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lain Dale

Presenter, LBC Drive

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by the presenter, political commentator and publisher lain Dale.

A well-known face around Westminster, lain opened Politicos Bookshop in 1997 – this spawned a long career in publishing which included founding Total Politics magazine and current affairs publisher Biteback. His media career has been equally successful. Launched in 2002, his blog lain Dale's Diary became one of the UKs most read political websites, and he has since written for the Telegraph, GQ and Conservative Home.

As well as his regular appearances on TV as a political pundit, he presents Drive on LBC, has stood for parliament, and was chief of staff to David Davis during his 2005 Conservative leadership campaign.

lain, thank you for joining me.

Hello.

So the first time I became aware of you was when you ran the bookshop and you started popping up on the television doing punditry, but I actually learnt doing research on you for this podcast that you actually started out your career as a financial journalist.

I did. I always kind of wanted to get into the media in some way. And my first attempt was when I was at university. I applied to get into the BBC's translation service at Caversham. I studied German at university so I went along and did an interview, and you know we've done a good interview, well I knew that I'd done a good interview and I think there were 12 jobs available, and I didn't get one. And I was I was really angry. And I found out later that every single person that did get one had been to Oxford or Cambridge and I'd been to the lowly University of easy access – sorry, East Anglia –

I went to Leeds Polytechnic.

Well, there you go. And so that attempt failed, so I then sort of was a lobbyist for a time and then when I finished doing that in 1990 I was trying to persuade the Thatcher government to get rid of something called the Dock Labour Scheme which I won't go into, but we did that and I kind of did myself out of a job, and I wondered what to do. And I got a job with a big PR company Charles Barker. I hated it. I resigned after three months because I was bored and thought, "What do I do now?" So I knew of Lloyd's List which was a sort of insurance shipping newspaper, daily newspaper, because I'd had to deal with them for my job with the port employers, and just phoned up the editor and he said, "Well, come in for a couple of weeks." So I did that, I was writing about insurance which I knew nothing about and cared even less, but I found that I could write about things that I didn't understand in a quite an authoritative way! So I was writing about 1,500-word columns about reinsurance and I still couldn't tell you what that was. And so that was my first sort of dabbling in the media. And I quite enjoyed it.

What came next?

Well, that only lasted six months because the guy that I worked for at the port employers then rang me up one day said, "Look, I want to start a lobbying consultancy based on transport – do you want to come in with me?" And I really ummed and ahhed about it because I was loving the journalism. I never thought, still don't think I'm a very good writer, but I kind of was making quite good progress in that and it was one of those thoughts in your career where you go one direction and certain things happen, you choose the other direction and other things happen.

A 'Sliding Doors moment', as I call it.

Yes, it kind of was. And so I decided to do that. So we formed a company called The Waterfront Partnership. Most of our clients were ports, railway companies, railway privatisation that was just starting. We did a lot on the expansion of Heathrow, M25 and all of that sort of thing. That lasted five or six years. I then fell out with my business partner, as one does from time to time, we've sort of kissed and made up now but it was a pretty horrible experience. And again it was one of those forks in the road. And I'd been to Washington a few times, I absolutely loved the place, it's still my favourite city in the world.

Mine too.

And I had seen this sort of political... well, it wasn't actually a bookshop it was more a sort of political artefacts shop, called Political Americana and I thought, "Why isn't there one of these in London?" So I decided to open one in London but it was

primarily based around books. We got the money together – looking back we were very stupid because we had very little money, I had no money of my own – and we opened just before the '97 general election, which of course was one of the most exciting times in politics.

Were you always on the corner where you've always been?

In Artillery Row, yes. We stayed there for six years. The congestion charge then came in and the lease was up for renewal, and bizarrely the landlords of the Crown Prosecution Service – probably the most un-ideal a landlord you could ever think of –

Yes, you can't rip them off!

They wanted to put the rent up by 50% and I thought, "Well..."

Did you say, "That's criminal."? Or were there any hilarious puns?

Well, there was no arguing with them really because it was all done... they had to get value for money for the taxpayer, obviously. And so I thought, "Well I could probably survive a couple of years, but 10 years' time this isn't going to work." I could already see what was happening with Amazon which was sort of in its infant stages, so I thought, "I've got to close this." So we took it all online, but there's no fun in doing an online shop. So I sold it in the end and also sold the publishing company which I'd started, Politicos. And it was around that time and I stood for Parliament.

So we were always politically ambitious? Because in my early twenties even I was a humble local councillor. I always had designs on being Prime Minister ultimately! Did you always think that you would do whatever you were going to do and then go to Parliament, or was this something that came to you later?

I was always interested in politics. I can member even as a sort of 14, 15-year-old, having a conversation with my grandmother, and I remember two things she said to me. Labour always spends more than they can afford – this was back in like 1975 – and she said, "And Michael Foot's a Communist." That was that was my political indoctrination!

She was arguably right on both.

Well, I couldn't possibly say! And I then, when I was in my sixth form, there was a 1979 general election, and in my school in Saffron Walden – comprehensive by the way, not private, people seem to think I went to private school when I did not – I stood in a mock election as a Conservative and held off a challenge from the National Front by a majority of 27%. Labour weren't very popular in Saffron Walden. And then when I went to university I started the Conservative Association there,

there wasn't one, it's a very left wing university, had great fun doing that. So I've always had an interest in politics. I did want to be an MP and I did apply to go on the Tory candidates list when I was 26 and they sort of half accepted me and half didn't. They said, "Well, come back in a year's time or when you've done something else other than be a researcher to an MP," which was absolutely the right thing for them to do in retrospect. I mean I thought they were mad at the time not to want me. But I then didn't do anything about it, went away and did a lot of other things. Part of the reason I didn't do anything about it was because I was gay and I just didn't think the two things combined very well. But once I got to the ripe old age of 40 I thought, "This is ridiculous; it's now or never. If I don't try, I'm always going to look back and think: 'Well, what might have been.'" I never wanted to be prime minister, bizarrely my ambition was to be Secretary of State for Transport because it was a subject I knew a bit about.

I've never heard that before!

I know! And you can actually do something in that job, whereas a lot of the other jobs your kind of a figurehead. In transport you can actually do things and change things.

We have had Jacqui Smith in a chair recently, and I said to her, "The Home Secretary is the worst job anyone could possibly want because no one cares if it's done well and there's every possibility things can go wrong."

Hmm. Well, I think in any job in politics there's a possibility that things go wrong but there's something about politics where you never quite lose the political virus, so even though I've given up on any political career now – I decided that after the 2010 election and I thought I'd probably live to regret deciding that – but I haven't regretted it once, and that's probably because radio gives me now what politics used to.

I feel the same. I tried to build a business and a political career, and I think you end up diluting your energies between both. When I gave up on my political ambitions, my business career has taken off hugely.

When I failed in 2005, when I stood for North Norfolk, I knew it would be quite difficult to get selected for the 2010 election as all the A-list thing which, I mean, I was on in the second round, but I then started *Total Politics* and Biteback and I thought, "I can't start two new companies and apply for a seat – it's not fair on the people that have invested the money for a start."

So another fork in the road.

It was another fork in the road, but after two years – towards the end of 2009 – I did decide to have another go, but by that time most of the seats had gone. Nearly got Bracknell, but Phillip Lee and Rory Stewart got ahead of me in that one. Then I did at

East Surrey, which Sam Gyimah has got now, but I just made the most terrible speech and it just all went wrong, and it was at that point I thought, "Right, at the 2015 election I'll be 52, 53; I'm not going to flog a dead horse for another five years." And the day after the 2010 election I texted Sayeeda Warsi, who was then the party chair, and said, "Look that's it. I'm done. Take me off the candidate's list." And she rang me up and said, "Are you sure?" And I said, "Yes, I absolutely am sure." Actually it wasn't in time for the election, there was a reception at Downing Street and David Cameron said to me, "You are going to try again aren't you?" and I just said, "Do you know, I'm not." And that was sort of again the next fork in the road, and it was at that point that, well, a couple of months after that I was offered the job at LBC.

It's quite a miserable life being a backbench MP though. I mean, I've worked for quite a number of MPs on all sides of the House, and I would say you've got more influence and more impact presenting your show on LBC.

Well, a lot of backbench MPs think that, they say it to me quite often. Up to a point, backbench MPs can change things. There have been so many examples in the last few years of backbench MPs who have had a real influence on politics, and I wasn't the sort of person that would have been desperate to become a minister, I think I would be far too maverick to do that. I don't think I'd have been quite the male equivalent of Nadine Dorries, but not far off. So I would have rebelled a lot, and if you rebel a lot you don't get preferment. That wouldn't have particularly mattered to me... I think at some stage I'd quite like to have been a minister, because you can actually do things. I can sit in front of a microphone and rant and rave all day long about how terrible something is. I can't actually in most cases do anything about it. Now there have been instances where I've been able to use my position on the radio to help somebody. I mean, I can think of several instances of that, but generally you are a gob on a stick. You are talking, and you can try and shame people. I did shame a government minister into doing something not that long ago, which had I not been on the radio I probably wouldn't have been able to do.

Many years ago, for my sins, I tried to ban the sale of Foie Gras, and I remember Ben Bradshaw was the Minister for Animal Welfare at the time and I remember having a meeting with him and thinking, "I'm at the wrong side of the desk here. Why am I trying to lobby you when I can be on your side of the desk?" But in the years later I've realised that he wanted to ban it as well but couldn't; he was as equally as powerless as I was. So is it worth it at the end of the day?

Well, if you're bitten by the political bug and you think you'd be a good MP, I think I would have been a good constituency MP, I think the Westminster side in retrospect would have frustrated the hell out of me. Quite a few of my friends who are now MPs really hate it, but they feel trapped. They could leave but what would they do?

They're maybe in their early 50s. Are they really going to start a new career in their early 50s? So I'm glad I'm not in that position where I would have felt trapped in something where I partially enjoyed it, but I actually didn't get as much fulfilment out of it as I do with my current job.

So just going back to your career narrative, we got to the point where you decided to make Politicos as online only. What came next?

After the 2005 election, and I really put my all into that, it was a terrible result and if you look at the result you must think I'm probably the worst political candidate ever! I could bore you for the next two hours on why what happened, happened. But I've written a long piece on my blog about if anybody really wants to look at it. I mean spent six months working for David Davis which I look back on and think I should never have done, because I was a square peg in a round hole. I was used to being in a position where I could make my own decisions. Because I didn't have the letter's MP after my name, most of the people around him and the other people involved in the campaign basically considered me a second-class citizen. I should have gone in and said, "I am his chief of staff, this is what's going to happen." but I think I had a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of chief of staff. So I'd like to think if I had gone in and done that, things might have turned out slightly differently because he... it was a very badly run campaign in many ways, and I hated virtually every minute of it, so...

What was he like to work for? I remember at the time David Davis looked the more prime ministerial between him and David Cameron.

He should have won. There's no doubt about it, he should have won, and I will take my share of blame for the fact that he didn't. He's one of my best friends in politics. I first met him in about 1988 and sort of thought then that he had it in to go all the way to the top. We sort of stayed in touch over the years, but it didn't happen for a number of reasons which are probably too complicated to go into here but he was, right up until the conference, he was way ahead and then he... well, the speech wasn't what it ought to have been, and lots of people gave him advice on it. My advice to him was that he should do a speech that was a leadership speech, not about being shadow home secretary. Other people gave the same advice and he ignored it. Now, he was never he was never a great public speaker and it wasn't... actually if you go back and watch it, it wasn't a bad speech, it was just that it was so different to what David Cameron did.

And he memorably did it without notes.

Exactly. And I remember about a month before the conference, being with David in Edinburgh where he gave a speech to 250 Tory Party workers without notes, and I remember whispering to his press office at the time, "I didn't know he could do that,

maybe we should do that for the conference speech," and the press office said, "Ah. Too late." I mean... what might have been. Because I mean, it was that moment. If you look back at the debates and the TV debates that they both did, David Davis won them all or drew them. I mean, David Cameron didn't impress in those, and yet because he was seen as something new, something different, he had the slogan 'Change to Win', he walloped him. And again, I mean if David Davis had won that, presumably I would have then gone and worked for him — I had decided I wouldn't continue as chief of staff but I would have probably done something within his team.

Would you have been his Alastair Campbell or his Lynton Crosby?

No... I always think at these things, you need to know what your limits are and what you're good at, and I don't think I would have been good in that kind of role. I think I would have probably ended up doing something at central office. I mean, who knows. But anyway, it didn't happen so...

When you were his chief of staff, you knew the campaign would come to an end because he would either win or lose. And then did you have any plans beyond that, or was it another fork in the road?

Well, it was in the sense that I had had a fairly knackering two years. I mean, anybody who's been a parliamentary candidate who takes it seriously, by the time the general election comes you are washed out. Well, I had I think two weeks' break between that and then starting working for David. So I decided to take six months out, which I'd never done before, and that's what I did. I mean I'd come up to London a couple of times a week, hold court in the City Inn in Westminster in the Millbank Bar, I'd use that as my office basically, and I did a bit of punditry, restarted the blog and try to think, "Well, what would I do next?" And the next thing was the sort of ill-fated 18 Doughty Street Internet TV station.

I remember that! I watched it once.

Which was 10 years ahead of its time. And that was its problem, in that nobody could quite come to grips with this thing. Stephan Shakespeare, who put the money up, we did it for a year but I think he got slightly bored with it and decided he then wanted to do a web-based thing that wasn't television, and it was an interesting experiment and in some ways it worked, in some ways it didn't. What we probably should have done is not done anything live, just done sort of short clippy type things. That's what you would do now. But it was it was a really interesting experience.

But you were already kind of building up an image at this point as a kind of internet politico.

When you're the first mover in something you've got a natural advantage, and there was *Guido Fawkes, Conservative Home* and me, as the three political blogs that people really read. There's nothing on the left – this is sort of 2000, 2004,5,6 that we're talking about.

Well, the left have arguably still never taken off, I would say.

Well, I think in terms of blogs, blogs are sort of almost dead now. They've been taken over by the mainstream media. So I had built up my blog, I hadn't actually intended it to become anything big but it did. And even though I've done quite a lot of broadcasting stuff before, this sort of took me to a different level. I mean, I was basically, virtually every day, on Sky News 24, Five Live, wherever. So I became, I suppose, with Tim Montgomery... we were the two Conservative...

Faces.

I was going to say spokespeople, there was a bit of a slip there, I didn't mean spokespeople. Because we were both, I think, seen as quite independent voices. We weren't seen as sort of party lackeys in any way, and I think actually looking back, that didn't do me any favours on the selection circuit. Even though people knew who I was, if you write a political blog you create a lot of enemies.

So did you see at this point that you might be able to do this as a career, that this might be the way to do it? That you'd monetise the blog in some way and use the traditional media outlets to promote it.

I did look at that. But in a sense the Internet is all about openness. People want to be able to have everything for free. Now logically, that's ridiculous because who would work for free? I looked at an American example of somebody who had done this where they charged people. I think it was actually voluntary, sort of £5 a year or something, and I did wonder about that but I didn't really have the courage to do it. And then I had the idea to do *Total Politics* and that sort of then took over really. So we started that in July 2008.

Fantastic magazine. I was a subscriber from issue two I think, right up until the point that it... what's the euphemism now, 'go online only' I think, and I really do kind of lament its demise really, because it was a cracking magazine and it focused not only on the issues, but also on the personalities and the gossip and it did it in a mature yet upbeat way.

We had our problems to start with, the design of it was dreadful to begin with. But when we got the design right I think it did become something that people rather liked. It was almost a trade magazine for the political classes. And I thought the house

magazine had never really fulfilled that role, it was very exclusive, it was very dull and very expensive.

It was really heavy as well! It was almost a doorstep if I remember, it was huge.

Normal people just wouldn't read it. So I thought there was a gap in the market but I hadn't bargained for the difficulty of convincing advertisers of this, and it probably took about 18 months really for the advertising to really kick off, and then we did sort of political breakfasts and things. And by the time it was sold to Dods it was profitable. I mean, I look back and I could have had a veto, because Michael Ashcroft was the other shareholder. I could have vetoed it, and in retrospect part of me wishes I had because I kind of knew that when it went to Dodd's they would desiccate it – and that's exactly what they did.

Do you think it was just a magazine of its time, or do you think that it was that sale to Dods where they made certain decisions which led to its demise, and it could still thrive now have those changes not been made?

I'd like to think so. I mean, we'll never know. When I decided to... put Politicos online and sell Politicos publishing... selling Politicos publishing in 2003 was the right thing to do, but it was also the wrong thing to do. It was the right thing to do because it needed more investment, it needed somebody bigger to run it. So that was why I sold it. I regret it because again, the people that bought it ran it into the ground. It's like with any business; sometimes it reaches the limits of what you can do with it. And I sort of sometimes wonder that about Biteback now where we're publishing 80 books a year, we've got a turnover of close on £2m. It's never been a cash-rich business – small publishing never is. Don't go into publishing if you want to make money, because you probably won't. But it's got to the point now where, in theory, if I sold it to a bigger publisher they might be able to expand it in a way that I couldn't myself at the moment.

But that expansion might actually chip away at the very heart of what it is.

Exactly – which is why I've never... I mean we've had sort of one or two vague nibbles over the years, but I've never taken them anywhere because I don't want history to repeat itself. I'm very conscious that I employ 12 people and any decision I make affects them. And if I sell the company to somebody else and then after a year they decide just to merge it into their general business, who knows what will happen? And I actually do take that responsibility very seriously.

Again I'm a fan of buy back out with the first book I read was Inside Out, Peter Watts' book. He's been a friend of mine for many, many years and I helped him a little bit with his publicity at the time. But it is quite a niche market, isn't it?

There's very few people that's going to... you're never going to sell hundreds of thousands of copies of Peter's book. I read Damian McBride's book recently, who has been in that very chair, and that's one of the best books I've ever read on PR. I mean, I've been in PR 20 years; I learned how to do PR from that book, and yet I still don't think it would sell millions of copies.

No, and to be fair very few books nowadays, unless you're a bestselling novelist, will sell huge numbers. I mean, Damian McBride's book sold about 25,000, which for a political book is pretty damn good. I spent 18 months persuading him to write that, which bearing in mind I was at the centre of that whole smear gate thing where he had to resign as Gordon Brown's adviser, was quite ironic that I should then publish his book. And we've become quite good friends and I think he is a terrific writer, and I've been trying to get him to do a follow-up.

He's very personable as well, isn't he?

He is very personable. He has unfortunately got this reputation that as soon as you meet him, that reputation just sort of goes.

But if you just read about him solely in the newspapers you go, "Who is this guy?"

You think, "What a terrible, terrible person," but he's not like that. Yes, political books generally do not sell very much. I mean people... so you employ 12 people and you publish 80 books, how on earth do you do that? Well, you can have to, to get the volume to survive. We all know what London overheads are like now, I mean just the office that we've got, sort of looking over Parliament, I mean it's a pretty nice office, but actually with the London property market as it is, we couldn't go anywhere else. When this lease finishes I suspect we'll have to move out of London. And that means all sorts of consequences for that. So we try to expand a little bit in the range of books that we do so we started to do some sport books; we don't just do politics and current affairs.

Seeing as we mentioned Damian and we're on this point, I can't let it go until we mention your very famous memorable wrestling match with the protester and the dog biting him! It's one of the first things where I think you came on the radar of a great number of people; that was the first time that my mum knew who you were, for example.

Oh. dear!

So part to me... I mean, having watched it, first of all it is funny, but I did empathise with you because you are the publisher, you know, there's someone deliberately trying to sabotage an interview, and it went

spectacularly wrong. But also even though it was terrible at the time, in hindsight do you think it was a good thing? Because I think it was.

In what way?

In so far as it got you on the radar of a different group of people. It extended your recognisability, and also those new people empathised with your situation.

Well, let me for the first time put on the record exactly what happened, because there are so many myths that have grown up around that. And even now, what three and a half years – is it three and a half years? Something like that – virtually every other day on Twitter somebody who wants to have a go at me will say, "This is the guy that beat up a pensioner."

Yes, but I have a colleague, Jordan, who watched it on YouTube yesterday and he just said, "Saw that clip on YouTube – what a legend!" So it doesn't necessarily mean...

Haha! Well, what happened was that my colleague has arranged for Damian to do all sorts of interviews on that morning, it was the morning of the book, and he was going to do one from the Heart studio in Hove with Nick Ferrari on LBC. So I said, "Well, I'll come, I'll bring my car and then I'll drive him from the Grand Hotel where he was going to do this interview, to Hove." Anyway, I got there – no sign of them so I ring up. "Oh, GMTV decided they wanted to do it on the seafront." I said, "Is that a good idea?" She said, "Well, we're on the seafront." So I had to go through the Brighton one-way system, so I drew up alongside where they were doing it, so I looked over – and this is going to sound very pretentious but I had a television in my car on the dashboard – and it only goes on when the when the engine stops.

Yes, I wasn't thinking of the pretension, I was thinking of the safety, actually! You're watching *Jeremy Kyle* as you drive along?!

So I thought, "Well, I'll see what this looks like on TV," so I put on ITV, and of course all I could see in this picture was Damian with this anti-nuclear protest thing behind him, so I looked over and thinking, "Why isn't anyone doing anything about this?" So I get out of my car, wander over, and the sound man was sort of trying to elbow him out of the way without actually looking as if he was trying to elbow him out of the way, so I thought – naively as it turned out – "Well, I'll give him a hand."

Haha! Sorry, I shouldn't laugh, it's terrible.

So I go up to this guy and he had a rucksack on. So I pulled him by the rucksack, never even actually touched him, pulled him by the rucksack...

I'm leaping to your defence here, actually.

So I pulled him away, and as I pulled him away he turned round and tried to punch me in the face. That sort of put me off balance, I then fell, he then fell on top of me, we sort of rolled over once I think, the dog started biting him rather than me, which actually was the saving grace, because it gave it a comic element, I sort of... kind of held him down, but to no point did I punch him, at no point did I kick him, at no point did I exhibit any violence whatsoever, apart from pulling him away, but legend has it that I beat up a pensioner. So of course, I am aware that there are cameras there by this point so I get up. He gets up, sort of goes back but not quite in the same position, I get back in the car, Damian finishes interview, gets in the car and I can remember turning to him and saying, "I don't think that'll become anything, do you?" So off we go...

He's the master of spin! He ought to know better.

So I take him to the Heart studio, then go back to the hotel and see my two LBC producers, tell them what's happened, they sort of piss themselves laughing and we have a good laugh about it. And then one of them sees something on Twitter and I'm thinking, "Hmm, is that going to become something now?" And I then made a very stupid decision to go and write about it on my blog, and I wrote a rather stupid blog post very sort of defiant, saying, "Well, I'm protecting my authors and I'll do it all over again," blah, blah, blah.

We've all been guilty of that.

Well, it was a very stupid thing to do in retrospect. And then basically the shit hit the fan. And I went on air that evening and I remember Alastair Campbell we had this... we were sharing a sort of room at Sky and we had a sort of... there was a wall in between us. Alastair Campbell came in and he goes, "What on earth have you done?" So I told him and he said, "If you need any help let me know." Anyway, about half an hour later, I've got 20 seconds to go back on air, my producer comes in and he says, "The police are outside." This is like with an hour to go on the show and I said, "Well, what am I supposed to do?" He said, "Don't worry, I'll deal with it." And what I learnt afterwards was that the police had been looking for me all day because somebody had made a complaint. I don't think it's actually him that made the complaint.

This is another issue with Twitter, isn't it?

Yes.

It's that everyone just goes to the police.

So I think several of the journalists... Sue English, who is head of BBC programmes, I think she had actually told the police, "No, no, he's not here," so they went away! Thank you, Sue! And anyway, they did come back.

Obviously saw you on air.

So my producer basically persuaded them that I would come to them after the show had finished. So the show finishes, my other producer Joe, he says, "Right. You will follow me. You don't look to your right, you don't look to your left, you just follow me wherever I go. You don't say a word," and it's kind like a military operation. So I walked out of the studio and there was Nick Watt, Dave Wooding, and like the whole of the lobby with their sort of pads, all looking at the floor – they couldn't look me in the eye. So I walk out and there's this car waiting for me and there's Gobby as well with his camera crew.

Nick Robinson's producer?

Yes. So I get in this in this car to be whisked off to Brighton nick, and of course Gobby says, "Is that a police car?" So Matt, my producer, says, "No, no – lain's got lots of cars, it'll be one of his cars." So anyway, I get interviewed and they basically give the impression that they're not going to do anything, and they were sort of quite sympathetic as I think they dealt with this guy before. But then of course I thought, "They are going to do something," because Caroline Lucas was arrested that day protesting against fracking and I thought, "If they charge her they're going to have to do something to me."

If Gobby's shouting something... we should explain to our listeners that Gobby is the BBC producer that often stands outside Downing Street and shouts at the minister as they walk in, "Are you going to resign today, Minister?" and that's why he's got that reputation. But I mean, if you were being shouted at, and also if the lobby journalists are looking at the floor, you become the target.

Yes. Well, in the police station I kind of realised something would happen because the police officers that I were dealing with, who were perfectly nice, doing their job and being quite friendly, they were then replaced by a senior person – and when that happens you kind of know that you're not in a good place. So I was told I needed to come back in two days' time. So I drove down to – I live in Tumbridge Wells – so I drove back down to Brighton I think on the Thursday morning, and my partner drove me, and I started to think, "There's going to be press there and I think I'm going to get a caution; I need to make a statement." So I drafted something and I thought, "Well, I'm probably not the best person to have drafted this," so I thought, "Well, who can I get to look at it?" So I sent it to my sister and I sent it to Alastair Campbell and

he said, "Give me 10 minutes." So he then rewrote it, she then rewrote his rewrite and she was rather pleased that he then took her comments on board.

He's such a good guy, Alistair, isn't he?

He was absolutely brilliant, I mean he really was. And we've become quite good friends since then and I'm now publishing is next diaries. So we gave the press the slip. We sort of... they didn't see us go in, they didn't see us come out, and yes I did get a caution. And of course... I mean, looking back I could have lost my job over that. I mean, LBC were fantastic and I don't think there was any point where they did seriously think, "Oh, he'll have to go." But they could have done.

You not you certainly not the most controversial of their presenters.

Ha! Who are you thinking of, Paul?

Well... we've only got 25 minutes left! You know, they have come under some criticism recently because obviously they got rid of Ken and yet Katie Hopkins, who again has sat on that chair, is still there. It must like the fact that its presenters are getting into the news. That must be good PR.

Well, I think to be fair he would have probably preferred that I hadn't got into the news on that on that occasion. Look, if you employ people who are professional controversialists, you are always going to get the odd story that maybe you'd rather not have, and yes, there have been one or two of those. I mean obviously with Ken, and I like Ken I've always got on with Ken, but he is his own worst enemy sometimes. And he didn't need to go as far as he did in what he said. Now, Katie Hopkins in many ways I'm a fan of, I disagree with her on a lot of things, but I cannot stand the intolerance there is not just on the left of people like her. We do have free speech in this country. Yes, I believe she goes totally over the top sometimes. Does that mean that she shouldn't have a newspaper column? Does that mean she shouldn't have a radio show? No it doesn't. And if you actually listen to her radio show, you hear a very different Katie Hopkins to necessarily the one that you think you're going to listen to. Bearing in mind she's fairly new at radio, just as I was when I first started, I think she's a cracking presenter. I mean if you just think of the sort of the radio bits that she has to do, going up to... I mean, people think it must be so easy to be a radio presenter, you're just sitting there talking. And what do I look most like to do? Talk. Well, it's very different to that because you have to be aware of the conventions of how you introduce the news, how you start an hour and all the rest of it. And a lot of people find that very, very difficult indeed and come a cropper because they just can't do it. Some people are natural at it and I would say she's one of them.

So tell us how LBC came calling and how did you move from being a kind of regular pundit as it were, to being at the other side of the table, and what were the challenges?

I'd always wanted to be a radio presenter. I mean, if I couldn't be an MP, that was kind of my next thing. And back in about 1998, 1999 when I was at Politicos, we spent a lot of camera crews, journalists come in and so that's how I started on the sort of punditry trail. And one person was Joe Phillips, who is the producer of Radio Five Live's *Sunday Service* program which, for people who don't remember it, was a sort of slightly irreverent satirical current affairs program on a Sunday morning, Fi Glover was the main presenter. Then there would be Charlie Wheelan on the left and Andrew Pierce on the right. And one day, I think I sent... we used to do 'I love John Prescott' badges on Politico, very good sellers they were too, and Fi Glover had a bit of a thing about John Prescott so I sent her a badge one day, and she mentioned it on air. And anyway, Joe Phillips, her producer, came in one day and we were talking, got to know each other a bit. And Andrew Pierce was on holiday and she said would I like to co-present with Fi and Charlie Wheelan, and of course I said, "Absolutely I would!"

Of course.

I did about... I only ever deputised, so I did about, I don't know, 15 or 20 programmes, and I really thought that was my chance in radio. And there was one day, and Fi had left by that point, and I think Juliet Morris was presenting and she didn't turn up.

What, she literally just didn't turn up?

Didn't turn up.

How come?

Her alarm didn't go off.

Well, that does happen.

So I thought this is mine because I think Charlie was away as well so that was somebody I can remember who was sitting in for him and I said to Joe let me present it. Anyway, she went to Steve Kyte the deputy controller at Five Live and he said, "No, no – Sheila Fogarty."

Was Bob Shennan the controller at that point?

I think so. So Sheila Fogarty was doing the breakfast show at that point, so Sheila just had six hours. And I was quite disappointed as I thought that would that would

have been my chance. And anyway they got a new controller... Amanda Platell then replaced me as sort of the first deputy so I thought, "Well that's it." And I used to do other radio bits, so I used to go on LBC quite a lot in its days in Bramley Road, Sandi Toksvig's show predominantly.

She's a great broadcaster.

Yes, absolutely.

I'd love to get her on.

But nothing really happened, so I just sort of... again, you think, Okay, well that didn't happen, don't worry about it. Move on." Then in 2009, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, who is a great friend of mine, we disagree on everything but we get on really well, she said, "Oh I've got an audition at LBC." I said, "Oh really? How'd do you do that?" And she said, "There's this guy, Jonathan Richards." So I emailed him and said, "Can I do one?" Anyway, he knew I was through the blog. And I'd said that Yasmin and I had always thought we could do a really good programme together because we had a certain on air chemistry; we used to do lots of paper reviews together, and we sort of come at things from very different angles. So we did this audition, a sort of 20-minute fake program where they would get producers to come in and to be on the phones, and it was a disaster. And I thought, "Well, I'll never hear from them again."

Why was it a disaster?

Well, Yasmin is brilliant at punditry but she – maybe I shouldn't say this – but she had difficulty doing the radio bits, the junction stuff. And I'm not saying that I was necessarily a natural at it, but anyway, three weeks later they rang me up and said, "Oh Petrie Hosken is off tonight, would you like to come in and present the evening show?" I said, "What, with Yasmin?" and they said, "No, just you." And I felt a complete shit and I rang Yasmin up and said, "Look, I might as well tell you they've asked me to do this," and she's been absolutely brilliant about it and has never held against me, we're still very good friends and she comes on my show. And that was where it all started. So I did this initial show, which could have been a complete disaster – I had little time to prepare.

Were you nervous?

I was. Because I only got there an hour before the show started as I had a meeting I couldn't get out of, they didn't even have a chance to show me how the phonebook system worked. So at the bottom you have a green and a blue box – those are the two calls you can go to, they've been queued up for you, but I thought you could go to any call on the board, so I'd go, "Let's go to Dave in Walthamstow," and they said, "No! He's not ready!" So it took a while for that to click in, and there was a few other

things that had... anyway, they seemed really pleased with it but then I had nothing more. So I emailed them and I said, "Look, just be honest with me – if you thought I was bad just tell me and no harm done." And they said, "No, no, no – we're just waiting to see if you get a seat because if you get a seat, obviously we can't really take this forward, but if you don't get a seat we really want to bring you on board." So I ended up co-presenting with Ken Livingstone, I think in March 2010 for a show, and then ended up doing their 2010 election night show which was quite a baptism of fire.

I can imagine!

I then did lots of cover shows over the summer, and then Petrie was off for a month in August so I did that, and then at the end of that... and I knew that I had done quite well and they liked what I was doing, and I thought they would offer me sort of some weekend show, and I was absolutely gobsmacked when they said, "No, we want you to do the weekday evening show," basically they're moving Petrie to the afternoons and putting me seven till 10. And apparently my reaction really shocked them, because I wasn't sort of jumping up and down with delight. In my mind I was thinking, "Well, how can I do this? How can I run Biteback and do this as well? It's two full-time jobs."

And both are amazing jobs as well – the thought of choosing between them would be agony.

Well, I couldn't. I mean, I could not leave Biteback, even though radio is what I've always wanted to do. So we made it work. And I've still got two full time jobs now.

Are you knackered all the time then?

I don't need an awful lot of sleep generally. I'm not going to say that I do it perfectly because I think sometimes something has to give. I have a very good deputy at Biteback who I've had to learn to delegate to and I'm not a natural delegator; I'm a bit of a control freak. So I don't going to Biteback every day, I do a lot of stuff at home, but I've managed to sort of carve out a life that I can cope with, even though there are times when I think, "This is just mad, I'm knackering myself," and my partner keeps saying, "Why can't you learn to say no?" Because if somebody says, "Oh, can you do me a 1,000-word article on this?" my instinct is always to say, "Yeah, okay." I have learnt to say no to more things but it's not something I'm particularly good at.

Do you think LBC suits you as a station? Because you know you have got that kind of independent voice. Would it work as well for example say, on Five Live?

Five Live was always my station of choice to listen to, and it would have been my dream to be on Five Live and I'm not going to lie that... I mean it's never happened and I don't think it ever would happen. But there is still something about Five Live that pulls at my heartstrings in a strange sort of way, even though I think in some ways it's not because partly because of the move to Salford it's very different to what it used to be. But I wouldn't have the freedom to do what I do now. I've got almost complete editorial freedom now, I think I've got the best two producers on LBC, and we've become a real team. We've worked together now for three years on *Drive*, and we have disagreements, but we usually come to the right conclusion. I don't have to go to committees, I don't have to get things signed off, if we want to do something we can more or less do it. I've got complete freedom to say what I want on air obviously within the laws of Ofcom and libel. I can be as opinionated as I like. I couldn't do that on the BBC. Everyone says, "Oh you must want to go to Five Live or Radio 4." No, I don't – because I don't think I could I would get as much enjoyment out of doing... when I did in the referendum campaign I did 30-minute interviews with George Osborne, Michael Gove, 15 minutes with the Prime Minister, I did lots of one-hour debates, and those were all our ideas, we got the guests... I don't think I could have done that if I'd been at the BBC. Now, nothing is forever; radio is a very cutthroat industry. We all operate on sort of annual or 18-month or two-year contracts, and we all know that at some point that will come to an end, and every time I go into a meeting to talk about a new contract I always think I'm going to get fired.

But that's healthy in some ways, is it not?

Well, in some ways it is. But it's.... you can't plan necessarily. I mean, I think I'm in a good position I think sort of... I've been doing *Drive* now for three years I've been on LBC for five and a half years. I would like to think that I would be there for some time to come, because I love what I do, and of course there are frustrations – there always are. But I don't think I would get as much enjoyment out of any other job in radio than doing what I'm doing now. So why would I want to move?

So what do you think will come next for you? Because you've kind of reached what I would consider, you know, if I wasn't going to be an MP or do my own job, you know, running a political publishing company and presenting, you know, the *Drive* show on LBC is a fantastic career. What would be next for you? How do you take it to the next level? Or is there no next level?

Well I'm not sure there is a next level, because I don't particularly enjoy television. I liked doing the Sky paper review with Jacqui Smith, I like doing the *Daily Politics* occasionally. I turn down a lot of television because I don't see the point in doing something that I'm going to be uncomfortable with. *The 10 O'Clock Show* on Channel 4, they kept asking me to go on that, and I just thought, "I don't think this is a natural medium for me." I think I can be funny but not forced funny, and I think that

on that show some of it's a bit forced. I did the Irish version of *Have I Got News For You* once and I found out that I wasn't quite as funny as I thought I was. So...

It's hard work, being funny.

Well, it is and I think I can be funny, but it's got to be natural and not to demand. I mean, that's what you have to have huge respect for comedians who have to be funny all the time. But I'm not a comedian, so what's the point in trying to be? So I've not got any great ambition to do television. I auditioned for that *Pledge* program on Sky, did what I thought was a really good audition, but then they decided they didn't want anyone who was a paper reviewer and I thought, "Well, why didn't you decide that before you asked us all to do auditions?"

You dodged a bullet there.

I couldn't possibly comment! In radio... I mean, I just don't know. I mean, I don't... people say, "Oh, you must be after Ferrari's show." I'm absolutely not because I have deputised for him, I mean I cover him when he goes on holiday, but he never goes on holiday, hardly.

No, he doesn't. It's a great show, of course. He's a great broadcaster.

But I don't think that breakfast shows really...

What time do you have to physically turn up at the studio to present that show?

Well he's done it for so long that he can turn up guite late. Whenever I do it I turn up an hour beforehand, but even that's probably not enough really. I mean, I get in three hours before my show. So effectively we have an hour per hour... because of the show loss of three hours, used to be four, and I just... I don't ever want to hurry. I mean, there are times when something happens where you can't get in till sort of half two even I think quarter past three is the latest I've ever left it for four, I can't remember why, but you have to have that preparation time. But we have no scripts. And this is where BBC presenters who come into this, they... it's a totally different world. We have no script at all. The only thing I script is my talk up the minute before the program starts. John Stapleton, who covers me sometimes, he reckons it's the most difficult job that he's ever done in broadcasting. When he said that to me he slightly took me aback because he's been around for donkey's years, I mean a real professional, and I'm sort of a Johnny-come-lately here. And I did start to think to myself, "Well actually, this is this isn't an easy thing; you can't just walk in and do this." There are certain things that you have to know what to do, and if you don't know what to do... I mean, just getting people to call in, for example, some people have not got the talent to do that, and they sit there... and I remember once the

switchboard went down and I had to talk for 10 minutes, and I think it was in the first program I did. Well, you find out a lot about yourself as a broadcaster then! Now, if I do a subject where I know that it's going to be quite difficult to get calls now and I don't get a call for quite a long time, it doesn't faze me any more. I used to gabble at that point, whereas now I've become much more deliberate and your brain starts taking over and you think, "Okay, well how to ask this question in a different way that will entice people to call in?" because you're not going to get hundreds of people call in on every subject. Now, on most shows we do get several hundred people phoning in but there are subjects – if you're talking about sort of male rape or something, which is difficult to do on *Drive Time* but you see that my evening show – you only need four calls really to last the hour because you've got to give people a chance to say what they want and I love doing those kinds of subjects. I don't.... people think of me as a sort of political geek but I love doing the ones that get...

The human stuff.

The human stuff. And I never thought I would say that, and that's kind of what I miss from the evening show that you can't do so much at *Drive Time*.

How do you put a show together? You know, when you're driving in to the studio and you think, "Well, I think we should talk about this, talk about that," or is it very much led by the news, or is it led by guests? Do you think, "Well, we have got the Chancellor coming in today," or, "We've got this person, so we're going to have to do something around that."?

It's very rarely guest led. I mean, if you've got a big celebrity, okay, you will fit them in wherever you can. It is largely driven by the news agenda. So at five o'clock, which is our peak hour we will always do the big news story of the day. We will usually have two guests, open up the phone lines and then do a news here to 25 to and quarter to so it's not just one subject, whereas other shows in the schedule will do one subject for the whole hour. I mean again, I kind of miss that because you get a really good phone-in going, whereas in our programme you have dotted news hits, business hits and all the rest of it right through. So sometimes the whole three hours will be the news agenda. Sometimes there is very little news about, so you have to sort of invent something that is kind of relevant to the news but you can have a little bit more latitude in the subject. And I like it... when you've been doing this for six years you do repeat subjects an awful lot, so I love it when we find something new to do and you get a whole new class of people phoning in because the biggest compliment anyone can pay you in talk radio is to say, "I'm a first time caller," because you have made them phone in through something that you've said – you've made a connection with a listener. I did love the guy though who rang a month ago to say, "Well, I'm a second time caller and I'm not at all nervous."

How much of it relies on your personal contacts book as it were? So for example, I mean just with this podcast I'd say about half, maybe two thirds, of the guests I know personally and invite them on and they say, "No problem." But then I also reach out to people from cold and I would say half of them say yes and half of them don't. How does it work when you say, get George Osborne on, or say David Davis, who you've known for decades?

I'm under no illusion; part of the reason they want me is for my contacts book because it is reasonably extensive and there aren't that many politicians that I couldn't ring up and they wouldn't take my call, which is an advantage. So I kind of... I mean, from a producer's point of view I'm a dream presenter because I can help them do their job, and I regard it as part of my job to do that. And so we rely on the fact that we do get much bigger name guests than many of our sort of rival programs on other stations. And I mean you don't every day want a big name necessarily but you do want a splattering of sort of, as James Rea says, 'the sizzle as well as the sausage'.

So lan, final question. What's been your best day so far in your career? Don't necessarily limit the answer to broadcast.

Oh, my goodness! I'll give you two. When I had Politicos, we did a fifth anniversary dinner to celebrate the fact that we'd survived for five years. It was at the Savoy, 500 people, guest of honour, guest speaker Margaret Thatcher – this was in 2002. Three weeks before that she has a stroke. So I'm thinking, "How on earth...?" What do I do? I mean, I've got 500 people coming expecting to hear Margaret Thatcher, they've all paid I think it was £100 which nowadays sounds pathetic, but...

Back then was a lot.

So I booked Bernard Ingham and John Nott and Peter Hennessy to do speeches. Anyway, it turned out that she did come but she couldn't speak. I was told that my task for the evening, and I was sitting between her and Denis, was to stop her getting to the microphone. And to cut a long story short, I was basically sat next to her for 90 minutes thinking, "Oh my God, what do I say to Margaret Thatcher for 90 minutes?" but she was absolutely brilliant – quite funny, actually. When Bernard Ingham was speaking she leaned over to me and said, "That man has a vivid imagination." And anyway, when it was time for her to go I stood up, looked to my right to make sure Denis was sort of following, and at that moment she zipped off to the microphone and she grabbed it. And she just – and by that point everyone was on their feet, even hardened old lefties got carried away by the occasion – and she grabbed the microphone and booms into it, "Thank you for that reception, the sort of reception only an ex-Prime Minister can get." And at that point I had my arm round her waist pulling her away from the microphone! So that occasion is probably one of the most memorable. I think in LBC terms I'll never forget May 22, 2012 – or was it

2013? – anyway, I'd been doing *Drive* for two or three months, and we got word that there had been some sort of incident in Woolwich; this was not long before we went on air, about five to four. I was thinking, "Well, I don't know what I'm going to do." I've got to go on air, I don't know any details, I know nothing apart from the fact something serious has happened. I look over to my producer Matt, who's on the phone, and I think, "What on earth is he doing on the phone?" and sort of typical presenter, sort of slightly hissy fit, thinking, "Oh, help!" And he just sort of signals to me in some way to sort of say, "Don't worry, it's going to be okay." Anyway, it turned out I had tweeted about 20 minutes before, "If anyone saw anything..."

I remember listening to this – not at the time, because you did a blog post about it like that and embedded the interview and it was terribly moving.

And anyway, this guy was three yards away from it when it happened. So we got him on straight at the beginning of the programme, James in Woolwich, and it was the most harrowing piece of radio. And of course, part of me is thinking, "How far can we go with the detail of this?" because he was being quite graphic in what he was telling me, but I was thinking, "Well, people need to know this."

The immediacy of it was there.

And then... I can't remember whether I had worked this out or whether my producer said something in my ear, but I thought, "He's in shock." And then you start thinking, "Well, there are Ofcom things here," so I just said to him, I said, "Look, stay on the line. My producer is going to talk to you." And that interview basically went viral — Sky News were playing it every half hour for the next 24 hours. And I mean, I hate even saying these words, but it won me sort of the Sony Interview of the Year award which I mean, okay, you always like winning awards but you kind of think in those circumstances, "Is it really appropriate?" Anyway.

You could argue that you won the award because you handled it so sensitively and expertly, because any radio presenter who is on air when stuff happens...

Do you know, it's really weird. I listened back to that interview not that long ago and I didn't think I handled it well, funnily enough. I know everyone said at the time, "Oh, you did that..." because I slightly broke down, well, my voice went a little bit in it, and I do have a tendency to emote on air which... I mean, I did it when I had to read Joe Cox's husband's statement out. It flashed up on my screen and I was interviewing Stephen Kinnock at the time and he was in a bit of a state as it was. And I read... and normally, to stop myself being emotional, I will read something 10 times just to sort of take the emotion out of it, but obviously with that you have to get it out. So I said to Stephen, "Look, I'm very sorry, I just need to break in to read a statement from Joe Cox's husband." So I started reading it without having read it at all, and got to the bit of the children both in love. See, my voice is going now. And I completely

went. And at the end of it I had to go back to Stephen and I said, "I apologise for breaking down, it's very unprofessional." And over the next day, the number of people who tweeted texted or e-mailed to say, "Why did you apologise? Because we were doing the same."

lain, it's been a fantastic interview. I could talk to you for another couple of hours, but it's gone so quickly as a mark of what a great interview it was. Thanks you very much.

Thank you.