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Journalist & Author

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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 down the line by James Bloodworth, the author and political journalist. A former editor of the blog Left Foot Forward, James' work has appeared in The Guardian, The Spectator, The New Statesman and The Wall Street Journal. He's the author of several books, including *The Myth of Meritocracy* and the acclaimed *Hired: Six Months Undercover in Low Wage Britain*, which was long-listed for the 2019 Orwell Prize. His political writing charts his own fascinating journey from Trotsky to pointed criticisms of today's left over its endorsement of authoritarian regimes. James, thank you for joining me.

Thanks for having me on.

It's a great pleasure. I'm a huge fan of your writing, as you well know. One of the few sensible voices on Twitter, so it's my privilege to have you on. Let's get stuck in. The Ukraine invasion has exposed the far less loving with Putin's Russia, and that's confirmed, frankly, your arguments about endorsing these authoritarian regimes.

Yeah, I wouldn't say that the entire far left has done that, but there is a significant group of people who have been in influential positions on the left. So the Jeremy Corbyn fraction of the Labour party, for example, have been from everything from pro-Putin to just unwilling to condemn the invasion or trying to both sides it and say that NATO is somehow to blame for UK Ukraine being invaded by Russia.

I mean, frankly, it's this so-called Stop The War movement, as you said, led by Jeremy Corbyn.

Yes. I mean, the stop the war coalition, it evolved shortly after the Al Qaeda attacks on the United States on September the 11th, 2001. The Stop The War movement arose, I think it was around a week after that, not to condemn the attacks of 9/11, but to protest against any American response to it. And they've acted in that way ever since in terms of their priority as opposing anything the United States does and not

really saying a great deal about what other countries in the world do, even when those countries happen to dictatorships, such as Russia.

Can we go through your origin story as all superheroes have? Your own political journey is fascinating. You were a member of the Trotskyist group Alliance for Workers' Liberty; you've edited the left-wing blog Left Foot Forward. Is your journey almost cliche, you start off with these high values on the left and progressively move more right-wing. Will you be a member of the conservative party in your late fifties?

That is a cliché because it's something you kind of see happen a lot. I think when that does happen, sometimes I think when you do see some people doing that, commencing along that journey, I think what sometimes happens is the youthful radicalism is almost a rebellion against their parents, or they're often from upper-middle-class backgrounds, and that's kind of a rebellion against their parents. And then they go to another extreme as they grow older and become more financially secure and less wedded to this animosity to their primary carers. But I was always on the left, and I still think I am on the left. It's just to what degree, that's what's changed.

I suppose the question is then what led to your disillusionment with the far left?

Well, when I first came to London was when I joined the Trotskyist group called The Alliance for Workers' Liberty. Before that I'd lived in Somerset, and hadn't been involved in political activism in any way. But I was instinctively very left wing and my step-grandfather and my grandmother, they were both staunch socialists, if you could call it that. And so I was always on the left. And then when I came to London, I was pretty much repulsed by the Stalinist groups, the groups that there still are, which are pro Soviet Union. I was disillusioned with the Labour party, because this was in 2010, after 13 years of a Labour government, when Labour party seemed very, very tired and wasn't coming out from many fresh ideas and I gravitated towards a Trotskyist part, which while far left, they seemed to have a more realistic approach to foreign policy. So they were consistent on foreign policy. So consistently against dictators, whether they were ostensibly socialist or not. And they were for two states in Israel, Palestine and that resonated with me at that time, someone who didn't much like the Labour party, who would never vote Conservative, who wasn't a Lib Dem, but who was also repelled by some of the other left groups. I ended up joining this very small Trotskyist group, I was only in the group for about two years. And then I suppose I used the group also for friendship when I first came to London because I came from Somerset and I didn't know anyone in London and joining a group like that gave you some kind of fraternity when I had none. So I didn't know anyone else here. So I think that was part of the process as well. And then as a couple of years went by, I kind of started to make my own friends in London and started to reevaluate ideas. But I wouldn't even say today I'm right wing. I think some issues I think right and left are no longer useful, but on the basic things like economics, foreign policy, for example, I think my principles are firmly on the left.

Well, I'm a Blair right and always have been, I stood in 2005, council for six years. And I used to joke with Tony that he wasn't Blair right enough for me

and I still am. And in fact, in your journalism, you ask questions off the left that say why they don't want to hear about Tony Blair achievements. They seem to be brushed under the carpet.

Yes. I mean, that is frustrating because my own backstory from when I was younger, I benefited hugely from the Labour government of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown a bit later and Gordon Brown as chancellor, of course. I probably wouldn't have gone to university if it hadn't been for Blair and his governments, because I mean we hear a lot of talk today about how too many students are going to university. And sometimes I think that's true. If you go to university for the sake of it and pick the wrong course, I think it can be a massive waste of time. But I think this idea that there should be some absolute limit on student numbers, I think the expansion of universities in the two thousands under Blair's governments, it changed the lives of people like me and also things around pension of poverty. So I have relatives who are hard up older relatives, I was brought up by my gran. And they were massively helped by the massive increase in money, which went to poorer pensioners under Labour's time in office. And it does frustrate me that everything now just goes back to the Iraq war. So I opposed the war at the time, but I do think it was complicated in some ways. I think some people such as Christopher Hitchens, Tony Blair himself, did make compelling arguments. Not all of them were compelling, the weapons of mass destruction argument, for example, but I think some of the other arguments were compelling in their own right. And I think it's childish and it's frustrating to see people who simply have this very black and white view of the issue and also that that therefore invalidates the entire legacy of the last Labour government. I think to say that you have to be in a privileged position to start with, because how could I say that and how could people like me and friends of mine at home say that when that Labour government did literally alter the trajectory of our lives.

They did an incredible job. I mean, I'm hugely grateful. And I think you want leaders who are prepared to take bold decisions, and that means sometimes will get things wrong. I think Tony genuinely did think that he could restrain George Bush. We went to the UN to the security council to get the so-called second resolution. We got Bush to agree to the roadmap, to agree that the root cause of instability in the wider region is the Israel Palestine issue. There's loads of things. The roadmap agreed on two state solution, the first time in principle. It could have worked. I think it's only rightly recognized that the Americans were gonna do it anyway. So why not try to have a stabilising, legitimising influence. I think that this is where you get into statesmanship.

I think the Americans were going to do it anyway. So I think that that's right. And I can see the argument that if they're going to do it, it's better to go in with them anyway and at least try and restrain some of their more gungho impulses, shall we say? But I feel like it damaged the institutions of this country, in particular, I think not just the Iraq war, but I think the financial crisis, the Iraq war, the expenses scandal, that was a cross party thing. I would not blame the Labour government for that, but I think we've seen such an undermining of institutions in Britain and across the west, and media as well. I see this in some of the responses you get to journalism nowadays. And I think the Iraq war contributed to that. And I think it has had a damaging legacy. The other counter argument I do find persuasive in terms of justifying the war, I don't think Iraq

could be a very nice place today. I think it would be a far worse place today if Sadam Husain had remained in power because who would be in power now, likely one of his sons, you would've likely have seen a situation comparable to Syria where you see this uprising during the Arab Spring. In Syria you have close to a million people have been killed by that war and Bashar al-Assad is still in power killing and torturing people. So there's almost no good option. So I think it is a quality of leadership being willing to take responsibility for the hard choices. And as much as I disagreed with the decision to go to war, I've never felt that Tony Blair has ever tried to dodge responsibility for taking that decision, which I think is admirable quality in a person and a politician.

And it is bizarre, history is rewritten because I stood for parliament in 2005, that was going into a third term. We'd already had the intervention in Iraq. We still got 60 seats. We were an outright majority. And I think since he left office, there was obviously an issue where they were trying to reduce his character and I think also Tony interestingly, cause I work in reputation management and he's never said this, but I think there was a policy of let my legacy stand for itself, speak for itself. And actually I think that in hindsight it was a mistake because it's allowed this narrative to emerge that actually we invented Iraq illegally, that he was a killer blah, blah, blah, blah. None of that was said at the time, like in terms of an analysis of his legacy, he won an election having done these things.

Yeah. I think that kind of speaks of the direction the Labour party went in after Gordon Brown left office in 2010, really, because initially under Ed Miliband, there was a culture where certain things were automatically wrong or there was to be no debate about certain things. So the Iraq war was just invariably wrong. Talking about immigration controls was just invariably wrong. And even though you are on these things, I tend to side with fashionable opinions for the most on those issues. I think you have to discuss them and be willing to change your mind and be willing to recognize that people sometimes oppose what you do in good faith. I think that is a problem on the left in particular where the assumption every time somebody disagrees with you is that the reason for their decision, it's the worst imaginable reason, it's the most base possible reason. It's rare that they simply came to a different conclusion, we both share the same first principles and we've reached different conclusions. It's always the worst imaginable reason. I think that's infected the left to some extent, I think that's a topic for an entire podcast of why that's happened. But I think that has had influence on Tony Blair becoming persona non grata not in the entire Labour party at all, but in influential sections of the media, the Labour party, and especially in academia.

To be honest, cause I'm Blair right, we're gonna end up going into a cul de sac and alienate the few listeners that I have because of me going about why Tony's so great. So let's pull this back to the media if we can, because I am genuinely fascinated by this. Did you always want to be a journalist ? We've talked about your move away slightly from the Trotskyist area, but was it always going to be journalism? And what were the first steps that you took along the way?

No it wasn't because the main reason for that was I simply didn't have an awareness that journalism was a career that one could pursue when I was younger. So when I was growing up, until I went to college and that wasn't until I was 22, journalism was not something that was there for me as a realistic career. It simply hadn't entered my reality. I always liked writing. So I always used to like writing stories. And I was quite a big reader and I used to write stories and make these comics. And I used to write letters to the newspaper as if I was writing a column or something, but in hindsight it looks like that, but it never entered my reality because no one in my family had been to university, no one in my family had been a journalist. It just wasn't a real thing. If I ever did think of anything like that, it would just be in the realm of fantasy. And so then later when I went to college, I had a very encouraging lecturer for my sociology A levels. We had a very small class, a very encouraging lecturer who kind of opened my eyes to the fact that writing in some way could be a way to make a living and then I never really deviated once I was on that path.

What was your original career plan? Did you think I'm going to enter the print industry, write a column in a newspaper, be editor of The Guardian? What were the original plans?

So I liked arguing. I was a very oppositional character at the time. As many people are in their early twenties and teens so I gravitated towards oppositional writing. So opinion columns would be a good example of that, where one of my favourite journalists growing up was Christopher Hitchens who has a very argumentative style, while also being highly literate and readable. So that was something I gravitated towards, but all of those, any form of journalism just seemed incredibly glamorous and exciting when compared to the work I'd been doing before. So growing up, I worked in a petrol station for like four years, I worked in a yoghurt factory where I'd spent all day putting the plastic lids onto Yeo Valley yoghurts four days a week, 12 hour days, I think it was. So any journalism, foreign correspondents, that appealed as well because it’s nice exploring a new place and writing about it. None of this seemed like work in the traditional sense that it had for members of my family. So it was just incredibly exciting to begin with. And I was quite humble, I'll take any job I can get. And my first job in journalism was a job on a pharmacy magazine to a weekly subscription pharmacy magazine. And I'm grateful for that, even though I haven't had any interest in community pharmacy particularly.

So it's like write if I’m hired, have pen will write?

Yes. And taking any opportunity to just learn the fundamentals, because it doesn't really matter necessarily what you are writing about in terms of your enthusiasm it does. So after a while, it gets a bit stale writing about things you have no interest in, but initially I just wanted to learn the mechanics of writing well and constructing a narrative properly. And just to be in London with a job, which again, all of this to me as a graduate from a Polytechnic who grew up in a seaside town in Somerset with his grandmother, this was all just exciting and I take any opportunity. I was very humble at the time. Hopefully I still am to some extent and yeah I was just excited by all.

Do you like the portfolio, the freelance career, that life, because in one sense you never know where the next commission's going to come from, there's no certainty, there's no regular wage. But on the other hand, you also have, as you've said, that freedom to write about whatever interests, you've not been handed an article to write about something you know nothing about, or you're not interested in, or we still have to uphold the newspaper's view on something. You can be 100% authentically you.

Yes. I like the freelance lifestyle for several reasons. I have ADHD, which it contrary to some things in the media, like it is in a myth, it affects many aspects of my life and I have to work with it and learn how to work with myself better, understand myself, understand what works for me, what doesn't, what kinds of structures I need to produce my best work and what kind of things don't work. And so freelance suits me because I can arrange my working life around the things that I know that work. Whereas when I've been in an office environment before I find it very hard to work with any distraction whatsoever, I find it very hard to lock in. I take medication and one of the things that that helps with is locking in on something. So I can start something and it takes me a long time to lock into it, but once I'm locked into it, I can get my work done. But then in an office there are constant calls for your attention to other things such as emails flying into your inbox, being disturbed by colleagues who would like to talk to you about some other thing you're working on, juggling five stories at once. I find it very hard to cope in that environment with my ADHD. I could if I have to, I can cope in that environment and I did but it made me a little bit depressed. I find it hard to thrive if you see what I mean. So I quit my job before I did hired, for example, and freelance, the kind of freedom to pick and choose in my writing, was the freedom to kind of delve into one subject over a long time. like what county port calls, like deep work that was, that was really beneficial to me. It's for some not for others. I know other people who can't get much work done at home and they have to be in the office, but I think it differs for everyone, freelance really suited me though. And just a variety of stories and things you get to cover. So I get to write about different things every day, if I am bored of a topic, but at the same time, I do enjoy really obsessively delving into one topic for a book, for example, and just sidelining everything else for a period of time. So, yeah I like those aspects of it.

So walk our listeners through what a typical week is for you. What are the kind of things that you write about, how do you go about doing your work?

It's slightly different at the moment, because I've been working recently on bigger projects. So my typical week will be, I will on a Sunday evening, I typically start reading up. Saturday I tend to take off, I do some reading, like the newspaper or something. I tend to take Saturday off most of Sunday, then Sunday evening, I'll start to kind of read up, get abreast of what's been going on. Then Monday I will spend a lot of Monday morning dealing with correspondence on my email and looking at my diary, working out what's going on in the week, going to the gym often first thing in the morning, because I just feel better at myself the rest of the day if I do that. And then I will start researching a New Statesman column, which I usually write on a Monday evening into Tuesday morning. So I file that at 11:00 AM every other Tuesday night because as I say, I have some bigger projects I'm working on as well. So that's a regular routine. I kind of know instinctively when to start. I keep my eye

out in the days before for things to write about. And then I'll spend Sunday evening and Monday researching it then Monday evening and Tuesday morning writing the column typically. Then the rest of the time at the moment, during lockdown I was working on a pitch for TV, for a documentary. With a director, we spent about nine months working on that, working up the treatment and that's gone too. We've now received some development money from a major broadcaster to take that further.So that's taking up more of my time. There's a book I have to write. So I have to schedule kind of two mornings a week typically to try and do some work on the book. It's not due in for a while, but it's good to be doing something to make it feel like it has that momentum. And typically that will be in the morning, the writing because they tend to write most of the time better in the morning, I think most writers have a time of day they prefer to write and for me it's typically the morning. And on writing days, I'll then go to the gym in the afternoon. So I say that's a typical week. I'm doing a TV thing this evening. I'll try and do some reading. And a lot of my time involves reading, which if you're a sports player or something, you'll spend a lot of time training. In terms of writing, it's like you spend a lot of time reading stuff. So it’s not as glamorous as the journalism job I may have thought it was when I was in my early 20’s, a young guy in Somerset. But I love reading, so it's not exactly like work.

I was gonna say how much thinking time do you do? If you've got a column or something to write, sometimes I'll watch something on the news and two thirds of it it's obvious, that's bad, that's good. And then there's other stories where I'm not sure what I think or what the solution is and I need to genuinely reflect on it. How much are you sort of stroking your chin and staring out of the window thinking how can we solve this problem and is this person right? Because you need to get your own thoughts in order before you then sort of codify them, surely?

Yes. I mean, I find that writing actually helps me get my thoughts together. So sometimes I will sit down and I have an inclination in terms of what I think about something. And usually by the time I've researched, I know what I'm gonna say. But often things come out in the writing that I hadn't reasoned out properly before. The writing and the thinking process are one in some ways for me. So there's times when I find that quite intimidating. So I've sat down and there's an insecurity there about what I'm gonna say, whether it's in a book or whether it's in a column. And I think that can be a problem. So when I was younger, trial and error, there are definitely pieces I've written where it's like what am I actually saying? So it doesn't seem like I'm coming down on one side with any kind of firm position, but I think one thing I feel like I have developed, and I think people do develop from repetition and going through this process and kind of reading other people. And again, I'm by no means the world's greatest columnist. But I think you can put complexity down on the page while still coming to a firm view at the end of it. And that's okay, it doesn't have to be this strident piece of polemic, which can make that easier to go viral. But I think the type of columns I like most are the ones which draw out this kind of moral complexity of an issue, but still come down firmly on one side. I would say typically I come down firmly on one side, but I wouldn't call my writing dogmatic. I think there is a kind of sweet spot there. And I think that my favourite writers do kind of hit that. So they don't use the opposition's weakest arguments. They don't argue against their opponents' weakest arguments. They argue against their opponents' strongest arguments. And I

think that's kind of when you see people doing that well, I think that's kind of the gold standard that I've always kind of admired.

What kind of relationship do you have with your readers? Do you read the comments below the line? Do people get in touch to sort of disagree with you? Is that something that you welcome? How does it work?

I suppose that today much of that takes place on Twitter. So there are people I regularly interact with on Twitter who do read my columns and then respond to them or ask me things about them. But one of the most dispiriting things about Twitter, I think, is the fact that you have people who in many respects your views are similar on issues so you do kind of line up on most issues, but then there'll be one thing they vehemently apparently disagree with you on and they're then you just kind of ostracise each other, whereas that just wouldn't happen in real life. I have plenty of friends who don't see eye to eye with me on everything but I think on Twitter, it's a bit limiting in terms of who we interact with because people bear these grudges and will stop following you, you stop seeing the stuff they're posting and vice versa. And I think Twitter can be quite harmful in that respect, even though it's probably the place where nowadays I interact with most people who are familiar with my writing. Also Instagram, but I've got a fairly new Instagram, So I don't have that many followers on there compared to Twitter.

And one of the impressions that I get from your writing as a long term reader is Tory libertarians want to govern Britain that doesn't exist, frankly.

Yes, the culture wars have been raging in America for much longer than they have here. I remember growing up reading about the culture wars in America and about these insane arguments that people were having over, basically the arc of progress as liberals might call it, where things that people of my generation who was teen at the time and it was the 1990's and going to 2000's and in Britain it seemed like there was a sense of progress. Why are people bothered about people being gay and things like this, and the obvious answer to the direction society should go into me growing up was people should be free to express themselves in the way they want in their personal lives. Because I grew up in the countryside, I really hated the kind of small minded, sometimes the small town mentality, if you like, that I just saw around me and in the conservative government I grew up with. And then it did feel like in Britain that people were just kind of getting on board with this agenda that live and let live. And I was really inspired by that, but then you look over to the United States and you have these debates raging with Christian fundamentalists and others about things that seemed kind of settled or being settled gradually in Britain. And I think the culture war, the libertarian have tried to import to Britain in recent years. With some help from the fact that the Americanization of cultures tends to happen anyway through the media, through the movies, et cetera. And I think the kind of attempt to import libertarianism is an extension of that. So you have these highly polarising libertarian figures in the United States who've done very well. You have these drifters in the media there, who've done very well out of that. And that model, there are some who are very obviously trying to import that to the UK and make money from it and give some kind of credence to their own obscure, cultish, utopian, or dystopian politics.

Tell us about the books. The incredibly acclaimed book *Hired: Six Months Undercover in Low Wage Britain*. And some of the anecdotes that he was saying about, I suppose anecdotes are not a strong enough word in terms of Amazon, and you continue to be a thorn in their PR department and department. But Amazon workers urinating in Coke bottles because they're afraid to take bathroom bricks. That made international news, of course, because the ARC demanded action from Amazon. Are you gonna do more books? What's the genesis of them? What's the process? How long do they take? Do you enjoy it?

Yes. So I am doing another book right now, in fact, so I had a commission for a new book before the pandemic in 2019. And the pandemic knocked that sideways a bit because I needed to travel to conduct some of the interviews. And during the pandemic, I spent 12 months looking after my grandmother in Somerset so she didn't get COVID basically. So she was 91 at the time. And so the book was kind of pushed sideways and that's why I worked on this documentary pitch and some other things, but then now things have opened up again, fingers crossed, in Britain, America. I am working on the book again. And the books about the manosphere really, it's about men drawn into certain subcultures in the manosphere, some of those toxic but it's looking at the process of radicalization if you'd like and the process of radicalization of how men get drawn into those subcultures. Because I was someone who, when I was in my late teens, flirted with the manosphere, with the pickup artists and some of these people and it's looking at the process of radicalization that takes place that gets people drawn into these. It's looking at the wider societal context of why figures like Jordan Peterson, for example, have come incredibly popular in recent years. And it's about essentially men who feel lost, young men typically, but not exclusively. Who feel lost and don't really know what their place is in contemporary society. And I wouldn't say it's a sympathetic look at those subcultures because some of the things that you find when you turn over that rock are quite nasty. However, I would say that it's an empathetic look at the process of radicalization. So I don't have to agree with the choices somebody has made. Nevertheless, I think it is interesting to look at some of the things some of these people have been through, whether it's personal trauma or related issues, socioeconomic factors that have led people down this sometimes extremely dark path and what it means for society, the rest of us.

Is the problem getting worse?

Yes, I think so. And it's related to alienation in general. So Noreena Hertz did a book called *The Lonely Century* and we had conversations when she was writing that. And I find the book really interesting and I think Noreena's a very good journalist and writer and I think she tapped into something that's a factor here, we're living more atomized lives because of technology. So in some ways it isn't liberating us. For example, it has the potential to liberate us in many ways, so one thing with dating apps, for example, I think that's had a big influence on some of this male rage. We view dating app technology as an extension of ourselves. So we make our choices through dating apps. Whereas technology doesn't tend to work like that, technology tends to shape the choices you make whilst you're making them. So the medium is

the message I think is the same used to go. So the technology itself is almost a Marxist concept as well. The technology has a life of its own, which shapes you as the producer or consumer of that. And I think dating apps are no different, and I think this is important in some ways the way the technology does this isn't necessarily important, but I think the way dating apps, for example do this, it is important, their influence because romance is one of the most fundamental areas of human life whether you are gay, straight, whatever it's fundamental to our sense of selves and how we see our lives pan out. And you have lots and lots of young men who, because people behave differently on dating apps and they behave in real life, essentially. You have lots of young men who become radicalised by this share volumes of rejection they're receiving on dating apps. And there are these communities with ready made explanations to this, which in many instances are incredibly toxic and misogynist for example. And I think the dating app technology, it's not that alone obviously, but people are transposing some of their experiences with technology, whether it's social media, whether it's TikTok or whether it's dating apps, they're transposing that onto real life. Whereas the way people behave on apps is shaped by the apps. It's not necessarily an extension of ourselves. That's a slightly convoluted way of explaining it. But as the book gets closer to release, I'll have distilled that into some more punchy sound bites, I hope.

That was very interesting when it wasn't punchy and soundbitey! What do you want from your writing? It sounds almost rude to ask that, like state your business, but obviously you want it to sell well to have an impact, but in terms of measurable outcomes, is it to influence policy? Is it to raise awareness? What kind of changes do you want to see from your writing?

I think that's a really good question. And I think it's a really good question that it's important to ask yourself as well. So like, why am I doing it? I had a really hellish two years,I'm not alone in that obviously because of Covid. And there are many ways it could have been worse, but with the pandemic I had this issue with a woman who stalked me for two years quite intensely at times. And then my grandmother passed away who brought me up. She passed away in January of this year. And so in order to have motivation to do something, to undertake a big project, you need to really understand why you are doing it because otherwise I think the motivation drains away because it's based on a superficial desire. So if I wanna do something and the main motivation of that is attention, or applause or something like that, I think that can work for a while, but when bad things happen, when different difficult situations arise, I think that it no longer motivates you anymore, you see it for the kind of superficial, shallow reasoning that it is, and you need to tap into something deeper. So why am I actually doing this? And I think with writing for me, writing this book, the creative process is a big part of it for me. So personal expression. So expressing myself in terms of I think I've had a fairly unusual life in some ways and I've been monitoring this community shall we say for many, many years since perhaps 2005, 2006. And I feel like I have something to contribute and have something worthwhile to say. I feel like I have a breadth of knowledge, and a depth of knowledge on the topic that I think is useful to feed into the broader narrative. That along with the creativity, I'd say the main things compelling me to write the book now. And I enjoy meeting new people and hearing their stories, even whoever they are really, I find it kind of fascinating, people's psychological journeys. And I find that even more fascinating now, when I had two really difficult years. I think when you have

experiences like that, it forces you to unravel some of your own psychological issues. And some of your own trauma, I think is an overused word. But I think often that is what it is, things from childhood. And it forces you to unravel some of your own issues. And I also find it fascinating to speak to others who, instead of just automatically writing people off. I think it's very interesting to kind of unravel. Maybe I should have been a therapist instead, but I think it's very interesting to unravel those things that have affected other people and see how that affects their life decisions.

Show me the boy and I'll show you the man. That's what they say and say, it's all about the way that you were raised. Your first book obviously was on the Myth of Meritocracy, something, this government's talk of levelling up as they call it is failing to tackle in reality. You've been very, very eloquent on that.

Yeah, so that was my first book because it was something that was bothering me. As I said, I grew up in a small seaside town in Somerset near Western Supermare places called Burnham on Sea. No one in my family had been to university. I had a cousin who went to university later on, but none of my family had been to university. I came from a broken home, brought up by my grandmother and I dropped out of school at 16, didn't take school seriously and had undiagnosed ADHD, quite bad ADHD. But there was this discrepancy between my grades in school. And so at home my reading age was always higher than average. And I was always reading these books on quite complicated themes, but there was just something going on with me, several things going on with me that meant I didn't utilise that in school, for example. And that stuff's complex. I won't go into that now. But I ended up just drifting around for a few years and went back to college at the age of 22 because a friend of mine who'd been similar to myself, he'd gone to Bristol university when he was 21. And it was because he felt, again, someone from a family who people didn't typically go to university, he felt encouraged. He believed people like him could go to university because the Labour government was sending that message out. And it was kind of the first time really, I think anyway, certainly in my lifetime. It suddenly became, whoa, we can actually do this. And my friend went and he encouraged me to go back to college, get my A levels, and go to university. But to go back to college because I was aged over 19, I had to pay, I think it was 900 pounds to do my A levels in a year. That was like the cost of doing the course basically. And I could not have afforded that, but my grandma kindly paid the money for me. And it just set me thinking, ever after that if that hadn't happened, I just would not have ever gone to college. And it's a small thing. I mean, it's a small thing in the scheme of things, but it just made me think how money can have such a, like you're at this fork in the road and money is everything in that respect. And it just set me thinking about social mobility, meritocracy, and just how unjust and unfair it is that someone could be able to. So I got an A in my A levels and it just set me thinking that I'm not stupid, I can do it, but there is kind of a culture that tells working class people, people from broken families, people from certain parts of the country, that university, that a professional job is just not for them. And then there's the money side of it. The money side of it literally puts up a brick wall between you and social mobility. And it just really set me thinking about that topic for several years. And the book was the essay, it is a fairly short book. It's like 100 pages. That the product of that thinking over those years and that it was kind of a passion project because I still find it so unfair that there's so much wasted talent. In this country and many parts of the world because of a lack of social mobility.

Do you have an enemy as it were, like a lot of columnists frequently spar online with columnists of another newspaper or a magazine and sort of regularly take each other to task. And sometimes it can sort of be great to socratically explore an issue other times it can descend in acrimony. Do you have regular sparring partners online?

I don't really anymore. I used to get involved in those kinds of spats with people, and then there'd be a falling out, usually permanent. That's why I stopped getting involved in those kinds of spats. I tend to prefer to talk about things with people in real life, contentious issues, because I don't want that environment of Twitter to bleed into other areas of my life and into my mental health, wellbeing, et cetera. So I think there are occasions in the past, definitely where I've had these spar matches with people over contentious issues. And I'm not afraid really of tweeting contentious points of view I have, but I tend not to get into arguments or even debates necessarily on social media anymore, because I think you can have a debate with one person and it can be fine, but then you just have all these people jumping in, quote tweeting you, and then you just spend a day with all of these people in your feed, just sending you abuse. And I just find it a weird way to behave. And I behave like that there after a while, if I spend a lot of time immersed in that culture, I begin to behave like that. And then I start to behave more like that off Twitter and with people I love and care about in real life. And I don't wanna be someone who's like that. I just don't want that toxicity in my wider life. I dunno if that sounds unusual or increasingly common. I feel like more and more people feel like that. And I do think you need to talk through issues and debate with people. So one thing I find with writing is, there are certain things I think I know, what's the Donald Rumsfeld quote about unknown, unknowns.

There are no knowns, there are things we know, we know there are unknown unknowns that the things we know, we don't know, like I don't know what the capital of, you know, Papua New Guinea is, but I could find out. And then he always says famously, the unknown unknowns. Things we don't even know. We don't know. I would call those blind spots.

Yes. So blind spots, unknown unknowns. I find that if I simply isolate myself and write and even reading books, it still helps me a great deal to go and chat with friends and people who think different things, because they will reveal to me the unknown unknowns that I hadn't known about previously, the blind spots. And then I think my argument becomes stronger. So I think it's absolutely essential to converse with people with different opinions, just to be a better writer. I feel with this book that my writing is much better than it was when I wrote *Hired*, because I just feel I see things more, three dimensionally, and I'm more willing to see things three dimensionally. So, I'm not wedded to a certain point of view so much. I have not conceded enough to say that I don't have an ideology or I'm non ideological or post ideological. I think I'm influenced by lots of things, but I feel willing to change my mind. There doesn't seem to be much resistance to that anymore. Whereas when I was younger, there was and I think that, I dunno if that's even that conducive to Twitter, maybe it's because I've spent less time on Twitter the last year and a half that I'm more willing to change my mind. Because I think what happens with Twitter as well is you start to identify certain ideas with people. And then because you have this hatred of the people who espouse them, you are unwilling to entertain the possibility that some of the things

they say may have value. I think most people with the things they say do have even a grain of value. I mean, I read books that sometimes I hate, but I still don't hate them because if there was a page that I thought that I found something useful from it, it's like, okay, I can integrate that into my own life or my worldview. But I think Twitter really works against that. So you start to hate people and you start to see your political enemies.

I can’t be bothered. Life's too short.

You start to despise him. It's just a waste of energy.

Obama said we can disagree without being disagreeable. And I've always liked that. I mean, I'm all for a debate, but like I'm bored of just debating it and arguing with people for its own sake. And I'm trying to use Twitter just for good. I’ve blocked thousands of people now. If someone's horrible, then I'll just block them and I won't give them a second thought. I was gonna ask you, we've got a few more minutes left. You've got the new book coming out. What's next for you more generally? You are a young lad, you've got many decades ahead of you. Do you have any sort of big items on life's to-do list? Are you gonna get more books out? Is it more of the same, or are you gonna take your journalism in a certain direction or do you gleefully not have a planner, as you said earlier?

The plan at the moment is to finish this book. So I want to invest all my energy into this. I'm a bit afraid that if I look too far into the distance, it can sap enthusiasm for the present. So I start to be too future orientated if you like. So the main focus is the book. I'm also working on some TV things, documentary type programs. So I'd like to do more of that, it's just something different that's quite enjoyable. And a lot of the ideas that I come up with for print, I don't always have time to do them. So there's kind of this bank of ideas. A good friend of mine is a director and we're working on some stuff in that area. So I say, watch that space. And more books, probably

James, that was a hugely interesting conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thank you for having me on. It's been brilliant.