

## **Isabel Oakeshott**

**Political Editor-at-Large, Daily Mail**

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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 journalist and author Isabel Oakeshott. Previously political editor at the Sunday Times, Isabel's reporting famously led to the dramatic resignation of secretary of state Chris Huhne, and of course his ultimate conviction for perverting the course of justice. Many years earlier, starting as a cub reporter at the East Lothian Courier, she has subsequently written for a number of papers including the Sunday Mirror, the Daily Mail and the Evening Standard. She is also a regular panellist on political TV shows such as Sunday Politics, Question Time and The Andrew Marr Show. Last year, Isabel also saw her third book published, Call Me Dave, an explosive and unauthorised biography of David Cameron, co-written with Lord Michael Ashcroft, and recently she has just been hired by Paul Dacre to be political editor at large for the Daily Mail.**

**Isabel, thank you for joining me.**

Thank you!

**Well, that's quite a biography! You've done loads.**

Well, when you set it out like that it sounds quite impressive, but it's taken a long time to get where I am, so not a very, very rapid trajectory.

**I want to go through the long, hard slog of your career right from the beginning in a minute, but you've written this book, why are you going back into newspapers?**

I think the year ahead is going to be incredibly exciting for politics. We have, as you know, a referendum coming up on Britain's membership of the EU, and that is going to be such a huge political story. I think it will be incredibly exciting to be working for one of the biggest and most important newspapers, covering that incredible

referendum. And additionally, after the referendum, whatever the outcome, I think that the media narrative will swiftly move on to who will be the next leader of the Tory party. Now, if Britain chooses to come out of the EU, then I rather suspect Cameron, whatever he says, David Cameron will not last very long, so the question of who will be the next Tory party leader, and indeed, Prime Minister, will come up very quickly. If we stay in the EU, Cameron may get a little bit longer, but nonetheless I still think that a lot of the media attention will switch very rapidly to the succession. So I think that it's an extraordinary time to be involved in political reporting, and where better to do that than on a huge national newspaper with a really mass circulation?

**Given that we can't trust the polls any more, and given also that we've had people as august as Lynton Crosby sitting in that chair saying no one knows anything any more about politics and all bets are off, you can't predict anything, what is your prediction for the referendum result? Will we leave, or will we vote to stay in?**

Well, you practically answered my question for me there by saying that polls are not to be trusted; I've learnt the hard way not to make these predictions with any confidence or assurance. What I learnt from the experience of getting it wrong in the run-up to the general election is that whatever the headlines are saying, sometimes one, as a political commentator, should trust one's instinct – and my instinct has always been that Britain will vote to remain in the European Union. That said, it is a very volatile situation. I think that the battle may be a lot closer than anyone, and probably even David Cameron himself, predicted.

**So what is life like as a day-to-day lobby kind of political journalist, then? What is it that's brought you back into it? Sell the job to us. Clearly you've got what I think is one of the best jobs in journalism. Sell it to us!**

I think the enormous privilege of being in the lobby, or having access to the Houses of Parliament, as you do if you are a political reporter with proper accreditation, is being literally in the corridors of power, having a ringside seat on these huge decisions that effect everybody's lives. For me, the main bit of the joy of it is actually the relationships that you forge over a long period of time with politicians. There are politicians now that I have known since they were right at the beginning of their careers, perhaps I first got to know them as back benchers, and then they gradually climbed the ladder, becoming junior ministers, ministers of state, and finally becoming cabinet ministers, and then I've seen them go through the whole cycle, and their parties lose elections, and now they're back in opposition and they may well be an opposition spokesman for something. In a way, as a political journalist who has known one of these individuals from the start, have been on a quite extraordinary journey with them – and I love getting to know MPs and special advisors, and enjoy the whole ins and outs of it, the skulduggery, the plotting, the who's up, who's down. I sometimes try to explain the job to people who don't really

feel enthused by politics as rather like being a sports reporter, only there are a few more women involved on the teams – but not that many, perhaps not enough – in that you're reporting on who's up, who's down, who's on the benches, who's in trouble for a foul, and in that way it's incredibly entertaining, but it's also intellectually challenging. Some of the issues that we're writing about, they involve me having to actually learn about something new all the time. So I have covered other areas – I was a health correspondent for a while, which was a lovely job – but I think there's nothing as challenging on so many levels as political reporting.

**What's your opinion more generally of politicians, now that you've been doing this job for quite a while? Do you have some sympathy for them, and is there a bit of tension in the friendships that you build up? Because if they get caught doing something dodgy tomorrow, you're going to have to cover it, and you're going to have to do your job and stick the knife in, aren't you?**

Well, let me take the first question first, which was what's my opinion of them generally. I think politicians get a really rough rap. I used to, many years ago, think I might quite like to be a politician, and working at Westminster soon hammered that out of me! I think that, by and large, in fact I'm going to say the vast majority of politicians, are absolutely in it for the right reason – they entered politics because they want to make the world a better place, or at least their constituency a better place, for the people that live there. I do think that something does happen when politicians get into Westminster, and if you're familiar with the House of Commons and the Houses of Parliament, it is an extraordinary rarefied world in there – I mean, you are literally cut off from the rest of London, or the rest of Westminster, you are in a kind of secure zone, and perhaps people change a little once they are actually in the palace of Westminster, but essentially the majority of politicians, I do believe, are in it for the right reason, and I don't think they get a lot of thanks. I think post the expenses scandal, as everybody will remember, politicians have had a much worse time of it, and there is a kind of general assumption that they're all in it for themselves, or they've got snouts in the trough, and I don't think that's true. A lot of our politicians, probably most of them, could be earning far more in other jobs.

**It's such a kind of risky profession to go in, isn't it, in terms of you've got to have the ability, but a lot of it is down to luck. That would put someone like me off.**

I absolutely agree with you about that. I think it's not a meritocracy as we know it. I've seen extraordinarily talented MPs being kind of blackballed because they have followed their consciences on a vote on this or that, and that was the end of their career trajectory. I've also seen people whose careers haven't been nearly as successful as their basic talents would suggest they would be because they have backed the wrong horse in a leadership race – and these things can be incredibly arbitrary. You could think that you are backing the favourite and then the favourite

crashes out, and that's it for you forever after. So I think, essentially, if you're going to become a politician, I think it's very important to love being a constituency MP first and foremost, because by God, you could be doing it forever – that might be it, that might be as far as it gets. It's no good going into politics thinking, "I'm going to be a cabinet minister," because it just doesn't work like that.

**Well, I went into politics to be a cabinet minister and ended up a local councillor for six years! I didn't get anywhere beyond that, so I can agree entirely.**

Well, it's probably a good start, and hey, you know what Paul? You're really pretty young – there's still time for you yet!

**I hope not to be honest, it put me off! But they say there are two things you shouldn't see being made – laws and sausages. Would you agree with that? That Parliament isn't as functional as it could be, perhaps?**

Well, as for the sausages thing, I have a really graphic memory of an episode of *The Apprentice* when their task was actually to make sausages, and I have never seen anything funnier in my life. I was literally crying with laughter at the extent to which these apprentices were completely screwing up the task of the sausage-making, and I don't even really want to think about sausage-making, because I'm sure that is pretty repellent if you saw it in an actual factory, but on *The Apprentice* it was just funny. As for seeing laws being made, well, it's... that sounds so succinct, that you could just pop into the parliamentary chamber and see a law being made – it's a very, very long, drawn out process. I think when there are particularly controversial pieces of legislation – I'm thinking right back now to the hunting ban many years ago – it was fascinating to see the hoops and hurdles and the to-ing and fro-ing, and it being thrown out by one parliamentary chamber and back in the other, and then finally it comes together – and that's partly why I do the job.

**So, last point there. What about the tension, then? You are friends with a lot of people, but on the other hand, if they do something wrong... I mean, even if they don't, you might have to criticise them in a column the next day. Do they take it personally? How does it work?**

I think this is really difficult, and it's a challenge for every political reporter who is in it for the long run, because you're absolutely right – there are relationships that you form, they may be with friends, some politicians do become personal friends, that is absolutely the case, and it then becomes very difficult if they then get themselves into hot water. And lobby journalists are often criticised for, as a group, being too cosy with their contacts. To give you an example from my own career, I slightly hesitate to bring up the dreaded subject of pig-gate, but Mark Field, who is a Conservative MP and genuinely a very good friend of mine, was falsely accused by

colleagues of being the source of that very, very controversial story, and that was really difficult for me. I mean, Mark is a family friend of ours, and I wanted to go out and say, “Mark did not give me that anecdote.”

**I've met Mark a few times – he's a really nice guy.**

Well, nice or otherwise, the fact was he was not the source of the story, but the difficulty I had was I could not get into a process of elimination. I did say to Mark that I was happy to go out and publicly say he wasn't the source of the story, but on balance, both of us preferred not to go down that route because otherwise you get into 'well, if it's not him, who is it?' and I didn't want to do that. But I am sorry that Mark went through that as a result of a book that I had written – and those are the kinds of difficulties that can happen. That's a very extreme example, but on a day-to-day basis, every political reporter has to make judgements about who they talk to in terms of going to get a reaction or a quote about a story on a colleague, and it can be very, very difficult.

**I'd like to ask you a little bit about pig-gate, but not about the actual subject, because I think that's been done to death if I'm honest.**

It really has.

**And I agree with your stance, you stood it up in the book as one source, I agree with that, but what I wanted to ask you was the kind of media furore around it. In one sense it kind of engenders attention and gives you some publicity, but on the other hand you think it's exactly the wrong kind of publicity. They have isolated one tiny thing in the book when there was so much other good stuff in there. Was it a blessing or a curse, or both? When you've come out of it the other side now, as you are when you reflect, what do you think?**

Well, I certainly wouldn't describe it as a blessing! But I would just say what I've said a hundred times over, which is that no author in the world would complain about the scale of publicity we got on the back of that particular few words in an enormous book, and as for the quality of the coverage, that is another question entirely. But I am not, as a journalist, going to sit here and criticise the media. I think that would be very unseemly.

**I did try once! What was the backlash like on social media? Because I know your second book, *Farmageddon*, Philip Lymbery, that you and I have worked together on, there's been a bit of a backlash on there. You are involved in some controversial things, aren't you? Is that a challenge?**

Well, I feel that my job, as a political reporter, is to break stories, and so I'm used to getting a bit of a kicking from the people who may feel that they disagree with the stories that I've broken, or they feel that I've made some kind of misjudgement over how I've handled stories, so to answer your question directly, it's never comfortable being at the centre of a Twitter storm, but when it came to the furore over *Call Me Dave*, I could fall back on the extensive experience I had of being in the eye of the storm over the story you referred to when you were introducing me about Chris Huhne, who was then the energy secretary, who resigned as a result of the story that I did, and at that time I did get a lot of grief on social media. Social media reaction falls into all sorts of categories, and I've learnt not really to trouble about many of the people who lash out at me because essentially these are people who are often nobodies with 11 followers, and they don't even have the guts to say who they are. Where it's painful I think, is being criticised by industry colleagues, and I take that criticism extremely seriously, and I think every time I'm at the centre of any controversy I will always learn something.

**Okay, Isabel. Let's go back to the beginning of your career, because it was at the East Lothian Gazette that you started on.**

It was in fact the East Lothian Courier, and I must say that that was... almost still seems probably the happiest job I ever had.

**Did you always want to be a journalist?**

I did always want to be a journalist. I mean, I'm a compulsive writer, and I used to write diaries every single night. From the age of 10 years old, what a load of tripe they were, my husband actually recently dug up a couple of old copies of my diaries, and was sort of wading through them, and great was my mortification as he described the utter tediousness of the stuff that I wrote there. But I did want to write, and I wrote... when I went to university I was on the student newspaper, but I was never sort of incredibly driven, focused or ambitious about getting there. I don't think I really, oddly, thought too much about what I would become. I remember doing a careers test, as you were probably subjected to, and I think it suggested I become a probation officer!

**There's still time.**

There is still time! Though I really hope my career doesn't lead me in that direction.

**So how long were you there for? Presumably, as you've said, you hadn't really thought it through, so you didn't imagine that you'd end up as a political reporter? You hadn't kind of particularised your ambition at that point, crystallised it.**

You're right that I hadn't crystallised it, I don't know whether anyone really does. Most people's careers don't follow a straight ABC path, you know, often you will go off at a tangent and paths will lead to somewhere unexpected. I spent 10 months at the Courier and absolutely loved it. This was one of the last independently owned newspapers in the country, and it was based in a market town in the middle of really a very lovely part of the world, the east coast of Scotland, and it was a great place to learn the trade at a level where mistakes mattered in the sense that if you got the time of the flower show wrong, Mrs Bloggs, who was organising the flower show, would be pretty peeved and would be most likely to turn up at the front desk downstairs and demand for some kind of correctional retraction, but at the same time Mrs Bloggs wasn't going to sue your ass, so you could make mistakes without the consequences being catastrophic, and I think that to learn the art, having to fill a page as I did – I was given a particular town and I had to fill the page, I had the North Berwick page, and I had to find stories. Newspapers don't generally work like that – here's your page, fill it up – and generally, if you don't have anything of quality then you're not going to get in the paper. But I had to find material, and it was just lovely. We used to cover agricultural shows and all sorts of low-level stuff, but it was a great start, and from there I thought, "Actually I love this work," and actually, partly because the money was absolutely horrendous, I had to move on quite quickly. It was not a living wage.

### **What came next?**

So from there I went to the Edinburgh Evening News, which was a gruelling experience, multiple editions a day, very, very exhausting. I would quite routinely crank out 2,000-3,000 words a day – a lot, a lot of copy. But again, that was very good training. It was exhausting, I remember actually physically struggling to get myself into work because the hours were so long, and I never took days off sick, but it was absolutely pulverising working there. But it was a good experience, and I wrote a lot of features for them, and I think I thought from there that I would probably become a features writer.

### **What was next after that?**

I don't want to bore people with the absolute blow-by-blow account of my detailed carer, but essentially I went Edinburgh Evening News, the Daily Record, which is a daily tabloid in Scotland, and from there I was a Sunday Mirror Scotland person, which was a pretty grim job, and from there I worked actually for the Daily Mail in Scotland, and it was at the Daily Mail in Scotland that I first had the opportunity to start doing some political reporting from Holyrood. And frankly, Paul, you may say nothing has changed, but I did not have a clue what I was talking about.

**I wasn't going to say that at all! I like the way you pre-empted it.**

This was a long time ago, and I pretty much had to look up what the different parties stood for.

**I think we have to do that now, don't we?**

I don't come from a political family at all, certainly not a party political family, so this was a whole new ball game for me. But it was an exciting time to be working at Holyrood – the parliament was very young then, and they were doing all sorts of quite radical pieces of legislation, so it was a really great time. And the Scottish Daily Mail was pretty much the only right of centre paper there, so we had a lot of fun.

**And when did London come calling, then? Did you always think you'd end up down at Westminster at this point?**

Well, I think that I probably would have always worked in London, but I think that once you've worked at Holyrood, it strikes me as a shame not to take it to the next level and see what it's like working at the mother of parliaments, so it became a natural progression for me. I have to say, it's not easy though to make that transition. I was a Scottish reporter, I wasn't a national newspaper reporter, and I really had to bang on doors and I was rejected many times before I finally managed to get in. And in fact, there was a sort of sideways step as I referred to earlier, working as a health correspondent for the Standard until a place came up on their lobby team.

**Had you crystallised your ambition at this point? Did you think, "Okay, I've done Holyrood, next stop London – I want to be political editor of the Sunday Times." Was that on your mind at that point?**

No. I've never been like that. In fact, after working at Holyrood, I took six months out to go travelling, and I am so glad I did that, it was a wonderful, wonderful time. I went off around the world with my then boyfriend, and I'm really glad that I did that in my 20s because the opportunities to do that are very thin on the ground, certainly once you've got children.

**So what was your first big political job when you moved to London?**

Well, I think getting into the lobby is the start of everything. You can't underestimate how competitive that is, and I got onto the Evening Standard's political team, and I always remember I was number four on the political team. And political reporting is actually very hierarchical, much like Westminster itself, and the way that the parliamentary lobby works is as hierarchical as the way that politics works, you know, so being number four was always... I suppose, on the fact of it, a rather lowly, humiliating status to have – but I always sort of thought to myself, "Number four is as number four does," and tried to exceed that. And from there, I think I did a couple of years on the Standard, it was great fun, again the hours were awful – it seems a

theme with journalism – but from there I got the job as deputy political editor on the Sunday Times, and that was another level, I suppose.

**So when you were deputy, that was under David Cracknell?**

That's right, yes.

**And then after a few years, he moved on and then who got the job after that?**

Well, I didn't! In fact the job went to a very nice man called Jonathan Oliver, who didn't stay very long, and I was busy doing the unspeakable thing, in newspaper terms, of going off and having babies, so this may have complicated my application process for various jobs over the years, but I did eventually get the promotion to political editor after Jonathan left.

**Is journalism still a little bit misogynistic, then? Is it a huge career obstacle, being a woman?**

Oooh, I'm going to have to be *really* careful what I say here! I mean, I think the simple answer is that – and this is just a fact – that newsrooms, the news gathering operation at the high end, is still very male-dominated, and I think it's fair for me to say that because I've worked on so many papers, and the management has been primarily male. Now, of course there are wonderful exceptions to this – Sunday Times, Sarah Baxter is now at the highest level...

**She's deputy editor, isn't she?**

Absolutely, and I believe she's on the board and all sorts of other things, so... that's just one exception, of course the Guardian has a female editor, so things are changing, but it's still a male-dominated world – that's not the same as saying it's a misogynist world, in fact I would probably say I have had advantages as a woman. In political reporting – again, it's not saying anything particularly new – there are far fewer female political journalists, and here's an example – it's very simple. You are more likely to get invited to talk on political television programmes because there are less women competing for those slots. I don't want to overstate this at all, but I think there are some realities there, and nobody wants to listen to politics reported just through the same middle-aged grey men.

**Presumably you wouldn't even get on the telly in the first place if you weren't up to scratch. You're right to say that it might open a few more doors, but clearly there's a quality threshold that still has to be met.**

Absolutely. Well, you've got to start somewhere, and I'm sure I've been not up to scratch on many occasions when I started out, in fact I have a horrible memory of

doing *Good Morning Britain* – it wasn't *Good Morning Britain*, it was known as something else, a long time ago – where I had gone on, many years ago, I think I was a health correspondent at the time, thinking I was going to be talking about the latest health report, which I would have been entirely clued up on, and walking into the studio only to be asked about the latest nuclear missile testing in North Korea, and that actually put me off doing television for several years afterwards – rabbit in the headlights doesn't even cover it.

**You have quite an active media career now, in terms of broadcast. Does that help? Does that lead to more opportunities? Does the print boost the television and radio type appearances? Do they feed of each other? How does it work?**

I think television is incredibly important. I mean, I am a newspaper person – that is my background, and I will always be a writer, essentially, that's what I do and I think that's what I'm best at. But I realised a few years ago, when I was invited to be on the panel of the *Sunday Politics* show when it first had a sort of relaunch in the beginning of 2011, I think, that I had to... whatever my fears were of being on TV post-North Korea-gate, I thought I'm going to have to man up and actually embrace television, because these days, and I don't need to tell people who are listening to this that, just being a print journalist is not necessarily going to sustain you for the next few decades. And there are brilliant print journalists who don't do any television, and they are wonderful, incredibly distinguished writers, and they don't feel the need to do it, and I'm not for a minute saying that they should do it, I'm just saying that for me, I felt that I ought to embrace that opportunity, and it did not come naturally to me, I made myself do it, and actually I love it now.

**What's it like going on *Question Time*? I've prepped clients to go on it, and even I'm nervous watching them, thinking they are going to get it wrong! But in a sense, that is the ultimate political show – you're not merely a pundit, if I can put it that way, people are interested on what your opinion is on the questions asked from the audience. Is it as nerve-racking as people say?**

It is an incredible experience. The first time I was invited to go on, I was so scared because I was just conscious of how high the stakes are on a programme like that. A *Question Time* guest, I don't know the exact figure, but I think it's over two and a half million viewers, it may be nearer three, it depends on the night.

**I had a client who went on it a few months ago and she vomited before she went on stage.**

Well, I understand that, and I think it's absolutely right to be nervous, because if you're not nervous you're going to cock it up! You know, you cannot be complacent going onto a platform that big. I must say, towards the end of the first time I was on

that show, I began to think, “Oh, I’m really quite enjoying this,” and that’s of course that’s exactly the point where it wraps up and your moment is over. The second time I did it, there was some awful snarl-up before we went on air with the transport arrangements, and at least three of the panellists were stuck on the train, and for a while it looked like it was just going to be me and one other panellist. Now, that would have been a moment, but because of all the anxiety over that, that again was a stressful experience. And then I was on again fairly recently, and whilst I’m not for a minute going to say that I wasn’t as nervous as always, I genuinely enjoyed it. I think that you can get more into your stride with these things the more often you do them, but I’m sure I will always, rightly, be anxious beforehand.

**What I like about these podcasts is we often use people’s careers as a kind of clothes line, then we hang interesting set pieces on it as well, we go off on a tangent. So just pulling you back to your time at the Sunday Times, clearly you broke a number of major stories there. Tell us about what life was like then, and tell us about some of those stories.**

Well, I think life on a Sunday paper, and I have done it before because I worked for the Sunday Mirror, is... it’s a very strange existence, because the cycle of the week goes so very differently to the cycle of a normal working week in that your week starts off rather gently. I’m sorry to any editors who are listening here because I should be saying we all hit the ground running, giving it 100% from the moment the clock strikes nine o’clock on a Tuesday morning, but the reality is that your week builds up quite slowly, and it would be madness to hurtle into it at full pelt on a Tuesday morning, certainly if you’re a political reporter because most likely what you are getting incredibly excited about on a Tuesday will no longer be of any interest by the Friday because things will have moved on. But it’s a kind of strange kind of psychological torture in a way because you have this immense test at the end of every week, and your whole week, and your whole week’s productivity and how you are assessed, comes down to what you manage to get in the paper on a Saturday – and that can be quite arbitrary. Of course, if you’ve got an amazing scoop, then most likely it will go in, but I have to say that’s not always taken for granted because any number of things can happen. And I found that... I think there is no Sunday newspaper journalist who wouldn’t say that there are difficult aspects of that, you know the pressure, the anxiety of will you, won’t you find anything in time, and if you find a good story on a Wednesday, perhaps someone else will have written it by the time it gets to Saturday, and it could be that for all your best efforts, and you might have given it your all, as I pretty much did every single week at the Sunday Times, you might not get on the front page – or, worst of all, you might not get into the paper at all. I think there were possibly a couple of occasions when I was deputy political editor, I had nothing in the paper, and the fact that I can actually remember that those were single, individual occasions when I got nothing in, it gives you some idea of how traumatic it is, and it’s a very visible mark of success, you know, either your

name is in the paper or it isn't – and if it isn't, your best hope is that people think you were on holiday that week.

**Absolutely. I work with a number of Sunday journalists, and if I ever try and ring them on a Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday, I am unlikely to get a call back – but I often get a text on a Thursday or a Friday from one of them saying, “What’s cooking?” And I’ll say, “Have you got anything?” and they’ll be like, “No – cupboard’s bare, we’ve got nothing. Have you got anything?” I quite like that actually.**

Yes, you don't like it if you're the one that's making the call as a journalist, they're thinking, “The cupboard's bare and I'm going to have to come up with something.”

**I imagine I'm one of about 50 people that they text. I'm glad to be on the list, that's the main thing.**

Well... I'm probably painting a very negative picture, of course it's wonderful when you get your story on the front page, but there is so much pent up adrenaline, and it's all happening at exactly the same time of the week when, for everybody else, the adrenaline is ebbing away. So one of the most sort of painful experiences for me working on the Sunday Times – which, by the way, I loved, I was there for eight years – was on a Friday night, when I would finally leave the office pretty late at night, maybe 11 o'clock or whatever, trudging back – our offices were then over in East London – trudging back towards the tube, and seeing all these happy, jubilant office workers downing drinks, and I was just thinking, “Oh my God, I've got nothing for tomorrow's paper,” or, “Is my story going to work out?” Any of those things. And it's tough. And having Sunday and Monday off as opposed to Saturday and Sunday... it's fine when you're young, when you're in your 20s, you may not have a family, but it's not a substitute for a normal weekend – life does not revolve around people having Monday off, and you mentioned yourself about trying to call Sunday journalists on a Sunday or a Monday – there's a reason we switch our phones off, and that is, because what we tend to get on a Sunday or a Monday, no matter how well we've done our job, is the odd complaining, whining text message from somebody who is not happy with a headline, or perhaps they've got a legitimate complaint. But there's nothing more miserable than you've just recovered from the traumatic experience of the week gone by, and then your weekend, such as remains of it, is overshadowed by someone who's not happy. Because contrary to popular belief, we do try to keep people happy – we have to, because we have to go back to them.

**Tell us then about the big stories you've covered. Can we start with Chris Huhne? Because you've brought down a cabinet minister.**

And you know, that's a very popular way of phrasing it, but I don't like the use of the phrase 'brought down' because it's not my mission in life to make life worse for anybody. I prefer to see it as having held to account a cabinet minister who I knew to be lying.

**So you were quite motivated at that point because you knew he was a wrong 'un?**

I don't like hearing politicians lying and knowing that they're lying, and who does?

**I thought you were going to correct me then in calling him a wrong 'un, but you didn't!**

And the public hates that. Voters hate that, and they have a right to know. So it was very motivating for me, hearing Chris Huhne claiming that the story I had written was nonsense when I knew full well that it wasn't nonsense.

**So tell us about the process of that. It was obviously quite an emotional time for everyone involved. I mean, you were criticised from a number of places, obviously Vicky Pryce was very bitter, Chris was clearly lying and cheating his way out of this, I mean, it was... you stood firm, and as you say you held him to account, but it must have been quite a painful process for everyone, really.**

It was a painful process for everybody. I would not for a minute seek to say that I suffered in any way, shape or form in the way that others did as part of that process. Yes, I found myself getting a good kicking, but do you know what? That's the world I move in, and I should jolly well be able to take a kicking now and again. All I would say, and a lot of people criticised me for the handling of that, and I would say two things: first of all, nobody at the Sunday Times ever expected that story to result in a court case. We examined all the evidence, we did not think it would come to that. And secondly, nobody except me and Vicky Pryce knows what happened – nobody knows the nature of our relationship, the discussions that we had – and they were endless – about what would happen if, or what would happen but, and what we agreed with each other – that is only for me and her to know, although I wrote about what I could write about extensively in the Sunday Times at the time. But what I would say to those who occasionally still give me a kicking for this on Twitter is, it was an absolute delight to see Vicky Pryce a couple of months ago at the launch party for *Call me Dave*. I think that says it all.

**Tell us about your writing career, then. We'll start with your first book, which is how we came to know each other, which was Peter Watt's book, *Inside Out*, which I thoroughly enjoyed. How did you come to write the book, how did you**

**meet Peter? What was the genesis of that? And did you always want to be an author as well as a journalist?**

So the background to that book, which is quite understandably, largely, if not entirely forgotten about now, because it was very much...

**I hugely enjoyed that book.**

Aww, well it's very nice of you to say so. It's very much a book of its time. As a reminder for people, this was the first insider exposé of Gordon Brown's regime, and it was very much the dying days of the Brown administration. And I had, through my job as then deputy political editor on the Sunday Times, got to know Peter Watt, who had been the general secretary of the Labour Party, which is not a job that now sounds as if it carries vast weight or importance, by no means to disparage the person who does that job now. But at that time, at a very, very sensitive point of the Brown-Blair years, when Blair was in the process, and a long, drawn out process it was, of handing over to Brown, the role of the Labour Party general secretary was an incredibly powerful one, and Peter Watt had been intimately involved in plans for the transition, he was intimately involved in labour's very well-documented financial troubles – at one point the party was 24 hours away from bankruptcy, and Peter was the one dealing with that.

**It was like a thriller when you read it in the book, you think, “Jesus, the party might actually shut down if the bank don't honour these cheques.”**

Exactly. And Peter had lost his job as general secretary as a consequence of a media furore over party donations, and he... when I got to meet him on a couple of occasions, I realised this guy had an extraordinary story to tell – not only about some of the key characters involved – so Blair, of course, and Brown, and John Prescott and Harriet Harman and various others – but also an extraordinary human story.

**He's a lovely bloke.**

He's such a nice man, and I really warmed to him – and he was also a writer's dream, because he had such an intimate memory of everything that had happened. You know, it's very difficult working with people who, if you're trying to write their story or write for them, who don't think in a colourful way. Now, Peter would remember who said what, when, and he would remember what picture was on the wall at the time, or what the smell was like in the room, or what he could hear, or what could be seen out of the window, and I didn't have to kind of surgically extract that from him – he would just pour it forth. And a lot of his memories were very funny; he had a tremendous sense, and still has, of course, a tremendous sense of humour, and I used to meet up with him to draft the book that we were going to write together, and we just laughed! We just sat and actually laughed, because the way he described

these pompous politicians just brought it all out so beautifully, and it was just such a pleasure, writing that book.

**He's not your typical politico, is he? He's a human being who just happens to work in politics. I always remember, one of the things that always impressed me about the book is the colour in it. I still remember to this day the anecdote where he said the Gordon Brown was being shown around the Labour Party HQ, and then he double-backed on himself and had forgotten he had already met some of the people, and he reintroduced himself, and they had to pretend they'd not just met the Prime Minister moments earlier.**

That's an absolute classic example of a book that was full of those brilliant – although I say it myself, those are not my stories, they are Peter's stories – these brilliant stories, and there were so many of those, just kind of *Thick of it* moments, and they were coming right from the top, the guy who had been top, but also I referred earlier to it being a very human tale, and there was this bit, I think it's at the beginning of the book, where he's resigned, and everyone is going nuts, and he kind of walks in a total daze into Victoria Station, or maybe it was Waterloo, and sees himself on a giant TV screen overhead by the departures board... you know, it's just the graphicness of it, and at the same time he was trying to go through a process of adopting a child that he had fostered, and he talks very compellingly about the effect of all that on his family life. And he and his wife Vilma have been wonderful over the ears at fostering children, and he writes a lot about that. And during that period he also lost his father, and actually Peter wrote that chapter of that book himself.

**Which was incredibly moving, I remember it was just called 'Dad'.**

I remember thinking, "Hey, you don't actually need me as a ghost writer, because you can actually write really well," but the thing was that that just poured forth from him in a way that he couldn't... I think he felt he couldn't have structured, and probably the book would not have happened anyway if I hadn't encouraged him to do it, so it was very much a collaboration.

**So that moves us swiftly on to your second book, *Farmageddon*. This is where it gets a bit meta really, because I had a peripheral involvement with this project.**

Yes, you just keep cropping up in my life! I can't get rid of you – not that I would want to!

**So tell us how *Farmageddon* came about, and the process of writing that with Philip.**

So, *Farmageddon* is an exposé of industrial food production. Perhaps that makes it sound a bit dry, but it is about, as we say on the cover of the book, the true cost of cheap meat. When I was first approached about this project and told that what was wanted was somebody to help bring the issue of factory farming to a mass audience, I have to be honest, my heart sank a bit. What is factory farming? I'd never heard of factory farming. When I actually understood what was meant by this, I could see that this was an issue that actually everybody probably cares about, you know? There are few people who say they don't care whatsoever what they eat, and they don't care where that food has come from – it's an issue that is very engaging to a vast number of people, and there's an extraordinary tale to tell there about what goes on behind closed doors. And this wasn't a 'poor animals' book, and I felt very strongly from the start that we shouldn't write a book that was all, "Let's all become vegetarians and eat lentils," – no offence to you, Paul, I'm sure you eat more than lentils –

### **I do like lentils, though.**

But I didn't want to try and preach to people that they should do something that they might regard as an impossible or undesirable leap. So what we argued for in *Farmageddon*, and it isn't just a long lecture, far from it, but the message of *Farmageddon* isn't 'don't eat meat', it's 'eat less meat and choose your meat very carefully'. And I really loved being involved in that project. My task there was to bring this issue to a wider audience, and I think that we exceeded that on so many levels. Has *Farmageddon* sold millions of copies? No, though I still hope it might do. Was it serialised in the Daily Mail? Yes. Was it also serialised in the Sunday Times? Yes. has it now been translated into five languages? I mean, this is beyond anything...

### **What imprint are we on now, eight or nine?**

I don't know actually, it's interesting that you mention that. But the idea that if Philip and I had ever been told, "Your book is going to be translated into Finnish and Japanese," we would have just not believed that. So... and as a learning process for me, I was actually learning about something totally new, and it's changed the way that I will always look at meat, absolutely, and changed the way that I feel about our countryside. People don't realise that farm animals have disappeared, or are disappearing from our countryside, and when you see those luscious-looking green fields of corn, ripening wheat or whatever it is, this isn't a lush, lovely thing. The most likely, very, very likely, that field will be heavily doused in chemicals – pesticides, fungicides, goodness knows what else – heavily doused, the earth there will be heavily doused in fertilisers, all of which are having a catastrophic effect on insect life, bird life, wildlife. This stuff matters – people carer about it.

**Is a problem with the capitalist system in a sense? I'm not an anarchal communist either, but in a sense I don't blame a farmer trying to earn a living. The problem is, it's what economists would call externalities, wouldn't it? If you buy cheap chicken, it's likely to have been fed prophylactic antibiotics and all this kind of thing. It's not good for the chicken, and it's not good for us.**

That is absolutely right – is it a problem with the capitalist system? I think that the question implies that it is somehow the most efficient way of producing things, ever for the farmer, and actually the evidence doesn't stack that up. I mean, it's extraordinary when you speak to farmers who are caught on this desperate treadmill, as we did not just in the UK but out in America where we spoke to people running mega-dairies, where you might have several thousand cows, none of whom ever see a blade of grass. And I remember very vividly being at a livestock market in some absolute nowhere-ville in Central Valley California, and this huge American bloke, who looked like nothing much would trouble him, let me put it that way, he had his cap on and his jeans, and he looked tough as anything, and while we were interviewing him about what it was like on his dairy, and I must say that none of these interviews were set up in advance, you know, this guy didn't know us from Adam... he broke down in tears saying that if he had known how touch it was running one of these farms, and everything was so fine-tuned, where you're really treating animals as machines, and he said that one of his friends, who also ran a mega dairy, had recently taken their own life, such was the pressure. So the point of that story is... it is a huge misconception to think that by confining animals indoors and scaling everything up, you are somehow going to be more profitable. It's not necessarily the case.

**Tell us about the third book, about this David bloke. Apparently he lives in a house just off Whitehall? How did that come about?**

Well, he actually lives in a house not too far from the house that I live in, out in the Cotswolds, when he's not in the office. So that came about because... I think partly as a result of previous books in that my co-author, Lord Ashcroft, who commissioned me to help him write an unauthorised biography of David Cameron, also has a strong interest in the publishing company that published the book I did with Peter Watt – so I was on his radar because of that. And people often ask me, "How did you get to know Lord Ashcroft?" and actually we didn't know each other well before we began working together on this project, but I think he had identified me, as a result of the Chris Huhne/Vicky Pryce story, as a reporter that was not afraid to go out there and break stories and take a bit of flak for it. And he approached me with the idea for the project, and I thought that there could be little that I would enjoy doing more than spending a decent period of time interviewing people and writing, which is what I love to do the best.

**But he is a bit of an enigma. To be honest, I was talking about the Prime Minister then, but it could also apply to Michael Ashcroft, actually! Was there an element there of being attracted to finding a bit more about David Cameron? Because it is a bit of a cliché...**

Well, I hope he's not an enigma any more, because I'm pretty sure I've filled in the gaps with the book there.

**What did you learn about him then, in a nutshell, that was genuinely new to you, having written the book? Because clearly you must have known quite a lot about him before, being a very well-connected political journalist, and knowing David, already living near him, but what did you learn as you wrote the book about him?**

I think I put flesh on the bones. So the bones are still the bones that were there before, but I had actually little idea of his background, you know, what kind of family, in detail, that he came from, the struggles that he had with his disabled son... so far, so predictable from me... I think your question is quite difficult, but what I would say that I took from it was that David Cameron, all his life, has been helped by other people. His progression has been smoothed by other people at virtually – not every, but virtually – every stage of his life. From the moment that he left school, the gap year posts that he had, which were all organised by his parents' contacts – the family had many friends in high places, I don't mean to sound chippy about that, that was just a reality – and people pulled strings for David Cameron, and obviously he had to have the talent to do well in the jobs that people helped to get for him, but he didn't have to struggle at any point really until, in fact, he was trying to get a seat as a MP and actually the usual parachute didn't appear, and he had to really try quite hard – there was no safe seat thrown his way. Unless perhaps there could have been, because he had certainly done his time as a special adviser, but he had to work hard to get that, and he suffered a few rejections, and then he finally got in in a seat in Witney as a result of...

**Shaun Woodward's old seat.**

Indeed. As a result of that sort of happy accident for him, I suppose. I thought it was very interesting why Cameron was chosen for that seat – the Conservative Association in Witney was traumatised – I don't think that's too strong a word to use – by the resignation of Shaun Woodward from the party, and there was so much going on there, there were issues about Shaun's stance on homosexuality and the so-called promotion of homosexuality in schools, which was all the Section 28 thing, which seems like such a long time ago now, and so archaic, but there was a lot of debate about that at the time and, more important, probably, to Witney, this issue about where their local MP stood on Europe. And Shaun, I'm sure he wouldn't mind

me describing him as a 'Europhile', and Witney Conservatives are not really of that same persuasion.

**They were glad to see the back of him, then.**

And so I think by the time he left, they were pretty exhausted and wrong out, and they were looking for somebody who was absolutely going to fit in perfectly to the environment in this constituency, and David Cameron, with his smooth country house skills, was... you know, old Etonian, made the right noises about Euro-scepticism – I'm sure he didn't go too far, but he made the right noises – absolutely fit the bill for them. He looked like a zero risk, if there's ever a zero risk, a very low risk choice for them. And so he proved... he's done brilliantly, he's massively increased his majority.

**Final question: what's next for you? Are you going to write another book? Are you going to become editor of the Mail? What's next?**

Haha.

**Present *Question Time*?**

I'm always in the market for books, but I think I'll take each challenge as it comes, and joining the Mail as political editor at large will be quite enough of a challenge to be getting on with.

**Isabel, it's been absolutely fantastic to interview you, and I really enjoyed our conversation, as always. Thank you ever so much.**

Thank you.