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Iain Martin

Journalist and commentator

Media Masters – September 28, 2017

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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 Iain Martin, columnist for the Times and editor and founder of Reaction, the website focused on political, economic and cultural analysis. Previously editor of The Scotsman, he has also been deputy editor of The Sunday Telegraph and The Wall Street Journal Europe. In addition to his journalism career, Iain is also an award winning author. His first book on IBS's role in the 2008 financial crash was shortlisted for The Financial Times Business Book of the Year and won Debut Book of the Year at the 2014 Political Book Awards.

Iain, thank you for joining me.

Pleasure.

So Iain, we were chit-chatting before the tape started and we were going through your career, and you said it started off in kind of reverse formation, in that you had a bit of early success. Shall we go through your career?

Yes, I've been through the ups and downs.

Start at the beginning!

I was quite young editor actually, or very young, I was editor of The Scotsman at 30, which is probably too young to be an editor but was terrific fun. And it was just at the point when it was pre- the advertising crash, and the Internet was then just this thing that we thought would never really catch on.

I still think it won't.

So there was lots of money and lots of fun.

The Scotsman is a globally respected newspaper.

Yes. And it then had a pretty good sale and it had quite a bit of money to spend and was a terrific thing to edit. So I edited that for three and a bit years, and then edited

Scotland on Sunday, and then I fled to London to go to the Telegraph and did various jobs there. So I had this weird thing, I started as a reporter on the Sunday Times and always wanted to be a hack. Never want to be anything else. I became a journalist in my native Scotland, and then became rather young an editor, and then moved down here and did a bunch of other stuff.

And what was the secret to getting the editorship so early? Was it just graft, was it ambition? Making editor at 30, that's serious.

Well, for that I have Andrew Neil, my mentor, to thank. So I suppose writing when I was a student journalist at Glasgow University, writing a fawning profile of Andrew, which we still laugh about, probably helped me a lot. And then my first gig was Sunday Times in the Scotland office, and then I was political editor of Scotland on Sunday, which Andrew ended up running as part of the Scotsman group. And I think we were very aligned journalistically and saw the world in quite similar way, both pro-market, probably at a time in Scotland when that was a slightly unfashionable view of the world. So we viewed the world in a similar way, and Scotsman was being shaken up – to put it politely – and dragged into the modern world, in a time of great transition in journalism, and I was there, and I was 30, and took the job not really expecting to last very long, and did it for more than three years and had an absolute ball.

Because we've had Chris Blackhurst in that chair, and he said he loved being a business editor and a business reporter, but he actually described being editor as a chore. He said it was like HR matters and legal things, and yes, he got the best tickets to the opera and occasional invites to Number 10, but other than that he actually didn't enjoy it. Is there a different temperament to being editor?

There is. I love Chris Blackhurst, but part of that is a question of timing then, that after a very long and very successful career, Chris got to be editor of The Independent at a time when, shall we say, it was not awash with money, and had lots and lots of difficulties. And I can imagine that more than half of his time would be taken up with that, and with budget cuts…

Financial modelling and all that gubbins.

All of that sort of stuff, and not as much time as he would like on the journalism side of things.

So when you were an editor you were an editor doing the job of being an editor, editing.

Yes. It seems like a different world really but you didn't really have to worry about the Internet. And that sounds odd, but the paper really was the paper. There was a scotsman.com but it was a small group of people off on another side of the office, doing something exotic which people thought, "Yes, maybe in 20 years' time it will eventually become as big as print." So I think that that's a mistake which we all made as journalists at the time, and hardly anyone really saw it coming. And the model

was, it seemed so settled and essentially newspapers had a… not a monopoly, a series of cartels I suppose. But had… there was a limited amount of space for advertising. So if you were a major company – an airline, a bank – or you wanted to sell a house, you know, runs right through the classified business and through the display business, newspapers had this wonderful business model which was, just as I was becoming editor, was just becoming apparent that that might be about to be disrupted in the early 2000s.

And then of course there was just this hurricane going through media. So it was a very different time. It was a lot of fun. I liked the technical aspects of it, I enjoyed the piecing together of a newspaper, and I liked the ability of, if you had a bee in your bonnet about something, or something you thought really mattered and potentially might matter to the readers or that you thought should matter to the readers, that you could have a go at making people pay attention to it. And it was just terrific fun, so it was also an era in which you still got out for lunch. Just. So I feel I'm very lucky. I just caught the tail end of not the Fleet Street end of it because I was up in Scotland, but just got the tail end of…

The traditional editor role.

Yes. Long-ish lunches when you wanted, and quite a lot of fun journalistically, and a lot of big stories to cover in that period, including the Iraq war and stuff which was difficult to edit through, but I learnt a hell of a lot.

How were you kind of mentored at that point? Because if you are the editor, who looks after your personal development? I've always wondered that.

No one.

It's quite a lonely job, isn't it? I know it's a cliché, but…

No, it's tremendous fun. I mean, if someone is lonely and miserable doing it then they shouldn't be doing it, because it is a terrific honour and a great thing to do and a terrific way to make a living. Fraught with difficulty and various points of stress, but it's not an arduous job. It's not like commanding a regiment or being a paramedic, so it's not fraught in that way, but there's quite a lot of responsibility with it. In terms of professional development, the answer is: no one other than people that you admire that you're drawn to who are generous with their time. In my case that was my first boss, Andrew Neil, who had edited the Sunday Times, the first paper I worked for. He was my boss but also, you know, a tough guy and could be robust, but really knew what he was doing. And in terms of guiding you through big stories or how to handle stuff, he was just fantastic to deal with. And then also other friends along the way who were great influences, who maybe been through the Fleet Street experience, some of them you collided with by working with them, and they became friends and key members of your team. And as a political journalist I've always had a great belief in speaking to the older generation. It's one of the reasons now, as a political columnist, I enjoy going to speak to someone who might be a cabinet minister in the 70s or 80s. And that perspective of people – and it applies in journalism as well –

Wisdom.

Yes. There are insights and observations, and just ways of approaching things which you should pay attention to. That's one of the dangers I think with what's happened to quite a lot of media now, is that because there's such a churn, you don't necessarily get as much of that interplay between the generations as there was there was in a classic Fleet Street or classic newspapers 20, 30, 40, 50 years ago.

We'll talk about the kind of current media landscape in a second, as it's not just the quality of mentoring which I think might have got caught in that. But just to go back to when you were editing The Scotsman, without being overly pompous about it, did you did you get a sense of just how important that that role was in society itself? You know, that you didn't want to let say politicians get one over you and that you had this quest for the truth, or am I overly dramatising it?

You had a bit of that, but it is hackery, and should always be remembered as that. It's important, done well, but you are a hack, and it's a mistake I think when people forget that. It's politicians who get remembered, not journalists, whether that's right or wrong, that's just the way it is, and politicians who get to the very top of their game stand a chance of, if not immortality, then certainly name recognition generations later among people who know and care about politics. Media is much more of a turnover, generation by generation, and people are not then quite recalled even 10 years later. That's simply the way it is.

You do remember some, though? We've got Harry Evans coming on in a couple of weeks and he's a bona fide legend.

Yes, he is. He is. But I'm just making a point about how journalists should be slightly humble about that. But how many other people from the 60s or 70s are really recalled? He's still writing books and doing his thing and being vibrant and interesting, and I'm sure he'll be a really interesting listen. But if I said to you, Sir Denis Hamilton from the 1960s Sunday Times, inventor of the Sunday Times Magazine, inventor of the modern Sunday Times, that Harry Evans then ended up editing and that Andrew Neil then did extraordinary things with…

I'm nodding, but I don't have a clue who he is. Your point is made.

So Dennis Hamilton had an extraordinary war, was close to Montgomery, served and then came back and went into newspapers, and was, if you'd said in the mid-1960s, he would have been regarded as one of the giants of Fleet Street. And there are probably from an equivalent era, you can probably mention lots of names of politicians from that period – Denis Healey, Roy Jenkins, Jim Callaghan, Wilson, Barbara Castle – so they always have that over on media. Which is fair enough, I'm not lamenting it. I'm just simply saying it's worth journalists remembering. With the Scotsman I had a very particular thing which is that it had in those days, less so now, and it's one of the papers that's been really, really squeezed by what's happened to media and what's happened to the collapse of the ad, the ad industry, or sort of print

ad industry, it had a very particular reach and a very particular social significance as an establishment paper in Edinburgh. So Edinburgh is a city, but a relatively small city, and it has the Scottish legal system, it now has the Scottish Parliament, and it has the Scottish establishment in its midst, so traditionally The Scotsman was the was the paper of the Edinburgh establishment. So yes, you were very conscious in a small city like that, that you were then going to dinner parties or drinks parties or sporting events or the Edinburgh festival, and people were very quick to give you their view on how you destroyed the paper, or what was good about it – usually what was bad about it.

Unsolicited feedback.

Yes. It was terrific in its way, I mean, pre-internet, people really told you; wrote letters, and really cared about it, and cared that this was their thing. I think it's fair to say that when I took over, they'd had a succession of editors, putting it politely. And I was conscious, actually living in Edinburgh – I'm originally from the west, from Paisley, and from Glasgow – that I was trying to reconnect it in a way. My politics were quite different from a lot of people in the city, but I was trying to reconnect it with that sense of place, and I hope I did that a bit. And whether I did or not, I had terrific fun doing it.

Why did you move on?

I moved on because I was editing a paper called Scotland on Sunday, which is the sister paper of a Scotsman, which weirdly used to sell a lot more copies than The Scotsman, and the papers were sold, the Barclay brothers owned the Scotsman and Scotland on Sunday. They sold, new owners came in, Johnson Press, who I didn't really want to work for them, and the Barclays bought the Telegraph, and I was offered a job down in London, and I'd always wanted to work in Fleet Street, for want of a better term, even though geographically spread, and jumped at moving to the Telegraph and had a lot of fun there and various roles at the Sunday Telegraph, I was comments editor of the daily… that was that was a lot of fun. But the internet then was really hitting newspapers, and we were, as an industry, just trying to grapple with how the hell do you respond to this thing. And we, of course, as an industry had made this incredible decision, which imagine if book publishers had done it, we just decided to give away our content.

No one even thought about it, did they? It emerged because like when you're at The Scotsman there was this team in the corner there, they were just used to sticking everything online, because it was just a such a small audience it didn't really matter. People actually still bought the paper.

Precisely.

This was the moment when people would rather go on the website than buy the paper.

Yes. And it just you just had this rush away by advertisers, and that initial calculation, that you'd set up, or you would expand the digital operation, and you had to do it. It was all done on a 'build it and they'll come' basis.

Field of Dreams.

Field of Dreams. And you just get going on it, and then eventually as print advertising declines, digital advertising will increase and one will replace the other, and on we go. And that the paper will still exist for a long time but with its decline managed gently and then replaced with something even better digitally. And as I say, the problem with that model – which Rupert Murdoch realised ahead of a lot of people – is that you'd gone from a situation where I said earlier where you had a finite amount of advertising space to a situation where advertising space was infinite, and obviously priced accordingly. So late 2000s, the industry was really in the middle of grappling with that, and Rupert Murdoch, who owns the paper that that I write for now, the Times, realised was that actually you had to try and re-establish that connection between payment and getting the product, which has happened with the Wall Street Journal, and with the Times. And elsewhere as well, you see on the FT, the Economist, actually subscriptions are doing really well across the industry, I feel very… after a 15-year period of thinking this industry that I love and think matters and is terrific fun but does matter, is rapidly getting to a situation where the best we can say is, "Well, you'll miss us when we're gone." For the first time, I really feel, post-Brexit and post-Trump, that a corner has seriously been turned – and a lot of that is to do with consumers being prepared to pay and thinking that they need to know about the world. And you no longer go to a drinks party or a social event and someone says, "Oh, I think politics is really boring." They might say, "I'm up to here with politics. It's doing my head in because I'm really worried about it." But it's no it really matters. You see post-Brexit and post-Trump that this stuff is serious, and people don't want to either appear ignorant or be ignorant, and people are prepared to pay subscriptions for, whether it's the Times or The Spectator or the FT, there's a bigger question about the mass *mass* market. And I'm not sure what happens there.

But even on the quality side, you've got the BBC giving away its content for free, a comprehensive website, the Guardian, even though it's haemorrhaging money it's free at the point of use, but for that annoying advert at the bottom of the page asking you to give £6 a month or whatever, which to my knowledge no one has ever clicked on.

(Laughs) Well, some people have, and they claim to have – I can't remember what the figure is – they claim to have some people doing that and becoming members of the Guardian. Personally I think they'll have to eventually, I'm assured by people at the Guardian that that will not happen and that free is built into the model, but I just don't really see how that works when effectively Google and Facebook just hoover up 90% of all new ad dollars and two thirds of existing ad dollars.

They're clever ones, because if you go on the Guardian's Facebook page, all of the hard work and investment in content generation is done by the Guardian, and yet it's Facebook that gets all the adverts and gives the Guardian a slither of the money they are getting.

It is incredible. I mean, there are many great things about journalism, but as an industry we always pride ourselves on lecturing people, whether it be banks or football clubs or other media companies or governments or officials, that they don't know what they're doing and that they're inept. It's fine, that's holding people to account. But actually when it comes to our own stewardship off our own industry, that must be seen, with the benefit of hindsight, as one of the most disastrous giveaways. Just giving away content like that and being effectively fleeced by Google and Facebook, who of course don't present it like that, but are now businesses worth billions and billions and billions beyond what a newspaper company was ever worth. I think it is going to come to a head.

It'll have to because it's unsustainable.

To me, the answer is relatively obvious but not straightforward. But I think it's going to come down to trying to make it clear that they are publishers under the law. I mean, the Facebook and Google model depends on them not being publishers. It depends on that they're simply conduits for information about which they are neutral, they take no view. Someone publishes on their platform or does something on their platform or posts a video. You'll notice they're now starting to be forced into confronting that and applying certain standards on videos and all the rest of it. But I think if you really, really want to tackle that – and actually the industry should probably 50 or 10 years ago have done a deal, a copyright-related deal for use of material and some ad-sharing model, though it's probably gone beyond that – I think they're going to have to be taken on, and use the law to effectively establish them as publishers who are responsible for what's on their platform, which would obviously change the model and make their model very difficult to continue with. I don't think that's easy to do, and it will require journalists across the west to probably act in a united fashion. But I think why I feel optimistic about journalism is that not only can you see that people are prepared to pay subscriptions for quality journalism, there's also a recognition across the industry that this the stuff that we're talking about has to be tackled at some point – because you see the impact on democracy and on conduct of the public conversation and on elections.

And newsrooms getting thinner and thinner. Jeremy Vine sat in that chair a couple of years ago and he said when he started at the Leicester Mercury or whatever it was, there was like 40 people in the newsroom – now you'd be lucky to get five.

Yes. I mean, certain places are still well staffed, but certainly at the local news and regional newspaper level it is catastrophic. And what that's done is just incalculable in terms of the free pass given to public institutions.

I was a local councillor for six years. The only thing I ever feared was the local newspaper; sunlight being the best disinfectant.

Yes. And I think there's a whole network. There are whole levels of British life that are not – they weren't covered perfectly in the past, I'm not saying that the old newspaper industry was perfect in every regard – and there are brilliant reporters doing fantastic investigations now, I mean look at Andrew Norfolk on the Times,

there are lots of good reporters doing good work, but I just think that there are, even in terms of the arts and charities, and how money is spent, and boardroom wrangles, and all of that sort of stuff which might have expected to be a page lead, and then right through to local planning scandals or misbehaviour problems with the local authority, it's not covered in quite the same way that it was 20, 30 years ago – and that I think ultimately that can't be a good thing, surely.

But this kind of monetisation thing isn't something that can be discussed almost academically in the abstract; it has real world implications. Now, for example your new website, Reaction, you've got a you've got a journalistic purpose but you also must presumably have a plan to monetise it. And then you have to take all these kind of things into consideration as to whether it's worth getting out of bed that morning to do the website financially.

Yes, there is that. I mean, the reason we set it up, and these things I think are always best set up with a journalistic goal and some excitement in play so that you're… of course the monetisation is part of it, but I just think that there are some things not being said, and there's a style of writing and commentary of which there's I think there's a gap for, and Reaction was founded just before the referendum last year in 2016. And we've got a bunch of really good writers, some very well established, some new and young and funny, some fantastic youngsters is a great part of it, and we are politics, economics, ideas, culture, and hopefully done in a slightly irreverent way. So we have a bit of capital, bit a seed capital, and then in January we decided to turn on subscriptions. Now, the numbers are small so far, but they pay a large chunk of the bills. And if we can double those numbers, they'll do more than that and we'll be able to pay some more writers properly. Doing events, some dinners with politicians that sort of thing, and really trying to be entrepreneurial about it and take the view that you'd have taken when you were starting something, I don't know, in the 18th or 19th century, that just, you know, you've got something you want to say – in our case about politics, economics, markets, ideas, how the world is going in the age of Corbyn – you want to do that, and just get up and running, and then if people like what you do go subscribe, and then try… it's real, organic growth. And I'm pretty confident we can grow it to a level where it can have a pretty decent-sized staff and make hopefully make a valuable contribution with some terrific writing, which you know, there's is always room for great writing and people having fun while they're writing it.

I enjoy it. I enjoy a good read. I fly a lot internationally and I like nothing more than a good book or I save tons of articles on that Pocket app, and then I'll start to wade through them – and if it's good writing, you enjoy, it's not a chore at all, even if you disagree with the writer. If it's written well you can admire it.

Yes, that's partly the thinking behind it. I mean, we are pretty broad church in that okay, I am pro… a moderate Brexiteer, but pro-Brexit, voted for leave, and some of our writers didn't. And we have a fantastic dingdongs, and you want to let a thousand flowers bloom, and have all sorts of discussion. So, yes. And it also is partly informed by… I loved blogging when it came along. There are criticisms you can make of blogging as a style, and I mean I like being on the Times now because

that's not what I do for them, and that is really, properly edited, if you know what I mean.

It's a proper column, it's not a blog.

Yes, and it has a real editing process, and the way the team there look after it, and the process it goes through.

Do you go to conference?

I do, yes. I go to various leader conferences and various meetings and it's just a fantastic thing to be involved in. But the nice thing about blogging, which maybe Reaction owes more to, and the name is, Reaction is not really meant to indicate dreadfully reactionary politics, although there's maybe a bit of that with some of some of our writers, but it's more a reaction to what we discussed earlier, about what's happening to media, a reaction attempt by a small group of writers to do something, and also that we react pretty quickly and we put together hopefully quite irreverent, fun, hopefully interesting and informative, analysis and commentary on stuff pretty much as it happens, you know. So Boris does something on any given day, but on Friday night, Saturday morning when I see the front page, and you obviously you write something then, and you then write something more considered the following day. But I really like that early blogging thing – I'm going to sound incredibly old when I say 'early' because of course I was a late adopter of that and lots of people have done it much earlier, people like Tim Montgomery in the UK and even before that in the US – but when I got to it in 2007, I suppose original bloggers would say that I was late to the party, but I loved that instant urgency about it.

That immediacy.

Yes. it was fantastic. Also it's a really good form to play around with. You can play around with form, with formats, with voice. You can be silly in a way that it probably can't be in print.

Because the subs would have removed the joke?

I don't know, it's just a format that then something about the author's voice that the reader then gets to know, and you can take a few more risks with it – sometimes that works, sometimes it doesn't work.

We expect fewer filters when it's a blog because they know it's just you and your laptop.

Yes. I mean, there are probably things I have a tendency of, if I'm writing for Reaction or blogging that sometimes the piece is going to be too long. Whereas as a discipline, to write 150 words for the Times, and sometimes that doesn't work, and sometimes the pieces are too long, and you could you could actually kind of cut it in half. But other times you get something which almost by accident is because you were into the writing and as it flows you think, "This is enjoyable to write, hopefully it's enjoyable to read," you end up with something much longer. Or equally, the nice

thing about blogging is it can just be 250, 300 words of an observation, it's something that's that doesn't need to be a full column.

A work in progress.

Yes.

Or it's a reaction.

Yes, but it's longer than a tweet, so that sort of space between.

So how does it work in terms of how do you divide your time in any one week between these various roles? And also how does it work editorially? If you've got a good idea, so you think, "Right, that's my Times column," or do you think, "I'm going to blog about that." What actually determines the thought process?

Good point. And the Times gets the priority! But they are quite different processes. And I'm sure like most like most columnists, unless they're Boris Johnson who tends to just do whatever is right in front of any given moment, most columnists that I know who write a regular fixed day column, like I write on a Wednesday for Thursday, once you've got that column done and the office tells you that they like it, or that it works, and you've played around with the intro, and it's signed off and in the paper, you then instantly start worrying about or thinking about the next week's column as well, so you have a brief sort of moment of relief and then I hope that people read it and connect with it and interact with it and think that it's okay.

How does it work in terms of interacting with other columnists? For example, I had Daniel Finkelstein in that chair as well. I mean do you have the same editor and he says, "Daniel's doing Brexit this week so you need to do something else," or is it that it's okay for you to both do Brexit because he knows or she knows that you're going to have a different perspective?

You get a bit of that, and there's a there's interplay and that's one of the nice things about an operation being properly staffed, that that's a conversation, and that's then obviously impacted on by what the editor is interested in. Yes, you might end up with two columns on Brexit, but it's unlikely – and part of the job of the editing process, which I know from when I used to do it in newspapers, it's about the mix and the balance and not boring the readers on certain topics, and 'ringing the changes', as my old boss always used to say. The job is to take people through the newspaper and catch their eye, and change the pace and have enough different subjects.

What's the process psychologically? Do you read , say, the Times on a Monday and spot a page lead and you think, "Right, I've got some serious opinions on that," and you knock out the column in reaction to that because it's topical, or is it that you sit there with a blank screen and you think, "What am I going to write about?" Do you have like a short list of topics that you might have created over the week on your iPad or something like that?

Yes, I scribble a lot of notes. I tend to be, I suppose – is this a strength or weakness, I don't really know, but anyway, it's how I do it – is that I'm primarily politics, and I began as a political reporter, so I try and talk to people at the Commons, I try and phone people up I've known for years who are in politics, talk to mates who are in that field whose judgment I trust, sometimes with other journalists, sometimes with people doing other things, and you have a rolling conversation about what's happening, and then you try and… I would hope that people reading my column, and part of the point of it is to try and explain to them what's going on, so some of it's reported commentary, and then what I try to do is set that reporting in context and try and say what I think is really going on, or anticipate something which is coming down the line, and try and contextualise it.

Isn't that incredibly difficult though, given that there doesn't seem to be any rhyme nor reason to what's happening in politics? I don't say that lightly, but I mean, does anyone have a clue what's going to happen next? There is a sense that all of the traditional rules have been completely thrown out of the window. I mean, the leader of the free world just tweets whatever he wants, blatant lies, and he seems to just get away with it because the next day he'll say something else that will attract the media's attention; we've got Corbyn in the ascendancy; Theresa May, I mean she was certain to get a 100-seat majority, I mean, only an idiot would think she'd lose seats, and that's exactly what happened! I mean, my flabber can no longer be gasted by what's happening in politics. Discuss.

Well put! think that part of the problem is that you had a long period – which really probably begins with Blair or maybe late period Thatcherism, but Clinton is one of the key architects of it – in which the politics of spin, and politicians have always spun and they've always had press officers, of course they have I'm not saying that that's that that is new, but you had a very choreographed style of politics and ways of behaving, ways to avoid scandal, ways in which presentation mattered and could be manipulated and mastered. I think part of what then went wrong is that I think… I always phrase it as the viewer, the reader, the voter, started to rumble this, and I always say that they can see the wiring, so they know when they're being gamed. So even if only a few million people have seen The Thick of It, in fact it's probably more than a few million, it's probably four or five million have seen an episode of it, they're aware, through that and other comedy shows, things like Have I Got News For You…

Yes, Minister!

Yes, Minister! maybe even helps to begin that process. Hadn't thought about that. That's a good starting point. You can say that drives cynicism about politics and all the rest of it – the British have always been pretty cynical about it; the post-World War II period where they were less so is probably an exception rather than the standard rule – but I think people become more sophisticated as media consumers. They know when they're being gamed. They know even the architecture of a speech, and how that's presented, and what the person is trying to do to them, and trying to convey to them. And I think that meant that when you had chaos like the financial crisis, and politics thrown up in the air, large numbers of people were then quite

receptive to people who didn't play that game and didn't play politics as according to those rules of post-Thatcher, post-Clinton politics about how you would behave, and how you would be spun and presented, and the things you would say about family, and how you would do little clips based on what was popular at that moment, and how you would associate yourself with popular stuff. People who were then who broke those rules, the way was open for them. Boris was very interesting in that respect, in that people like the fact that he was maverick, he committed what were regarded as gaffes that would probably have destroyed any other politician.

And yet it increased esteem in which most you know regular people held him. They thought he was a legend, and clearly not a party clone.

Well, I can remember my son, who was then much younger, I remember saying to him just in passing at breakfast that the night before I had been on a radio station and that Boris had been sitting next to me, and he was the next interviewee. And of course he was just, "Boris, Boris, Boris!" So even amongst youngsters, he had extraordinary recognition as the guy who'd done all the crazy stuff on television, the mad tackles and the crazy hair and everything. So you have that, you then had Trump obviously, Farage is very disruptive figure as well and not playing by the traditional rules and prepared to say stuff that people would say, "But that's a gaffe, you can't say that!" and he'd say, "No, I just call it as I see it." I'm not a Farage fan but it was a interesting technique. And then I think it plays out most of all with Corbyn, where I'm extremely distressed by what's happening to the Labour party.

Me too.

But there's no doubt that it's I think a significant part of his appeal is that lots of people in the mainstream media and mainstream politics think he's a loser and that he's somehow, in their eyes, is authentic and seems to stand for something else and a different way of doing things, and just as Trump voters did, Trump voters *hate* CNN, they hate the mainstream media, they hate it as much as they hated Hillary Clinton.

But I've been doing politics for 15 years, and the only thing I knew to be certain is that any idiot like Corbyn would underperform when compared to someone like Miliband, who even then I didn't think would win because he was off the left, and then he outperforms Ed Miliband! I mean, literally every single facet of my political beliefs about how things work was completely turned on its head. There's no logic to it, it would seem, initially.

I think with hindsight, I mean, I thought standing there watching, waiting for the exit poll I was asked one of the parties, "What do you think?" And I said, "Oh, Tory majority of 40, but they don't deserve it." And thought it might be a little bit below that. But you're right, I didn't anticipate… very few people, I can't think of anyone really immediately who anticipated a hung parliament. There were a number of things in in play. The Tories looked incredibly arrogant. There's a real residual, tribal Labour vote that did not want to see the Labour Party humiliated and disappeared, and did not want Tory hegemony. There's also in places like you look at how labour performed in Scotland, there are a lot of voters there, there are a lot of Labour voters

who weren't necessarily endorsing Corbyn but they did want the Labour party to survive as a thing. And then you just had this disintegration mid-campaign, which I've seen a lot in recent years, but never seen anything quite like the disintegration of Theresa May.

They built a presidential-style campaign around someone who didn't want any publicity or any one to one. I mean, what can what did she do other than The One Show with her husband?

She's a very shy, reserved person to which people say, "Well, she shouldn't be in politics." But then so was I, Claudius. I mean, there are lots of examples of people… George Osborne is a very shy person naturally who's had to conquer that and teach himself to have a public persona that appears confident.

That used to be wearing a high-vis jacket.

(Laughs) it was for a while!

So there's that so there's plenty of examples of relatively shy or reserved people conquering that and being convincing politicians. But what I've never seen is the swiftness of the fall that, when she went into the campaign, and I was never a May fan, and she had this brand which… strong and stable came from focus groups. So those were words that were put sometimes given spontaneously. She was strong, she was stable, she was a sensible person.

That seems to resonate with the job of home secretary as well, isn't it? I'm the person who is not going to let your armed robbers out of prison by accident.

So she was, particularly with women voters, but when she called the election, hugely respected – I was going to say popular – but just seen as a good, sensible person, the sensible person who turned up after all these stupid Tory boys had been trying to kill each other in the street, in Downing Street, arguing over who's going to be prime minister. Along comes a grown up, you know…

Slightly austere, but in a good sense, not in any evil sense, in a in a kind of matron-like responsible person.

And then if you felt, over the course of seven to 10 days around the manifesto and what followed after that, you could feel it in the air, you just feel this opinion changing. And what had begun as strong and stable – and actually a lot of the public didn't really know her very well, they just had this vague impression of her – within a week, it went from that to 'strong as stable' was 'weak and wobbly', and worse than that, sort of unyielding, not very nice. And that shift happened in a week, 10 days, and was real – and was, in a way, good for the voters, because they clocked this stuff. They watched those encounters, they saw the clips on the 10 O'Clock News of her looking awkward, and they knew that this was someone not comfortable. They knew that there was something wrong, and something didn't fit. And the result was this opening for Labour. Also, the Tories were hopeless this time, and this shows

how quickly things are changing in terms of digital campaigning. The Tories are run, remember, a rather brilliant digital campaign in 2015, with a young team who essentially worked out how to use buying power and Facebook and Google to get in front of voters. What had happened in the intervening two years, was that sort of diminishing power – it still for some brands, still in terms of advertising and sponsored posts, of course it still is a part of the power of Facebook to shift products – but in politics, it had been replaced by… again, people could see the wiring and they could see when something was sponsored or something was pushed into their timeline. They wanted, genuinely, to share stuff, and hope of course Labour spent money as well, but the original impetus was organic, and of people joining something and joining something that was insurgent. And that was very different from what Tories were doing. The Tories tried to repeat what they'd done in 2015, but within two years the entire media and advertising landscape had totally changed, and Corbyn had done it on the back of building an army of, particularly among the young, younger people who were prepared to share this, and in many cases might not share every aspect of his politics, but particularly on the intergenerational warfare stuff, were motivated on the idea that they wouldn't be able to get a house, or the idea that were going to be saddled with debt, but it also went further up the chain than just young voters; it went up to 45. So the Tories have a major generational problem, which Corbyn exploited rather brilliantly. And also he's a really good campaigner, which most of us journalists had missed. What's he been doing all his life?

Sat on the back benches with his arms folded and speaking at ridiculous rallies.

I can't believe I'm defending Corbyn! But he's been at rallies and campaigning, and his whole leadership has been a campaign – unorthodox, but just going around to rallies telling people what he tells them.

I admire the fact that he stuck to his principles. It pains me to say it, but on some things like the abolition of Trident and nuclear weapons, I think nuclear weapons are profoundly evil and it's for that reason that I would ban them. It's nothing to do with efficacy of deterrent and all that. So there's many things ironically that I actually agree with Corbyn on. Having said that I'd rather French kiss a skunk, as Blackadder would say, rather than have him as prime minister.

Yes. That's a view with which I would concur. I think what I find scariest about the whole thing from a media point of view – and this is an open question, I don't know the answer to this – is that lots of stuff which conventionally would have mattered doesn't really matter at all. So when you say that he was effectively pro-IRA…

He won't even condemn it.

But when you get… but when it comes down to it, I often think with politics, and this is why Gordon Brown is in the mainstream of the Labour Party, Tony Blair is in the mainstream Labour Party, John Smith, Margaret Beckett. Perhaps even still the majority of Labour Party's MPs. But with Corbyn and MacDonnell, with the hard left, you are crossing into something different where they don't really accept

parliamentary democracy. Their interest is in the politics of transformation through direct action, and the 'politics of the street', as MacDonnell refers to it. And then, when you say… as I say, I don't know what the answer to this, is when you say to people or you write this, look, John MacDonnell is a Marxist, and people say, "Oh, that's an exaggeration, a ridiculous exaggeration," and then there is actually a clip of him saying, when he's asked, "Who are your greatest influences in terms of writing?" And he says, "The works of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky." I mean, he's not hiding it. What more do you want him to say to explain his views? But that simply doesn't resonate, so people think, "Venezuela it doesn't matter. The Irish question doesn't matter. Terrorism stuff doesn't matter."

Look at Richard Burgeon a few days ago, the shadow justice minister. The trade union leaders were saying that they will call for illegal strikes if public sector pay is going to be cut. He was asked on the Today programme several times. I mean, this is this is a man whose job it is if he was to get into government, to uphold the rule of law, and he wouldn't condemn people that would illegally strike. But this is insane.

But did you notice what he was doing there? And there's a there's a really interesting trend here, and it's very clever by the Corbynistas, is that he refuses to even accept the terms of the interview. So what's happening there is similar to what Trump did in the US with great success, is that the mainstream media is disliked by large numbers of people that Corbynistas would hope to appeal to. So from the off, just saying to John Humphrys or whoever, "Oh that's BBC bias," or, "I don't accept the premise of your question," is actually very smart. It's incredibly disruptive in media terms. The old acceptance that there were rules about how you behaved…

Rules of the joust. Queensbury Rules if it was boxing. You conduct yourself in a gentlemanly manner.

Well, more just that if you'd… I'm not sure if Denis Healey ever did that, but if you're asked the question…

You'd answer it. Or at least try to. You would at least acknowledge that you were trying to get round answering the question directly, or you'd say something clever in response – but you were accepting that the question to begin with was legitimate, and the broadcaster had a right to ask it. What they seem to be doing, as a deliberate technique borrowed, I think, from Trump and from observing how Trump did it, is to not play that game at all; to actually say the mainstream media game is a game, and is inherently corrupt and they won't be judged by it. And as I say, back to my point about how do you connect with people and how do you make them think about this stuff, there are large numbers of people who say, "Well it's annoying journalists, and if journalists are saying something then it must by definition be wrong, untrue, unfair." So you've really then got the politics of the echo chamber, which is back to the old Facebook point of people just reinforcing their own their own worldview. People always did that to an extent, you know, if they read newspapers they read a particular newspaper, they got a particular editorial line, but then they also had other things that they would listen to like ITN News Ten or the BBC.

I enjoy reading columnists I disagree with.

Yes.

I mean, sometimes like Polly Toynbee, I agree with two thirds of what she says. Other times she gets it wrong, but I'm always intrigued as to why she's got it wrong, because she's clearly not an idiot. And I'm engaged. I agree with 90% of what David Aaronovitch says, but I enjoy the columns upon which I disagree with him the most, actually.

I don't know why someone would simply want to just read what confirms their prejudices, but that seems to be the case for large numbers of people – which on something like Brexit just makes it almost impossible. And what I thought, as a Brexiteer, was going to happen, hasn't happened, which I'm sure my Remain friends would say, "Well, that's the fault of the Leavers," is that I thought you were going to get almost the coming together of moderate Remainers and moderate Leavers, which is probably about 75% of the UK, excepting that Britain was going to leave, but have to try and do it in an orderly, sensible way that doesn't completely disrupt trade, and retains links with the European Union and our neighbours. We can leave the European Union, which in its current incarnation is only 25 years old, but we can't leave Europe. It's geographically, culturally impossible.

To say nothing of the food, and we've got a big tunnel connecting us to it.

Precisely.

I don't think anyone is going to flood that.

But then that didn't happen. But instead you've still seen the 52/48 thing. It's very, very polarised and people are very, very angry. You've seen the reaction to bodices rather botched intervention, I mean, he's a lightning rod for anyone who is still really annoyed that Britain voted to leave.

So what's going to be next for you in the next few years in terms of where your career is going?

Well, I love writing for the Times, so editor willing, I'd love to carry on writing for the Times. I really enjoy doing that. Reaction, which I do when I'm not doing the Times, I hope I can grow, and I'm pretty confident I can, I'm pretty excited by it and I've a lot of backing from people who think it can work.

What's the URL, for our listeners?

Very good, I'd forgotten that. www.reaction.life.

Dot life? I didn't even know these top level domains existed! Is there a dot death as well?

Exactly. That's a good idea actually, reaction.death. So I hope we can grow that into something with a nice subscriber base of people who enjoy good writing, putting on reader events, which are doing more of this autumn, and pay journalists.

Do you consider yourself in your mind's eye, the editor of that site or the managing director? Just in terms of your own psychology, that interests me.

Having to do both really, as you know about growing a business, as the founder of it you just have to muck in and do everything. I'm quite lucky I suppose, in having done that editing thing earlier in my career, I did do quite a lot of commercial stuff as well, and I'm quite enjoying just being very entrepreneurial about it. And if we can, on the fly, quickly put together a good book event that our readers are going to enjoy, or do a ticketed event, that sort of thing, and if it helps pay the bills and grow the site, then great. But I think we can get it to a stage where it's got a good subscriber base, and it funds some really good journalism and continues to be terrific fun to do.

Well, Iain, it's testament to the terrific fun I've had in this podcast and this conversation, that we've actually run out of time, and I haven't asked any of the questions I wanted to do because we got side-tracked on a number of quite interesting topics. So thank you so ever so much for your time, I very much appreciate it.

Pleasure.