

## **Sir Harold Evans**

### **Former Editor, The Sunday Times**

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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 here in New York, and joined by Sir Harold Evans, former editor of the Sunday Times. A reporter at 16, he completed National Service in the RAF before graduating from Durham University. He quickly rose through the ranks at the Manchester Evening News and became editor of the Northern Echo at 31. Revered throughout Fleet Street, his name is synonymous with the golden age of investigative journalism. During his 14-year tenure at the Sunday Times, he campaigned for and won compensation for children affected by thalidomide. He moved to the US in 1984 where he was founding editor of Condé Nast Traveler. Now editor-at-large at Reuters, he is also a best-selling author of a number of books on American history and journalism.

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

Pleasure. Even though you're from Yorkshire.

**Yes. I know we... It's the War of the Roses isn't it? So we agree to set aside our differences for the next hour?**

I think we should, otherwise we'll never get out of the studio.

**Well, indeed. You lot won, of course, but we'll move swiftly on from that. It is a pleasure to talk to you, Sir Harry, I've been looking forward to this for many years. When I started this podcast three years ago, I remember saying to my wife at the time, "We need some big names on like Harold Evans." So I'm very pleased. It's taken me a few years to get you on. You're 90 years old now, I hear you're still as passionate about journalism as you always have been.**

I'd say more. I see so much every day which requires the very best of journalism in public affairs, and gets quite a lot of good journalism but not enough. Because why I'm so passionate about journalism now, when I began as a reporter, when I was 16, I was finding out who'd died, who'd married, and who robbed the police station or whatever it was. And then, of course, as I came through different aspects of

journalism, I gradually realised that the most important thing I could do, and that a journalist could do, is ask questions. And there are so many questions that come up in a more complex world, that I really feel that now is a fantastic opportunity for every journalist to make things clear which are not clear, and to expose wrongdoing and crimes and lies, because the air is very, very polluted. It's like being in Pinocchio or something, because everybody's got long noses. So I'm just as passionate as ever, because every day when I read the paper or listen to the radio or TV or on the web, I ask, "Why aren't they asking that question? Why doesn't he ask him?" For instance, you get a gun massacre, quite common in the United States.

### **Very sadly, yes.**

What's the question that I have that nobody's answered? The question is quite simple. They go to the NRA, which is a lobby for guns, for some defensible reasons, but also for other indefensible kind of, everybody has to have a gun, massacre in a church, "Well, let's make the church into an armed repository."

### **Their position is, the solution to a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun. It's insane.**

The question I would like to ask, and I would like to go to every arms manufacturer, "Why do you manufacture assault weapons? Why are you resisting a ban on assault weapons? Why are you resisting?" But people, they don't go to the gun manufacturers, the people who are making the biggest profits, who are subsidising the NRA. So that's just one example of part of the controversy about guns in America. There's one party which is never hindered with a question. So as a journalist, as a reporter, I would want to go and in fact may do, but I've got other things to do, so all the time, and particularly at this time in America when there are so many false statements being made, you want to go and say, "Where is the proof?" So the two concerns that I have, and which are reinforced today, are why, why, why, why, why, and then, "What is the evidence?" So this inquisitorial aspect of the press, the investigative element, is very important, but I don't want to put investigation on some particular plateau. The point about it is, it should be routine in journalism to ask the why, and obviously to try and stay truthful. Now, whittling out the truth is very difficult, because it's very often complicated, not for malign reasons, but because the truth is very often complex. Take for instance, if we have to explain global warming, the physics of what's happening – and there was a brilliant programme by NASA the other week, pointing out evidence of what our planet is going to look like in 50, 100, 200 years' time, we should look at how the planets differently evolve. We have a probe on Mars at the moment, is there sign of water on Mars? If there is, could it to be habitable at one stage, or will Earth, this tiny blue globe...

### **End up the same way.**

Will it become another burned out planet with global warming and climate change? So when we get some of the ridiculous, completely stupid statements, particularly in the Republican Party in the United States, you just wonder, they ought to see this programme, and they think their sons and their attitudes, and their descendants, are

going to be confined to a planet that may not be as devastated as Mars today, but will lay the groundwork for that kind of thing. I'd like to give you an example, if I might, Mr Trump, who is the President of United States, of course.

### **He is indeed.**

And therefore has access to all kinds of information that he wants. So what is his view? You would presume that somebody who was put in charge, not just in the United States, but as a leading voice on the planet, what's his view? How does he explain, or does he not explain, what is his attitude to the education by 97% of scientists, that global warming is taking place and will have catastrophic consequences? And I'd like to read you, if I might, something I brought with me.

### **Of course.**

This is Donald Trump, asked a question. And this is what he said about climate change. *"And actually, we've had times where the weather wasn't working out, so they changed it to extreme weather, and they have all different names, you know, so that it fits the bill. But the problem we have, and if you look at our energy costs and all of the things we're doing to solve a problem that I don't think any major fashion exists, I mean, Obama thinks it's the number one problem of the world today, and I think it's very low on the list. So I'm not a believer, and I will – unless somebody can prove something otherwise – I believe that there's weather, I believe there's change, and I believe it goes up and it goes down again, and it changes depending on years and centuries, but I'm not a believer. And we have much bigger problems."*

### **Crazy.**

Yes, Mr Trump, we have a much bigger problem, beginning with your comprehension of the difference between weather and atmospheric changes.

**I should point out to listeners, you've just read an extract from your latest book, *Do I Make Myself Clear*. Does it not trouble you then that Trump doesn't seem to regard matters of fact as actually merely opinion? Because as you said, the consensus, vast consensus on the part of the scientists and environmental scientists is 97% sure that man-made climate change is real. So it's not a matter of opinion. And yet he seems to shift the debate that it is, that his opinion counts just as much as all of science.**

You've put your finger on something very important. The key verb in his description is 'I believe'. You can believe the moon is made of green cheese if you like. It's not a fact.

### **It's not.**

It can be a belief. The Republican Party echoes him, and the whole Republican Party is now in the same naive belief category. If I asked you, let's say Mr Blanchard, "Do you believe in gravity? I mean, there such a thing as gravity?" You say to Mr Trump,

“Do you believe in gravity?” “Yes.” Okay. “No, well, it’s just a belief.” Well, if it’s just a belief, why not walk out of these 42th floor and test gravity now?”

**Absolutely.**

Because it does exist. So when you make some of your ridiculous statements like, “It goes up and it goes down,” what about if you asked deeper? The underlying trend is going up and up, and up, and up, and up. So belief is not a scientific fact, and he has no capacity. The big tragedy, Mr Trump, who’s extremely clever, extremely cunning, a brilliant demagogue, he has absolutely no comprehension of what a fact is.

**But he also seems to have poisoned the well of journalism itself. This whole cry of fake news is so that when CNN, or someone like yourself, an eminent long-standing journalist, attacks him, his supporters say, “Well, that’s the fake news media.” So he’s succeeded in closing their ears, and therefore the minds, to half of America, his base, they think that the media is their enemy.**

Yes. One of the terrible things that he does, has done, is to call journalists, ‘enemies of the people’.

**Disgusting.**

The enemies of the people, same phrase picked up from Joe Stalin, by the way. And I saw recently a wonderful film called A Private War, which featured Marie Colvin, Sunday Times reporter, who lost an eye in Sierra Leone because she went into dangerous places to report what was happening in humanitarian terms, people being murdered, and crimes, and so on. And so she was dedicated to try and find out what was going on in Syria. And she got killed.

**She was murdered.**

She was murdered, actually.

**She was deliberately targeted by the Assad regime.**

She was targeted, and she was murdered.

**We had Sarah Baxter on the podcast recently, the deputy editor of the Sunday Times.**

That’s wonderful. So...

**She was very clear that Marie Colvin was murdered.**

She was murdered. Exactly. It’s just like Khashoggi was murdered in Saudi Arabia by the Prince. And I’m going to say that again: By the Prince.

**I agree with you.**

Not by the shadowy figures we imagined at first.

**It's preposterous to believe that it would have happened without his consent. Of course, he ordered the killing.**

He ordered the killing. And so, there we have these two instances of the murder of a journalist who had been critical, admittedly, of the Prince, but wasn't plotting any kind of revolution. Then we have Marie Colvin. And every single day of the week all around the world, in a minor matter or major matter, we have journalists who are not enemies of the people, exposing drug trafficking, exposing the opioid epidemic, exposing how that epidemic started, and what can be done about it. They're not the enemy of the people, the enemies of the people are the people who are making a profit from that kind of stuff.

**I agree.**

Secondly, Mr Trump, who can't be bothered with the complexities of it, and doesn't appreciate that, without investigative or ordinary reporting, we'd be in a hell of a mess.

**And does it frustrate you? I mean, in one sense it's an obvious question, but does it frustrate you that these people seem to be in the ascendancy at the moment? There's some strong evidence that suggests that a lot of people voted Brexit because they perceived the immigration problems to be a lot worse than it was because it's been exaggerated by the Daily Mail and the Daily Express and so on. And Trump supporters... he won the election.**

Well, Brexit is a classic case, because the nincompoops who led the rats over the cliff... I've changed the metaphor here. The amount of lies pumped out during that was not sufficiently exposed by the journalists. You'll get £350 million for the National Health Service, you'll get this, you'll get that. And they lied throughout. So the problem then with the polarised press in Britain in particular, which you get some of the papers like the Mail and so on who would support Brexit and they wouldn't expose the lies. You get other papers and news operations which would expose the lies, and they'd been met with, "That's fake news." So the whole debate has been degenerated in a way which didn't quite exist when I started in journalism at the age of 16 as a reporter. It's totally degenerated, and the influences are something that we can trace. But this is a really serious issue, because now Britain – and all the Leavers can shout at me if you like, I don't care – just consider what you've done. And as the consequences unfold, with gross national product is going to fall by nearly three percent, no question about it, look what's happened with the pound. When this nonsense started about getting rid of the channels that were some kind of expression, some kind of understanding about immigration – we'll come to that – nonetheless, the pound was at 170, it's now at 120 something. Britain has been devalued, and its devaluation is going to continue. Now, immigration is a serious issue. I don't pretend it isn't. The whole international scene has not yet come to grips with what can be done. See, take something like the caravans coming from Latin

America into the border with Mexico, on which Mr Trump made a big deal, “They’re coming in like invaders.”

**Some of them are good people, but they’re rapists, and awful language, build a wall.**

On the other hand, though it’s quite frightening to see...

**Incredibly inflammatory rhetoric and very scary.**

When some of that advance guard, as it were, not the women and children, some of the young men through rocks and attacked, they vindicated his attitude. And so that was a very bad scene altogether. So as a good reporter, you have to take the whole picture into account, but it’s no good getting back to the great curse of American journalism, which I think was taught too long in the schools, on the one hand, on the other, and I wrote about this time and time again, the truth doesn’t lie necessarily in the middle. On the one hand, they actually got the autobahn built. On the other hand, they murdered all those people in Poland. There’s no, ‘on the one hand’ on the other’. On the one hand, Jesus Christ was a bit of a nuisance, on the other hand, he wants to do good things.

**That’s the damage, isn’t it, that journalism isn’t about saying that one person thinks it’s raining and the other one says that it isn’t raining. Your job as a journalist is to look outside the bloody window and see what the truth is.**

Exactly right! She said, he said. So the job of the journalist is very difficult, because how can you whittle out the truth from these competing claims? What is the evidence, and how prejudiced are you? And how far do you push a criticism? For instance, coming back to Mr Trump, I tend to think that to regard everything that he tweets as a subject for laboured attack is ridiculous. He plays the media like a flute!

**He’s an absolute PR genius.**

He’ll say one thing one minute, the press rushes to investigate that, he says a different thing the next day, and the next day has something fresh, so they rush off to do that.

**The genius of Trump in that sense is that there are so many things that, in any other presidency, would be a resigning matter – but they don’t even last the full news cycle because he does something else the next day.**

No, he’s brilliant. In fact, a friend of mine, who claims to be in the know, said at the beginning of the presidency to various people, “Well, how would you go about this job?” And so they gave an answer. He said, “Wrong, wrong, wrong. We’re in a reality show. We change the script every day.” So that’s what has happened. So the reference to the Pied Piper of Hamelin is quite relevant, I think, here. For instance, the first job of the media is reporting on the speeches and stuff, which are on the record. Then there’s the discovery of things that people would rather prefer concealed. There’s explanation, and thirdly, there’s exposition. So if you go through

the three stages, sometimes you end up having to campaign and say, insistently, "This is not true. This is not true. This is not true. This is a lie and that's why it's going to be damaging to people."

**Let me just take you back, if we may, to the beginning of your career. You mentioned earlier that you started as a journalist age 16. Did you always want to be a journalist? If we could spend a few minutes going through your amazing career, how old were you when you know that journalism was for you?**

Oh, I can date it precisely. It was Dunkirk. I was 11, 12 and my father was driving steam engines in the blackness of the night, carrying ammunitions and stuff. And he got a break, and he took us all to Rhyl. And I loved building "walls" against the Irish sea. Not that I'm against the Irish, but I was against the sea theoretically, and there in the distance was a group of men, and we walked up to them. I didn't want to go anywhere near them, I wanted to keep playing, and my dad got talking to them, and they were dishevelled, lying without any real clothing, makeshift clothing. They were survivors of Dunkirk. And he talked to them, and he found that what they were telling him was a somewhat darker picture than they were being given by the newspapers at the time. Now the newspapers at the time were trying to keep up public morale, but as Churchill said, "Wars are not lost by evacuations." So the evacuation, which was brilliant in Dunkirk, so I realised then, watching my father and realising how many questions he'd asked, that they answered freely, that we got a different picture. So I began to think.

**It sparked your curiosity.**

Yes. How do we get a picture of reality on which to depend – 'the invisible environment' as Walter Lippmann called it. The only way we can begin to get a piece of that environment with truth is by asking questions. He says, "What were the guns like? What was your equipment like? Where were you here? What happened there? Why did you do this? What happened there?" I think he was driven crazy, but they wanted to talk to somebody. Of course, sometimes the art of journalism is to persuade people to talk what they don't want to talk about. But these men did want to talk, and they were wonderful. So I'd already realised that I was never going to be a mathematics or physics major, although I did a good essay on coal once. I didn't pass the 11-plus examination because I was, partly, in my excuse, I was evacuated from the bombing, which was intense.

**I don't think you need an excuse now, Sir Harry, don't worry! I think you've made up for that since.**

So at the age of 15, I did manage to get five school certificates, which entitled me, I didn't realise it at the time, to go to university. I had no idea of going to university at 15. But my mother and father invested in me the equivalent of quite a lot of money today. They saved up and saved up, because my mother had opened a grocery store and my dad was working all hours on the railway as a driver. The money they saved sent me to a business college, Northenden College, in the middle of Manchester. I learned shorthand and typing. So when I wrote innumerable letters at

the age of 16 saying, "Give me a job. I can do shorthand and typing," I got a call from Ashton-Under-Lyne on Monday morning, and I got there, and I got a job as a reporter.

### **Incredible.**

So that was the start.

### **Well done.**

I was lucky, because the grown men were away fighting the war. There was one man who had been invalidated out, called Jameson, and he took me to courts and he taught me how to report the courts. The shorthand was terrific. The coroner always insisted, "Come and just look at the body." I didn't want to look at the body. I was too squeamish altogether. But I'd go to the police station and ask questions. They said, "What's a lad like you doing asking questions like this?"

### **So you were really thrown in the deep end then.**

I was thrown in the deep end, yes. So that was good. I got my first taste... all of the reporters at that stage had the task, "Go and see Mrs So-and-so, her son has been killed," or, "Her son has been captured. Just tell them and bring a picture back." "What? You mean you want me to knock on that door when this woman's in distress and ask her for a picture of her son? I can't do that." I didn't say that. I went to the street. I got to the door. I turned away. I got to the end of the street. I thought, "This is your big test. You've got to go and do it. You can't go back to the office." So I went and knocked on the door. I said, "Excuse me, ma'am, from the Ashton-Under-Lyne." "Oh come in lad. Have a cup of tea. Come in."

### **She wanted to talk. She wanted to share the memories.**

Yes. "Oh look, this is a picture of my lad, make sure you give it a good show." I realised a very, very, important thing in Ashton-Under-Lyne, in that early reporting. There is something which is very much missing in many places today; a community of feeling. We all thought we were all part of the same community. So I became welcome then. So I did that. But then when I was called the Royal Air Force... and a lucky break that was, I was in for two years and nine months. Lucky break, because in my barrack room, because I had shorthand and typing I was made a corporal, two stripes, because I could take down... I was assisting an Air Commodore to write reports on accidents. He would give it to me and say, "It's a dog's dinner. See what you can do to clean it up." So I cleaned it. The point about it is, there were two men in my barrack room who were as interested as I was in what was happening, but they were talking a language I didn't understand. They were talking like John Maynard Keynes, and philosophers, and economists, because they'd started at university. I realised that I was only partly educated. I'd heard John Beavan, who was a famous Manchester Guardian reporter, give a talk to us. We were kids, you know. So I was determined to get to university. Unfortunately, I couldn't get... I had this school certificate, but no university would accept me without Latin. I could say the Grace. [Says the Grace in Latin]



**We'll take your word for it.**

Then I found one university which had a course called social studies. I thought for a time it might be terrible, you know, sending me into disputes of all kinds, but actually they had a course for politics, and I took it. I got an honours degree. I got through the first year, they promoted me. Anyway, the point about it is that... and that was, by the way, only possible because the Conservative Party, Butler Education Act said ex-servicemen, like the GI Bill in the United States, should be entitled to an education. So I got a fantastic education at Durham University. Politics, Economics, Aristotle. What do you walk to talk about? Plato? Aristotle? That gave me a larger picture of how can we preserve the best of what we have in the lines of Edmund Burke? And how can we deal with the things that need reforming? So I left the university infused with this wider perspective. So I'm a great passionate believer in education. Then, having served in the Royal Air Force, where I'd started newspapers and magazines and things... my first attempt where we'd handset the type ourselves by the way, me and a few of the lads...

**Wow.**

I made a mistake. We... Because we put a picture of an aircraft on the front of the magazine, and when I went into the barrack room after, "What are you playing at? Bloody aircraft, we see those all day you bloody fool."

**We want to see something new.**

We had Lancaster bombers and stuff like that. So the next one I put a picture of a pretty woman called Diana Dors.

**I think that was advisable.**

Advisable. That sold out completely.

**There's a lesson for you!**

And it wasn't smug but it was a way of getting them to read what was in it. Then of course, when I came out of that, I got a job at the Manchester Evening News learning to make... condense and simplify language, which was a fantastic experience for me, and it's basically what I learned to enable me to write books about the English language and so on. But the key experience was reading a paragraph in the Sunday Times, of all papers, which said that Vancouver was starting a programme to detect cancer in women, cervical cancer. And I thought, "Why don't we have a programme like that in Britain?"

**Sensible question.**

By this time I'd become editor of The Northern Echo.

### **At 31, at this point, wasn't it?**

Yes, something like that, 31... I don't claim to be a child prodigy, but I was fairly young for an editorship at that stage because it was a big deal.

### **I was a total loser when I was 31. In fact, I'm not much more now!**

So the question is, "What do you do with it?" So why don't we have one? That's the very core of reporting. So I was able to get a young guy called Kenneth Hooper, he was well educated from Cambridge, he was a trainee journalist. I said, "Go to Vancouver and find out what they're doing." About two months later he turns up... he hadn't been to Vancouver, he'd been up the road to Newcastle where there was a very brilliant doctor who'd been trying for years to get the British government to introduce a programme to detect cervical cancer in the early stages when it can be killed and cured – 2,400 women were dying every year.

### **Needlessly.**

Every day, because of cervical cancer, which was detectable and curable. So when this information came out, I went bananas. I wrote to every MP and the famous... become kind of celebrated because I got them to question the minister in Parliament by saying, "You wrote to your constituents and to ask the Minister of Health this question." So it goes like this: "Will the minister respond to The Northern Echo's suggestion there should be a campaign to detect cervical cancer in women?" "No sir." Enoch Powell, the Minister for Health. The following a week another one of the MPs, "Will the Minister now introduce coverage for cervical cancer?" "No, sir." And they asked again the following week. "No, sir." "No sir." "No sir." "No sir." Enoch Powell would never introduce it. Then one week, one of the MPs got up and said, "Will the Minister now introduce..." Of course, we'd been going on with this. I'd written to every MP, I'd written pamphlets. He said, "Yes, sir." It was a new Minister of Health. And that was the start of the cervical cancer campaign. I'm very proud of the fact that it has saved 2,400 women every year.

### **And more.**

When I got to the Sunday Times, the pilot programme that had been agreed was extended to become a national programme, because I was able to write to a wider audience.

**Let me ask you then, about The Sunday Times, because we were going through your career and we've got to that point when you joined the Sunday Times. I mean, that was an incredible number of years.**

It was.

### **I mean, just talk us through some of the highlights.**

Well, I was very fortunate because the chairman and the real creator at the Sunday Times who'd built up its circulation considerably close to a million, and we took it to a

million and a half, but nonetheless the man who created it was a youngish brigadier, and by one of those curious coincidences he was at Dunkirk in the water, with a platoon of the Durham Light Infantry, lost hundreds of men, and he was up to his shoulders in water.

### **Wow.**

So he now is back in Britain, not a university man, but he liked what I'd done at the Northern Echo, so he invited me to join the Sunday Times, and the point is he already was a very... because he hadn't had an education, he valued education enormously, and so he appointed me, and when he moved on to be chairman of the company I became editor of the Sunday Times. It's important to say that I owe a lot to him, and the newspaper industry, and journalism in Britain owes a lot to him generally for what he did. It was fantastically exciting.

### **I'm excited just hearing about it.**

It was so amazing to me. The week I arrived... there was an insurance fraud. A man called Dr Savundra, automobile insurance, which is a complete con, and I happened to know an MP who'd been in Sri Lanka where he came from, and said, "This guy's a crook. You should look into it." So I mentioned it – now, this is important – that was the best piece of information I had to put that drop of information in a test tube inhabited by Murray Sail, a brilliant Australian, Bruce Page...

### **And allowed it to fester.**

Three or four people of enormous... I mean, we followed this round and we were able to expose it. Then when I got further on, I came back from lunch one day with Jeremy Isaacs, who later became head of Channel 4, and he said, "Isn't it interesting about Philby?" What about Philby, who is this guy Philby? I didn't know. He said, "I understand his wife is writing a memoir." So I got back to the office and I said to Bruce Page, "Philby. Go look into Philby." So all I'm doing is connecting positive and negative. So it was fantastically exciting.

### **An earth-shatteringly large story, exposing Kim Philby as a spy.**

Yes, absolutely.

### **I mean, decades later we're still talking about it.**

I know. I can see it now!

### **What was that like?**

Bit by bit. It was exciting. I remember Bruce coming into my office and saying, "Look, here he is!" And he showed me a photograph. Bruce came in with this photograph, and it was a young Philby, who had been in the Spanish Civil War, reporting, but when he came back into general circulation he'd been on the kind of left... he was

now dining at the Anglo German Society. And then Bruce said, "Look, here he is, building a new identity." What a brilliant remark! A complete fantastic... so I said about going... my own sources, going to ministers, talking with them, but all the reporters thought the same thing. "Hello, this is the Sunday Times Insight team. I'd just like to talk to you about Mr Philby." Click. Click. Click. I wrote to the former head of the Secret Service, Menzes, and he wrote back to me and said what a copper-bottomed bastard this Philby was. But he wouldn't say any more.

### **So he was fairly neutral about him then?**

Ha! So that... I don't know what... of the many investigations we did, and the whole staff was agitated. By the way... this isn't due to me, but it's very important to remark on it. We shared a common purpose. We argued like hell about what the facts meant or where we should go next, but we did share that ideal that it was a public service that we were doing.

### **It was.**

We had no business asking these bloody questions unless we had some point about it, as with the cervical cancer. And as when I was trying to expose the fact that we'd hanged the wrong man in a murder case, Timothy Evans. Which we did, and we succeeded, and so on. But that was a fantastic case. So when we got thalidomide, which is now a... last week I was in London; one of my friends, who had no legs and no arms, just died, and five or six thalidomiders came around to the club I was staying in, and we discussed it. You know what is amazing about these people? We had won compensation for them after a tremendous battle that we had, and we had to go to the European Court of Human Rights, and so on and so on. I had to risk going to prison and all that kind of stuff, which we could glamorise if we wanted to.

### **Again, if a film was made of it, it wouldn't be believable. It's just incredible.**

Well, what's incredible about it today... well, winning in the European Court by 13 votes to 11 made the British government change its law. Britain laboured very extreme restrictive conditions. When I go to London today, and it's been the same ever since we won the compensation, those thalidomiders have been leading the fight in places like Spain, where... there's still no compensation in Spain. Real reactionary court.

### **Disgraceful.**

So they've turned their energies into helping other thalidomiders all around the world, and I find that fantastically inspiring.

### **When did you first hear the word thalidomide in your tenure at the Sunday Times? What was the moment when that word actually hit your eardrums?**

Good point! It must've been about 1969, 1970 when I'd begun to get it... initially, when I began, I was more concerned to get express sympathy and raise compensation – but the more I read about it I wanted to know what was this gene,

what was this disease, or what is it that's happening. By the way, there is still today something hard to comprehend. It's like a sniper's rifle. If you took the one pill on the 24th day you'd lose your hearing. If you took it on the 28th day you'd lose a leg. If you took it on the 37th you'd lose an arm, and so on. So it depended when you took the pill. It was like Martin Johnson, the director of the Thalidomide Trust, rightly said it was like a sniper's rifle. So what a horrendous roulette it was. This drug, released without any testing on pregnant women – now, let me just say something about journalism here, and this may sound as if I'm blowing my own trumpet but to hell with it – here's the thing. So when we got our group together, Phillip Knightley, a very, very important reporter, Bruce Page, so and so, so and so, so and so. Different people, I could name them all, one after the other. The point is this, once we got our teeth into it and decided there was an outrage here, not just for the level of compensation being offered, and the fact that the government and Mr Enoch Powell, the cervical cancer man I mentioned, was also... refused to see the thalidomide children. He refused to take up their case, refused to have a public inquiry. So this was outrageous. Absolutely outrageous. He's supposed to be responsible for the people, and they were just following their own instincts and the advices they were getting from the civil service. And where was that advice coming from? The drug companies.

### **Unbelievable.**

It was unbelievable. It was unbelievable.

### **Or incredible is a better word.**

Yes, Paul... Okay, so you're with me. We've both investigated this, and we now can show indisputably that the levels of compensation are cruel and bizarre and completely unjustified. So we took a chance against the contempt of court, which said you should not report anything. In 1972, September 1972, we had this big double-page spread. Not a single newspaper, not the Economist, not the Times, not the Guardian, not the Daily Mail – I'll come back to the Daily Mail, a special case – did they report it. Do you know why? They all swallowed the idea that a pharmaceutical could not cross the placental barrier. I was married to a biology teacher, Enid Parker, and she said, "That's ridiculous, of course it can cross the placental barrier. It isn't an iron curtain. The foetus in there is protected by the placenta, but a pharmaceutical can get through to it."

### **Of course it can.**

Not one of the brilliant newspapers or correspondents ever challenged that during the initial stages of the thalidomide campaign.

### **Which presumably, was even then deeply reckless and negligent of them at the time.**

Yes, absolutely.

**Because that's their job, not to accept the conventional wisdom, and to challenge those very notions.**

Well, the inhibition by the British government on contempt of court was very serious, because the paper could be found and put out of existence if you defied the law of contempt of court. The law of contempt of court used to run from the moment a case was set down for trial, and so the early victims' cases were set down for trial early on, and then as more people piled in seeking compensation, the period of silence enforced on the press and everybody else, and the victims, the parents, were told, "If you don't accept this settlement, we'll take it off everybody." So the brutality...

**That is just blackmail. That is just brutal.**

Jack Ashley, the MP, said it's like... because it was a Scottish firm, the distillers making the whiskey, "It's like coming at you with a jagged whiskey bottle". Just terrible. Looking back on it, we were brave and resourceful, and it must be stressed that it's not just Harry Evans running out in the street spouting this science. I had a team of people.

**Yes, but you were the editor, you led that team.**

I had a team of people who were fantastic and dedicated – and by the way, who would argue like hell with me if I said, "Surely this means X". "No, it doesn't." "Yes it does." "No, it doesn't." And then, "Let's go to the references, let's call up this."

**But that's testament to your approachability as a leader. Can you imagine anyone in Donald Trump's orbit questioning him along those lines? That's one of the reasons why he's in the trouble that he's in, because he's all-powerful and can't be questioned. A really good leader, like yourself, allows his team to challenge him, because that's what you want, that they feel they can do that.**

Absolutely. I was lucky to survive, because I asked so many damn fool questions.

**How long were you editor of the Sunday Times for?**

Fourteen years.

**Wow. During your tenure as editor, Rupert Murdoch bought the paper, did he not?**

Yes. We were a very successful paper. The unions were always fighting between each other, and the press room, where we printed all these vast numbers of big papers, a lot of pages, had people come in just at the weekend to do that. They had no real loyalty to the paper, and they took every opportunity they could to try and get more money for the shift. And they also, between the craft union in the press room, and the labouring side, the unskilled side, there was this tension, so they were always watching the differentials in pay. That was a source of aggravation, and I'll never forget the moment that we won the great victory in the European Court of Human Rights enabling us to print more information. They demanded a bigger

increase in pay, and then they went very slow. The run, we were trying to print 1,600,000, we were only running at about 800,000 and we're obviously not going to finish. I asked them to come to my office, the union guys, I said, "All come up." I sat with them, and I said, "Do you realise that you are frustrating a great campaign on behalf of the thalidomide children?" "Oh, yes, we think you're right about the thalidomide children, yes." I said, "Well, I want you to just finish the run, and have your claim against management later, because I don't control your pay. What I control is what I publish in the paper."

### **The words.**

They went down and they continued, they promised me they'd finish the run. They didn't. The next day I was on television, under attack by the union leader. I said, "You really misuse your power." And of course that was the terrible tragedy, because the whole enmity and warfare between the printers and the management was complicated, because we were working every day with the comps, doing the setting of the type and laying out the pages, and we had a good direct relationship, but we had none with the men in the pressroom, who invented names all the time, Mickey Mouse and so on, to draw... one thing I must mention is that the Thomson family, first of all Roy Thomson, took on chance on agreeing with Denis Hamilton that I should be the editor of the Sunday Times, was a terrific man, completely believed in the journalists being... used to carry a card in his pocket saying, "I give my journalists complete freedom. If you're complaining about something, go to them." That was Roy Thomson. His son was the same, and his grandson, who is the chairman...

### **And ideal newspaper owner really.**

He was wonderful. Well, you had limits. If you were found to attack the Queen herself, or had a series of bad judgements against you in the courts, you'd be out. He had very high standards, but he didn't interfere in the day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month, year-to-year. And his grandson, who's the chairman at Reuters, David Thomson, is the same today. Reuters is, of course, a highly principled news organisation. Anyway, what we achieved at the Sunday Times could not have been achieved without Roy Thomson, and the Thomson family being at our back. So when they got frustrated by the continual production interruptions by the union, they said, "We're not doing it any more. We're going to put the paper up for sale." They put up Times newspapers as the two papers together, which were then linked, the Sunday Times and the Times. William Rees-Mogg, the editor of The Times, went to Canada, announced he was going to run the Times separately if he could get the London management of Times newspapers to give him that opportunity. And I set up the Sunday Times group, all the eight top executives on the Sunday Times, financial director, production director, and we made a bid to buy the Sunday Times, and we had James Callaghan, the former Prime Minister with us, we had all these highly skilled technical directors with us. We thought we were bound to win. Why? Because the monopolies law said that nobody should control more than a certain percentage of the British press. When Roy Thompson bought the Times, the daily Times, and added it to Sunday Times, it gave him 6% of the British press. He had to go before the Monopolies Commission to justify 6%. And along comes Rupert Murdoch, and wants to control 37% of the British press.

### **Amazing.**

He already had a profitable newspaper with the Sun. So, we thought, “Well, he can’t possibly succeed, because you have to go before the Monopolies Commission and we can show that the Sunday Times is a standalone, profitable operation, and that the leadership will be adequate for it managerially, and dedicated journalistically.” What nobody knew, and took me 30 years to prove, was that Rupert Murdoch had a secret meeting with Mrs Thatcher where it was on the nod that she would see him through the monopolies legislation. That meeting, she denied, he denied.

### **Both of them lied as well, because that meeting did take place.**

Both of them lied. She lied because it was politically embarrassing, but she could not gainsay the fact that her press secretary, Bernard Ingham, kept a minute of the meeting between Mrs Thatcher and Murdoch, which showed exactly what had been. But Murdoch, despite the evidence which was produced at the Leveson inquiry, continued to deny this meeting had ever taken place.

### **Unbelievable.**

So not only did he cheat, but he also lied and cheated, and got his hands on a tremendous instrument of his latest successes. He’s a very... brilliant business operator. Brilliant, absolutely brilliant. I would never have thought of lying and cheating, it wouldn’t have occurred to me.

### **Do you want to descend into lying and cheating? Even if you might make a bit more money, is it worth it in the long run?**

That’s a good question. If this is the inquisition now, and I’m lying on your bed of nails, and you say to me, “If we say you can get up from this bed of nails and you can continue to control the Sunday Times editorial, but you have to lie a little bit about what you would do,” as Albert Finney said in a great film once when he was considering seducing a young lady, “Well, I might succumb. I might succumb”. So I’d like to think I’d have laid down my body rather than... and I certainly did try, because in the end after a year of working with Mr Murdoch – and the first six months were terrific, the second six months were horrific – of interference of the grossest kind, to deny that the recession was continuing, when it clearly was...

### **A line had been crossed, you couldn’t carry on?**

Yes. Well, the point is I had to be... and then of course when the Leveson inquiry, the only bit of humour in the whole thing is when Mr Murdoch, as I say, a very capable, fluent individual, was on the stand at the Leveson inquiry, and the counsel said, “Mr Evans here describes how you broke the five promises that you’d made.” Five promises, and then he went through the five promises: not to give direct instructions to the editor, not to try and merge the Times and the Sunday Times into a News International company, not to do this, not to that. Five essentials for a free paper. He said, “That’s not true,” he said, “What happened was Mr Evans would come to me



and he'd say: 'I don't know what to say. Could you tell me what to say and I promise it won't go beyond these doors?' And I'd say: 'But Harry, it's not for me to say, you're the editor. It's not for me to say.'"

### **It's not even believable, is it really? Someone of your stature.**

The office convulsed with laughter, because I'm a very agreeable fellow actually, but there's a point at which I say, "Piss off!"

### **"Sling your hook."**

And of course, he's since then, he's demeaned the British press for sure. And the hacking inquiries and Leveson exposed it. So, the legacy of Rupert Murdoch is going to be very mixed. On the one hand, a brilliant business guy, on the other sense, somebody who debased the British press, and his influence on Fox News in the United States is palpable and clear.

### **What came immediately after your departure from the Sunday Times?**

The Sunday Times and the Times all came under News International and Rupert Murdoch. The editor of Sunday Times, now the editor of the Times, I have to say, that when I go re-involved in the thalidomide controversies, and they saw me, and I was able to winnow out what was really happening behind the scenes with the German trial, which is a separate story, which is a corrupt trial in Germany. The editor of the Sunday Times then, he moved from the Sunday Times to the Times, took up the cause and did very well. So that particular thalidomide tradition continued. But of course, the paper's different from what it would have been if we'd been running it. I don't want to say, "After the Lord Mayor's show, the muck cart," it's not that at all; it's much more complicated than that.

### **Can I ask you about life in America here with Tina? What's it like, two journalists living together? Do you edit each other's copy? How does it work?**

She is utterly brilliant. I've never met a better journalist, because she sees things that I don't see. That's one qualification. Second, if you read her book, *The Vanity Fair Diaries*, which is not only vastly entertaining, it also reveals how could somebody come in at the age of 29, take over a magazine which is honestly going to close any day now, somebody from England who doesn't even where the Bowery is, and transform it, and makes it hugely successful, and then takes over the *New Yorker* and increases and saves it from declining circulation. And does other things like the *Daily Beast*, where she shows you... you're asking what the relationship is, well, I cower in the corner. At least, I give a good pretence of cowering in the corner. She's a hugely capable journalist, who's always seen where the real story is. I can just imagine how she would have been if she'd been on my *Sunday Times*. She would have been with Lewis Chester and Brian MacArthur, and all these other people. It's too many of them to name. She did, in fact, write for Godfrey Smith, the brilliant editor of the colour magazine. What she does... we share copy. I give her my copy, and she goes, "That's where this should begin." And on the seventh paragraph, she says, "This is where it should begin". And I find she's absolutely right. She's always

right, pretty well. What I contribute to, if she shows me something she's written, first of all I'm completely amazed by the language, and the hilarity of it, but I can say, "Look, you could shorten this here and there." I'm an editor, so I'm used to doing that. She really has attracted so many good writers – Simon Schama, Marie Brenner, all these people eager to work with her because of this gift she has. Tina is a force of nature. Is she exasperating? Yes, because she's very often right, and I'm very often wrong. Occasionally I get a little bit correct.

**Well, that sounds like marriage to me. You're 90 years old, Sir Harry. Are you ever tempted to slow down and put your feet up a bit? Because I'm 43 and I'm already thinking that I could do with a bit of a rest.**

Well, I've got things I'd like to do. Some of the things I'd like to do are actually just... I'd like to read more biographies than I'd be able to read. I wrote the book *The American Century*, and they made America a study of innovation. I'm very deeply interested in... I'd like to continue my reading, although I may have to indulge in extra expenses, getting my copy from where I will be to where it will be accepted.

**What piece of advice would you give to someone who wants to be the next Sir Harry Evans then? I've admired your work for decades, and I've been trying to get you on the podcast for years as well. It's an honour that you've done it. What advice would you give to aspiring journalists now that want to be the next Sir Harry Evans?**

Have a head full of questions. Do not read anything... test yourself, get the New York Times, or get the Times in London, or get the Guardian, and read the longest story there, and tell me how many questions you have out of it. If you have fewer than 10 questions when you've read the whole paper, go into the church but stay away from journalism. In other words, a heightened curiosity, to a point of almost paranoia. Cultivate that inquisitive curiosity, that relentless curiosity. And, to quote Shakespeare, "To thine own self be true." Do not simply accept and enjoy what you enjoy reading because the opinions happen to agree with you. There's the way you challenge yourself. So then ask yourself, "Why am I asking these questions. What's my point?" I think the first and almost the last essential is that now of course when you've done that, it does help to have a book like *Do I Make Myself Clear*.

**Oh, very well, well sold.**

I learned so much from reading good...

**Available from all good book shops, and on Amazon, or wherever you buy it.**

People like William Zinsser, and so on. I absorbed all those books, and they helped me to understand and help to write more clearly, and so I'm so pleased to be able to put those things down, so they can actually do that kind of thing. And of course, some of them will be something else. They will be great writers in themselves, and they won't need a damn thing from anybody.

**Sir Harry, it's truly been an honour. Thank you ever so much for your time.**

No, it's been very stimulating. You're not really escorting me out, are you?

**I think the security are going to escort us from the studio shortly. Thank you again!**