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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 Tim Shipman, political editor of the Sunday Times. A veteran of four UK elections and three in the US, Tim's career includes time at the Daily Express, the Sunday Telegraph and the Daily Mail, where he was named deputy political editor in 2009. His best selling book, All Out War, is widely regarded as the definitive account of what happened behind the scenes of the Brexit referendum, and he recently took home the Print Journalist of the Year Award from the London Press Club.

Tim, thank you for joining me.

Great pleasure to be here.

So, Tim, tell us about your new book, Fall Out, the story of Teresa May's bungled election and the battle for Brexit. It reads more like a thriller, really. What a year to chronicle.

Yes, it's amazing. A lot of people were generous enough to say the first book was a thriller but they thought the second one was a horror story, but I think that may just be people in the Tory party. But it chronicles all the mess that happened post the referendum, Theresa May ended the first book triumphant, it looked like she couldn't do any wrong. Mistress of all she surveyed. And the second book is all about how she spent six months grinding away at Brexit, and then thought, "I've got a 20% poll lead, let's have a crack at this," and what went wrong and what happened afterwards.

Because I was one of the many people, I don't know whether you were one, where I just thought she was very clever to call the election, because only an idiot would think she'd get a majority of less than 100.

Well, I think a lot of people around her, and in the Conservative Party, felt it would have been negligent not to call it. The mistake was not calling it in my opinion, the mistake was the campaign that they ran and the manifesto they wrote and the discordance between the public image of Theresa May up to that point, and the way she behaved during the campaign, which I think came as less of a surprise to people who've been around for 20 years than the public that were just discovering her.

I've always thought Lynton Crosby was a genius – in fact, he sat in that chair a couple of years ago – but to try and orient a presidential-style campaign around Theresa May – don't get me wrong, I think she's an effective competent person – but she doesn't really have the charisma. Frankie Boyle says that she looks like she's emerged from a haunted mirror.

(Chuckles) I think there may be some truth to that. Chris Patten, the former Tory chairman, said putting someone who's frightened of the media at the heart of a presidential election campaign is a bit like putting a heart surgeon frightened of the sight of blood in the operating theatre.

And having the leaders debate with Amber Rudd deputising for the Prime Minister was just weird.

Well, she did a pretty decent job to be fair. And that looked like it had put her on the fast track to success, but British politics being what it is, we speak about a month after her own career collapsed. So it's fast moving times at the moment for journalists keeping up with politicians making all these mistakes. I think of it as the bonfire of the contacts, the last few years, really.

So this is going to be a deliberate short and open question because this is going to give you an opportunity to monologue. I was thinking about this on the way to the studio in the car, thinking, "What is the question I want to ask?" And it really is this: What the hell is going on?

Oh, I wish I knew!

You of all people should know!

Well, look, I think most people who've been doing my job have been pretty scarred by trying to make any predictions about what might happen, and I think journalists have to take a view that we should be humble enough to say that our best abilities should be directed at trying to explain what has happened and write the most interesting stuff about it. Trying to predict what might happen is a bit of a fool's errand, but broadly speaking, my take on the period since the election was Theresa May went in boasting that she was strong and stable, by the end of it she looked weak and wobbly, by the autumn she probably looked weak and stable. The big question for this year is whether she continues as weak and stable, or whether the Brexit thing is her undoing and we return to weak and wobbly.

When Tony Blair was prime minister there was a sense that there was a settlement in politics. That it was argument over the left and right, but mainly around the centre ground, there was stability, and people became disconnected, almost bored, with politics really. I mean, now all bets are off, aren't they?

Yes. And it was the same for journalists. I started in Westminster writing about politics just before the 2001 election, and for the first six or seven years of my time there it was Blair-Brown-Blair-Brown every single week.

The tee-bee-gee-bees.

Yes, exactly. And some of it was fun. You could phone up one side and say, "The other lot say you are an idiot," and then phone them up saying what the other lot just said about them, and you'd have a story before you'd drawn breath, but it wasn't terribly exciting. The coalition gave us something new, something we hadn't seen before, but pretty much since the Scottish referendum onwards we've had earth-shattering turmoil. And the interesting thing is, it's all still flowing from that economic crash in 2008, and I don't think we really understood the significance of that. The strange thing is it took six, seven, eight years for that to flow through into having a big political effect. But that's the world we're living in now, where there are very fine margins between the two big parties. If you look at that result of that general election, a few thousand votes one way or the other could have meant Theresa May didn't need the DUP, or it could have meant she couldn't possibly have been prime minister, and it feels like there's big ideological politics going on, but the margins on the ground are pretty narrow and events do determine the way these things are going to go. I don't think we can predict who's going to win the next election at this point.

I'll get to that in a second. Because you said predicting the future is a fool's errand, but want to try and invite you to go there in a second. But in terms of looking at the broader picture, we nearly lost Scotland, we'd lost Europe, Trump has got elected; there seems to be a anti-establishment feeling now that people just want to vote against the establishment, whatever that is.

Yes, I think that's right, and I think it's a lot of people who feel politics has let them down. People say, if they look at Brexit, and about some of the reaction around the general election, this rejection of the party that was running the show, there is a slight feeling that as a crisis of democracy going on and this is all a bit of a disaster. My take on it actually, is that this is actually democracy having its voice. These are the people biting back. And I think if we live in this country, you can see a political class that is at least attempting to engage with that and analyse what's wrong and come up with some answers. If you look at what's going on the continent, where people keep making statements about, what, the Italians have now elected the wrong government so they must have a different government, I think that you can see the strains of why perhaps we decided to leave. I think the British political class gets a bit of a kicking, not least by myself, but I feel that however blind and denuded of hope they might be, they are stumbling around desperately feeling for answers and they may not have found them yet. But I think there's at least an attempt to try.

And do you think that kicking is going to knock people out of their complacency? The Democrats clearly never thought Trump would win; the Remain camp thought they were going to be a shoo-in, so although they campaigned everyone including Brexiteers thought that Remain was going to prevail; loads of people that I know that were Remainers didn't vote because

they were again sure that it would prevail. So do you think this is the actual shake up the people need to engage with democracy again?

Yes, I think that's possibly right. this is the joke about the Tory Party that they veer between panic and complacency, and post the local election results and a feeling I think from some of them that Jeremy Corbyn didn't make a very good job of how he handled the Russia-Syria issue, some of them now think, "Oh, well it's all right, it's all in the bag." If they get into that mindset, they'll probably be in for quite a rude shock. But if you look at the younger MPs, there's a hell of a lot going on at the moment, with people setting up new think tanks and movements, and desperately trying to come up with some new ideas. Yes, the subtext of that is that there's a bunch of people who might quite like to be leader of the Conservative Party and they're looking for a platform that they can arrive with, but I think in the under under-50s is a bit of energy there; the over 50s maybe drifting back into their complacency.

Do you think there's a chance Jeremy Corbyn could be prime minister? I am a card-carrying member of the Labour Party, have been for over 20 years, and that fought fills me with horror.

Well, as it does a lot of people in Parliament, including people on the Labour benches. But I think we'd be fools to say it couldn't happen. If you look at the margins from the last general election, and everyone got very excited about the youth vote and everyone said there'd been this youthquake, and everybody under the age of 25 would vote. Well, actually, if you look at the numbers, there's still only in the late 50s about 57%. If that got up over 70%, the level of people over 65 that vote, the Tories are out of here. There's no question about it. But Corbyn's personal rating has been dropping over the last few months and the Tories appear to have opened up a narrow, but fairly consistent, lead in the polls. And most Labour people who look back at history would think that with a pretty ineffectual government Labour ought to be quite a long way ahead in the polls at the moment. But those were the days that you and I were talking about earlier. The days of Blair and Brown and Michael Howard and all that sort of thing, you felt you knew what the rules of the game were, and now I don't think we feel that any more. You're constantly trying to learn new tricks, despite being an increasingly old dog in my case.

Well, you and me both, frankly. I know nostalgia ain't what it used to be and all that, but was there was a level of professionalism in our politicians in terms of media management 15, 20 years ago that doesn't seem to be there now? Corbyn seems to go from one self-induced crisis to the next. And frankly, Theresa May looks frightened of the media. When she's on, she looks visibly uncomfortable in a way that other prime ministers didn't.

She hates it. She doesn't like being around it. But it's more than that, she also thinks that it's profoundly unimportant at some level, she thinks it's trivial. And there has been this view, which May and Corbyn both share, that somehow the media are rather silly, and what's important, in Corbyn's case, are big ideas, or in Theresa May's case, sort of grinding on and doing a good, sensible, pragmatic, low-key job. But I would agree with your thesis. I've been covering this for 17 years now, and both front benches are the least imaginative and able in terms of dreaming up an idea, pursuing that policy and then selling it via the media to the public. And a lot of people

at the top of both parties view the stuff that Alastair Campbell and others pioneered as slick PR nonsense that in the Corbynistas' case is sort of witchcraft almost. By definition it's bad, because it's trying to sell people something rather than convince them of the big idea. But there is a basic lack of professionalism in all of this, and that's why a lot of Labour people despair of what Corbyn does, and a lot of Tory MPs look at Theresa May and think, "We can't possibly go to the next election with her," because she's just not someone who can sell an idea and a narrative, and the kind of thing that inspires people to go out and vote. I think Corbyn was very successful at getting the people who liked him to like him a lot. His challenge now is to get other people to like him, and that's not something he's shown himself willing to do so far, and in May's case there's a lot of people voting Tory rather grudgingly who would quite like to go to the ballot box feeling a bit better about themselves.

I'm going to vote Tory at the next election, because for me she's a competent prime minister and he's not going to kill us. I trust her with the nuclear codes, you know? She doesn't inspire me but she's a reasonably safe pair of hands. I don't agree with everything, but the thought of Corbyn being Prime Minister frightens the hell out of me. But that was one of the things I wanted to talk to you about, because there's this jingoistic, tribal, incredibly loyal following that people like Donald Trump have and Jeremy Corbyn, where you can't reason with them. At least the Tories would get rid of Margaret Thatcher when they needed to. Even we got rid of Tony, when he did honour the deal and eventually buggered off. You don't get the sense that any one of Corbyn's supporters can be reasoned with, and yet they're in the vast majority now.

Well, I think there's an element of that.

I sound bitter, don't I?

Well, I mean, you, I think, come from a section of the Labour Party that feels it's been disenfranchised.

We have. I'm one of the few remaining Blairites, and always will be.

You know, there's a lot of frustration out there about this. It is a bit of a faith-based thing, and people who share your view have a lot of fun on Twitter. If Jeremy changes his mind on a sixpence, they all veer from supporting him the one way to supporting him the other way, people always just tweet #NotACult and everyone gets terribly excited about it. But the only oxygen that's going to do away with that is a massive crushing defeat, I think, to be honest.

So the last question about this stuff, because I've got plenty to ask you, is what is going to happen between now and the next election? I know you just said it is a fool's errand to even think about it, but do you have an idea talking to people behind the scenes, or are they as clueless as perhaps we think they are?

Well, it's two armies manoeuvring in the dark not really knowing where their own troops are, let alone where the other people's troops are. I think there's a sense that

Theresa May will be given until Brexit to sort everything out, after which, as long as it's legally been put through, I think a lot of Brexiteers will think, well, at that point Brexit is safe, but we want to be the ones helping to define it. And it's pretty clear now that Brexit is not a moment, it's a process that could run on for several years yet, and I think Brexiteers will take a view that they want to be the ones doing the negotiating at that point. Ultimately, they don't trust Theresa May as much as they used to. She's paid quite a canny game of triangulating between the different groups in her party, and my take on what happened in the general election was she went in with two problems – the hard core Eurosceptics and the European Commission – and she came out with four; both of those groups enhanced and emboldened by what was happening. Plus 15 Remainer Tories who can overturn a majority, and the DUP, on whose vote she depends to remain in power. She's a bit like one of those medieval torture victims with a wild animal strapped to each limb, and all four of them are pulling in slightly different directions, and so far she's managed to keep her limbs attached to her torso, but it may not last forever.

It feels a bit like when you pull on one of the strings of a tapestry and the whole thing unravels. Because I couldn't have predicted that Ireland would vote to legalise abortion, and yet Theresa May relies on the DUP's votes and Northern Ireland is the only place in the UK where women don't have full control over their bodies. I mean, the whole thing just seems almost made up. You couldn't make it up.

Yes, you can pull on a thread and it all unravels, but in a sense it's all weirdly tied together as well in this really tight mesh. The whole of Brexit is now being defined by the Irish being quite aggressive, and the European Commission keen for the Irish to be aggressive to be the point of the spear to try and get Britain to stay in the Customs Union. And that's all come about because of the Irish question. And you know, six, eight months ago that was barely being talked about as part of the Brexit talks; everyone thought that some sort of fudge would be presented. And the thing that interests me is you look month by month through these Brexit obsession. The things that everyone gets excited about and suddenly becomes an expert on vary wildly from month to month, you know? To start with it was all should we be in the single market or not. And then we spent months talking about the Customs Union. And then everyone was suddenly an expert on Euratom, and whether we were going to remain in that, and what the rules were, and the European Court of Justice. And then the Irish problem came up, and ever since then we've been back to discussing that and the Customs Union.

Do you ever get a bit of Brexit fatigue? Because I do. I mean, Katya Adler is a fantastic journalist on the BBC news, but sometimes when she comes on – it's no disrespect to her, she's been in that chair – I think, "Oh, God, it's Brexit again, I'll go and make a cup of tea." And it could be incredibly important information she's about to say, but I'm in the kitchen making a cup of tea, deliberately absenting myself from hearing it.

Well, I think a lot of the country is. I mean, some of them think it's already happened, and other ones are completely bored of this whole subject. And I think what's happened is we've had a kind of… the kind of divisions that you've had in British

society for years have suddenly become seen through the prism of Brexit, and everything has become a bit weaponised. You know, there were posh north London liberals being rude about white working class people in Hartlepool 30 years ago, but now it's all seen as it's all down to Brexit. So it's weaponised a lot of divisions in society, and I think a lot of people are quite bored of that. As journalists, it's… you know, I try now… I've got this reputation as the guy who's writing more words about Brexit than anybody else. We did a big number in the paper earlier this month because we felt that it was time to put it back on the agenda, but most weeks these days we're writing one small story or a couple of stories. The days of writing 2,000 words every week fortunately are over, but I think you can see towards the end of this month and then again in the autumn that we'll probably be writing about very little else.

I don't say this just to flatter you, but I think one of the things about you that makes your writing so interesting on Brexit is that you bring it alive. You get a real sense of the behind the scenes nonsense that's going on, and now everyone seems to be on a combination of autopilot and winging it at the same time. The whole thing just seems to be a complete shambles from start to finish on all sides.

Well, the challenge is to try and make it interesting, and I'm lucky in that I've got an editor who will a) give it space but b) is prepared to tolerate fairly spicy language in his newspaper. And the nice thing about writing about politics these days is you can show it red in tooth and claw, and where people are being truly vile to each other there's an opportunity to show that, and that brings it alive. And I've always been interested in the personality battle; it's something that is probably my biggest fault as a journalist. I'm as interested in the horse race, as it were, as I am in the policy.

The blood sport of it.

The blood sport of politics. But so much of the policy in these situations is currently being legislated through the bloodsport of the personality battle, that that helps you. If you can attach these ideas to different people – people understand Boris Johnson and they've got a sense of who Michael Gove is and the Brexit bulldog David Davis – you know, they can see those people and I think that has helped to keep maintain some people's interest in the subject – not everybody's. You don't have to go too far outside the media village of Westminster to realise that not everybody is reading everything you write on this subject.

And again, that's strikes me as the negligence of the Remain campaign, when during the referendum, even now, is they were overly complacent and they didn't see that the Brexit supporters viewed it as an establishment stitch up. So the more experts they whittled out – they thought, "Oh, they're there, the more these northern people will here from these extra economists – and of course they saw it as more of an establishment stitch up. And now, I have a problem with people calling for a second referendum, because there was an in principle in-out referendum, which was carried by majority the British people, then there's been a general election where all the major parties stood on a manifesto to enact Article 15 get on with it, and yet much as I respect people

like Alastair Campbell and people like that, they're calling for the second referendum, but on Democratic grounds? The matter couldn't be any more settled.

No, I would agree with that. I find it personally difficult to countenance a second referendum, and it would be a lot easier politically if public mood had changed, but if you look at the polls there's been a bit of ebb and flow here and there, but if you talk to someone like Tony Blair, he will tell you privately he thinks it needs to be 60-65% baying for it before it's remotely viable, and that simply isn't the case at the moment. And it's not going to be the case in time, because that needs frankly to happen before the withdrawal bill has gone through, which will make it legally binding, and certainly before next March, and it seems very unlikely that that's going to be the case, unless something very dramatic happens in the autumn.

And do you think that what so-called Remainiacs, people like Andrew Adonis, they can't be advancing the case because they just look unhinged.

Well, that's an interesting observation, which is shared by some people I know. I'm a great fan of Andrew, he does his politics with great enthusiasm, but it doesn't look to me like he's winning at the moment.

Do you feel sorry for any of these people? I feel sorry for people who are confronting a will they no longer understand, but my respect for them is based on whether or not they make an attempt to get to grips with it. And some people have responded rather better than others. Westminster maybe has more people who live at the extremes than the rest of the country, but there are good and bad on all sides, and there are people who are fun, and people who are boring, and you try and spend time with the with the ones who aren't.

So what's a typical week for you? How does it work in terms of getting the story? Being a Sunday political editor obviously has a different rhythm to being, say, Tom Newton Dunn, for example, who has that daily rhythm.

Well, it's a totally different thing. It's a bit like a weekly essay crisis at university. People were always were terribly rude about David Cameron running his government like an essay crisis, and I slightly sympathised, thinking that wasn't the worst way to operate. It's always how I've operated most effectively. No, it begins on a Tuesday, I go in in the morning for a conference with the other heads of department, and around most of that table people have decided what's happening that week and most of it is being put on the page, you know, and sort of help the home section, travel, places like that.

Have they seen much of you kind of lunching at the Cinnamon Club Tuesday to Friday, and then panic Friday night or Saturday morning, then you're away.

Well, the week certainly accelerates as it goes on. So you have an ideas meeting on a Tuesday… Tuesday and Wednesday I spend lunching and talking to people, and hanging out at Portcullis House and disappearing to the Red Lion or the Blue Boar.

That sounds awesome, by the way.

The news desk wants a few more ideas by a Thursday morning, but you basically want to have your stuff in a heap by Friday morning. Friday is then an intensive day of making sure you have copper bottomed everything, putting in lots of calls and then starting to write, and I'd probably start to write by seven, eight o'clock on a Friday night and I'm normally still there at midnight. Saturday is actually an easier day than Friday really. You get your big stories written earlier in the day, if you've got a big read you get that finished, and then the rest of the afternoon is spent filling the smaller stuff in the gaps around the sides. But at my place they want the big stuff on the table so they can make the big decisions on a Saturday. My job is twofold really; it's one, to look back and give you the most interesting or a new line on something that's been happening, or a big read potentially, and for the front of the paper you want to try and throw things forward. What's the next big thing coming up? What's happening next week? What's the next big argument? What's the next big row? What's the next big policy decision? And on a Sunday paper you are entirely beholden to your contacts, really. There's some stuff that happens live. Not very much. So you're reliant on having ideas and chasing them, or people phoning you up, or sending you bits of paper or, increasingly, messages on your phone that disintegrate the second you open them.

It all sounds very cloak and dagger. And what is your relationship like with contacts? What is their motivation? Is it always purely self-interested? Is it quite matey? I was elected on York Council for six years, and the Yorkshire Evening Press, as it then was, I used to have a very good friendship with the political reporter, Gavin Aitchison, and I used to tell him all kinds of stuff really, because some of it was in my interests, some of it wasn't, but actually overall it was about building a friendship with him and I got repaid in spades.

Well, I think that's a very interesting observation. I think most people assume that everything comes with a leaden motive of, you know, someone believes passionately in something and wants it to happen so they tell you about it, or someone is a minister who thinks they've got a clever idea so they want you to know about it to show the world how clever they are. Sometimes they're in a battle with either the Treasury or Downing Street and they think if they tell you about it's got more chance of happening because Number 10 won't want to look like they're slamming the brakes on something. Sometimes, someone is aware of something that somebody else is doing which they think is a total nightmare, or they don't believe in, or they think won't work, so they leak it to you in order to try and kill it off.

One of these so-called briefings against someone.

Yes, exactly. But I would say a good 50% of it is simply people giving you stuff because they like you and they trust you and they think that if they help you one day, you might help them one day, and as a journalist you've constantly got to ask yourself, "Why are they giving me this?" But a surprisingly large amount of it is people just being helpful.

And when I did my six years as a counsellor in York, sometimes after the council meeting – I was in Labour, I was opposition – but I'd sometimes go with the Lib Dems or the Greens, and we'd all sit together and have a few pints, and after three or four you'd just end up telling secrets. I mean, everyone knew everything really, and I wonder whether alcohol obviously plays a part of that. It's the old journalist's trick, isn't it? Do you ever have to sit down with a source and get absolutely paralytic with them to get to the story?

Well, the key is to get less paralytic than them, and sometimes frequent runs to the loo to take notes are in order. It can sometimes look like… you have to sometimes claim the seal has broken rather quickly than it has so you can go and make the notes. But alcohol is less a part of Westminster than it used to be. I mean, for a Sunday journalist, yes, you can still coax people out on a Tuesday or Wednesday for a couple of glasses of wine. And towards the end of the week, you find people winding down outside the pubs of Westminster who, if you do a quick talk, and find them two hours in, then that's better than finding them half an hour in. But it's not as big a thing as it was. It's still a big thing at party conference, and actually because people drink less, party conference these days can often be a bit more leery than it used to be, because there are frankly fewer experienced drinkers than there used to be.

They don't have a strong enough liver.

You used to go to the TUC Conference and you'd be about eight hours in before they broke, these guys would be nine, 10 pints down before they said anything interesting. These days you normally hit pay dirt on the third glass.

You're living the modern life of a journalist in this interconnected Twitter-enabled age. So you're building your own brand, as well as that of the Sunday Times. You've got to pop up on television, do your punditry, you're writing your book… it sounds to me there's actually quite a lot to do. You've not only got to work in your career and do the story, you've also got to work on it as well in terms of… I mean, sometimes I've read your story in the Sunday Times, because I haven't yet got to the Sunday Times on any particular Sunday, I've done what me and a lot of my friends do, the thing is go to Twitter and then I follow your link from you tweeting your own story.

Yes.

So you're kind of journalist and marketeer.

No, I think that's absolutely right, and it is partly about… it's now part of our personal assessments at the paper are about what you're doing on social media. I remember working at the Mail when you weren't allowed on television and they didn't know what Twitter was. That's quite a while ago now.

Isn't that still the case now?

Well, I don't think that's the case now. But certainly there are papers where… you know, at the Sunday Times they like having writers with a brand who are well known out there, but that brings with a lot of responsibilities, a lot of profile, and a lot of criticism – and it means that you have to be quite careful what you do and how you do it. And you find yourself thinking a lot more about your craft a bit, and it is important to try and be balanced and to give everybody a fair shake, and that's what I certainly try to do in my books, is to make sure people can explain themselves how they're doing things and why they're doing them. And I think for the most part, there are people on the left who I think that I deal with Corbyn fairly, certainly there are people who don't. But the Sunday Times is a good platform for that as well; I think I've interviewed John McDonald three or four times, this is a guy who's happy to come to a place that he doesn't think is his natural political home, and tell us what he's up to.

It comes across as quite reasonable on the TV and in interviews. I don't agree with his politics, but other than a few things he's said, he actually strikes me as an all right bloke.

Well, I think going back to what I was saying earlier, I think he is one of those who is probably being a bit more professional than some of the others on the Labour front bench, and some of the interesting tensions at the top of the Labour Party at the moment have come down to… you know, McDonald was pretty keen to be Chancellor of the Exchequer and thinks that yes, he has a pretty radical approach to how he wants to run the economy, but he's going off to the city, he's talking to them, he's explaining what he's about. He's prepared to talk to journalists to explain what he's about. And if you look at that general election campaign, there was quite a lot in that manifesto that showed that he was trimming his sails a little bit on some of the tax issues, with a determination actually to cost the manifesto, which not everybody thought was a good idea, because it was obviously going to come out quite a large number. But he said, "Let's do that and that will give us more credibility." He talks to a bunch of economists, and you see in him at least the theoretical pursuit of what you and I would recognise as what Blair and Brown and others were doing 20 years ago. Not everybody approaches it like that.

It does seem to me that the public do still look at the leaders and make a judgment about their personality. I was talking to my mum the other day and she said Corbyn is like an angry geography teacher. She actually said, "The reason why I don't trust him is because of those flashes of anger in his eyes when he's doorstepped by Sky News." I mean, all politicians get doorstepped. And she compared and contrasted that to Michael Gove who, if you remember, brought out that tray full of cups of tea for the assembled masses. And that's one of the reasons why she likes Michael Gove and he doesn't like Corbyn. I don't understand why politicians cant see that.

Well, it's a mystery to me as well. A good interview should be a conspiracy between a journalist and a politician. You're trying to get the best story you can, and they should be trying to get their message across. Theresa May, and to some degree Jeremy Corbyn, both treat it as a test that they have to pass by saying as little as possible. I think that's particularly true of May. And her staff have a phrase called

“The Flash”, which is exactly what you’re talking about, is that combined look of terror and rage that goes through her face when she is confronted with a question that she doesn’t want. It’s not even that; it’s a question that she’s not seen before. Because for May, once she’s heard a question and she knows the answers she’s given before, she just wants to give it again. I think the question I always want to ask her in interviews, and there’s never enough time because you’re butting your head against the wall, is, “Why do you see this as a hostile thing? Why don’t you see the benefits of it?” I’d love, when she’s finished with her career, to have a proper conversation with her about that, but when you’ve got your 20 minutes and you’ve got to get a line there’s not really time for existential conversations about the craft of media management.

And not to defend them, but you can kind of see it from their point of view. I mean, I think they’re not handling it correctly, but to make their case for them they would say, “You’re either my enemy are you certainly not a friend. You’re not doing my PR, you’re looking for a news line, you’re looking for me to say something.” Our media culture is still about battles; it’s unnecessarily combative; if any minister thinks aloud it’s classed as a gaffe. I mean, it seems to me that there’s a pretty poor culture that we all operate in.

Yes, I think that’s fair criticism. But I think the politicians that are less cowed by that are the ones that survive the minor gaffes. I think if you are used to speaking your mind, you can get away with much more. Now that hasn’t necessarily worked always for Boris Johnson. His people would say literally anything he says is jumped over and it’s terribly unfair that when Phil Hammond says things of similar gravity in terms of gaffes he doesn’t get the same treatment. But if you look at someone like Ruth Davidson, who is in your face most of the time, she can get away with a heck of a lot more because she’s got a reputation for being frank and plain speaking, and if she goes five per cent too far she’ll get the benefit of the doubt most of the time.

She seems to do it with a warmth and a glint in her eye that people like.

Well, I mean, Michael Gove, Ruth Davidson, they’re ex-hacks. They sort of know the game, and it’s not just that they know it, they actually quite enjoy it. I mean, there’s a perfectly legitimate criticism of Michael Gove and Boris Johnson that they approach the referendum a bit too much like opinion journalists, and not enough like politicians. But in terms of…

Well, they won.

Well, they did. But you can look at some of these people and think sometimes they’re trying a bit too hard to be interesting than to be right. But it’s something that gets them the benefit of the doubt most of the time, and let’s be honest, we’re all human. It’s not just about the craft of media management. If people are generally interesting and say things that you can write down and put in your newspaper, you tend to think more fondly of them than people who don’t.

Do you think Boris's star has waned really? I mean, he didn't go for the leadership. To me, I thought it was a perfectly okay mayor, it suited his personality, that you want a outspoken agitator and a campaigner, and then now he's foreign secretary it doesn't seem to me to be the right fit. Because he can't be the old irreverent Boris, but neither does it suit him just being sensible Boris that's just campaigning for Brexit. He seems to be a more dull version really, and has fewer opportunities to give that Boris flourish that he used to do that the media used to love.

Yes, I think he's feeling quite frustrated. I don't think Brexit's going quite as he would have hoped, and I think he's in a constant battle with the people at the top of the government who don't want him to say as much as he says, and he reins in for a while. His staff think this is all going quite well, and then he just can't help being interesting again at some point. I think if he'd had a better first year as foreign secretary I think it's entirely possible he would have been prime minister straight after the general election. But the two occasions when it was possible for him to have that job he hasn't been in the right frame of mind to do it, and it's increasingly hard to see how that job falls into his lap now.

A lot of it is just luck, it seems, as an outsider looking in.

Well, there's luck and timing. You make your own luck to some degree. You've got to be someone who looks credible, but who also grabs the main chance when it comes. And if you look on the other side of politics at the moment, a lot of people pining for the return of David Miliband. This is a guy who had three at least three chances to grab the prize – twice against Gordon Brown and then against his own brother – and he ended up not being ruthless enough to do it. I think he needed four second preference votes from Labour MPs, half of whom he didn't bother to phone to ask for those votes. And everybody who's sitting around now saying, "Why can't we have David Miliband?" Well, you could have had him before if he'd grabbed it when it was passing. I always think of politics and the leadership as a little bit like one of those ZX Spectrum games where the logs and stuff were floating along the river and you have to cross over. And it was a case of timing your jumps to the next log or the next passing vine – and the politicians who get on are the ones who time run well. And Theresa May have fallen short, but everybody else had shot themselves in the head, or shot other people in the head, and she was the one left standing. And she was at least there and she looked credible. And that's how it fell to her.

I mean, fortune favours the bold, and when you look at the ultimately failed careers of people like Gordon Brown and David Miliband, there was the election that never was under Gordon, he ran the entire country up the hill thinking we were expecting a general election and then clearly had a wobble, and then pathetically tried to deny it. Everyone watching it on the six o'clock news…

Well, it's always the denial, isn't it? So Gordon Brown said, "I was never thinking of having an election," and then Theresa May told us nothing had changed. And I think both those moments, the British public looked at those two leaders and said, "You must be having a laugh," basically. "You're taking us for idiots." And the public will put up with quite a lot of stuff, but they won't put up with that.

I knew I'd end up asking you about all this interesting stuff, but I want to try and ask you about your journalism as well. This being a media podcast and all. So I'm going to force myself into… I don't want to get sued under the Trades Descriptions Act!

The boring details of my career.

Well, no – because it's incredibly interesting actually. I mean, this could be a three-hour podcast! So let's work backwards. You were deputy political editor at The Daily Mail. What was that like? Are you of the one view that Dacre should be locked in a mental hospital for the rest of his life, or the other camp that says he should be in prison for the rest of his life?

Is there a third camp?

Absolutely not!

That says he's the probably the best newspaper editor of the last 30 years?

We'll let you have it then, go on.

No, I mean, it's a tremendously invigorating place to work, it's a hugely professional place, and when it's 'on it' it's probably the most satisfying place to work in Fleet Street.

It's just utterly ubiquitous, not only in this country but around the world. The Mail Online is the most widely read newspaper website in the world.

Yes, and I think there's probably a problem for them going forward, that the paper and the website are so completely different. Paul Dacre gets criticised, he gets called Day Old Dacre because they are sometimes a bit slow to respond to things, but when he reads the British public well – which he does probably more regularly than any other editor – he captures something. And he does everything, in the old Spinal Tap phrase, by turning it up to 11. A lot of people don't like that; sometimes it's quite awkward when you're working there. It certainly makes maintaining contact sometimes more difficult than working in other places. But when they get it right, boy do they get it right! And they do it with balls and gusto. And when you're involved in that, that can be quite a lot of fun. I much prefer working well and working, and having the space to do journalism with a bit more detail and depth and nuance, but also with guts. My editor, Martin Ivens, is someone who has printed all sorts of things that other editors would have run a mile from, if you think about the stuff the Insight team has done on Russian drugs and the FIFA scandal.

The Sunday Times has been for decades my favourite paper, and frankly always will be. There's a lot in it to read.

Well, I find that very week! I mean, you know, I think I sort of know what's in it.

There isn't a lot in other Sunday papers though, randomly. You get the Observer – no disrespect to it – but there's not a lot in it.

I sit down sometimes thinking I know everything that's in it and start flicking, and two hours later you're like, "Oh, that's good, I must have a look at that as well…" And in politics, what you want is an editor that backs you up. We had a story earlier this month about the doomsday scenarios that the Brexit department was putting together, and they came at us pretty hard over that. But I was confident in the story, and he backed me up, and we splashed it, and if we'd done anything other than splash it people would have thought we didn't believe it ourselves. The paper backed Brexit, but here we were saying, "This thing isn't going terribly well."

There's trouble at t'mill.

Yes. And the editors are a good story and stuck it on the front page and away we go. It's like the Mail a little bit in that you want to do it right. You want to have the big story, and if it causes a bit of mischief then all the better.

You've worked for Dacre, you've worked for Richard Desmond. You've worked for some pretty big characters over the years. Do you lament the fact that we don't have the robber press barons any more? You look at someone like Yevgeny Lebedev, and he isn't of the Bond villain mode that say, Robert Maxwell was. I think the worst thing that Yevgeny Lebedev wants to do is just to be photographed with a few Hollywood celebrities, he doesn't want to kill us. I quite like the fact that Robert Maxwell might have get killed me. You want really evil people owning papers, surely?

Well, I think there's a certain section of Britain that thinks all the people that own and run newspapers are evil anyway, so I wouldn't particularly say we need any more of that! You know, it's a difficult market at the moment. The world is changing around us. Everyone's got to adapt. As you were saying earlier, as a political journalist, you spend half your life on social media in addition to things you're writing for. Before I did this podcast I did another podcast this morning, I've been on Twitter, I give speeches, I talk to contacts. That's my week, and it's constantly talking to lots of different people. But newspapers are the same – they've got to adapt and survive. And that means that you have to do it with a bit of balls. And I think the interesting thing at the moment is people are prepared to pay good money for proper journalism, and I think the one thing you could say about the Times and the Sunday Times is they've made a subscription model work in the same way that the Washington Post and the New York Times have, and that means there might be a future for doing what I'm doing for a good few years yet. I've had a lot of colleagues and friends disappear into PR, and they'll be dragging me, I suspect, like Paul Dacre, out of this business with my cold dead hands around the wheel.

And I employ a lot of journalists in my own PR practice, and it does seem as a society that the money's in PR now and not journalism, and that can't be healthy in the long run. I had Jeremy Vine sitting there a year or two ago, and

he was saying that when he started at the Leicester Mercury there were 70 people in the newsroom. Now you're lucky if you get five.

Yes, that's true, and it's deeply sad to see that happen, but we've all just got to adapt and survive. I think for young people coming through, there's still a great career to be had here, and to some degree you've got opportunities you didn't have. I look at some people who've made a name for themselves very quickly because if they get good stories or good ideas they can be, as you say, promoting themselves on social media. You know, an obscure blog suddenly becomes a big story.

Or one book on chavs and loads of Sky News paper reviews and loads of Twitter followers and then you've got a career and a column in The Guardian.

Well, exactly. I mean, Owen Jones has a lot of critics. I'm rather a fan of Owen and actually he's someone I engage with. We kind of have a deal where we don't slag each other off on Twitter, if we've got something to say to each other we do it via direct message, and picks my brains occasionally, and I certainly pick his. And for old gammons like me need to find out what's going on over there.

But like you said, there are more opportunities for aspiring journalists. It just seems to be a more crowded marketplace.

Yes, it's very crowded. I think you can make your name much quicker and move… you know, I think of the years that you had to do your time. I was lucky, I got straight on national newspapers out of university, but even then you had a long slog ahead of you to get to any position of eminence. And I look at someone like Harry Cole from the Sun who made his name with a blog, quickly got on another blog – I mean, Harry is interesting because he's one of the few people moving in the direction of blogs to traditional media – but I look at someone like that who's talented, he's got great contacts, he gets good stories, and he made a name for himself long before he was 30. I was political editor of the Sunday Times at the age of about 37, 38, having done quite a lot of toil. I'm glad I did take that time because it meant that the people who became MPs when I started working in the lobby were by then on the front bench or in the cabinet. And you grow up together with people, and there's no replacing that level of longstanding business and trust and all the rest of it. But yes, I think you can get on quite quickly. There's a guy I worked with who was a fantastic researcher on both of my books called Gabriel Pogrund. He talked his way into the Sunday Times, got himself on the Sunday Times magazine, he won Young Journalist of the Year, and he's now off to do the Stern Fellowship at the Washington Post. And that's simply by getting stuck in and making himself useful, and when he was asked to do things by the news desk at the Sunday Times he went and delivered speedily, in difficult situations, and he's come from nowhere in two years.

It also begs the question, when you referred to the blogging then, Harry's career trajectory is what is a journalist these days. Paul Staines is a very good friend of mine and runs the Guido Fawkes bog. Is he a journalist? What is it to be a journalist these days? Is this journalism? This is an amateur podcast where I am very lucky to interview some big names like your good self, but what is it to be a journalist these days?

Well, I think ever since… any big event that happens, virtually everybody in the street can be a journalist. Taking video…

Because of smart phones.

Yes, exactly. You know, it's changing, and I think journalists need to look at that with the same degree of understanding and benevolence as politicians need to look at people saying to them, "You're the establishment and we're not interested in your views. You have to earn the right to speak to us and tell us things, and we're not just going to give it to you on a plate because you've been doing it for a long time." So someone like me, I'm for some people the embodiment of the wicked old corrupt lobby system, obsessed with the horse race, spending my time talking to a bunch of politicians when I should be going up to Hartlepool to talk to ordinary people, every week I put my reputation on the line by writing stories that I think are interesting or accurate, and you have to stand or fall by that. And hopefully you build up a body of work which means people trust what you're writing, and maybe trust some of your judgments as well. But that's not something that just arrives because you've been working for 15 years on a national newspaper. Now, you feel, because of Twitter and because of Facebook and all the other places where people interact, you have to justify your existence every single week. And that's certainly the case, you know, it's always been the case that you have to justify yourself to the people who employ you, and I think increasingly you have to justify yourself to the people who read you – and they are are much savvier clued up and much more able to get other sources of information than they ever used to. So the only thing you've got is that body of work and that reputation that you've built up, and hopefully by writing a couple of books, and writing stuff that doesn't get contradicted very often, people will trust what we write and buy the Sunday Times.

Do you worry that there's a flip side to that coin though, that you're getting people who are self-appointed journalists, that have got no training, don't have a clue what they're talking about, and are getting it wrong in a very real way. I mean, you only have to look at Tommy Robinson, obviously a thoroughly unpleasant guy, don't agree with anything he says or the way he goes about doing it, and of course ignorance of the law is no defence. But there's no way you would stand outside a court filming people as they walked in while they were on trial, calling them guilty and saying… because it just falls foul of the basic contempt of court laws. Also, if I have a problem with your journalism I'm sure there would be a complaints procedure, or I could email Martin Ivens directly – there seems to be a way to complain. Whereas you've got a lot of these gung-ho people that are seemingly utterly unaccountable to the point where they're actually breaching the criminal law.

No, I think that's right, and the attorney general a couple of years ago tried to suggest to them, "Hang on a minute, you are as bound by this as anybody writing." To some degree that's not my problem. You know, if all those people are roaming around getting it wrong and making an idiot of themselves, then hopefully some people will want to pay a small amount of money to hear from people who are more clued up than that. But I think if you look at the models that work these days, the free for all, great fun websites that pick up literally everything and do it dramatically like

the Sun or Mail Online, they're going gangbusters, and at, we hope, the quality end, the Times papers are very productively proceeding with a subscription model, where a lot of people are prepared to pay for quality journalism. My fear is that the people and the publications that fall between the two are the ones that are going to suffer in the next few years.

Which bit of the job do you enjoy the most? I mean, obviously there's the thrill of the scoop and seeing it in print and so on, but what actual aspects of the day-to-day life do you enjoy? Is it the building a network, having the gossipy lunch with a minister, is it going on air, is it literally knocking the words out and then seeing it in print, is it the thrill of knowing that you've got an exclusive? What are the actual good bits of it moment to moment?

Well, you've covered most of it! No, I mean, it's nice being part of an interesting world and getting to meet people who were very talented and to some degree running the country. I mean, the degree to which they're running it is always the question that we're trying to answer, but that's interesting, and a privileged position – and if you ever forget that, if ever you walk across Westminster Bridge, you only have to look up and see that building, and I think that's pretty much the coolest building in the world and it never stops being exciting going in there. But it's when someone tells you something and you think, "Hang on a minute, that's a pretty decent story," and then you might ask a couple more questions, and if you think they're trying to give you the story you can get into it in some detail. If you think you've made a slip you sort of squirrel it away and off you go. But there's a great many moments. It's a selling job as well, you have to persuade your newsdesk or your editor that this is a big story, and most of the time that's relatively straightforward if it obviously is, but sometimes you have to go and fight for it. And then when they tell you at four o'clock on Saturday afternoon that you've got the splash, well that's great, and then you front someone up, and when they cough to it, or they know that you've got them bang to rights, you know, you put the phone down and sometimes you would punch the air or whatever. That's the fun bit. Most journalists are egomaniacs, so I quite like walking into the newsagents and picking up the Sunday Times, and buying it, and paying with my credit card, and thinking, "I wonder if anyone will notice that it's me." What you learn quite quickly of course, is that most people who read newspapers don't look at bylines – it's only journalists and their mothers that do.

Is there ever a tension when you speak to someone, like what I would call the Anthony Scaramucci moment, where someone tells you something that could ruin their career, where you have to wake up not revealing it there and then and keeping them as a contact, or doing what the guy at the New Yorker did and splashing on it straight away, which was a huge story, but of course killed the golden goose, because the guy who gave him the story could never feed him stories ever again because it got him fired.

Yes. I mean, there's often a tension. It's not all the time – I mean, people quite often are trying to tell you something – but just occasionally that happens, and you've got to make that judgment call. My career has been based generally on trying to maintain decent relationships over a long period of time, because I think that's pretty

productive. But I think any journalist that got the story that Ryan Lizza got that day would not be able to resist the temptation.

Couldn't sit on it.

I don't think you can sit on a story like that. I mean, occasionally I'll have a conversation with someone where they'll say, "You can put this in the paper and save this bit for your next book," all of which will end up in the paper eventually if it's any good, it just delays it by a few months. But yes, that's a moral dilemma, and all journalists have to decide where they want to draw that line. Some people, you know, very successful at blowing things up on a weekly basis. I try to take a medium term view, but if the fish is big enough it's going to get fried, isn't it?

Final question, then. What's next for you? Are you going to be political editor of the Sunday Times for the next gazillion years, or do you have a plan as to where your career might go? If you don't mind me asking.

Well, I think in journalism it's pretty difficult to plan; you have to grab the passing vine, and it depends what the passing vines are. They're going to have to be pretty good, because I think I've got the best print job in Britain. Clearly, potentially writing a column at some point might be interesting. I've got a deal for a third book, so I'll be doing that. Hopefully that will draw a line under some of this Brexit stuff. I'd quite like to write some fiction as well potentially, but no, my plan is to stay in and around politics. I've put a lot of legwork into this, and you want to keep exploiting that. You can't ever rest on your laurels, you have to keep developing new contacts and getting to know the new people and trying to spot the new talent and that's quite fun as well. But yes, I want to stick around and write this print horse as long as it is still going.

Tim, I had a sneaking suspicion that I would hugely enjoy his podcast even coming in, and I wasn't proved wrong. Thank you ever so much for your time, it's been great.

It's a great pleasure to be here.