Alastair Campbell

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the very top of their game.

Today I'm joined by journalist, broadcaster and political strategist Alastair Campbell. Starting his carer on Fleet Street, he rose through the ranks and served his political editor at both he Daily Mirror and Today.

In 1994, he was appointed Tony Blair's spokesman, and as one of the architects of New Labour, helped them to victory in 1997. Subsequently appointed Downing Street press secretary, then director of communications and strategy, some in the media regarded Alastair as more powerful than many members of the cabinet!

He resigned in 2003, but would continue to advise the Labour Party in the run-up to subsequent elections. A familiar face on television, he has spoken publicly about his struggle with alcohol and depression, advised many left of centre political parties around the world, and written 11 books, including his recently published Winners.

Alastair, thanks for joining me.

Pleasure.

My first question really is, how ambitious were you at the start of your carer? Was it always global domination, or was it a bit more humble?

No, I was ambitious. I can't remember how I knew about the Mirror Group training scheme, but once I decided I wanted to be a journalist, I decided I wanted to be editor of the Daily Mirror. I started out on a paper called the Tavistock Times down in Devon, and the Mirror Group owned all these local papers, and that's actually where I met Fiona 35 years ago. And the day I started on the Tavistock Times, I appointed myself sports editor, because they didn't have one! The guy who was sort of doing the sports pages didn't like sport, so I said, "I'll do that." So I gave myself a column on day one! So I was quite ambitious, yes I was.

Was that your ultimate job, then? Did you think, "I'm going to be editor of the Daily Mirror."? That's the destination.

I think when I started out – I had been through quite a wild time leaving university, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. You mentioned the alcohol thing; I was probably developing quite a bad drink problem by then without realising it. I was busking, I was doing ridiculous jobs, I was working in a casino…

What were you doing in a casino?

I was a roulette dealer.

That's awesome!

Well, up to a point. I actually got sacked. I have never, ever, ever found out why.

Couldn't you do an FOI request?!

I don't think casinos operate quite like that! But anyway, so I did all these crazy jobs and I ended up at this local paper. Once I decided I wanted to be a journalist, I definitely knew I wanted to work on the Daily Mirror, and once I worked on the Daily Mirror, I knew that eventually I wanted to be political editor, and I think if I had stayed in journalism I would have wanted to be, and hoped I would have been, editor of the mirror.

Why journalism?

I think I've always had a love of words and stories, and I have always really been into the power of language. I wonder if it's partly… my dad was from the Hebrides, and English was his second language, and Gaelic was his native tongue. And even as a young child, I used to write all the time – I used to write stories. You know how it's really hard to get your kids to write thank you letters and stuff like that…

You were the opposite?

Any opportunity I had to write stuff, I would do it. But it's interesting – we didn't have that much journalism in the family at all, but I just have always loved words.

But being the editor of the paper doesn't involve that much journalism – it's more management. Did you see that as a progression in terms of a carer? You were going to cut your teeth in journalism for however long and then move into the upper echelons of journalism?

I think journalism maybe has changed, but I never, ever saw the editor's job as being management; I saw it as absolutely being about journalism. And the editors I worked

for, they were terrific journalists, whether it was Richard Stott, Mike Molloy, although Mike Molloy came through the art background, he wasn't a reporter in the way Richard was. The editors that I worked for, Bill Hagerty was another one, Eve Pollard at the Sunday Mirror, she was my editor for a while, and they were very much, I felt, yes they were managers, they were managing the paper, but I saw them very much as journalists.

I only ask that because we had Chris Blackhurst on a couple of weeks ago and he was saying that one of the major aspects of being the editor was the HR and the legal…

I think it's changed. I think that partly, because newspapers now, there's less slack in there. I think editors in my time were able to appoint lots of different people on quite good salaries to pick up the stuff they didn't really want to do, and that would include what today you would define as management.

Did you think you were inevitably going to be drawn to political commentary and political journalism? Was that always what you wanted to do, or would you have done anything along the way, as it were? What was your plan at that time?

I think at the start I thought I would, and I wanted to, end up in sports journalism, and that's why I gravitated day one to writing about…

And appointing yourself columnist.

Campbell's Corner! Picture byline, dodgy haircut… but yes, I think I did see myself as… I also wrote… one of the guys on the training scheme, who ran the training scheme, a guy called Cedric, and he edited this small short magazine about newspapers – and this is how cocky and pretentious I was – I had only been a trainee journalist three months when I was writing this piece for him about why Britain ought to have a British equivalent of L'Équipe – you know, the French daily sports newspaper – and I never understood why we didn't.

We've got the Racing Post and that's about it!

Yes, but I think the other thing that's happened is our daily newspapers now probably cover sport as much as L'Équipe does. But I think I saw myself going down that route. The politics really came once I got on to the Mirror.

So when you joined the Mirror, were you appointed in a political role?

No – what happened was, one of the great things about the Mirror training scheme is that you were given an attachment to one of the national titles at the end of your

training if you got through, it. You had a year on a weekly paper, a year on the Sunday Independent, which covers the South West, and then if you got through that and you did your law and you did your shorthand and all that stuff, you got a six or eight-week attachment at one of the nationals, and I got an attachment at the Daily Mirror, which of course was the one that I really wanted. Actually, even before that, I had this extraordinary… because I was a bit sort of wild, I guess, and the bigwigs at the Mirror Group used to come and talk to the trainees, and Bob Edwards, who I think I'm right in saying is in the Guinness Book of Records for having more editorships than anybody else, certainly back then, and he came down, I had too much to drink, and I ended up in this rather playful argument with him about the coverage of the Falklands War, bizarrely, and I ended up slapping him on the face, just in a kind of friendly, a bit inebriated, sort of way. By the time this had got back to Fleet Street, I had laid him out because he had made a pass at Fiona! Neither of those things were true, but that's the story. So I got this reputation for having hit Bob Edwards, which I didn't. Meanwhile, Fiona was being interviewed by Anne Robinson, who was the women's editor of the Mirror at the time, for an attachment on the women's pages, and – very good piece of advice – Annie said to her, "You should definitely be a news reporter before you do anything else." and Fiona ended up getting a job on the Express. I was waiting in the pub for her to finish this interview with Anne Robinson. Two guys walk into the pub, come up to me and say, "Are you the guy who hit Bob Edwards?" And I'm sort of umming and ahhing, trying to explain it wasn't quite like that, and they realise, yes it was me, and it was Richard Stott and John Penrose, who were both senior executives at the Mirror, and on the basis of this, offered me shifts on the Mirror! On the basis that I had hit Bob Edwards, I was good enough for them, and they offered me shifts! I just thought this was a joke. I went back down to the West Country, carried on my training, two or three weeks later I get a phone call out of the blue from Richard Stott saying, "Listen, I'm the assistant editor in charge of news at the Daily Mirror – if I offer you shift, you take them!"

So you knew he was serious.

He was serious. And that's how I first got into the Mirror.

So when you started doing shifts, what were you doing? What was the day to day?

Very general news. My very first story on the Daily Mirror was I covered Eddie Kidd, the motorcyclist stunt rider, he had just ridden his bike over, I don't know, 20-odd buses or something, and fallen off.

Badly?

No, he was all right. He did it, and so I had to go… it wasn't an interview, it was like press call – so that was my very first story.

Was that ward 12 or something? How badly hurt was he?

No, he was fine! He was fine. I think it was in a restaurant or something, and I got a single column. That was my first national paper byline. I'll tell you the other ting I learnt very early on, particularly on a tabloid newspaper, if you want to get really good shows in the paper, make sure you're working with good photographers – because sometimes… I remember once, I was sent to cover this story about a woman who'd had a baby, and she had not wanted to leave hospital because she didn't think that the house she was going back to was fit for a child to be brought up in, so she sort of staged a sit-in in the hospital, which was quite a good Daily Mirror story, you know, human interest, a bit of a particular angle and what have you, so we got down to the hospital and went and talked to her, and then… I don't know if you would even do this now, but you had to get permission, even though she was there, she wanted to publicise it, she had to get permission from the hospital about taking pictures in the hospital.

I think that still applies now, actually.

I don't know. Anyway, they wouldn't give it.

That seems uncooperative!

It was! So Alastair McDonald – in fact my dad, being a Campbell, he used to think it was very odd that I spent so much time with a guy called Alastair McDonald, if you think back to the Glencoe Massacre and all that – left, and I thought, "That's giving up a bit easy." What I didn't realise, he said to me, "Stay here as long as you can, stay here as long as you can," and he just went and found a place where he could see through the window. We've got this amazing picture of the mother holding her baby.

Taken through the window?

Yes. If he'd have stayed in and played by the rules, and just gone by the book…

He'd have got nothing.

No, it would have been a page lead. But the picture was so strong, it ended up as the whole of the front page, and I remember the headline was I'M STAYING PUT.

So that was your first front page byline.

I think it was my first, as it were, exclusive, so-called, that was billed as an exclusive, and then the political thing… I'll tell you how that started. I was becoming more political, and thinking that journalism was an important part of the political process, and then… you remember the Bradford City fire?

I do.

Well, the reason I can remember that as vividly as I do is because I spent that weekend, not reporting, but as a minder for Neil Kinnock and his family, because we had got this agreement with Neil and Glenys that they were going to bring all their relatives up to this London hotel, and we were going to do this massive – like 100-odd people, and aunties and uncles and cousins and nieces and nephews – and it was going to be this big double-page picture spread of the Kinnock clan, as it were. And London was the obvious place – we could have gone down to Wales but I think that would have been more difficult – so we actually gave them a fantastic weekend, they all came up, theatre, football, whatever it might be, and I was sent there by the news editor to just keep an eye out to make sure that no other papers were sniffing around and finding out what was going on. And that was the first time I got to know Neil. And it became quite a… because of the Bradford City fire happening, one, Neil, obviously as the leader of the opposition at the time, it was going to be a big national moment and he would have to, as it happened in the end it would become a big parliamentary issue, but also Robert Maxwell was our owner, and he had this crazy idea that he and Neil should fly up to Bradford together. So I suddenly became the meat in this particular sandwich, so I was almost like advising Neil from the day that I met him.

That's incredible.

And saying, "Listen, whatever you do, don't get involved."

So you were poacher *and* gamekeeper.

And to be honest I always was really, on the political side. So that's how I got to know Neil, I then started to do a few stories with him.

Clearly he became a good contact.

Yes. And eventually, Joe Haines, who was the group political editor, and he of course had been Harold Lawson's press secretary, and now back in journalism, and Joe was a fantastic tabloid writer, he really was, and he just said, "Do you fancy doing politics full time?" I went down to Westminster in the lobby, I was political correspondent, I was number four I think, on the team, and then come the next election they asked me to cover Neil for the whole group, which I did, and then a bit later became political editor, and there you go.

Had you heard of this Tony Blair bloke by then?

No. I can remember when I first met Tony.

I can remember the very first time I saw him. There was a Sunday Times magazine that said could this guy ever be prime minister, and he was shadow home secretary, and there was this picture of this good-looking young man… of course John Smith, inevitably, was going to be the next leader.

That's funny though, because you know I did a piece for the Sunday Mirror magazine when Eve Pollard was editor, and she said, "Do a piece on six rising stars." Now how's about this, I'll tell you.

Name names, go on.

Tony Blair.

Heard of him.

Gordon Brown.

Heard of him too.

John Major.

Wow.

Michael Portillo.

So it was cross-party.

Yes, yes, I had to do cross party. Then Mo Mowlam, Andrew Mitchell.

Wow. Andrew Mitchell?

Yes. Now, they were the six that I named as possible 'go all the way'.

Why did you choose those six?

Tony and Gordon, I knew very, very well. I was poacher and gamekeeper with them. Funnily enough, I probably worked more closely at first with Gordon. Gordon had a column in the Daily Record, and truth be told I used to help him write it, and we used to do political campaigns and leaflets and stuff together – I was very, very political by

then, I never hid it. And so I chose them… you could tell that Tony and Gordon had something special. They had energy, they had ideas, they had passion, they had conviction, they were clever. I think if you're in journalism, political journalism in particular, you are always on the lookout for MPs that are going to make news and create stories. And Gordon in particular at that stage was very, very good at generating news, at having campaigns that didn't just last a day but then you came back to them again and again and again, so I was probably at that stage closer to Gordon than Tony, bizarrely. Looking back, that might seem odd, but I was.

When was the moment when you thought you were going to have to ditch journalism and go full-time advising? Was it when he offered you the job? Were you expecting it?

The day before John Smith died, if you'd have done a poll of most people in the Labour Party of who would be the next leader of the Labour Party is John Smith were to die tomorrow, most people would have said Gordon Brown. The minute John died, the theoretical question produced a completely different answer when it had to be real.

It's almost like the planets aligned, didn't they?

They did, they did. And I was… by then, I was now on Today, I was assistant editor there in charge of politics, and Richard Stott was my boss again, he had gone from the Mirror, and I was doing this regular slot on BBC Breakfast telly, reviewing the papers, so I had done the papers, I was being driven into the office, the phone went, and it as Hilary Coffman, who ended up working for me later, but she at the time was working with John Smith, she had also worked for Neil, and she basically told me that John was ill, and the reason she was telling me was that, you know, obviously there was going to be a big story and they wanted people like me to know because they knew I would go out onto the airwaves and be very nice about him. But I could tell in her voice that it was probably… what she was telling me was actually they were about to announce he was dead. By the time I got to the Commons, the first person I bumped into was Jack Cunningham, who was a very close friend of Johns, who was in tears. And then it was announced officially, and it was an extraordinary day because I'm a journalist, I was suddenly having to write 3,000-4,000 obituaries which, you know, you just have to get on and do it, I probably did, I don't know, dozens of radio and television tributes, and immediately – because I'm afraid this is just the way politics is – immediately the question was being asked: "Who's next?" The last interview of the day was Newsnight, and Mark Mardell was doing it, and I said, "Listen, I'm only doing this on the basis that this is a tribute to John Smith; I'm not getting involved in speculation about the future, I'm just not doing it." "Yeah, fair enough, okay." Last question: "So, Alastair, who's the next leader of the Labour Party?" and I just said, "Tony Blair."

Why did you say that?

Why did I?

Did it come from your subconscious at that point?

I've no idea. I just said it. To this day, I think Gordon thinks that was all part of some Machiavellian plan that worked out, and it wasn't – it just popped out. But do you know what, earlier, when I was in that car, and every time I drive past the Westway, this comes back to me – every single time I go there. Because it was a life-changing moment. I knew instinctively that Tony was going to win the leadership and I was going to work for him. I just knew that.

Kind of a moment of destiny.

Just don't ask me why, but I knew it. So when he finally asked me, I said no, I took a month to say yes, but I did it.

I've been involved with the Labour Party as a member, an activist and as an advisor for 20-odd years, obviously not as successfully as yourself…

Well, no, not as high up…

But I knew Gordon a little bit to say hello too, and Ed Miliband, But ne of the questions I wanted to ask you as a media consultant is, they were quite warm in real life, much better in real life, and lots of people who met them said, "Actually they're really nice, they're not like they are on television at all," whereas Tony had the ability to convey that warmth and that personableness.

Yes.

Do you think it was just a question of media training, then? What was their problem? I don't mean that in a disrespectful way.

No.

What was the thing they didn't get that Tony did?

I don't think that this whole thing about whether you come over well in the media is important. It is important, but it's not the be all and end all. What is important is who and what you are, what you really believe, and most importantly – and this is one of the big points in the latest book that you mentioned about winning – what the strategy is, and that has to be just absolutely clear. If the person can become, if you

like, the human embodiment of that, so much the better. You see, if you look at somebody like… in the book, I pick on Angela Merkel, as I think the best and most successful of the current crop of world leaders – you wouldn't say she was that charismatic.

You'd say she's formidable, frankly.

Right – but that's happened over time. But you wouldn't say she's a Clinton or an Obama when she speaks, and even though she speaks fluent English I bet you've never heard her speak English, because she always speaks German – so most of us hear her through an interpreter. So my point is, the reason that she's successful as a leader is because of who she is and what she believes and what she does. And I think that what Tony was able to do, you see, he did really believe what he was on about, with New Labour, you kind of felt it. It was real. Now yes, he's a very good communicator, yes he's a very attractive personality.

I joined the party bout two days after he became leader.

There you go.

I thought, "This is a guy who can do business."

Now that's something in him… you see, I think this thing about leadership, political leadership – it shouldn't be like this, people should make measured, rational decisions over time, but they don't – they react to people on an emotional level. And I wonder, for example, with Gordon, who was a formidable politician, no doubt about that, but remember he became leader of years of this Tony/Gordon thing.

The TBGB-ies.

Exactly. Ed became leader after this contest with his brother, which people thought was odd. I think for both of them, I'm not sure they ever quite got over that with sections of the public.

Do you think in a sense then, it was a sort of 'got off on the wrong foot'? Tony came in because it was a genuine, unforeseen event, that John died, he came in as a fresh face, and no-one could accuse him of plotting behind John's back, whereas there was this whole hinterland of problems between Tony and Gordon…

He was also very, very good at what he did, and he did have this… I write in the book about this. The things you need for winning a campaign are strategy, we had that; leadership, we had that; and teamship, and we had that as well. Now the teamship frayed a lot at times, and ultimately I think brought us down, but for a long

time we did have a formidable team, and you put those three things together and it's quite difficult to knock you off course.

When Tony hired you, what was top of your to do list?

Win the election.

How?

By having a clear strategy.

In terms of the media?

Well, I think the strategy was the most important thing, and that was New Labour, modernisation, and then making sure that the public knew what that was and what it meant for them, and an important part of that was making sure we got the media into a more level playing field than historically it had been.

Including embracing the Murdoch press, and winning the support of the Sun etc.

I remember when I first said no, and then I said I'll think about it, and then we went on holiday, and we had this what we sometimes describe as the holiday from hell because we were on holiday with the Kinnocks, Fiona, my partner, and Neil and Glenys, and my parents, and lots of my friends thought I was mad for even thinking about doing this job.

It's beyond 24-7.

Yes. Because your life just gets completely taken over. But Tony has got very good political instincts; he was over the other side of France, near the Spanish border, and he just phoned me up one day and said, "Have you got any spare rooms? We're thinking of coming over." And I knew what was up, what was going on, he was going to come and talk me into it. So I had Fiona and Neil in one room trying to talk me out of it and Tony and Cherie in the other trying to talk me into it.

Was it like an episode of Fawlty Towers?

It was a bit! It was not a relaxing holiday. But once I'd decided I was going to do it, I remember I went for a walk with Tony up in the hillside just behind the house where we were, and we talked about that, and I remember he said to me, "Look – I know you're good at press stuff, but actually I want you for a lot more than that. I want you for strategy, because I think you've got a strategic mind and we're going to have to win this through strategy." But I do remember saying, on the media/press side of

things, I said, “We’ve got to try to neutralise the right-wing press” Because I had seen what they’d done to Neil.

They treated him abysmally.

Ed recently had the same, pretty much the same. We had it a bit, but by the time we got it, we’d been in for a long time. I don’t think we set out saying, “Let’s get The Sun to back us.” Let’s be absolutely frank – The Sun backed us because they knew we were going to win.

That was one of the questions I wanted to ask. Did you feel there was inevitability that you would win and Tony would be prime minister? I remember at the time there was lots of talk about you probably won’t get an absolute majority and you might have to do a deal with Paddy Ashdown.

Yes, there was a lot of him around, yes.

You can look back in hindsight and say it was obvious, but actually I don’t think it was at the time.

Often these things aren’t. I always felt that we were strong, but at the same time I think one of the reasons – and this is something else I’ve written about, which I think is really important when you are putting together trying to win a campaign – is we used to wake up every day, and our first instinct would be, “Right – what can go wrong today? We can still lose this.” I can remember…

That’s a healthy thing to think. No complacency.

Absolutely. And the no complacency message was real, even to the point of on the election night, when the exit poll had happened, they were talking about a three-figure majority, and I was phoning Millbank, our headquarters, from Sedgefield, telling David Hill, who was the main press guy in charge down there, saying, “Can you stop people drinking Champagne, because it just sends the wrong message.” He thought I was completely insane! He said, “We’ve just won a general election after years and years in the wilderness, it’s kind of hard not to tell the Labour Party not to celebrate.” But that no complacency, we had that drilled into the whole system, and we even… Philip Gould and I used to have this regular meeting where we would sit down and the only thing on the agenda was the answer to this question: “If we were the Tories, knowing about us what we know, what would we do with it?” And then on the basis of that I would send Tony a note, it would just say, “We’ve got this problem, we’ve been thinking about this, thinking about that,” and that, if you like, is, I think, part of the mindset that says you haven’t won until you’ve won – and as you say there was a lot of talk about would we have to do it on our own, would we have

to jump into bed with the Liberals, blah-de-blah, but in the end it all came together at the right time.

Where were you emotionally at that point? Because you had been hired by the leader of the Labour Party, and even rank and file members of the party wanted change, we were desperate for power, but there you are, going into Downing Street as head of press you've got the civil service machine – it would have been a much more difficult challenge, wouldn't it, than once you've become a civil servant, to actually effect change and get things done. Were you nervous? What were your emotions at the time?

You know, I think I will resent forever the fact that I didn't enjoy the night at all. Everyone else seemed to. Tony didn't either, actually.

No, at the Royal Festival Hall he looked pissed off, actually.

He did, yes – and we both were. And also I'd had this ridiculous thing, we'd scribbled a few notes on the plane down from Sedgefield about what he was going to say when we got to Festival Hall, and I put them in my inside pocket. And then we landed, got in the cars, and we had this ridiculous moment where the cars went the wrong way down a one-way street, and we had to do a three point turn… if you've ever seen a convoy trying to do a three-point turn, and to get the cars back in the right order, it was bedlam. And we had the radio on and we heard, you know, *…things can only get better…* and we heard, "Tony Blair is nearly here," and blah, blah, blah. As we were here, we go up this ramp, cars are pulling round, Tony and Cherie were in the front car, then there was a police car behind them, and Fiona and I were in the car behind, and I jumped out of the car, because I suddenly remembered I'd got his notes. Now, he wasn't going to need them but I thought he might. I jumped out of the car while it was still moving, and it went over my foot.

Jesus.

Honestly. It was going really slowly, it just sort of nicked my foot, it didn't break it or anything, so that didn't help my mood either, and then he went up and did that new dawn thing and it was all fine, and people were going…

Which wasn't even a metaphor at that point, was it? I think dawn was breaking.

Do you know what? This is what happens when people think you are really good at what you do. The press were actually saying that we had deliberately delayed things so it would be dawn, so he could say 'new dawn', which was absolute nonsense! He saw he sun rising, whether it was a new dawn or not! But anyway, we got inside, and I said, "Oh, God – I just want to get to bed." And he said, "I know, this is grim, isn't it?" Honestly we were both like, morose. And I think for both of us – him, obviously,

on a kind of monumental scale – it partly was that thing you alluded to, you're thinking, "We've been careering around the country for months, we've had no sleep for days, and tomorrow, he's about to start as prime minister, and I'm about to inherit this clapped out communications side of things that I've got to try to – which we've just sort of run ragged with a team of, you now, half a dozen people – and I'm going to have to try and get a grip of it.

Did you feel there was a lot of opportunity, or did you almost feel daunted by it?

I was still, to be absolutely honest, I was much more focused on the fact that I had just got this new job! I had this extraordinary first day where my PA, who came to be indispensible, but day one I was really close to getting rid of her. One, she was in tears, telling me how much she liked John Major – well, you know, my mindset wasn't exactly in that place! –

I think because she was a civil servant.

Because she was a civil servant, yes. And the second thing was, the next time I saw her in tears was because she said, 'I can't cope with not knowing where you are." Because I had run the whole campaign from an office the size of this table, and a mobile phone. In fact two mobile phones, because the battery kept going! And that's the way I operated – I was always on the move, and she wanted somebody who was always behind that desk and she knew where they were and she knew what to say to people who were phoning and all the rest of it. As I say, over time, we got used to each other and she became completely indispensible to me, but that was a slow process – and then there was the whole thing about… I'm not somebody who buys the argument that 'this is the way we've always done it'. I'm not saying there aren't benefits to that in some ways, and that's why it was very useful; Robin Butler (unverified), who was the cabinet secretary, the first conversation I had with him, I said, "Can I ask you something? These people in the communications side of things, they do understand that they're going to have to change things, don't they? Because one of the reasons we're here with such a big majority is because it wasn't working," and he said, "Absolutely." So once we got the go-ahead for that, we really did start to shake things up a bit.

Are there any highlights or lowlights from your time in Downing Street that we don't already know, as it were? And I don't mean the obvious stuff like Iraq, or disagreements with the BBC from time to time, but what were the B-list type challenges and victories that weren't as noteworthy as the more spectacular stuff?

A lot of the best moments were to do with Northern Ireland, and a lot of the worst moments are to do with Northern Ireland.

An incredible achievement, even now.

But I think… what else… a lot of the moments that I really liked actually were to do with people who worked there who weren't even part of my team. There was a kind of spirit about the place that was really quite good, so when I was going through some of the really bad moments, whether it was Iraq, the BBC, the Hutton Enquiry, whatever… when you asked the question, a couple of people popped into my head – one was a messenger called Bill; he was like something out of a Dickens novel! He just shuffled around… and he always seemed to be there when I was feeling the heat a bit, and he would always just say something very nice.

And just lifted your spirits.

Yes, just sort of made you feel that, you know, things were okay. I'll give you another one that's… do you remember when John Prescott whacked the fella…

Very famously. I always remember the guy's mullet as well! To be honest I wanted to give him a right hook.

Terrible.

In the end John gave him a left hook, as I remember.

Was it a right hook?

No, it was a left.

Okay. It was a jab more than hook. But bear in mind, that was the day we launched the manifesto, right? And then Tony was doing Question Time, and the media were just going absolutely crazy saying he's going to have to sack him – you can't have your deputy prime minister thumping a voter in the face in the day that your campaign kicks off! So when I told Tony, on the way out of doing this Question Time recording, and we got in the car and I told him, and he did look a bit kind of, you know, my God. Within about 20 seconds, the driver, terry, and the special branch guy in front, they both started laughing, and they couldn't stop laughing – and that was when we knew the public were going to view this in a completely different way to the way the media are viewing it. So those kind of moments, you know, stick with you.

Was there a stressful time when Tony had to be the ambassador for the UK, when he had to speak away from party politics, big monumental things like when Diana died and things like this, did you feel that was more stressful in

terms of getting the tone right, because no-one was going to criticise whatever he said, but you still had to get the tribute spot on?

Listen, if you're the prime minister, you're always going to be open to possible criticism if you get it wrong. I think those big national moments… you don't say to yourself, "This is one of those moments that is going to be remembered." You don't say that, but you kind of feel it, and we definitely felt it about that, and the very first set of discussions we had when we got the news that she was dead, was about that. When should he speak? What should he say? Where should it be? These are utterly legitimate questions about moments that are going to shape a mood for a country, and that partly is what leadership is about.

Do you feel a kind of… the deadline, though, when you have decided where Tony is going to speak and roughly what he is going to say, you're going to have to find a quiet corner somewhere and write the prime minister's tribute to Diana…

Actually, no – to be fair, it wasn't something that was written down – we talked about it over the phone. Because he was up in Sedgefield, and I was in London. Because remember it was in the middle of the night, and we decided early on that he wouldn't do anything, and he was going to go to church in the morning anyway, and we had decided, in the night, that we would wait until then. And of course, you are scrabbling around then, and I remember Phil Wilson, who is now an MP, he worked for Tony in the constituency, and I remember phoning him and saying, "I'm really sorry about this, but would you mind getting there and just making sure that there are barriers in place, and that when he gets out of the car he's in his own space…" This may sound ridiculous, but you know when you see those politicians surrounded by dozens of microphones, it just looks so undignified, so we had to kind of do that slightly by remote control, but actually I watched it with my daughter – she's in her 20s now but she was really young then – in the kitchen. I'll tell you when I knew… there are two moments when I knew that it was one of those moments. The first was, it was live on BBC and they had a panel in the studio – I can't remember who was on the panel but I think David Mellor was one of them – but I can remember they cut from Tony to this panel, all of whom just looked like, really kind of moved, and then all of whom said in their different ways, "That was just extraordinary, what he did there." Because you never know with these phrases, whether they are going to connect or whether they are going to be naff. The next morning, the front page headline in the International Herald Tribune, right across the front page was WORLD MOURNS PEOPLE'S PRINCESS. And people say, "Who wrote that, was it you or was it Tony? I honestly say, and this is the honest answer, I cannot remember. Because it was just… we were batting backwards and forwards all night, talking about it. And also, don't forget, we both knew Diana, reacting on an emotional level, reacting… I ended up turning all the phones off because it was just going crazy, and we had this one phone like that

Tony and I were talking on the phone, and I think the ambassador… I think the ambassador had to identify the body, so there was all this logistical stuff…

Did you get apprehensive when Tony was giving big speeches? For example, you were in the kitchen there, you're watching the prime minister speak from church live in BBC1… what are you going through when you watch it? Do you think, he's clearly very talented, we've got the lines, I know he'll deliver it well, or do you think, 'Oh, God – I hope nothing's going to go wrong." Because I remember, I went to quite a few conference when I was a parliamentary candidate; when Tony used to speak I used to see you at the side of the conference set, and you did look slightly anxious/focused.

No, I was anxious, and I often… see, those party conference speeches are important moments in the calendar – they were, they still are – they were big strategic building block moments. And I was anxious, and I was anxious mainly about making sure that things went well, but also you've got to remember, when a leader in those circumstances does something that is going to be commanding the attention, it then sets up a whole load, a new set of work for me to do – that's part of the anxiety as well, and that's the thing that never, ever stopped. So yes, you were anxious, and you were… and the other thing is, you've got to remember, you're trying to think through the whole time how this is going to go down with the public, the media, with colleagues, with your opponents, are there any weaknesses, did he open a flank, did he make a mistake, is there something that he said that wasn't quite right that we're going to have to correct? You think about those things all the time, and you become almost… machine-like is too strong, but you do definitely have a sense of you're not just in that moment; you're in the next moment, and the next moment, and the next moment. I'll tell you the funniest one in terms of the speech, was the Women's Institute. Do you remember the Women's Institute speech where he got a slow hand clap? I was in my office watching that with John Prescott.

Did you have a wry smile?

Well, I don't think we've ever had more argument about a speech than that speech, and Tony just had a bee in his bonnet about it, that that was the speech he was going to make, and that was the audience he was going to do it to, and we were all saying to him, it's just not the right place and it's not the right time. And I think… I mean, I used to go with him to every big event, so I don't know whether we'd had a bit of a row, because we didn't go – I was in the office, and I was sitting there with John Prescott talking about something else, and we had the television on in the background – I wasn't even watching it, so there's Tony, I said in my diary, I looked over John's shoulder, and I could see that he had what I called his 'Bambi' look on, and he just looked absolutely startled. I turned up the volume, and there are thousands of blue rinses, slow hand clapping the prime minister! Just dire! I remember the briefing later that day; the press loved it, absolutely loved it. You've

just got to tough it out. You've just got to say, "Look, they didn't like the speech, some of them, for whatever reason, but I'm going to tell you what the message was. This is what he said, this is why he said it… you've just got to tough t out. It's true that bad news is more likely to fly than good news, but don't forget, for us – particularly when we're in opposition – good news for us is bad news for the government. So that was the dynamic that we were trying to develop.

How did it work when you were attacked personally? Nowadays, with twitter trolls and all this kind of thing, I wonder how many times you do it. I was involved in an animal welfare campaign about five or six years ago, trying to ban the sale of foie gras, and I got thousands of people calling me horrible names, saying, "How dare you try and do this," blah, blah, blah… the first 10 really stung actually, but then it kind of… once you're into the two or three hundredth person saying that you're a twat…

It's funny, you know, when Fiona was working for Cherie, I think I'm right in saying that the biggest anti mailbag that Cherie ever got was when we were at lunch or a dinner, and there had been foie gras on the menu.

What, condemning her for eating it?

Yes, I don't even know if she'd eaten it, but… I can't remember. Listen – foie gras is one of those issues. Here's a thing – you mentioned Twitter. Of course, we didn't have Twitter back then, but I never, ever block anybody – golden rule. For me. I just don't mind getting abuse. If somebody says, "Just read your book, loved it, I put a five star review for you on Amazon," I feel better if I see that than, "You're a complete twat and I wish you were hanging from a lamp post," but it doesn't bother me that much when I get those.

Has it changed, dealing with Twitter, you were famously slow to it and now you're really prolific on it.

I like it. I like the engagement, I like the liveliness of it, I like the instantness of it…

Do you think Ed Miliband, for example, should have run his own Twitter, rather than someone else? It might have meant fewer tweets or a few minor spelling mistakes, but do you wonder whether that might be a way for people to connect?

I think at the last election, I think we were better at social media than the Tories, but we still lost – so I don't think you should overstate its importance. There's a wonderful quote from Arsine Wenger in the book where he talks about how we've gone from a vertical world to a horizontal world. Vertical, the leaders were, the same as a football manager or a politician or a businessman, whatever it might be, they

make the decisions and then it goes down the system. Horizontal world, 24-7 media, social media and all that stuff, you're just being battered and bombarded with other people's opinions all the time, and I think the important thing is not to get overly influenced by it. Don't not listen, but don't allow it to drive your strategy – drive your own strategy. So I don't fear social media at all; I think there's obviously a really bad and dark side to it, and whether it's social media to radicalise young jihadists, or whether it's social media for grooming by paedophiles and all that stuff, it's revolting, there is that dark side, but I think in terms of the politics of political engagement in a democracy like ours, I think it's a good thing.

Do you think that journalists starting out in their carer now have it easier because of social media? They can start a podcast or get known on Twitter… or do you think they have it much harder because there are fewer newsroom positions now, no one wants a journalist that's just going to write, they have to be able to do video and audio and all this kind of stuff… would you warn a young person starting off in journalism off, or would you say the world's their oyster now?

A bit of both. I mean, I think the media landscape, since I was in it, starting out 30-odd years ago, it's just so different, totally different. If I think about some of the big stories that I was involved with, the first really big national story that I remember having anything to do with was the Penlee lifeboat disaster (corr), well that was back in the 80s, it was a terrible disaster where the Penlee lifeboat got lost at sea, and it was a huge international story, so all the media came down to the West Country, and I by then, I was still on the local paper, I had started to pick up work with the nationals and I was doing a bit of research and tip-offs and stuff like that, and I can remember being out with some of the guys who were down there on the nationals, and they would be staying in nice hotels, they would work reasonably hard during the day, they'd file by about five o'clock, they'd go to the pub and have a few drinks, they'd go out for dinner, they'd check in with the office once on the telephone, they might get a phone call or midnight when the first editions started to come in, they might have missed their line and they'd have to top it up, but now, stories like that, they're tweeting en route, they would have to listen to the radio and be online and track all the websites to make sure they're not missing anything, and I think one of the dynamics of modern journalism is the pressure to get the story right, but late – that pressure is far weaker than the pressure to get the story regardless of whether it's right or wrong, but quick. I think that makes journalism much more difficult actually.

You can see that with the difference between the BBC News channel and Sky. I mean, Sky's famous unofficial motto is 'never wrong for long'.

Never wrong for long, yes.

But the BBC, I remember once a couple of years ago, they actually put out a policy statement to say they would rather sit on something and make sure it's 100% nailed on right before they put the breaking news strap on it.

Even on that you have situations where, okay, that's the BBC, but you're thinking of the BBC as a television screen – but here's the thing. Let's say somebody who you think is likely to be in the know tweets something. Let's say it's a football transfer. Let's say the sports editor of the evening paper in Newcastle tweets that the manager has been sacked and he's being replaced. You think that guy's going to know, and he's tweeted it. The fact of him tweeting it becomes breaking news, and even if the BBC don't put that up on their screens, you can guarantee there will be lots of BBC people retweeting it. So where you decide a policy on stuff like that I think is very difficult. I think social media has changed journalism, in some ways for the better but I think in a lot of ways for the worse.

How's that?

This point about it doesn't matter about whether a story's right or wrong, you've got to get it, because it's already out.

I think the access you can get to celebrities bow can work both ways. I've lost respect for some celebrities because I thought they were exciting and talented, and they sound mundane, a lot of the stuff is, and all the self-promotion, and you kind of think, "Actually, you've lost that mystery."

But enough of Piers Morgan! Actually to be fair, Piers is still quite lively on Twitter.

Yes, he is – he's got a character, and it's just a shame…

Wenger out, KP in, stop killing people in America.

I agree with him, not wanting people to be killed in America – he's the wrong guy because no-one seems to like him, unfortunately. But he makes perfect sense, doesn't he? If you were advising Piers, then, that's an interesting question…

Excuse me, I'm not advising Piers… ha-ha.

Would you tell him to find another spokesperson, because he's so toxic no-one's going to listen to him on gun control?

Listen, Piers is very, very good at being Piers – he doesn't need any advice at all. He even turned losing the slot at CNN into a kind of… no, Piers is a survivor.

Tell me about your book, *Winners*, then. Because I've bought it, it's on my iPad right now on Kindle, but I've not read it. It's one of those books that I want to read but I've never got quite round to.

Why not?

Because I'm reading Nick Robinson's book, then I've got Richard Desmond's book, and you're third on the list.

No, I'm sorry, mine came out before both of those!

It did, I agree.

Right, well you can put Robinson and Desmond in the bin – for now –

The virtual bin.

So what do you want me to tell you? Do you want me to tell you why you ought to read it?

Yes, but also, when we go back to the start of your career and you were talking about how ambitious you are, is that something that you learnt on the journey? Have you always been interested in that kind of motivation about what makes a winner?

I think I've always been interested in exceptional, hyper-achieving people. Why and how, and particularly the how – and this is a book about how. And so it looks at winners in sport, business, politics, a couple in entertainment, and tries to draw general lessons. I also feed in things that I think about winning, some of which I have talked about with you tonight, about how you win campaigns, how you put strategies together, and I think one of the conclusions I reached in the book is that if I look at real winning organisations, I think you find the best of them in sport and the second best in business, and the third best in politics – and I think that's quite dangerous.

From the skim of it that I've had, one of the things that struck me about it is it was quite involved in the mechanics of how, whereas you read the kind of Anthony Robbins style, American, gung-ho success type literature, and it tends to be, if you dream strong enough…

No, no, no – it's not that, it's not that. It's definitely not that. No, what it is, and what it tries to be, and what I think it is, is an analysis of remarkable hyper-achieving people, but trying to do it in a way that you could actually improve the way you do what you do. There's none of us… you and I are never going to be José Mourinho, Anna Wintour or Richard Branson, but I've learnt something from all of them, and I've tried

to distil it in a way that's accessible. So actually, like you say, the Robbins 'dream big and follow the stars' and all that kind of stuff, that's all crap as far as I'm concerned.

But they love it over there.

But I'll give you an example. I'm really keen on Australia, and I love the Australian sports winning mindset; we're coming up to the ashes, and you've just had England against New Zealand, and people are saying just how fantastic the New Zealanders have been, and such great sportsmen – well, fine, that's great – but they did lose. And now we've got the Aussies, and they won't be quite so sportsmanlike, and you know what, there's a chance they might win! I'm not saying the two are directly related, but sometimes they are. So I love the Australian winning mindset, I love it. So I've done this chapter on the winning sprit of Australia, and I know Australia reasonably well, I've been there a few times, but I wanted to get somebody properly researching it for me. So I've got this guy out in Australia who was kind of digging up loads of stuff for me, and I was sending him the drafts, and he sent me a note back saying, "I love all this stuff, but you've got to find a way of bringing it to a level that everybody can understand." So I say in the book for example, anything you do that's meaningful, you have to be clear about the objective, then set the strategy, then only then go tactical. And he actually said, so for example, apply that to losing weight objectively. Strategy: diet and exercise. Tactics: Put a picture of a fat person on the fridge.

Avoid pie and cake.

Yes – use the stairs, not the lift! And that actually is a… and I've included that in the book now. So it's not just about… you see, winning is not just about becoming president of America, or winning the Champion's League, or being Usain Bolt. Only one person can be Usain Bolt, and he's kind of cornered the market. Winning can also be about setting yourself difficult objectives and then working out how to meet them, and my point is I think you can take from these people what you learn from them, and apply it. I have found, for example, in the way that I think about strategy, I've got very, very clear views about strategy, but I'm slightly tweaking them, having spent quite a bit of time talking about strategy to Garry Kasparov, and how he applies it to a chess match, and José Mourinho, and how he applies it to a football match, because it's slightly different. One of the things that too many people – and again, I think politics is terrible for this – people get into a comfort zone, and they think because they have been doing stuff a certain way it must be right – often it's wrong. And one of my favourite chapters in the whole book… I don't like Formula 1, it's not one of my sports, but separately, Ben Ainslie, the sailor, Billy Beane from baseball, the Moneyball guy, Clive Woodward, rugby, Dave Brailsford, cycling, they all said – because I was talking about how they use data – they all said if you were going to write a chapter about data, you've got to go and do Formula 1, because they're the best in the world. And I went and spent some time with Mercedes and

McLaren, and I couldn't believe it at all. Couldn't believe it. Just the volume and the attention to detail but also, more importantly, was the mindset that they applied to it. The mindset applied to it as that data is there to drive innovation and higher performance, whereas I think in politics, we use data for confirmation bias to make us feel we're doing the right thing – and they never, no matter how fast they go around the track, they never think it's as fast as they could have gone, and I think that's a winning mindset. I've written 11 books, and why you write the books that you do, I just don't know. But this one, I think, has been boiling away in me for a long, long time. I think partly…

Curiosity?

No, I think partly politics. I think partly a worry that we're just slightly losing the winning mindset – we Labour, we Britain – and that we don't celebrate winning enough. I think that's in there. When I started, I shaped it around the idea of… the idea was to be write about political campaigns that I have been involved in that I've won, and what lessons can you take from that and apply to other worlds. It's become a completely different book, where I've gone and talked to the other worlds first – sport and business in particular – taking their lessons on winning, and merged them and moulded them with my own views on winning, and ended up with a book that's very, very different to how it started out – and that's probably why I've enjoyed writing it as much as I have, because… and I've got to tell you, it's really good fun. What's been really good fun has been just the luck involved. So I went t New York to interview Anna Wintour. I thought, "Well, I'm paying my own way, I'll try and get a speaking gig while I'm out there," so I got a speaking gig at the New York Yankees stadium; it was an event about social media and sport, and they paid my way and all that, and I was all fine. I did a talk at the dinner for all the sponsors, and in the Q&A, this woman stood up and asked me a question that literally kept me awake all night, and how I had gone from this life at the epicentre of power to this life where she said, "Okay, it's interesting what you do, but it's not as important – how have you managed to make this transition?"

I was about the genuinely ask a similar question.

Were you? Well, listen…

I was going to frame it in terms of asking you to frame your typical working week as well.

Okay, well I'll tell you. She asked it in such a way that I literally couldn't sleep, because actually it goes to the heart of the dichotomy in me all the time: should I have been making more of my life, should I have stayed in politics, should I stand for parliament, should I… that goes on all the time. But, you know, I've now got a nice life, I've got freedom, I've got more time, I can do different things, blah, blah, blah. I

saw her the next morning, and I said, “Do you know what? You kept me awake all night, and I want to know why I asked that question.” Because in my experience, often, when people ask really personal questions, they’re asking about themselves.

Absolutely. Transference.

And she said, “You could be right, but it’s not me, it’s my boss.” I said, “Who’s your boss?” She said, “Floyd Mayweather.” And *that’s* how I got the interview with Floyd Mayweather! So it’s just luck.

It is often luck, isn’t it?

And it’s one of the best interviews in the book – as you’ll find when you read it.

Indeed.

Once you've got through the *fascinating* memoirs of Richard Desmond, and the *unbelievably* interesting book by Nick Robinson.

Actually, Nick’s got a few colourful anecdotes that he’s been saying over the years. But what is a typical working week for you, then? Penultimate question. I know you’re about to say, “There is no typical working week,” but where do you work? What is it you do?

What do I do now?

Yes.

I still kind of tend to work on the move.

Do you have a separate battery charger now for your iPhone, rather than having two phones like you did in the old days?

I’m less on the phone than I used to be, but I’ll tell you what, I can write thousands of words on there. I wrote most of this last book a mixture of on there and on a Mac, and a lot of that was on planes and trains – I’m very good at working on planes and trains. But in terms of most working weeks, most working weeks I’m probably abroad at some time, either for a day or two, I don’t like going away for a long time. I do a lot of work in the Balkans, political stuff, as you know I went back here for the campaign; I try to write something every day, even if it’s just a blog, but I will write something; I do a lot of public speaking, I have a golden rule that every time I am paid to speak I do a charity thing before the next paid one.

A kind of ying and yang, as it were.

Yes. And then I do a lot of campaigning for charities, mental health charities in particular, and leukaemia and lymphoma research… so writing, speaking, consultancy, campaigns, charity, I do exercise every day…

Are you still a prolific runner?

No, less running now. I still run a bit, but I prefer cycling, and I've actually… I don't want to worry you too much, but I've got into boxing!

Wow. Well, final question then.

Go on, then.

And it's probably linked to boxing, of course, when you kindly agreed to an interview, I asked a few friends and family and so on as to what they'd want to know, because again, the difficulty with this is, people feel they know you, the ups and downs of your carer and everything has kind of already been done, and quite a few people said this one question actually, I don't know whether it will be a yes or no, but they said, "Was he flattered by Peter Capaldi's interpretation of Malcolm Tucker?" Did that flatter you? Did you help him? I mean, how did that work?

I didn't help, no – but it did…

Because he was funny.

Yes, he was hilarious, and my kids love it.

I bet they do!

And I do… I was, I'll be honest, I was quite sad when he got Doctor Who! Because Doctor Who is a bigger brand than Malcolm Tucker!

I love Malcolm Tucker. He was exquisite in his unpleasantness, wasn't he, and the insults.

Yes.

Were you as… how much of it is a fair interpretation? Is it fair to say none, or was there a grain of truth in there?

There is a grain of truth; I am definitely robust. The grain of truth is the idea of being the person who is that… both trying to control the government agenda, and the

media agenda – that was my job! My job as director of communications and strategy was to make sure that the government was going in the right direction, and doing the things that Tony Blair wanted it to do.

It's a hell of a job.

Right? And then the other part of it was making sure the media reflected that. I mean, I do swear a lot. I don't swear quite as much as Malcolm Tucker! You know one of the things I'm proudest of, though? It's that lots and lots of people have slagged me off down the years, but none of them have been the people who have worked with me directly, and I think I was always a good boss, I always encouraged young talent, I have always believed that actually, if you looked through your team, you might actually find that your most talented and likely to succeed person is the one that is aged 22-23, and is currently number seven on the list… one of the first things I did when I went into Downing Street was to ask a guy who was well, well down the pecking order to apply for a job as my deputy, and I have always been good at that – spotting talent and wanting talent to flourish. I have never, ever feared other people's abilities, and I think that's something I saw in Tony as well. Yes, it was difficult with Gordon, as we were talking about earlier, but he wanted other big figures around him, and I think too many people... Jack Welch I quite in the book as saying, "If you don't get the brightest and the best people around you, you could be short-changing yourself.

Alastair, there's tons of things I could ask you about that!

Well, you know, it's dark, we could stay all night!

Well, I am mindful that we've been chatting for a very long time, so I think we're running out of metaphorical tape. As I say, there's loads I could ask you, but I think we need to leave it there. Thank you ever so much for doing this.

My pleasure. Thank you.