people!

**Genuinely I thought those were amazing.**

So you want their stories.

**So your job is almost like to not speak and just the kind of open question and let and let them get on with it.**

Just that. I mean, not to be judgmental about what they did. I mean, some guy's serving 50 years for killing people. Why do I have to be judgemental about him? He's been locked up behind bars for... what is there to judge? He's been judged. What is more interesting for me is to find out how he got to this place. What mental processes were involved for him that made him do this? Does he regret it? How does he contemplate his fate now? Would he do something differently if he had a chance? That's interesting. But hitting him on the head for killing people? That's useless.

**Having watched that documentary, I was genuinely impressed with it, and as you just said, they were beating themselves up more than anyone. They were exceptionally penitent, and I got the impression that it was genuine; they acknowledged that they'd learnt their lesson.**

Yes, give them a chance to beat themselves up, you don't have to do it all the time. Let them. Sometimes you really have to be sharp with politicians who have learnt the art of evasion terribly well now, but in general, just put the microphone there, turn the camera on, let them speak. I mean, you can almost fade into the background. The odd prompt and so on to answer the questions, and I must say it worked for me. It worked I think for the programmes; we got amazing stuff out of these people because of that approach. and certainly in the prisons. we went out of our way to

show a kind of respect for the fact that these people were allowing us into their lives. They could say, "Go to hell." And that gets you nowhere.

**Do you think the kind of gladiatorial style of interviewing is on its way out? Because even amongst politicians... I listen to the *Today* programme sometimes and John Humphrys or go three rounds with a junior minister, and I'm none the wiser at the end of it as the minister hasn't kind of shown any weakness of drawn blood or revealed anything he or she shouldn't have done, and then you think, "What was the point of it?"**

No, I'm very loathe to criticise people's style, and as I said earlier, politicians have learnt the art of evasion. You ask them about Sloane Square and they give you a long story about the birth of the civil rights movement in America or something, you know, they go off on a different track, and interviewers do have to kind of try and bring them to heel. But I find a lot of the gladiatorial style a little uncomfortable. And then the main question too is, at the end, what do you get? Did you manage, by adopting this style, to extract more information out of somebody than you normally would? I'm not always sure. But, you know, people develop their own styles, and as I say, it's too easy to sit back and criticise what people do, and it's too easy, after you've been in this business as long as I have, to think that people aren't doing it properly now – of course they are, and of course they have to change, and of course they have to adapt, and generally speaking they do it well.

**I don't expect you to name names obviously, keep your confidences as it were, but have you ever had a moment where a politician has kind of denied or evaded something on air, and then the second the cameras are off they say something else? And I'm thinking very famously of Michael Brunson at *News at Ten* of course, when he interviewed John Major and he was on the record, he was like, "Blah, blah, blah," and then when the camera went off, although he didn't realise that the mic was still live, he said, "Do you want any more? The bastard's still out there." Do you remember?**

Yes. Well, that's... I mean, you know, politicians are human like everybody else and they let slip things. I think this similar thing happened with Gordon Brown and that lady when he was campaigning. As I say, it's too easy to sit back and criticise people's styles.

**Tell us what you're doing now, because you've got a documentary strands as it were. One of the things I wanted to ask is how do you pick your topics, because the Mafia one was absolutely fascinating. Do you kind of throw a paper football around the office saying, "Lets think of some ideas."?**

It's a much lesser story than that! I am approached and people say, "We have this idea about doing something about the mafia." I am not really hooked on too much

criminal activity. I don't read books about crime, and whatever I told my colleagues I didn't see all the Mafia films. I am not turned on by people killing each other for whatever cause. But the subjects are fascinating. Who are these people? Why do they do it? What is the organisational structure which enables them to behave in this way? How do they survive for so long? And I found that aspect of going into the... the human condition that produces this kind of phenomenon is very, very interesting, so that that that's why I did it. So it's a far less glamorous story than it is from my point of view; I am approached by people with an idea. It's the same thing with the prisons. I have such a profound dislike of prisons; I don't think I've ever been anywhere near a British prison. The idea of being incarcerated doesn't work for me; I'm terrified by the mere thought. But it was interesting to talk to these people about how their lives ended up in this way, and I was particularly interested in talking to people on death row, because regardless of what he's done, how does a man or woman face the possibility of knowing that on this day you are going to be put to death?

**But also that the not knowing when that day might be as well.**

Yes.

**I am firmly of the view that being on death row is in itself a cruel form of torture.**

Yes, well I... which is of no consequence at all, but I am against the death penalty, I don't believe that the state should be involved in killing people. But it's fascinating. I spoke to one guy, who I will never forget, and the question was a terribly simple almost childish one really, I said it to him, "What is it like when somebody on your row is taken away to be executed?" He gave great thought to the question and said, you know, he said, "It's terrible. You had an association with somebody, you talk every day, you say, "Let's go to the exercise yard together," you share a meal together. And then one day, this guy comes to you and said, "Hey man, I got to go." "And you know," he says, "When they take him down those steps, he ain't coming back because they're going to kill him." Great answer, I thought... so to get things like that I thought was immensely rich for me, and it was as I say, it was a side of life I had no experience of. And it's always nice when, even though you were way past retirement age and so on, you are exposed to new experiences. If you can do that, and if you get the chance to do that, you're very, very, very lucky – and I have been extremely lucky.

**Well, penultimate question then. Do you consider yourself retired, then? And how recognised are you on the street? Because in a sense you've got the luxury of being able to get involved in stories that interest you. I mean, what's keeping you busy at the moment, if that's not too grand a question?**



No, no – I mean, there are always more offers... the documentaries we have done have been very successful and not only because of me, I mean, because they were very well done... the researchers who find these people and get them persuade them to tell me, it's just amazing.

**But is there a deliberate scaling back of your work commitments, or are you busier than ever?**

I am rather boring about work really. I have no comprehension, I have no understanding of the business of not working. I mean, what is that? I love going to the cinema and I love playing tennis, I love walking... I can work and do all those things. Why do I have to stop work to play tennis? You can go and play tennis or golf in your off days. So I am a boring worker really, I think I am. I bore people even more by saying that it's... many, many, many years ago I read and was very impressed by some lines from, you know, in school some lines from Tennyson who says in one of his poems, "How dull it is to pause, to make an end,. To rust unburnished, not to shine in use! As though to breathe were life." Why pause? There is going to be a time, very shortly in in some cases, where we'll be pausing for a very long time; a pause from which there is no reprieve! So why not, while they are they still alive, why not do things? I'm quite lazy when I'm not actually working really, but I like to be occupied. I'm at my best when I am occupied, I am a better person if I am doing things. I am more at peace if I think I'm doing something worthwhile.

**Does it help to have a kind of recognisability? I hesitate to use the word 'celebrity' because obviously you are a very well known journalist. But does it does it open doors now, or does it sometimes get in the way? You mention the cinema and playing tennis do you jump the queue because you've been on telly or do people think...**

No, I don't think so. I mean, I think people are generally very kind, but I... you know, you control your life really in a way. I've always thought it's a job like any other; people who deliver milk do a very important service. People who bake bread. If you appear on television, people begin to know you a little bit more but it doesn't make that difference... I enjoy the work.

**Last question, then. What's been the one interview or single encounter this stuck with you all of these years? Is there someone that kind of stands out?**

I'm always asked this and it's a strange question because journalists see these things very much in a time frame. If you are thinking of doing it now, for example, you would probably want to talk to President Assad or if there was somebody who was head of ISIS or whatever, or you would probably want to talk to President Obama or Hillary Clinton or do a long, penetrating interview with Donald Trump about what he actually believes. So it really is according to the time. You know, at the time before

the first Gulf War, Saddam Hussein was the man to talk to. Again, the other person who was interesting who I managed to talk to, that was President Bush. The one interview which, having said all along that I try to keep my emotion out of it, the one person I was really, genuinely, wonderfully surprised by, and it's an emotion which stays with me to this day, was Nelson Mandela. I... here was a guy who'd spent 26 years in prison and who'd come out with a determination to change the system of government in his country and who was absolutely convinced, that despite all that had gone on before, he could do this peacefully; he could do this involving everybody, not in a divisive way as the previous governments had done, and all the questions I put to him about how difficult this was going to be, he pushed him aside by saying, "If you are genuine about wanting to do this, it's possible." And we kept saying, "But you can't possibly have an arrangement with a national party; those guys are diametrically opposed to everything you stand for." "If you are prepared to negotiate in good faith, everything is possible." And I was shocked by that, wonderfully. I remain so today, and I still think it's a it's a good guiding point from which to begin to embark on the solution to any kind of crisis. If you show good faith, if you really, really want to do it, then you find a way of resolving arguments. Nothing is that intractable if you desperately, desperately want to find a solution. I genuinely believe that, and it came from my encounter with Mandela. And I thought he was quite a sensational figure. I mean, how can somebody emerge from all this time in prison with such a conspicuous lack of bitterness? How is that possible? Could I do that? Could I be like that? Could I be that unbitter? I wouldn't want to put too much money on it.

**Well, Sir Trevor, it's a mark of the respect and esteem that you're held in that it's one of the few interviews that I actually got butterflies on the way here to doing, and we've interviewed some pretty big names here, so thank you ever so much for your time – I learnt a lot and we're very much appreciative.**

Thank you for asking me.