

## **John Whittingdale MP**

**Former Secretary of State for Culture, Media & Sport**

**Media Masters — September 2nd 2022**

Listen to the podcast online, visit [www.mediamasters.fm](http://www.mediamasters.fm)

---

**Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm joined in the studio here in London by John Whittingdale MP, former culture, secretary and media minister, who this year celebrates 30 years as an MP. A former political secretary to Margaret Thatcher, working closely with the then PM John, specialised in media policy. After entering parliament in the 1992 election, a former chair of the culture select committee. He was appointed Culture Secretary by David Cameron when he grappled with the issues like the future of the BBC, famed for his love of heavy rock. John returned for an encore as a minister under Boris Johnson. John, thank you for joining me.**

It's a pleasure.

**It's not often that we truly get massive names like you. I mean, this is an incredible privilege.**

Thank you very much. Well, as I said to you earlier, I am a regular listener, and actually, I think you have been very good at inviting almost every major player in the media industry. So, I found your podcast as interesting to listen to as it is now to be here and take part.

**Well, that's very kind. I think now that we sort, maybe I've completed Media Masters now that you're here, I've got the former Secretary of State on, so I can just sort of retire.**

Well, there's no shortage of former Secretaries of State. There has been a very swift turnover. So, you could probably devote the next few months to nothing but former Secretaries of State.

**Isn't it an impossible job? I mean, I stood for parliament in 2005 and lost, but first of all, I loved just that year campaigning as an MP. I was a putative MP, I should say. It was an amazing thing where you actually get to see every aspect of society, from the local colliery to the chamber of commerce to everything knocking on all the doors. I don't know any job that gives you access to the complete city, every demographic, every area, every people. What an amazing job.**

It is, and it's a particular strength, I think, of our own system that we have constituencies, and every member of parliament, from the Prime Minister to the newest MP, goes back every weekend to sit and talk to the people who they represent in their area. And it does give you a direct linkage. So, if we're debating education policy, I will have been in and talked to the head teacher or the staff in my local school, and that applies in every area and it keeps you grounded. And, I do quite a lot of international work, and other countries don't have that strength of connection and look at me in astonishment; even when I worked for Margaret Thatcher, she used to go and do constituency surgeries evenly, and she was very dedicated to that. And it applies to every MP.

**She might have had protection at that constituency surgery because she was the Prime Minister, but it was unthinkable until recently that an MP would require actual physical protection. And now we've had two MPs murdered. I mean, obviously, he's appalling, but you must yourself feel slightly more physical, greater risk. Given that everyone seems to be angry and shouting, blaming everyone these days, particularly the MPs.**

Well, I mean, I've done it as you say for coming on 30 years, which is 30 years now, and I've never seriously felt threatened, but then again, my constituency is in Essex. It's not that far from South End, where David Amos, who was a good friend, was murdered. And no, I think every MP sat and thought that could have been me. And, I don't think that we should stop doing surgeries. I think that would be a massive loss to the system, but we have had to take extra precautions, and I'm afraid that's just a sign of the times.

**I mean, 30 years as an MP, though! You must like the job, or you're a glutton for punishment. It's almost a cliché to say, but what an incredible privilege it is**

**with every party, any colour, to serve the local people. I mean, the people you must have met would've been amazing.**

Yes. I mean, I've been incredibly lucky in my time because I went to work for Margaret Thatcher as her political secretary when I was 28, and I was elected in my very early thirties. Indeed. I still have framed on my wall, The Sun headline, which read, "meet Maggie's toy boy", which was a profile written of me by Trevor Kavanagh when I was first appointed to the job. And it then went on to talk in the first paragraph about how I liked heavy metal.

### **What was Margaret like?**

Pretty intimidating to be honest. I was young, and when I went to work full time in Downing Street for her she'd already been Prime Minister for nine years, and she was a huge figure on the international stage. And I was very conscious of that. I was slightly nervous about trying to advise her on what to do. She was pretty tough. She could be very demanding and if she didn't agree, or if she thought that something you'd said or written was not good enough again, she'd let you know. But having said that, she was fiercely defensive. Nobody could criticize her staff and she was very loyal to her staff. She inspired huge loyalty from them and great affection from the messengers, the garden room girls as they were called who were sort of the secretaries in Number 10, right through to her protection officers, they would all have laid down for her at the first request. I mean, she was a remarkable person to work for. I stayed in touch with her after she left office. I actually walked out of Downing Street two paces behind her and helped her set up a new private office. I remained with her until I was elected to parliament. Then I stayed in touch until sadly she died.

**The brutality of politics. It never fails to shock me even now with what's happening as we record this, with the current Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, who would've thought for one second, that he would've been decapitated so quickly, given that he, I mean, whether we agree with his politics, I'm not what an election-winning machine.**

I know. I was a Boris supporter. I remain a Boris supporter and I mean, he had flaws without doubt and politics is a brutal business, as you say, it is difficult to think it's been said many times, it's difficult to think of any political career that hasn't ended

somewhat unhappily. I'm sure he will go on. He has many talents which he will now be able to exploit outside of government. I had no expectation, particularly after he'd got past all the difficulties we had over the Sue Gray report and the rest, that was a very difficult time for him, but he won the vote of confidence in Parliament and it looked as if he could now get on. He was leading the world in terms of the reaction to the Russian war in Ukraine, et cetera. And then out of nowhere, as so often happens, something blew up and I know it was the last straw and he couldn't survive it.

**I mean, I'm a member of the Labour party. But as prison rules, I can respect my opponent. I thought in many ways he was treated unfairly as Prime Minister. I also felt a bit sorry for him personally, because obviously, he was a great mayor, outspoken, and quite a character to have that real ability to connect with people. And then you get the pandemic, which in a sense is a managerial bureaucratic rollout of vaccines, highly technical in nature. But if you get it wrong, people die. And, the Sue Gray report, as you say, people were angry at him for different reasons. And then this most obscure of technicalities is leading to his downfall, there are plenty of other reasons why he might resign, but not that.**

I think it was as much people's perception of him personally than any policy failure. If you look at previous Prime Ministers who have been removed from office, it was normally because of quite significant disagreements. So, Margaret Thatcher, who I worked for, it was all to do with the European poll tax at that time. John Major lost the election very badly. Tony Blair was scarred by the Iraq war. David Cameron for having called the referendum and lost it in the case of Boris, it was people who turned against him personally. And actually, I mean, I think there were always people who hated him and he's somebody who generates very strong feelings on both sides. And like all MPs, I was subjected to a huge number of emails from people saying that he had to cover. There were no circumstances under which they would support him again. And actually, it was a demonstration of the danger now of setting policy as a result of either emails or social media or whatever, because you only hear from the people who feel very strongly. One way the people who liked him, weren't writing to me saying, he's marvellous. He's got to stay until he went. And then having had this huge number of emails telling me that from my own constituents and not all were my supporters, but some definitely were saying they could no longer support him and he should go when he did go. I then got the reverse, a huge number of people writing to me saying, why is he going? That he's been so successful in these specific areas? Like COVID like Ukraine, Brexit, et cetera. And there was a backlash,

but politics is brutal as we say. And he left and now we have to find a new Prime Minister, perhaps by the time this goes out who the new Prime Minister is.

**It's what I call the TripAdvisor problem. That if you go on TripAdvisor to look at any restaurant or hotel, the people whose towels weren't changed exactly, they're the people that write the reviews, because they're negatively motivated. It's a vengeance frankly, whereas I've had loads of pleasant experiences in restaurants and I wish them well, but I can't be bothered to write a positive review.**

You're absolutely right. People tend to quickly complain if something goes wrong and quite often don't say anything when things all go as they should. That's not to say that people shouldn't complain. And as an MP, like all my colleagues, we get letters saying I've been waiting too long for my hospital operation or I had a very bad experience or the housing situation is very bad. And I take those cases up, I try not to reach a general judgment about the quality of the hospital on the basis of those few cases. Because, as you say, there will be 90% of people who've been very well treated are very happy with the outcome, but haven't complained or haven't said so. Obviously, we are there to try and help the people who are unhappy, but you've got to keep in the back of your mind that hopefully, this is a small minority.

**What was it like being a minister? And you went back as well. Like going back to an old marriage, I mean, I read Chris Mullin's diaries and it put me off wanting to be a minister because he didn't achieve anything. You used to go to the Brits and Iron Maiden didn't even win an award. So you can't have been that powerful.**

I used to say to the BPI many times, why is Iron Maiden nominated?

**You were the Secretary of State couldn't you pull some strings?**

Yes, well actually when I went to speak to the BPI, which represents all the record labels, they did introduce me to speak at their annual meeting to the strains of Judas Priest's, which they played and then presented me with a framed album. But if you become a member of parliament, it's often a lifetime's ambition achieved, but then you discover that most of the time MPs can't make a great deal of difference. You

can at a local level if somebody comes to me in my constituency to say they're unhappy, then sometimes I can help because I can get onto the chief executive or whoever and say I'm not satisfied with this. Please sort it out, but on a parliamentary level you are mainly voting according to your party, you are helping to deliver the, if your party is in government, the program, but you as an MP are just one person voting and you can try and persuade ministers, you can try and influence the direction, but largely, you are there to support your party. If you become a minister, then you begin to be able to set the direction of policy you reach are you're able to take some decisions. I've been lucky enough that I did spend some time running a department. And once you get to that point, then you can actually really do things which will make a difference to the sectors for which you are responsible.

**And it's an odd brief to hold isn't it, culture media and sport? Because like, if you're the health secretary, then there's a reduction in deaths from X, Y, and Z. You built that many new hospitals you would task with things like, had the BBC, for example, things that might criticize you. When I was a counsellor for nearly seven years, I was very much in support of an independent press within York, as long as it supported me. If they wrote an article criticizing me, I'd burn it down to the ground.**

Well, Culture, media and sport, it's now a digital culture, media and sport, is a vast range of different responsibilities. All of these are very important to people's lives everyday lives in a way that many government departments are not. I had a particular interest in media policy. I had done this from, almost, the time when I was first elected and I happened to become Secretary of State at a time when a BBC charter was up for renewal. So, the biggest issue in my intro was the renewal of the charter. I was pretty pleased with what we managed to come up with through, as a result of long, and sometimes quite tough, negotiations. I've always had good relations with the direct general and it may surprise some people even now to hear that I am a very strong supporter of the BBC. I have lots of criticisms. I think there are questions over how it's paid for or going forward. I think, sometimes like everybody, I've been critical of some of the content, but at the end of the day, the BBC is the finest broadcaster in the world and is an enormous asset to this country. So the DGs that I've worked with ranging from when I was Chair of the Select committee, Mark Thompson, briefly George M. Whistle, then Tony hall, who was there when I was negotiating the charter and now Tim Davey, who was there in my latest time as minister and with all of them, I had a good relationship.

**You're almost trying to balance an almost reconcilable set of competing priorities. Aren't you?**

Well, I mean, the BBC generates very strong feelings, particularly actually in the conservative party who have long believed that there is a sort of bias against them equally in the Labour party. I suspect as it's been shown, they've sometimes felt the same. And then you have the media, which is relentlessly critical of the BBC and always looking to write stories about a waste of money or bias or whatever it happens to be. I mean, being DG is a very difficult job. I don't envy them, but, everyone has also said, that they are enormously proud to be leading what is an extraordinary organization.

**And as you said, it's to our credit because of the unique way that the BBC is funded, they genuinely are. I believe them to want to be impartial, whereas they're not in other countries.**

I mean, we have a range. Media in this country ranges from the public service broadcasters that have an absolute requirement to be impartial, and the BBC is perhaps the centre of that. You then have other broadcasters who are still required to be impartial under the Ofcom broadcasting code. So, even something like GB News, which you might say takes a particular view, nevertheless has..

**To have a couple of token lefties on**

It has to, well, one or two are less than token. But they are scrutinized by Ofcom and the same applies to radio where even though Nigel Farage can be given the radio show that has to be a balance across the piece, then you get to the printed media, which have no obligation to be impartial, but, who do need to at least be factually correct, legally sound trusted because otherwise, people will abandon them. And beyond that, you've got the wild west of the internet now, which has led particularly in the last sort of few years to concerns about disinformation, bots and all the rest. So it was an enormous span. But at the heart of public service, broadcasting is reliable, trusted news reporting. That is not just by the BBC, we are lucky that we have a number of news outlets, which are regarded as reliable, trusted objective professionals, and that's something which I've sought to preserve throughout all the jobs I've held.

**I was chatting with Jack Straw a couple of years ago. And he said that the only people he really took advice on when he was Foreign Secretary was other Foreign Secretaries because Tony was his boss and his colleagues in the Civil Service and his Junior Ministers, no one was on the same rung of the ladder as him. Did you talk to other people in other countries that had a similar role to you within government? Was there a network of support?**

Not really because I mean, our media here is very different to other countries. I did when I was chairing the Select committee, I did an inquiry into the future of the BBC. And as part of that, we did go and look at other countries. I remember particularly we went to Germany and Canada and a variety, but there is nowhere quite like the UK in terms of the BBC. I mean, I think Germany, particularly on funding had one or two quite interesting models, which we considered, but no, there isn't a club of culture Secretaries in perhaps the same way there is, of course, as Prime Minister, or indeed as Foreign Secretary. I mean, you meet regularly in gseven meetings or whatever they happen to be. There is no such similar organization covering media and broadcasting.

**The press of criticized me quite a lot over the years from time to say I'm on various subjects, but, yet you are there as the cultural secretary and the tabloid pressure invading your privacy. That must give you a perspective to be at the heart of it.**

Well, I mean, I bare the scars in the same way that a lot of politicians do...

**And podcast presenters too.**

Yes. I mean, I've been splashed on the front pages.

**I haven't made the front page yet, but I aspire to.**

It's not something I would particularly recommend, but, I mean, that is the price of A) public life and B) having free and independent media. And occasionally I've said, gosh, now they have really tested my allegiance to the concept of a free press without any kind of state regulation. Not just in my case, but, there have been

colleagues of mine and, and the others and actually private citizens who are not public figures who have been treated very badly, but at the end of the day, and I still believe that an independent free press is an absolute hallmark of a properly functioning democratic society and that the alternatives and I went through the phone hacking scandal cause I chaired the select committee looking into that.

**You chaired the committee that actually had Rupert Murdoch in front of it.**

We did indeed. Of all things I've done. I mean, perhaps that session is one, which certainly got the greatest attention because it was watched around the whole world.

**What was it like?**

Well, it started off that the committee had been looking at phone hacking. We had obviously taken evidence from the editor of The Sun, who was Rebecca Brooks at the time Andy Colson, et cetera, the editor of The News of the World. And there was a feeling that we needed to go higher up the organization we'd interviewed the head of News UK, but the members felt strongly we should interview Rupert Murdoch.

**Can you subpoena them?**

That became the big question. So Select committees have powers but quite often they've never been properly tested. So we first...

**This is all this reservoir of ill-defined powers.**

First of all, we sent letters to three individuals saying that we required them to appear before the Select committee. And those three individuals were Rebecca Brooks, James Murdoch, who at the time was running the News UK Business News Corp in Britain and then Rupert as the ultimate sort of head of, of News Corp. And we got three letters back Rebecca broke saying, yes, she would come, James Murdoch saying, well, yes, I suppose I'll come. But I can't do the dates you've suggested. And Rupert Murdoch who said, no, I don't think it's anything that I can help you with. I'm not really involved. I sit in my office in New York and I wasn't involved. So we then wrote to all three, again saying we require you to attend and we set a date and we dispatched the Sergeant to arms to deliver these summons. And this is a character

who traditionally wears tights and carries a sword. I don't think he actually was dressed that way when...

**I worked for a member the House of Lords and he's got the equivalent is the gentleman usher of the black rod. I love it and the letter is "dear black rod"**

So the Sergeant was sent off to deliver these letters and, of course, we told the press we were doing it and the press got tremendously excited as to what would happen if he didn't come

**It's like Line of Duty, isn't it? It's an urgent exit required.**

I was being asked by the media. So what happens if he refuses your summons?

**It's going down**

To which the answer was, well, I didn't really know because it's never happened.

**God bless our constitution.**

I was told that there is a prison cell under the clock in Big Ben and potentially he could have been incarcerated there, but this did not seem very likely. So we had to await whilst we had to see whether or not he would accept. And he then wrote back saying, yes, he would come.

**He couldn't have not come.**

I've always suspected that the reason, and I have some reason to believe that this is the case, was that, of course in the UK, you have to be a fit and proper person to hold a broadcasting license and refuse a summons from parliament might have raised the question as to whether or not you could remain a fit and proper person.

**So is that why I've been refused to license?**

So, that represented a very serious threat to him. I mean, it never reached that point, but I don't know whether his legal advice has told him, but anyway, the result was he came and we had this session, which was watched by millions. I mean, because it went out across America, it went out across Europe, it went across Australia. It was even watched in China because Rupert Murdoch had quite strong Chinese interests, and it was the first time he'd ever really been cross-examined in a hostile environment. I mean he might have given interviews, but not been aggressively questioned by hostile interviewers. And he started off, this is the most humbling day of my life. And then he sort of slightly gave the impression that he wasn't quite sure and he'd asked James et cetera, but actually he, despite his age, he was clearly pretty sharp and we had quite a robust exchange which went on and just at a time when it be, I thought probably most people were beginning to lose interest after an hour and a half or whatever. I spotted at the back of a room, this person getting up and walking around to leave. And I wasn't really focused on him, but he was carrying this cardboard plate with shaving foam on it. And as he passed, he pushed it into Rupert Murdoch's face and all hell broke loose because we didn't quite know what was in it. And immediately sitting behind Rupert Murdoch was his then-wife, Wendy Day who sort of shouted and lept in the air and then sort of whacked this man and then pursued him out of the room. And there was this sort of policeman in the corner who hadn't really been paying that much attention. He sort of suddenly sat up, well there's air, airport style securities yet into parliament. You don't expect, well actually it changed what happened in regard, particularly select committee hearings, because I mean I went to see the speaker immediately afterwards and I said, look, I know this is the most widely watched select committee hearing ever and we have allowed a witness to be assaulted. Right, it was only shaving foam, but it might not have been. And this has gone out to millions and this is really quite bad for Parliament. To give him credit, John Perko said absolutely right, and there was an inquiry held into how it had come about and what measures needed to be taken. And so additional sort of checks was then put in place to prevent it. But it was the most extraordinary hearing. I mean the hearing alone questioning Rupert Murdoch was an enormous event, but to then have this happen at the end of it just added to it. And of course, the tabloids couldn't resist, because he'd started off with this comment about it being the most humbling day of his life. And so of course the headline that the next morning was humble pie.

**And yet I think it probably backfired to do that because there were so many things that were quite interesting that that pie pulled the focus away from.**

Yes.

**Because that's what led him on the 10.**

Yes. And absolutely. And there were even suggestions, which I don't believe for a second, but there were even suggestions that this had been a set up to generate sympathy for him and to divert attention. Because I think there were people who rather, as you just expressed were quite cross that the very serious issues, which he was being asked about were then overshadowed by this stunt that had been pulled by some comedian.

**Do you like being the Secretary of State where you've got whatever power, large or small, you've got some power to make that decision, you've got the government car, or was it better to be the Chair of the Select committee because you could explore issues, have a Socratic dialogue, but in theory, you couldn't sort of quote-unquote, do anything, but you have the power of thought leadership of influence, in sense, you've got a greater swear, haven't you?**

I wouldn't say greater. I mean, without a doubt, select committees have become steadily more important. And I'd like to think that DCMS select committee played its part, particularly in testing things like the paths to someone witnesses. We also had a session where somebody attempted to sue one of our witnesses and we had to again, go to the speaker and get him to remind the courts about the provisions of the bill of rights that parliamentary privilege allows select committees to take evidence from people protected from legal action. So, select committees are very powerful, but at the end of the day, a select committee can make a strong recommendation, but there is no obligation on the government to accept it. And quite often they don't. Whereas if you are Secretary of State, then ultimately, yes, you have to get an agreement of your colleagues around the cabinet table, but you essentially are taking those decisions. So between the two, I would always say that being a Secretary of State was the most satisfying job and, I felt it was the most exciting job I'd done.

**Many people have dubbed you the comeback king because you're culture secretary, and then Theresa May (I wonder what happened to her) replaced**

**you. Did you ever anticipate returning to the government? Cause I'm very close friends with Nigel Griffith who was one of the other ministers that were sort of, replaced and then came back into government. So for me personally, it was normal, but...**

Well, I'm very unusual in terms of going back to my first appointment. Most members of the government move around, let's take Jeremy Hunt for instance, who was Secretary of State for culture, media and sport, and then woke up one morning and my minister rings him up and says, Jeremy, I want you to be Secretary of State for health now. I mean, in my view, he did a good job, but this was out of the blue. It wasn't an area in which I think he was particularly knowledgeable. And that applies right across the board. Firstly, I was the first time chair of the select committee I'd ever been put into the job of Secretary of State of that department and I've only ever been in government or indeed in psych committee covering DCMS. So I mean, when David Cameron asked me to do it, he said, I'm appointing you because you know more about this than anybody else. Now, I was extremely grateful to him for saying that, but it's actually highly unusual. When the new Prime Minister appoints her new cabinet or his new cabinet, we'll wait and see, there were a number of considerations, but actual knowledge of that particular brief comes quite low down. And that's been the case for every Prime Minister.

**What was it that Robin Day said? Respectfully here today, gone tomorrow. there is something to be said though to having an amateur. And I mean that in the proper sense of the word respectfully as the decision maker, because you've got a network of professionals, but it does need someone that can have that broader sort of real world view.**

Yes. I mean, you're absolutely right. And the vast majority of secrets have stayed come into a job, having not necessarily particularly being involved in that area of policy. And you rely upon extremely knowledgeable and professional civil servants to advise, and you have special advisors now to give a political dimension. So, you are there to take the decisions on the basis of the advice, but it does help without doubt, particularly actually in the media field, which is quite technical. I had a very good relationship with the officials in DCMS, many of whom I remain friends with and I'm still in touch with because I mean, my permanent secretary said, well, Secretary of State, we prepared you a brief as we do for all incoming ministers, but actually, more about this subject than the people who've written it because they'd only been

imposed for maybe two or three years. I'd chaired the select committee for the previous 10 years. So to some extent, I did feel that I knew more about it than a lot of the officials and that undoubtedly helped. It meant that you don't have the period of getting up to speed on learning the issues, et cetera. You could hit the ground running.

**Is the UK like any country a drift on the globalization of media? Like we have the global head of marketing for Twitter, but he was saying the difficulties they have as a global media organization. So for example, Holocaust denial is obviously appalling and repugnant, but in first amendment free speech, right in America, they would've pulled your right to say in Germany and France, it's a criminal offence to do that. So if you have a tweet, it could be illegal in one jurisdiction and not in another, they've got multiple jurisdictions. And then also countries like Turkey that are obviously clamping down on these kinds of free speech, the least to say Russia and other states. So it's difficult. We're just one piece in a tiny global media jigsaw because you might get an injunction against The Sun, but like US Weekly could publish something in a sense. Are we just one minnow now?**

Well, globalization has been increasing steadily. I chaired a committee some time ago on privacy and injunctions where you had very strict laws in this country, preventing the media from reporting certain things, but actually, it took a few clicks of a mouse and you could find exactly what it was that was being, prevented from publication in the UK because it was all over the internet elsewhere. And that has become particularly challenging, as you say when you deal with these media giants, the big tech platforms, which aren't global. So I've been involved in the debates around the online safety bill, there's also the whole issue around competition of markets and the power of the platforms against the news providers, and publishers, where countries are all grappling with these same issues. So obviously you remember Australia tried to impose a levy on...

## **On Facebook**

Facebook and other platforms.

**To get them to pay for the journalism that they're linked in.**

We are looking at a slightly different approach, which is much more to do with competition policy. We've established the digital markets unit, but these are all different ways of addressing essentially the same issue. And it relates both to the economic consequences of the dominance of the tech platforms, which is where we are intervening through the digital markets unit and then the whole issue of brand content. And you have this very difficult trade-off between, as you rightly say, freedom of speech, which in America is absolute, but is regarded as very important in this country and quite a number of others. But you have to, against that, look at harmful content which may have contributed to young suicides, grooming, child abuse, jihadist recruitment, I mean all sorts of different areas of content, which is harmful. And that led to the most difficult concept which was the online safety bill proposed which I think I wasn't entirely sure was the right concept, which is this thing legal but harmful. There are many people who say, actually, if it's harmful it, shouldn't be legal and have this sort of rather nebulous middle ground of something that is legal. But nevertheless, you shouldn't be allowed to say it because it's deemed harmful. I don't think it's highly satisfactory, which is why I think it's probably a good thing that the bill is now being looked at again, it's been improved a lot. My colleague, Damian Collins, who chaired the joint committee examining it made some improvements, but I know this is such a difficult area, and I think it will occupy parliament for quite some time to come.

**I think some of it dates very quickly as well. I mean, I can remember years and years ago, the European Union challenging Microsoft on putting internet Explorer onto desktops. And it was all about that it should be competitive and they're abusing their monopoly powers, the dominant operating system, and now whatever the rights and wrongs at the time, it just feels a bit dated. I mean, now it's moved on to like my iPhone has a walled garden. If I create an app, only Apple can say where it's on there, that doesn't seem fair. But on the other hand, I enjoy the fact that I don't have a virus checker on my iPhone because of that walled garden that fascinates me.**

And, Apple is now sort of preventing the use of third-party cookies and having apps on which giveaway your data to the owners of the apps who can trade it elsewhere. And, to some extent, Apple can say that that's all about protecting people's privacy. But equally, it's strengthening Apple against the competition. I mean, these are very difficult questions and the fact that we have now got an in-depth study from competition authority into these platforms, I think is a good thing. As you rightly say,

the European Union has been active, as have other jurisdictions, particularly against Google and Facebook who have become the major sort of dominant players. You can go back and at the time, maybe 10, 15 years ago, the major players have now vanished and have been replaced by these new ones. So, things change, but I mean, you remember, do you remember when Rupert Murdoch bought MySpace?

**I do, yes.**

And that was regarded as a very fast-sighted move because he was moving into this new area of user-generated content, social media, it could have been, but it actually happened. And it wasn't MySpace that succeeded Google bought YouTube, which was clearly a very,

**It was derived at the time, actually.**

Yes, and now YouTube is perhaps the most powerful video content provider on the planet.

**A lot of my friends don't have a TV that's tuned genuinely to a tuner. It's just, that they have iPlayer and YouTube, and that's all in both apps.**

This then leads you onto another issue which I have grappled with and which is got to occupy governments, which is the long-term sustainability of the license fee. Because as you say for the first time, you have a generation who doesn't regard it as necessary to have a traditional TV, or to look at traditional broadcasting. They can and they're perfectly happy looking at the streamers and YouTube, and as a result, under the law, they're not required to hold a TV license.

**And I do feel a little bit sorry, for say, ITV because there's the dominant BBC, but now they're coming and been squeezed from all the Netflix, which frankly, would dwarf the BBC of their resources.**

Absolutely, and that's an argument which I'm very conscious of. ITV are now moving into their own streaming service, which is launching very soon ITVX and the BBC have got to the party a bit late, but they're also examining it through iPlayer, et

cetera. But you do have these multinational streamers with access to resources far greater because they are international. So I know we already have Amazon, Apple, Netflix, Disney+, and that list is growing by the week. It'll be interesting because I subscribe to all these ones and there comes a moment where you say, I just haven't got the time to watch another content provider. And the result is it means that the time you spend watching traditional broadcasters is falling, that is less bad news than the BBC, which at the moment can rely up upon the license fee, but obviously has profound implications for ITV. And of course, for Channel Four, which was another area of policy, which I spent some time thinking about and where it is exactly those pressures, which I think raised questions over the long term, sustainability of Channel Four.

**I was talking to my niece who's 19, the other day. And I was reminiscing about when I was a child and Dallas was on, on a Wednesday night and I talked about points of view. And she was saying, why would they have a 10-minute program after that? I was like, well, because it's an hour in America, but that we don't have ads. And I said, it was annoying if you set the video of the football before ran on late, because it means you'd miss the last 10 minutes of Dallas, because if Dallas had to start at 10 past eight, you'd miss the end and she couldn't get a head round that, and then I had to say, well, we had to wait seven months before we found out who shot JR. And she was like, what? So it didn't come on the next day in the UK after it had been first aired in the US? I was like, no, I mean, the technology has just changed completely. She even asked me what a B side was.**

It has changed everything. I mean, it's raised big questions for broadcasters and film production companies, because of course, as soon as something is aired anywhere, then either it is available through the internet legally or if not it becomes available illegally.

**VPN we've all got one.**

So, you've got the biggest TV show in the world. So it said, Game of Thrones, in its early seasons before it was available here, or we were lagging behind people were watching it illegally online.

**The biggest crime of course, for which they should all be shot, was they were tweeting about it without any spoiler alerts.**

So now you've got House of Dragon, which has just begun, but it's still going to be rolled out on a weekly basis to keep the audiences up. But, you're not going to have advanced knowledge by sort of seeing an American version before a British version. It has to be done on a worldwide basis that has raised all sorts of questions. I mean, it's a huge issue for instance, for the cinema industry, because we always had traditionally these things called windows. So a film was released for theatrical viewing in cinemas several weeks before it was available on well, firstly it was DVD in those days. And then video platforms.

**It was a DVD for rental and then a DVD for purchase. Then it would've gone to Sky. They've managed to con even more money out of us by having sky premium, which then goes onto sky movies. Then it goes to terrestrial, doesn't it?**

But, of course, windows were completely destroyed by the fact that you could actually find things on the net through pirate sites as soon as they were released, sometimes they were rather poor-quality films with a handheld camera and somebody who sneak one into a cinema, but they became steadily better. I know windows are still there, but I think most people regard the way you get around it for the cinema business as making this theatrical experience better than you can get by sitting at home. Even if you have an enormous TV screen.

**I remember that there was a science fiction magazine shop in York all those years ago, like 30 years ago. And, I paid some money every month because when Star Trek: Deep Space 9 premiered on what was then the Paramount network, it wasn't even going to be aired in the UK for like a year. And that was intolerable. So, they had someone with a VCR tape it and then FedEx it the next day to us. And we all gathered around like a TV in the shop and paid five pounds to watch it. I mean, it's a missed commercial opportunity, isn't it? Because they could have done that. And obviously, they've caught up. Here's a question for you that really does sort of weigh on me, to what extent are you grappling with existential problems as an MP and as a minister where there is no necessarily right or wrong? So like for example, and you don't need to give a personal view on this, but as an example, I have one friend who is trying to**

**lose weight and loves the fact that there are calorie counts on menus now. And then I have another friend who has an eating disorder who genuinely finds that the worst thing in the world and says that I understand it will help some people, but it's actually making my eating disorder worse. So you've got competing and conflicting priorities now like you, I imagine I wish both of those people, well that the lady with the eating disorder also says she doesn't want to be asked whether she wants calorie counts. Because that would then put the spotlight. So you're almost thinking, well, how do you grapple with existential conflicting priorities where you wish both sides well, and yet their interests materially differ?**

I had that same experience. I was approached by organizations representing sufferers from anorexia about that because governments set off with very good intentions. Oh no, yes. We have a so-called obesity crisis.

**Can I declare an interest as a member of the obesity crisis?**

Well, I'm probably not qualified to speak either. But yes, you set off with good intentions and generally I don't like banning things. I don't like taxing things. I think providing information to allow people to make an informed choice is a much better route. But even when you do that, you then run into the adverse reaction of people who may be suffering from a disorder like that, which didn't really feature. And another area I looked at is the whole issue of advertising of, so-called, unhealthy foods quite closely, there is a whole question mark of whether or not actually banning ads has any impact. And the evidence suggests it doesn't really, but when the people who were advocating it didn't follow on from the consequence, which is the impact on people who rely on advertising revenue. And so I can remember children's TV, apart from sort of cartoons from mainly America and the BBC that still provide CBBC, et cetera. There was a time when ITV had a lot of children's programming and then they decided to drop it. And there was a huge sort of pressure in parliament, early day motions calling on ITV, why have you done this? But it was the same people who'd also been calling for a ban on unhealthy foods, advertising on TV during the hours when children were watching or in programs, which were likely to be watched by children.

**So, there was no money left to make their shows.**

They really had not seen that if you remove the revenue generated by children's programming on a commercial broadcasting station, then the natural, obvious consequence is people wouldn't make children's programming anymore because they can't raise any money and that was indeed what happened. So you've got to look at the round and the impact. So you've got to weigh up these are the benefits, but these are the consequences and the costs and you have to reach a judgment.

**A lot of political matters are just a matter of conscience. Aren't they? I mean, I don't like the fact that we have Trident if I'm honest, I don't like a nuclear weapon that could kill thousands and thousands of people. And then I think, I don't believe any Prime Minister would want to press the button anywhere. They're not murderous and I don't know whether it has a deterrent effect because the people who would deter are not going to cough to the fact that they're deterred by it. So like, I don't know whether it deters or not. So like maybe I think, well, let's err on the side of let's have the damn thing and also it creates a lot of jobs, but it feels icky to me. And yet I obviously enjoy the safety that Trident does give me as a citizen of this country. if it does make me safe.**

It's one of those issues where there's no definitive proof. I mean, you can say, oh no, since the Second World War, we haven't had any conflict in which nuclear weapons have been used. And therefore, that is deterrence working. I don't know if those who are opposed to nuclear weapons would strongly argue against that. And actually, we are currently in a situation where perhaps for the first time there is a concern and there is a worry, that if things could escalate and we could see them being used. I believe in the nuclear deterrent because I mean, I do think it is the ultimate guarantor of our safety. And that becomes all the more important when as we have seen in the last few months, you have a state which is willing to invade its democratic sovereign neighbour in the mainland of Europe. So, I mean, what had appeared to be unthinkable for quite some time actually has now become reality.

**It really scares me, because I watched Blackadder Goes Forth. You see all these documentaries, those hundreds of years ago, it was the Germans. We hated, basically it was racism. Now, no one would have a problem with the people of Russia or the people of Germany. It's the regime that we want to**

**change. Absolutely. So at least we're less racist having said that, I honestly don't know to be to how to deal with someone like Putin because can you reason with someone who clearly is demented, frankly. And, if we were to launch a missile, nuclear or otherwise, against his people, frankly, he's murdering his own people anyway. Would that put him off? How do you deal with an absolute tyrant like that?**

I've spent some time on international issues and I've chaired the group in parliament, friends of Ukraine. I've been to crane many times and was actually very concerned about the threat to Ukraine before the invasion. I mean, certainly ever since the annexation of Crimea which took place in 2014, and all my Ukrainian friends said his ambition is to take back Ukraine.

**We should have paid attention to them.**

We should, I did make speeches at the time saying this is a serious risk. Having said that, nobody really thought that he was going to it even the Ukrainians didn't think he would, he masked all the troops on the border, but they didn't think he would actually invade. And then he did. And it is said that he only respects strength. And I think that is probably right. One of the reasons why he felt he could perhaps get away with invading Ukraine was because he had managed to get away with previously with not just Crimea, but he annexed parts of Georgia before that, he had people murdered on British soil. He has been getting away with things for far too long.

**Obviously, I'm not a military or tactical strategist, but what frightens me as a citizen is I don't even know what we can do. I'm not got to criticize the government for action or inaction because I don't know what we can do. We can't invade Russia. We're obviously doing the maximum we can do in terms of financial penalties against him, his associates is that all we've got?**

Well, we're doing a combination of things. Obviously, we're supplying quite a lot of weaponry, we're supplying aid, we are imposing sanctions on Russia and it has to be done on a global basis. I visited Mariupol, which is now a heap of rubble, about four years ago at a time when the Ukrainian armed forces did believe it was a significant threat. And actually, the UK was providing assistance to the Ukrainian armed forces. Then we were the only country to be doing so and, I think we perhaps do have quite

a good record in providing support as the Ukrainians recognize, but it hasn't been enough. And the current situation is still deeply worrying. I still have a lot of friends over there and the state of that country and the humanitarian crisis is huge.

**One thing, having stood for Parliament myself and seeing the privilege that it gives you access to every layer of society in every area. Fascinating. It was fascinating for me. I really enjoyed it. But I think this makes you as an MP, uniquely qualified to answer this question, which is society seems to be slight, not necessarily unravelling, but there's a lot of uncertainty. We've had the pandemic, we've had Ukraine, and we can't fill jobs. There's a lot of uncertainty about where people's workplace practices are changing. I used to go into an office five days a week. Now it's only two days a week. There's a lot that's changed. Cinema chains are going bankrupt. We thought we'd reach a sort of stable society, where it was getting slightly, potentially dull politically. Because things now are changing that we never thought would change. Are you an optimist about the way that society is heading? Or do we have some real challenges to address?**

Oh, we certainly have real challenges. I mean, in a way you have a sort of perfect storm of a whole number of different, enormous issues coming together. They are to some extent related. So, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war in Europe has resulted in an energy crisis. It's resulted in a food crisis because Ukraine is a major producer.

### **The bread baskets of Europe**

That is feeding through into cost of living increases particularly, obviously, energy is a massive challenge. And then you've got the post-COVID consequences with still a risk, COVID has not gone away. I've been fortunate enough that we have managed to tackle it and protect most people against the worst, but lots of people still getting it. Then you have an enormous challenge for the world and global security in the form of climate change, which has almost been pushed down the agenda because we've got these other issues, but it most certainly has not gone away. And as we've seen with extraordinary weather events, et cetera. So, any government is going to be faced with vast challenges on a scale that actually are pretty much unprecedented all coming together. And, for a lot of these, are generated by events which are totally outside the control of the government. If Putin decides to cut off all gas supplies to

Europe, I know the consequences are enormous, you can say that we are at fault because we have allowed ourselves to become too dependent, which I think is probably correct. But however, it is too late now.

**I think that's also a generational error. It would be unfair to blame one government or one party.**

It's 30 years, 40 years. Yes, absolutely.

**I mean, who'd be in the government of any party? Almost the desire to want to be in government should immediately disqualify because I mean, any Prime Minister incoming is going to be faced with an entry. I know that's a cliché that they all say that but, there are a lot of problems, but he seems to be that there are more fundamental problems than ever before.**

I've been in parliament, as you said for 30 years. I mean, I suppose the financial crisis at the end of 2008/2009 was an enormous challenge on a global basis. That affected a lot of people's lives, but it was a single event and perhaps we got through that and I'm sure we can get through the current challenges, but it, it does seem that there are all these different threats coming together. And you're absolutely right, it is going to require, I think not just strong leadership in the UK, but it's going to require a concerted international effort at a time when a lot of countries are facing uncertainty. I mean, we in this country have lost a Prime Minister and are slightly prevented from taking any firm decisions until we get a new one and a new government. You've got America where, goodness knows where America is heading.

**Now, if you do do 60 years as an MP, you're at the halfway point, this might be a chance to reflect on what's got to come next in the next 30 years.**

I don't think I should do another 30 years.

**What's next then, if you don't mind me asking? And you could say is none of your bleeding business.**

Well, the interesting thing about politics is that opportunity to come along. I never expected to be put in the cabinet. I was thrilled when David Cameron asked me to do so, and I enjoyed the job. I then left, as you said, and I didn't expect to be brought back. I've got various things I'm doing now. I'm just about to go to Korea where I was asked to become a Prime Minister's trade invoice. I'm going off to talk to the Koreans about business opportunities. That's quite interesting. I lead the UK delegation to what's called the OSC parliamentary assembly, which is very fixated on Ukraine and the European security position. So, it's quite a lot going on. I don't know, wait and see, it's one of the things that is enjoyable. I have a job which I love, which is representing my constituency. That is something which is very satisfying. And then you get asked to do other things on top of that. And I've been very lucky. I've, so far, had a number of very enjoyable and interesting jobs to do, and I hope there may be more to come.

**John, that was a hugely interesting conversation. I'm obviously incredibly grateful for you coming on. And clearly, I've completed Media Masters now. So, it has been a privilege and one of the most fascinating conversations I've ever had. Thank you.**

Paul, thank you very much.

***Well, wasn't that amazing? It was created and produced by Podcast Partners. They are really lovely people and rather good at all this podcasting guff. Find out more at [podcastpartners.com](http://podcastpartners.com).***