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Hugo Rifkind

Journalist and Broadcaster

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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 broadcaster Hugo Rifkind. Beginning his journalism career as an editorial assistant for People News, he went on to become a columnist for the Herald in Glasgow. Previously economist for the Spectator and GQ, he joined the Times in 2005 as a diarist and features writer, and now writes many of their leaders, a weekly opinion column, and of course, My Week, the very popular diary parody. Well known as a panellist on BBC Radio 4's satirical show The News Quiz, his debut novel Overexposure was published in 2007, and a collection of his columns, My Week: The Secret Diaries of Almost Everyone, was released in 2013. He's won a number of rewards for his work, including columnist of the year at the Comics Awards, and Best of Humour and Critic of the Year at the Society of Editors Awards. Hugo, thank you for joining me.

Hi Paul, how are you?

How has lockdown treated you, then? Has it proved fertile material for your columns and all the various shenanigans you're involved with?

No, it's awful. It's awful. The last thing in the world you want to be at the moment is a dilettante flippant journalist who looks at things and takes the piss out of them without necessarily engaging too deeply. That's awful right now. Lockdown has been an experience of looking at all this wonderful stuff in newspapers by people who really understand the world and what's going on, and wondering what the hell I'm doing in there as well. It's frankly been a professionally troubling time, but I think for quite good reasons.

I mean for me it's a bit like Groundhog Day.

Yes

I've struggled to find inspiration, but your job is to be funny. I mean, you can't force that, can you? You just have to be it.

Yes. I mean, it's perhaps a slightly heavy way to start, but it's a quite difficult business, the ethics of being funny at the moment. I'm fortunate in that a lot of, I'm sure we'll talk about it later, but quite a lot of my job is not funny, and that's fine. That's easy at the moment, relatively speaking. You speak to people who know what's going on, you analyse what they've said, you present the information, standard journalism. The funny side of stuff is tough. Firstly, nothing is funny at the moment. Everything is terrifying. But second, when the humour you normally do is... I mean, a lot of the humour I do is generally about other people's incompetence. Now there's certainly a lot of incompetence going on at the moment, but A, it's not funny. And B, while it's certainly worth pointing out other people's incompetence in a reporting fashion, whether it's worth taking the piss out of it, whether that's helpful, whether that's the morally correct thing to do at the moment, I'm never quite sure. So yeah, I find the funny columns I write much more of a struggle at the moment, the normal. Although I'm plugging away anyway, because that's the gig.

Is there a procedure to "be funny," because I can enjoy a bit of light-hearted banter in the pub, but if I had to sit down to make something that was both enjoyable to read and funny, I don't think I'd do that. Is it like the clap, you've either got it or you haven't?

I don't know, to be honest. I think maybe it starts off like that. The main funny column I write, the My Week column, I've been writing for, I don't know, 15, 16 years now, I think. And I was writing a very similar one for four or five years before that. So we're talking the better part of two decades. And certainly when I started off writing in that way, when jokes occur to you, they sort of happen in your own brain and they're like you're being told them by someone else, and you might think of something that makes you laugh. Whereas now I approach jokes in a very workman like, kind of, yes, that's funny, kind of way. I haven't made myself laugh in 15 years, I don't think. Hopefully I've made someone else laugh. I mean, I hope I'm not in the majority there. So you can actually be quite, you can think, well, that scenario feels like it might be a joke. That's how you tweak it, that's how you make it a bit better. So it's not dissimilar from other sorts of writing. You're just putting the words in the right order until they do what you want them to.

And then do you have some kind of comedic safeguard? Do you have a colleague or a friend or a relative that you then emailed this and say, is this funny? Because if you don't find yourself funny, how do you know it's funny?

Well that's a bit of a gamble. Not really, no, I quite often... so again, the funny column, I'll quite often get my wife to read it. She's very funny, she's got a very good sense. But generally speaking with My Week, every time I write that column, this sounds like a fake humble brag thing to say, but I swear it's true. Every time I write that column, and bear in mind I write 50 of them a year, and have done for, as we said, well over a decade and a half. Every time I write it, I think it's the worst one I've ever done. And then I am pleasantly surprised the next morning when I look at social media and it seems to be going down quite well. But genuinely every time I file it I think, well I got away with it this week, that didn’t quite work. That is just the experience of writing it. And you learn after a while to just have that experience and recognize it as probably erroneous, because your track record shows it's erroneous, but that is still how it feels most of the time.

I mean I'm like many readers, I love the parodies in My Week.

Thank you.

How often have readers not read the disclaimer and been confused, and what about the subject, are they flattered to be lampooned? I'd love for you to write a column mocking me, but I know that I'm nowhere near big enough.

So there was a weird period of time where, I think it was Sunday Times, ran a column that was also called My Week that was a serious look at somebody in business. And so I used to get emails from people saying my client has just invented a new, I don't know what, hand dryer or something. Would you care to write about them for my week? And I'm kind of like, I can, but I don't think you want me to. But these days, readers tend to get it. Sometimes, once in a while, someone won't get it. I mean, quite a long time ago, I did one of, I think it was Geri Halliwell. This was a really long time ago. And that ended up in Suits Corner in Private Eye because they thought it had been her. So then you're kind of like, well is that good? It's obviously been a very convincing parody, but also perhaps, if you don't realize it's a joke, maybe that's a fail. I'm not quite sure. There was one I did, it was Zach Goldsmith, once that John Snow quoted from at length on Twitter, because he thought it had been real as well. Which was again, a little alarming. Sometimes the subjects of them really like them, and I will occasionally hear from such and such, or, I was in this cabinet minister's house and he had it on the fridge, or he had it in the toilet, or something. And that's difficult because on the one hand you're like, well, that's flattering as a piece of writing, I suppose. But on the other hand, they're not meant to like it. They're not meant to read that and go, yes, that's how I like to be portrayed. So it's a bit troubling when people like it. Generally I feel quite guilty about doing it when I think about the subject, so I try not to.

Is there any line that you wouldn't cross? Because there's always the risk that you might bump into one of your subjects at a party. Has that ever happened?

Oh yes. I mean, lots of them. Loads, loads. The main one I can think of is I bumped into, it wasn't at a party, but maybe not long after, maybe a month or two after the first time I did Jacob Rees-Mogg, and he'd just had a kid, he just called, let me get this right. He just had a kid called Sextus, his sixth child. And I'd had a joke in the column about his nanny watching tennis, and he didn't realize he'd had 10, or something like that. I mean, I'm messing up my own joke terribly, but that's the basics of it. And I was interviewing Rees-Mogg along with Jess Phillips at the Cheltenham Literary Festival, and he made a point of bringing that up and saying, "we all found it very funny." And again you're like, well, that's very flattering that even the target of the joke liked the joke, but that was a nasty column. I wrote a nasty column about you, and I don't want you coming up saying you liked it. That's really not what I'm after. But generally I try not to bump into the people I've written about.

How does it work when you have to turn the words into speech and you appear on The News Quiz, is that a different challenge? Because is it quite a competitive environment as well? Do you come to the recording at the radio theatre with pre-prepared jokes, and how much of it is banter? How does that

work?

The News Quiz is lovely. The News Quiz is the most fun I ever have. I'm very fortunate in the way I do it, in the I, again, I've been doing The News Quiz for quite a long time now, I think about 12 years. 10, 12 years.

I've been listening to it for decades.

Yes, oh sure. And when I started doing it, I wasn't necessarily supposed to be funny, I was there as the journalist to talk about the news, but other people made jokes about it. And I think, I hope, I've evolved in someone who can hold their own in the comedy way. Jeremy Hardy, who died last year, use to always call me when he thought I'd made a good joke on The News Quiz, which was wonderful, those were the best phone calls, which I miss terribly.

And coming from him, that's must have been amazing. He is much missed.

Just amazing. Yes, I sort of lived for his weekly phone calls where he'd say, you sounded like a stand-up this week. And I'd go, thanks man. But again, that being said, it remains quite easy for me because really, I mean, yes, I need to carry my weight on a human level these days, but also I'm a journalist, so I should have a level of expertise in whatever the story is that perhaps some other panellists don't have. It's not competitive, not really. You hear about a lot of TV panel shows, particularly, being everyone's sort of fighting away and undermining each other, and it's always a competition about who's got the better agent. Whereas The News Quiz is very nurturing and supportive. You try very hard not to talk over people, you really try not to kill other people's jokes. People who treat it like a competitive panel show... the audience, back in the days when we had an audience, just doesn't quite like it. It's just not the vibe they want. As to whether you prepare, let's just say you know what's been in the news. So you have a think about what you might say about what's been in the news. Actually, the preparation that you do is, this might sound strange, but it's incredibly similar to doing question time, in that you're aware of what topics are going to come up and you think about what you might say about them. But News Quiz is a bit harder, because you've got to have jokes about them too.

So do you sit in a darkened room for two or three hours the day before and read the papers and plan? I mean, is there an actual process to it? I'm fascinated by it, when you say you prepare, how you would actually go about doing that?

So personally, because I'm a full time employee of the Times, when I'm not writing the three columns I do, I write leaders, I write editorials, and I also write features and book reviews. So I'm full time employed, I don't have a lot of free time generally. So my preparation for The News Quiz, generally is the afternoon before I'm recording, we normally record on a Thursday night, so that afternoon I will sit down for about an hour and think about the 10 or so topics that might come up, and make sure I've got something to say about all of them. Without giving away trade secrets, you might have a bit more of a steer if you're going to be doing the big story of the week. So you can kind of sort of work on a slight monologue for it. I mean, I wouldn't say I have the chance to spend real hours, real proper time working and preparing for it. I'd

imagine some comedians do, because it's much more important for a lot of comedians, because it's their main shop window and they make a living out of, you know, they have to do well on the radio and then they go and tour and then they sell tickets. So again, the pressure for them is much greater. For me, I just go on and I have a laugh and I love it.

What's it like as a performer now, not having a studio audience? Because as a listener, you know I'm a big fan of The News Quiz and Have I Got News For You, and all of these shows. And of course the comedians and the people and the guests on it are as funny as they were before-

Oh that's good.

with the lack of a studio audience. Oh, of course. But it's less funny overall, because there's obviously a contagiousness to laughter. I still love The News Quiz, it's not your fault there's no audience, but is it different to perform it as well?

I mean I've only done one since the lockdown. It's very hard. Angela Barnes is chairing that, presenting, hosting, what do we say?

She's awesome.

She's great, I feel really, really bad for her that this is how she starts, you know, sort of lifelong ambition to chair this wonderful Radio 4 show, and she's got to do it in these weird circumstances. What we do know is we connect through clean feeds, a high quality audio thing. But at the same time, we're looking at each other on Zoom, the panellists, so we can all see each other, so we can make eye contact, which makes a massive, massive difference. But the way it's very different from how it used to work is, as you say, normally if you're telling jokes, you do need people to laugh to know that you've just said a funny thing. Otherwise you don't know, and you would just the tone of how you're talking depending on what the reception's like, and it's just performing, it's how it works. That obviously doesn't work now. So what you need to do with the panel now is you need to be much more supportive of each other. You need to listen. Generally when you do it in front of an audience, you spend the time when other people are talking vaguely listening, but also thinking about what you're going to say next. You can't do that now, you've got to listen you've got to laugh if it's funny, because they need to know, they need your feedback. And so I think we're in the very early stages of figuring out how that works, but Angela seems to be a natural at it. I'm sure they'll get there, but it's tough for them. And I'm not going to pretend otherwise.

Let's talk about the sensible side of your job, as it were, the non-comedic then.

Sure.

As you say, you do a lot at the Times. how long have you been there now?

So I started writing for the times as a freelance in, it must've been spring of 2001.

Yes, I think that was about right. And then I went on, I joined the staff in probably 2005 or 2006, or potentially 2007. I can't remember which one. No, 2005, it must have been, I joined the staff as the gossip diarist. And then I did that for far, far too long, it was a horrible job. And I was a features writer again for a bit, and then I've been writing leaders, editorials now for maybe 10 years, I think.

Is the gossip column something that readers perceive would be great fun and hugely enjoyable, but as you just hinted up there, isn't as enjoyable as perhaps people might think?

I'm sure it's incredibly enjoyable for some people. Some people love it. I didn't love it. Just in a coldly professional way, it's a very, very tough gig. Depending on how you do it, it's a tough gig whatever, but if you're someone like me, I'm much more of a... I'm a writer. I've learned how to be a journalist, as in I've learned how to find out information and present it, and sometimes find out information that people don't want me to find out, and all that kind of stuff. I'm a taught journalist, but I am instinctively a writer. What I'm good at is writing, is sentences, is paragraphs, all that kind of stuff. And so when you're doing a gossip diary, that's all stories. You've got to be a hell of a story getter, I wasn't a hell of a story getter, but you've also, with the writing, because the point of me doing it was that it had to be funny. What you're really talking about is 10 to 15 standout jokes a day, all about some little weird political or showbiz story. And you've got to turn the whole thing round. This is in the days before Twitter as well, I was doing this. You've got to turn the whole thing around in maybe 70 words, and you're led by the layout of the page. And it was just an incredibly taxing thing to do.

It's put me off already, I can tell.

And then when you're not doing that, you go to these parties when no one wants you to there and no one wants to talk to you, but you need to get some sort of information in order to put it in the paper the next day. And I spent the whole time feeling like I was producing to 60% of the best of my ability if I'd been doing something else. But of course, if you're doing it 2% better than the next person would have done it, then you don't stop doing it until, you just never stop doing it until you make a fuss. So I did it for quite a long time. I think it was okay, I think readers liked it, but it was not a happy time for me.

So you were glad to move on from that. What came next them within the Times?

Very glad. So it coincided with the change of editor, well almost coincide with the change of editor. When James Harding took over, I think I kept doing the diary for maybe six months to a year after that, but I'd really had enough by that point. And so I managed to get myself, what did I do? I went back to Times 2, where I'd been a freelance beforehand, the feature section, and I mainly wrote features. But I also wrote a sort of opinion column notebook in the op-eds pages. And I kept doing the My Week column. Because the My Week column, I started doing when they took me on as the diarist, and it was basically an excuse to not have to write another bloody diary Friday for Saturday. It was, "Can I do something else? Can I just make some stuff up for this day?" And they let me do that and so that one I kept doing, even

when I stopped doing the diary.

And you still enjoy doing that now, though?

Yes. I love it. I mean, actually, well, I say I love it. At the moment, I mean, we're talking now on a Friday, Friday is the day I write it. So after we finish talking, I'll be doing this week's. It's like I said, normally, it's the most fun thing I write. At the moment, it's definitely the hardest thing I write, there's something very nice about something that's so completely your own. It's a real privilege in journalism to have a column that only you write. That you've created in concept pretty much, obviously it was based on other things when I started doing it, but it's evolved a lot since then. And so when I'm on holiday, no one else writes it now that's a real rarity, it's a privilege as a column, that it's so your own. So I do love doing it, but it's sometimes hard.

What's a typical week for you now then? How do you balance your time?

I write at the moment on a Monday. I write an opinion column for Tuesday, which goes in The Times on a Tuesday. On a Tuesday, I write editorials, which can be anything. So I'll write domestic editorials, I'll write foreign policy editorials, I'll sometimes write the funny third editorials. Although, people often assume they're me and they're very often not. Just as part of the editorial team. And I also, when I have time watch a lot of television. On a Wednesday, I watch a lot more television and write a TV column, which runs on Saturdays. On Thursday, I write editorials again, a bit like Tuesday and on Fridays, I write My Week and maybe one week in, depending, four or five or six. I work on a Sunday doing editorials for Monday.

How does it work as a TV critic then, when you're doing that? Can you watch television as a normal person? Because I watch television in my underpants, only half paying attention to it while I'm also on Twitter. You obviously can't do that.

I mean, normally when it's not lockdown, I go into the office on Tuesdays and Thursdays. So I definitely can't watch television in my underpants when I'm sitting at my desk next to all of the cams. That'd be outrageous. I'll think about it. But no, I mean, the TV column I write, I'm not a TV expert. I don't know a huge amount about TV production. I try and write about TV very much from the perspective of a viewer. So I try and watch normally. Sometimes, if I manage to clear a day, on a day when I end up not writing an editorial, say a Tuesday, I literally go into the office and I'll sit there and I'll watch 10 hours of telly in the office, and then I'll go home again. And if you're going into work and your job that week is to watch, I don't know, the entirety of season nine million of House of Cards or whatever, that's not a bad job, is it? That's pretty good. So I'd like to think I generally enjoy it as much as a normal person would.

And are the columns difficult to write, given the challenges on social media and all the brickbats, that you get all extremities? I mean, you wrote recently that any government in a democratic system will be overwhelmed by the crisis. I know that your columns have often sought to side with tolerance, about centrism and it seems with social media, that people are dividing into extremes these days.

Yes. I mean, that's good and bad, I mean, from the perspective of a columnist. I mean, I engage quite seriously with the feedback I get from my columns, both those comments and on Twitter and in social media, which is quite hard to do, because a lot of it is just mad and awful, and you've got to have quite a good filter. But also, a lot of the time you're wrong and you get called out for being wrong. And you can learn a lot from the manner in which you're called out for being wrong. Or you can learn that the argument you've made saying, X has actually been more suggestive of Y, because you haven't considered a whole aspect of things. Or you can learn that the throwaway comment you put in paragraph four, actually had more impact than you meant it to. And has ended up derailing the whole argument. And that's the only bit anybody notices. And so bits of that are annoying, but they're also very, very informative. I mean, the point for me when I realized that the kind of comment writing I was going to do was just going to be interactive like that. It was quite a long time ago. It was when there was the debate around equal marriage in... Well, when was, that? Was that 2011, 10 or 11 thereabouts? And the first column I wrote in support of equal marriage, I realized that I had basically structured it. It was basically using the arguments I'd had on Twitter, using the fact that I knew how to make this argument, and this was going to be the response. And that was how you defeat the response and all that kind of stuff. It was a very didactic process. And that was incredibly useful. So while it can be annoying, knowing that you've got however many thousand or sometimes tens, or even on a bad or good day, hundreds of thousands of people staring over your shoulder at everything you write, you always did. And that is the point, that the only difference now, is that you hear from some of them. So I really try and see the value in that.

I mean, in the old days, the only measure of reach that a journalist had, would be the news-stands sales wouldn't it, and the number of subscribers. Now you're getting feedback in real time. I think for me that stage one of the litmus test is, is any person engaging with me on social media or giving me feedback? Are they well-meaning? They don't have to agree with me, but one of the biggest shocks I've had is just how awful some people are. And it fascinates me. Were people always awful and Twitter's just giving them a voice or is there something about social media where they feel that can be desperately rude to people in a way that they wouldn't, if they'd met them at B and Q or a social occasion?

Well, I mean, I think both of those things are true, but also people don't necessarily know they’re being awful and when they are being awful, they think it's allowed and actually the manner... I mean, I write at least one and sometimes three columns a week taking the piss out of people, that's awful. Jacob Rees-Mogg never did anything to me, that I should take the piss out of the things he called his son. I justify that to myself and to my readers and I think it is justified, by the fact he's in a position of power and he deserves scrutiny and if bits of that scrutiny are mocking, so be it, deal with it, blah, blah, blah. But that's precisely what people think when they come at me on Twitter and say whatever. Now, that might feel offensive to me and often does, but I think a lot of what manifests as nastiness on social media is, it can be misunderstandings of over status and perceived status. And people respond to criticism on social media as if it's somebody standing in their room talking to them, but that's not the spirit in which it's made. It's made more in a someone standing

shouting at the television, for example. And so I mean, this probably sounds intensely hypocritical, because I quite often, will get back on there and give as good as I get. But when I have the strength to, I try and remember to be quite tolerant of the fact that people might be coming from somewhere quite different from where it seems like they're coming from, to me, if that makes sense?

Yes, absolutely. I mean, some journalists take a joy in stirring up the controversy and there's no shame in that. If that's what they have... People like Piers Morgan, even your own colleague, Giles Coren. I think Giles is a fantastic journalist. I absolutely love what he does, when he winds me up, I enjoy being wound up by him, because he's great. But you strike me as someone who doesn't seek that out in the same way as they might do. Not to say that their way of doing it or your way of doing it, is bad or good. It's just different.

No, I don't generally seek out controversy. I mean, sometimes if you're making an argument about something, you know who it's going to upset and you don't care, that definitely... And that was particularly true with say, Brexit, for example, you know you write a column about Brexit and you're going to... I mean, the percentages vary, but there's going to be a percentage of people who are going to absolutely agree with you and probably would do whatever you said. And there's going to be a per centage of people who hate you for it. And sometimes you don't care if they hate you for it. You don't care if you wind them up, you can almost delight in winding them up. And that's an unattractive and relatively dangerous way to think, but it can lead to some quite good writing. So I indulged myself in that quite a lot. But generally speaking, there's just not much point in controversialism, right. It doesn't get you anywhere. I mean, one of the things I find most upsetting about the whole Brexit process and I was a Remainer, a die-hard Remainer, is its just how unhelpful it all was. I felt myself starting to write in a way that I'd have never have written before about absolutely abandoning conceptualism, absolutely abandoning the idea of thinking, "Well, some people are unreasonable, but you still need to reach out to them or else you're not going to get anywhere." That's always been the bedrock of politics. And as much as I've got politics, my politics is as much as I've got politics. And I strayed quite a long way from that and didn't really know how to get back to it. And almost more upsettingly, quite a lot of the time, my writing was better, because I had done. That was all quite existentially challenging I think.

I mean, Obama said that a few years ago, he said that, "We can all disagree without being disagreeable." And I think that's one of the biggest problems, both on our side of the Atlantic and in the U S, that people want to attack the messenger. There are people that wanted Brexit and people wanted to remain, who had views that were worthy of respect and held them, honestly, that there was people on both sides that really dragged the debate down. I mean, I was a Remainer ultimately, I think it was a mistake. I was on the fence for the time during the referendum, but actually you could be a Brexiteer and Remainer and have that view honestly. It just seemed to me that the debate was never about what he should have been about. You just have everyone attacking each other. There was a pernicious and nastiness to it, wasn't it?

Yes.

It's was deeply unpleasant.

But it becomes tough, because yes, absolutely I would agree. This is again, me saying exactly the sort of thing that I feel strongly, I shouldn't say, but I'm going to anyway. It was absolutely true that when we had the debate on the referendum, people could in good faith and having known plenty and been well-informed and being smart and clever and diligent, could come down on both sides. By the time we were a year to 18 months after the referendum, I could no longer... When I found someone who was still making the case that not only did they feel the Brexit was something we had to do, because of where we had got to, but they were still making the case, "No, I think this is a good idea. This will be good for Britain. This is better for Britain than the alternative." I could not find any way to take their comments in any way other than, the only thing I was asking myself was whether they were lying or whether they were stupid. And I know how that sounds, but I mean, this is just, honestly, I could not look at the things being said by say, Michael Gove, 18 months after the referendum and just allow for the fact that he believed it, because I consider him to be a very clever man. And so when you're dealing with arguments that you think, "I just cannot respect this. I cannot take this. Either. This is in bad faith, or this is idiotic." And it has to be one or the other, because I cannot conceive of it being neither of those things, which was very much the situation I got to with Brexit. And in many respects with Brexit, that becomes tough, because if you're trying to be consensualist and you feel you ought to be consensualist, and you're trying to be a peacemaker, that involves an element of dishonesty on your own part, which I've never been very good at.

It's difficult, isn't it? Because, we're both educated, we're both on Twitter. There's an argument to say that remain lost, because we're basically all of the same mind agreeing with each other, but to slightly descend into cliché, but the men and women who work in working men's clubs in Sunderland and things like this, they're not going to view the debate even in the way that we see it. So that's probably why remain lost.

I mean, of course, that's right, but that has no bearing on what's right or wrong.

Of course.

I mean, you can make a very good case that Remainers, and I'd count myself among them have handled themselves appallingly, have made their case appallingly. I'm not sure it would have made that much difference, if they'd made it better, but that's beside the point. But ultimately none of that has any bearing on whether or not Brexit is a good idea. It just doesn't. It's a different conversation.

It's fascinating, because I obviously am addicted to the news that and you're a news maker, you're a columnist, you're a journalist. But I'm always shocked, I just assume everyone else is. And I have relatives in my wider family that might watch the news once a fortnight, if it's on, they just catch it on. One of my relatives likes Michael Gove, because they saw a 10 second clip of him coming out with a tray full of cups of tea for the journalists, that were waiting outside his house. And my family member said, "Oh, he seems like a nice

chap." That was it. That's why he gets the support, that 10 second thing of him delivering cups of tea.

Oh, I mean, it goes a long way. I quite like Michael Gove. I remember a few times I used to sit next to his wife and on Times 2, when I was features editor, we got on very well. Again, I find it just impossible when people who I respect generally, are just making arguments that I just don't believe they can honestly hold. And becomes an impossible thing to deal with. You either have to, I don't know what you do. You either have to do to reduce the respect you have for their intellect, or you have to call them liars. I mean, this is the only two paths.

It's very difficult. I mean, for my sins back in the day, I was a York Councillor. I was on the council for six years. And the day I got elected, Labour got elected, we lost to the Lib Dems and they took over all our environmental policies, about 90% of them, which were good ideas and badged them as York Pride, so they could put a good name on it. The Labour group just voted it down all the time out of what I thought, was just sheer bitterness. I mean, actually, if we wanted the best for York, we should have voted for it, it was our policies. But these local politician types were so bitter, that they'd rather just vote it down, just because they didn't want the Lib Dems to take the credit for it. I mean, it seems to be a terrible system on all sides, really.

Yes, I guess. I mean, that is the danger, that you become partisan yourself and you start being illogical in the arguments you make and the arguments you entertain. And I guess, all you can do is be vigilant about it, I suppose.

Presumably, you have a bit more respect and affection, or at least an understanding of the difficulties they face? Because obviously, being the son of a prominent conservative politician, I mean, obviously growing up in a Thatcher hating Scotland as well, that must've been quite a challenge?

Sometimes, although I was not very connected to it. I knew it was going on. I was aware of my dad's job. I mean, he was Scottish Secretary from what, I think, 86 to 90. So that would have been from when I was between the age of me being nine and 13, I guess it was. And so I knew, I was probably much more politically than say most kids my age, but it wasn't really my daily life so much. When I lived in Edinburgh and most of the action, I guess, Scottish politics was happening in Edinburgh, but big politics was all happening down in London. And we didn't really know, we didn't have political friends or anything like that. I did feel quite removed from it. I think that a lot of the legacy it's had though, is yes, I do have an instinctive assumption of good faith on the part of politicians. I do generally think, that politicians are trying to do the right thing rather than trying to be self-serving. That is my default position. I must admit it has been challenged over the past few years for reasons we've discussed. But that is generally what I come back to. And I think, the legacy of my childhood has a lot to do with that.

It's fascinating how party politics is less relevant these days. People backed Boris as prime minister, or they don't like... I mean, I resigned when Corbyn became leader. I've only just re-joined. I was a member for 24 years. And then I resigned when he became a member, Well, for the obvious reasons and then

re-joined under Keir. But issues like Brexit cut across party politics. I mean, it seems to me that party politics is more meaningless than ever now.

Yes. Well, I think it's also partly because we've... Politics is strange. Politics is, if we're talking about a pre-coronavirus age, God knows what happens now, but all the politics we had was big as an existential, but ultimately didn't, in a strange way, it didn't matter that much. If you think about the big political fights of the past, what, four or five years, you've got Brexit, you've got the Scottish independence. These are huge and important questions, but they're not the meat and drink of how much money we give to the NHS. They're not about what support a business should have. They're not about-

Existential, aren't they?

Yes. They're not about benefits. They're not about, oh, this is what we should do in schools. They're much more decadent than that in a way. And so, what that mean... We were talking about my dad earlier, I wasn't a terribly political teenager or even really in my twenties, but generally speaking for all my life, I've had different politics than my dad. I'm considerably to the left of my dad. I was a member of the Labour Party. I, in fact, joined when Corbyn became leader, although to vote against him, but that's another story. So, I always had very different politics from my dad, except I find for the last few years, I suddenly have very similar politics to my dad, because we agree on things like Scottish independence. We're both against it. We agree on things like Brexit and both against it. We have a sort of similar view of most foreign policy. We've been against, generally speaking, I think with some exceptions, we've been against the same wars. I think we disagreed on Libya, but I think that was the only one. Part of the reason for that is because the things that politics used to be about, which were basically tax and spend and individual liberty are just not what politics is about anymore.

I've always been on the left of politics, but your dad strikes me as an old-school politician. And I mean that with huge respect and affection, that he wanted what was decent for the country and was serving the country. Maybe I've got rose-tinted glasses on, but we don't seem to have that now. Or maybe I'm just... nostalgia isn't what it used to be. But there seem to be a respect for what was best for the country on both sides of the House, which seems to now just be unnecessarily adversarial.

Well, I think it will come back. I think the current crisis we're in will end up reintroducing notions of... You don't want to be grandiose about it, but notions of service. And I don't mean that in too sort of wartime and Churchillian a way, but just the idea that there is such a thing of... Again, I'm too much post Generation X to even be comfortable saying these words, but just ideas of patriotism and loyalty and responsibility towards society and community and all these kind of things.

Decency?

Decency is easier. Decency is abstract, whereas these things are a bit more... abstract is wrong, but you can have decency towards anyone, whereas these things are almost more tribal. The idea that you look after your own people first has been

slightly shameful for quite a long time, for good reasons. Whereas actually, when you have politicians and their job is to keep Britain safe from a virus to help people. That's why people talk a lot about the war now, because you're reverting back to a time where your first principle is to look after your people in a very tribal way. And I think it's going to change the way we all think about politics, I think, and it's going to change the idea of being in... It's partly almost back where we started. You have these politicians now who are running, and in many cases, mangling and cocking up terribly our coronavirus response, but generally speaking, this isn't what they got into politics to do. It's not their fault this has happened on their watch. These people, for the most part, they're hacks and political chancers who were meant to be steering through a stupid Brexit. They weren't meant to be dealing with this profound global crisis. And so, they have this responsibility thrust upon them. I don't know, they're the person left holding the parcel. And so, it really does reintroduce these ideas, if you're Matt Hancock now, your job is to serve the country in a way that has always been true in the abstract, but it hasn't been as immediate as it is now.

I was terribly ambitious in politics for well over a decade. I would have looked at whoever the Health Secretary was or the Prime Minister and wanted their job. Whereas now, having built my business... Yeah, I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. I want Matt to succeed, but I also don't envy him. I mean, it's a no-win job, is it? Whatever he does is never going to be enough. And I'm sure his intentions are honourable. It's like being the Home Secretary as well. No one cares about the Home Secretary until someone escapes from prison or a paedophile has done something and then it's all bad.

Well, I mean, it's also... To come back to journalism, it affects how you scrutinize these people. Because like I said, you've got to scrutinize these people. You've got to scrutinize what they're doing in a reporting sense. You've got to report government errors and all that kind of thing. But the bit of journalism that involves almost crowing about other people's failure, and I say that very cautiously because that's obviously a lot of what I do, is about, it's not just saying these are the reasons why this person is shit, it's saying, "Look how shit this person is. Let's enjoy how shit this person is." Let's... enjoy is the wrong word but let's just, I don't know, whatever, let's indulge in how a person…

Sneer at them.

Well, sneer, yeah. Or just the sort of rallying cry, "My God, look how crap this is," which a lot of satirical journalism basically does that. And again, I say that not as a criticism because it's a lot of what I do too, whereas now, there's just a kind of decadence to that, because it's like, you've got to appreciate how fragile the situation we're in now. If Matt Hancock just goes, "You know what, fuck this, I'm out. I'm done." And no one else wants to be Health Secretary and the whole government goes, "We just can't do this anymore. We give up." It's like, there's no bedrock of support there. It's not like a thousand other people who are both willing and capable to leap in and do the job. I think you've got to have a degree of awareness of however terrible they might be, they're there, they're holding the can. And so, there's a difference between sort of scrutinizing them and undermining them, which I find myself very uncomfortable thinking. But I do think-

I had John Humphreys on two or three years ago when he was at the height of his powers on the Today program, and even then I could sense that people were tiring of the gladiatorial style interview that people were having. And also, you could look at Corbyn and look at even Trump and Boris as a kind of backlash against the overly polished, overly erudite way of the Obama and I love Tony Blair, he's the best prime minister this country's ever had. I'm a huge fan of his, but you can see why someone in a working men's club in Sunderland might think he was too articulate and too polished.

Yes. I mean, it doesn't get anywhere... The interesting thing about Blair is of course, is Blair stopped being like Blair. If you look at Blair on Brexit, and again, this isn't really a criticism because I agree with him on Brexit, but what the hell happened to the third way? There were two ways on Brexit and he was one of them. What happened to the middle and to conceptualism on Brexit. There was none of that.

The big tent. Yeah.

Yeah. It wasn't big enough to have Nigel Farage in it, was it?

No. Well, to be honest, I think I'd go for a pint with Nigel Farage. He seems to be good company, but that's why a lot of people support him because they like him as a person. The guy's a legend. I'd have a pint with him and therefore vote for whatever he says, or maybe I'm just being unkind and unfair. I don't know. But it does seem to me that a lot of it is based on the affection that the public have personally for the leaders of certain parties or causes.

Yes. I think that the success of someone like Farage is because he hasn't done real politics ever. It's what we were talking about before, the big picture stuff that ultimately in many levels is just irrelevant, is all he's ever done. You try and think of... If the Brexit Party had done what Farage wanted it to do, and it swept the board at the last election, imagine if we had a Brexit Party Health Secretary right now. Brexit Party in charge of policing. A Brexit Party chancellor trying to put together a package that would help small businesses or in some way, ease the pain for small businesses. A Brexit Party chancellor managing furloughing. It's just madness.

Insane.

These people aren't competent to run anything. And so, it's relatively easy for Farage to present this thing of saying, "Yes, I'll pander to your prejudices and I'll be the guy you'll go for a pint with," but you wouldn't fucking put him in charge of a thing, would you? Would you?

I personally wouldn't put him in charge of anything, I can assure you. You wrote very movingly about how you're the only Jew at your Edinburgh boarding school. Did the rise of Labour anti-Semitism make you feel an obligation to reveal more and write personally about your heritage?

I wouldn't quite say it was an obligation. Maybe sometimes it was. It had never been

that interesting before. I hadn't really thought about it very much. And I didn't think of it as being terribly relevant to myself that I was Jewish. I had friends in school who in more recent years, he said to me, one friend in particular, he said, "I'd never realized you looked Jewish. I thought you just looked like yourself. And then I saw Jewish people and realized they look like you." I look a bit Jewish. It never occurred to me it was interesting or important. I don't lead a particularly Jewish life. But then I found as anti-Semitism became more on the agenda... Actually, where I sit in that I'm a very heavily exposed to the British establishment in every obvious way, but I'm also very much secular North London liberal, but then I also have this-

And a human being.

And a human being. Well, we'll put that last. But I also have this, I have a large family and a lot of my cousins are Orthodox Jews. And I have an understanding and an awareness and a familiarity with their community. I was once, to some extent, part of that community. I was bar mitzvah'd in an Orthodox synagogue in Edinburgh and suddenly all this stuff just became relevant. And you feel actually, maybe I have a role here that I can be a bit of a bridge there. I don't know.

It's such an odd thing because I genuinely can't understand it, having been a party member for 20 odd years, when there has always been this sneering sort of... I call it almost like reverse racism. It's like, oh, black people, Hispanic people have been, they're the victims of their race, but the Jews have got the money and the power. And whenever you try to reason with someone like that and say, "That's not the case," they were so sure of themselves about that and sanctimonious that they weren't being racist, even though they were, that you would just reveal yourself to be part of the problem. Are you a Murdoch stooge? Are you in the pay of Israel, et cetera, et cetera, which is yet more anti-Semitic tropes.

Racism is insidious in that way. And whatever our backgrounds or politics, we always need to keep remembering that, that the point at which we start understanding racism as only being about power hierarchies, we're sort of forgetting what it is. It's not a unique thing about Jews that they face racism despite being perceived as powerful. That's also the case with the huge amount of racism faced by groups in Nigeria, racism faced by groups in Rwanda, racism faced by groups in parts of China. Maybe what Labour was guilty of doing there was fundamentally forgetting what racism was, I think.

It's odd because I didn't think anything of it, but when I first got elected to the council sort of 15 years ago, whenever it was, and we had our first meeting and then afterwards we're all in the pub, someone brought up something and a person very senior in the York Labour Party said, "Well, that's the problem with Jewish people. They control the media." And they weren't saying it as a joke. And it was so ridiculous thing to suggest. I never even give it any thought. And then, because they were all lefties on the council at the local level, they were back then and never gave it any thought. And then when Corbyn got elected, I started to realize that there was an actual, very strong element of anti-Semitism on the far left, which was just an odd thing. I still can't get my head around it. I

resigned when Corbyn became leader, 20 odd years of membership and I've recently re-joined for obvious reasons. But do you think Corbyn was an anti-Semite, do you think he just turned a blind eye to it or just have a soft spot for them? There was obviously a serious problem there.

There was a massive problem there. I can't get myself into a space where I think Corbyn himself was an anti-Semite. It doesn't make sense to me. He did believe himself to be an anti-racist. It's not like he had this secret thing going, I'm an anti-racist, but not Jews. And we talked about Jeremy Hardy earlier. Jeremy was a great friend of Corbyn's and shared most of his politics. And Jeremy Hardy and I spoke often about the left and Jews and Israel and how all that kind of thing fit together. And I think the problem that Corbyn had was that he, I think he had turned a blind eye, like a lot of people on that bit of the left, for quite a long time to the growth of attitudes about Jews and about Jews because of Israel rather than about Jews through Israel, that were just blooming and becoming incredibly prevalent and were obviously just completely unacceptable. And I think he'd got to a stage where he'd put up with that for so long, it became impossible for him to call it out without undermining everything he'd always done. He was in a prison of his own making in that kind of way, but he must have begun to recognize when he suddenly looked around at all the people he was being attacked for hanging out with, my God, I've missed something here for years. But I find it very hard to comprehend a situation in which Corbyn himself would be thought of as having... well, that Corbyn himself had animosity for Jews because they were Jews. I think he was guilty of disliking a lot of people for reasons he hadn't really thought about. And actually, the reasons why he disliked them, he opposed them, he criticized them, whatever, was because they perhaps epitomized a sort of success in business, despite coming from a minority community that had perhaps abandoned the left in the way that he felt they shouldn't have done. Once you map all these things together, what you're talking about is Jews. But he would probably never quite did that, which I think was maybe quite common on the left. If that makes sense.

I have a friend of mine who's very senior in the Labour Party and we were discussing the problem and exploring it socratically as a genuine exploration, without us having an argument. And my friend said to me, he said, "The problem is," he said, "Corbyn is incompetent. So he's not actually competent at anything. But he also has a blind spot about this." It wasn't that, like you say, he genuinely believed himself to be anti-racist, but he had a blind spot. And when you add incompetence and the blind spot together, that means that, that's going to be the worst area of his leadership.

Yes. I think there's a problem on the... What a lot of all that revealed, there's a problem generally on the left with how the left views minorities. The left often has a quite paternalistic approach to minorities. Minorities are all very well if they require help and offer fealty and are downtrodden in some sort of way. I think the left has an issue with minorities, where minorities start behaving like anybody else. And what a lot of people, never mind communities, just people do, is if they become more successful, more established, They often drift away from the left. It's just what happens. All kinds of groups do it and I think there was a strong bit of the left and particularly the white left that looked ... and in fact, it's also why a lot of the most problematic people in Corbyn's bit of the Labour Party actually turned out to be, in

some shape or form, Jewish or part Jewish, I think because they had a difficulty of looking at this community that had been a minority and now no longer seemed to require the support of the left in the same sort of way, which led to an animosity that they just themselves didn't understand properly, weren't capable of comprehending properly, but which was absolutely manifested antisemitism.

I run my own business in public relations and one of the reasons I do that is I don't want to have a boss and I don't want to be managed and I don't want to do continuous professional development and all of this. It's not arrogance, it's just pure laziness on my part, but how does it work with you as a journalist? Do you have mentors or coaches? Or do you have other writers that you admire that you kind of run things past? Unless you're avowedly and utterly opposed to self-improvement like I am, how would you go about doing that?

I mean at the moment I don't, but I was lucky in the-

Good. We know best.

I was lucky in the earlier stages of my career to have had a few people who picked me up and helped me and used me and encouraged me. I mean, look, the advice I always give to aspiring journalists, and I generally ... I mean I don't really understand often the career path of journalism, simply because I was a freelancer for quite a long time and then I went into a staff job and it just, I didn't really do the kind of junior reporter to more senior reporter, going here and going there.

The traditional ladder with rungs on it?

I mean it had rungs, but in a slightly different way. It was much more chaotic. I did a lot of it backwards. I started as a features writer and then I dropped down to being a diarist and then I went, it just went all over the place.

So it's a Snakes and Ladders version of the career?

Yes. It's because I was freelance and because I was pitching copy at editors, often without having met them for quite a long time. But the advice I often give to people, if they're trying to pitch features, which is how I got started in journalism, is remember at every turn that your job is to make an editor's life easier. Your job is to basically arrive in an editor's inbox and they're going to look and go, "I can use that person rather than this person and my life will be easier." That means making sure you're pitching something that's exactly the right length and tone for the thing you're pitching for, that you're not treading on anybody else's toes in a way that's going to make your editor's life awkward. You're just turning up and solving a problem, even if the problem for that day is who's going to write this column. You're just helping. Where I was very fortunate early on in my career, my first job was at this website, People News, which was a kind of gossip news website that I got a job at quite randomly. My flatmate was temping in the company next door and he'd just been speaking to someone there and they said, "Oh, we're looking for people to write all this stuff for this website." He knew I wanted to be a journalist, so I gave him a sort of CV and they called me in for an interview and that was that. That was staffed at the time by a lot of people they'd poached from various newspapers who had friends at other

newspapers.

I started writing for that website and my boss, my immediate boss at that website was this woman called Olivia Stewart-Liberty, who had come from Tatler I think, and went on to The Mail. She's a novelist now, but she was friends with Stephanie Marsh who, at the time, was a commissioning editor on The Times who had just started as commissioning editor on The Times, she was very junior, and she was looking for people to fill her pages, to write funny things about haircuts and celebrities. She read some of my stuff on the website and she phoned me up and said, "Maybe you could write for me. Try and have a go at writing this." I sent her some copy and she was like, "Yeah, that's not quite right. You need to do this, that and the other to it." So she pretty much, I mean it's thanks to her that I got into The Times. I got into The Times thanks to her patience with putting up with me while I figured out what to do, in a very helpful, tutoring kind of way. That kind of thing is really, really, really important. The same is true when I started writing comments for The Times. I'd written op-eds for The Herald for a few years, but writing a comment for The Times is a slightly different ball game. My comment editor at the time, Anne Spackman, was very much like, "This is the kind of thing I think you should be doing. This is why it's useful." Then, at around the same time, I started writing editorials and then it was Danny Finkelstein who needed someone else who could write leaders. He needed someone else who could write editorials. He thought I might be able to do it. The first ones I wrote, he was like, "This bit should be different." Again, it is very much a kind of mentorship type thing.

I imagine Danny would have been a great mentor. We've had him on the podcast before. He's a legend. I've always been a big fan of Danny.

He's fantastic. He's one of these people who, as well as being very knowledgeable and funny and clever and all the rest of that, he just has an absolutely instinctive understanding of copy.

It's very readable.

He's very readable, but he's not ... some people are very structured in how they write. Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. Danny is very structured, but just seems to do it instinctively. He almost hides the bricks when he builds the wall, if you see what I mean. He's just a brilliant writer, I think. Again, he was incredibly helpful to me when I started writing editorials, but he wasn't doing it for my sake. Although I benefited from it enormously, he was doing it so he himself had to write fewer editorials and he had another person on the team who could write these things. So these days I sort of find myself in the opposite situation. I try to be as supportive as I can of younger colleagues and younger journalists when they're trying to write things and try and share how it's done and all that kind of thing. I think there's a problem in journalism generally where people don't think about the writing that much. Everyone knows there are good writers in journalism and bad writers in journalism, but the idea of teaching people how to write, which you can do, people think that you're either a good writer or you're a bad writer, but there's so many tricks and structures and all that kind of stuff that you can just, it's very easy to help people with. Most people just aren't really taught that kind of stuff at all.

There is a problem though, isn't there? Because a lot of people think that writing is easy. I mean it is a skill that you can acquire, but it's something that you have to fundamentally be able to do and have a skill that's there that can be improved. I think a lot of people, I mean I've hired a lot of ex journalists and some of them are fantastic PR people, and then others, they fail abysmally because they just can't get the way to adapt their skills.

Well exactly. I mean there's writing and writing and you've got to understand exactly what you're writing for. I mean I think I'd be woeful in PR, because I'm not sure I'm any good at hitting messages that hard. I think I'm quite an understated writer. It takes me quite a long time to get to the point. But what I find a lot of people entering journalism sometimes struggle to understand is they might be great writers, they might be really, really good, they have a thought and they sit down and write a blog about it, but you say, "No, you can't do that. You've got to write, I need this in 900 words. I need this in 900 words and I need to know what the point is by the end of the first paragraph." That kind of thing. That's a much, much more disciplined skill. It's why I always say to people that, even though most of the news we consume these days is online, if you want to understand how to write for newspapers, read a bloody newspaper, understand how the article you're writing relates to all the other articles in a newspaper. Understand what it means to write when you're not writing for the endless white space of the internet. You've got to fill that box and you can't go over that box and it's got to, in some way there's got to be some way of putting a headline on it that tells you what the column's about, roughly. Maybe there's even got to be a photo that goes with it. What's it of? What's the headline? That kind of stuff, which is very easy to just not realise if you think of writing as being just a matter of producing copy.

I'm absolutely gutted as a citizen that there's no money in journalism these days. I'm in two minds about it. A healthy society needs lots of journalists to cover what's been doing, but on the other hand, if my niece is starting out in her career, she's 15 now and she said, "I'm considering journalism and law." I'd say, "Well both are very worthy, but one of those you're going to be skint, largely and the other one you're going to do reasonably well." I'd probably tell her to pursue law. My own selfishness is creating the shortage of journalism. It must have terrible consequences for the industry, but also for society.

Well beyond, probably beyond teaching, there's not many ways you can use a brilliant degree with less reward than as a journalist. I don't want overstate that, I'm relatively well paid and there are journalists and columnists who are still doing pretty well, but yes, the money has fallen away from journalists and journalism in a big way over the past 10 years or so. Where that leads is it leads to people, the only people who are going to be ... well, particularly in terms of ... no, I guess in all forms of journalism, it's a bit like acting and it's a bit like other forms of writing as well, the people who are going to do it are the people who are going to be able to afford to do it, the people with private means. If they're the people with private means, they're not going to be representative of everybody else. I think it's always worth journalists fighting to get paid. It's always worth journalists, even young journalists, not writing for free. It's a very hard thing to say, you're not going to write for free, but not writing for free and there being a price tag attached to journalism. I have a lot of fights on

Twitter when I'll tweet something from The Times and people say, "Oh, it's behind a paywall, I can't read it." It's like, "I need to get paid. I need to get paid and for me to get paid my company needs to get paid. If my company doesn't get paid, I get paid and my company doesn't get paid if you don't pay for journalism." I will make no apology for writing for a paywall publication. Thank God for it.

Absolutely.

Thank God for it.

I subscribe to almost all of the newspapers. I don't read The Telegraph much, but I subscribe to it because I want there to be a Daily Telegraph. It's as simple as that. But yeah, you need a plurality of views. Do you not think, I mean, do we really think we'll have the same number of newspapers now as in, say, five years from now? How can that possibly ... will the Evening Standard be here? Even The Independent has already gone digital.

I think there are always, not always, but for a long time there are going to be more print readers of everything than you think. I haven't got the figures in front of me, but it's always worth reminding yourself of how many people still, on a day to day basis, buy the Daily Express. It never fails to astonish me, it's a lot. There will always be print sales, I think, to some degree, but no, I don't think we're going to have the same number of print newspapers in the same sort of way. It becomes increasingly less logical for there to be such a thing as a print Guardian. Perhaps in time it won't be that logical for there to be a print Times, a print Telegraph, depending on the delivery mechanism, the apps by which they're bought, all that kind of stuff. That's not necessarily negative. There is a huge plurality of journalism at the moment. There are a huge number of sites, a huge number of specialist sites, a huge number of longer form sites springing up. America's doing rather better than us in that way, but it's still happening in Britain. There is a lot of journalism out there and there is a growing understanding that journalism does, in some shape or form, need to be paid for. I'm not that pessimistic about the industry generally, although the shape of it now, as it is currently divided up into newspapers, I think is definitely going to change. Actually particularly at the mass market end, the red top end, the tabloids. I would be more worried about the future of some of the red tops than I would be about the future of some of the quality press, I think.

Last question then, what's next for you? I mean I appreciate things are great at the moment. Do you have a career plan? Do you want to do more television? Will you be editor of The Times? When Piers Morgan eventually spontaneously combusts on air and they need a new lead anchor, would you put yourself forward?

No, I don't think so. I really like my job and I like the way I get to do lots of different things. I like the way I get to do a lot of writing and a bit of radio. I get to be serious and have serious conversations about foreign policy, but I also get to write silly stuff in the paper. I pretty much have the career that I always dreamed of having and I'm not keen for it to change a huge amount. I enjoy broadcast. I think it's probably not my major strength, so I wouldn't ever want to do something that meant I was writing much less than I'm writing now. I don't think I'll ever edit anything much. As I said, I

edited the diary column and I didn't like it very much.

It's a tough job, isn't it?

Yes. I mean actually editing a paper, I think, is ... let's set aside the fact that I think that's a career path I'd have had to decide on some decades ago, or at least a decade ago, it's just not quite me. I'm not really tough in that regard. I'm far happier working for other people and being able to hide behind them. If my career in the next ... God willing I've got one, but in the next 10, even 20 years is much like it is now, I would not be unhappy with that.

Hugo, that's been an absolutely fascinating and very, very enjoyable conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.

You're very kind. I enjoyed it too.