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Columnist and presenter

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by the columnist and presenter David Aaronovitch. Starting his career in the 1980s as a television researcher and producer, he moved to print journalism in 1995 as chief leader writer for the Independent. Now a columnist for the Times, he has since written for many major UK newspapers and won numerous accolades, including the Orwell Prize for Political Journalism. His television work includes the TV documentary series, The Blair Years, for BBC One, and regular appearances on shows such as Newsnight, the Andrew Marr Show, and Have I Got News for You. He has also written three books, including a personal memoir.

David, thank you for joining me.

You're welcome.

David, you describe yourself as a "radical moderate" on your Times biography. Is that a popular position in this era of polarisation?

The first thing is, I had to describe myself as something. So when people say to you, "We need an encapsulation of your views in about eight words, what's the best you can give us?" It's a bit like, "What's your favourite movie?" You're flustered and you start looking around, "Oh, what genre should I go for? What period should I go for?" And so on. So there's several things I could conceivably call myself politically. But I dislike the term 'centrist' and I don't really like the term 'moderate' very much. I'm quite an eclectic holder of opinions, and so I quite often get accused by people on the right of politics of being an appalling left winger. "Look at your views about Europe, look at your views about immigration," blah, blah, blah. "An appalling right winger, look how hostile you are to Saint Jeremy, look how you're in favour of intervention around the world, liberal interventionism," and so on. "Look how you're not in favour of Labour's expenditure plans." I haven't written about that yet, by the way, but you can presume that I'm not going to be in favour of all of them. Until in the end you just kind of come down to what's the nearest encapsulation of the thing that I can possibly get to? The sort of series of views which seem to me to have a big relationship with the views that I held when I was younger, but I'm not exactly the same in all points as them. Of course, what people want to do continuously is they

kind of create a journey for you with a narrative arc, which they can easily understand and which allows them to kind of stick you in a category. I suppose I do the same to other people. So I'm supposed to be on the left to right journey. But certain things like I've been liberal on immigration, I am a staunch for, and the values of... I suppose one or two things that have slightly changed for me more recently, which have taken me a bit by surprise, is I think I've learned something during this whole last horrible five years about the value of institutions, that as a young person I would've just said, "Oh, they're so funny, they're so useless. Stupid judges, stupid Parliament," etc., etc.. Then I've gradually come to realise that institutions that have stood the test of time, and to a larger extent are kind of malleable and are responsive, but not over-responsive, in other words, have a kind of sense of themselves, are actually incredibly valuable, take a huge amount of time to construct, can in the wrong circumstances, take no time at all to destroy, and then you are left with rubble. I don't think I thought that at 19.

I'm a staunch Republican, I really want an elected head of state. But what really undermines my argument is the pragmatic element is that The Queen does a reasonably good job; if it ain't broke, don't fix it. And you know, there are plenty of other problems to solve. So in the sense that I'm becoming a kind of closet Monarchist, even though I still maintain, I've got Republican blood in me.

No, no, that's right. Yes. I think in that case you are either a step ahead of me or step behind, depending on which way you want to look at it. Because if you kind of begin to interrogate why it is that the thing works, then that gives you some kind of idea about if, you know, the relationship of an institution to people, and the notion about legitimacy. I mean, The Queen, the Monarchy, has legitimacy in so far it actually literally cannot do anything. They can't, you know, we discovered during the entire Boris Johnson prorogation crisis that actually all the monarch can do is what the prime minister, not even Parliament, what the prime minister tells him or her to do. And that's it. So your Republicans and my Republicans are neither here nor there. All we'd be really talking about is whether we then voted for a president who has actually separate powers in some way from the prime minister, because at the moment, on the whole, we just don't have that.

And the thing that really kind of, as I say, I'm still a closet Republican but, and the thing that really convinced me is when the Guardian turned over Prince Charles and they did that FOI and took it to the high court and got his letters. He just struck me as someone who might write to the local paper. And the responses from the ministers was basically like, "Thank you, your Highness."

I know, it was good, wasn't it? It was very good. We're trying to run this kind of incredible kind of sinister story. Prince Charles manages to get people to change their important decisions... and you couldn't really locate anything that anybody had changed as a result. And it was quite obvious that their responses were politer than they would have been, or at least more immediate than they would have been, to an ordinary member of the public. But what actually had that same kind of slightly pained quality that the member of the public might've got.

Because I normally pre agree with most of the things you say before you said them, which as you said before we started this recording, is something that would worry you as a columnist. In fact, let me ask you about that before I go into my anecdote. How do you want your readers to engage with you? Is it that you want them to pre-disagree with you and then be won over or challenged?

No. I guess if you had an ideal encounter with a reader, that reader would say, "I sometimes agree with you, I sometimes disagree with you. I'm sometimes persuaded by you. I'm sometimes not persuaded by you, but I tell you what, I always think you write beautifully." I have to say there isn't really such a person. I think I must've met one person who said that. People have a tendency to say, "Oh, thank god you say the things you say, because they're just what I think." You know, "You have a way of putting into words what I think." And that kind of, you have to appreciate it. I mean, who's not going to like that? But I would rather have the person who said, "I started off not agreeing with you, but by the time we got to the end, I think you'd more or less persuaded me." Now, the quality of the thinking that might have gone on there is enjoyable to me. I think a column to me, the ideal column should be one which starts the reader in one place and finishes them in another. I'm not interested in reading columns which finish exactly the same way as they start. It's a bit like a drama where there's no character development. They just remain the same right the way through. Well, what's the point of that? Who's learned anything from that? The writer hasn't learned very much because they'd never even tested their own views, and the reader certainly hasn't learned anything. So yes, they can say at the end, "I agree with all this. I agree with it at the end as much as I'd agree with it at the beginning." Fine. You're not interested in learning, you haven't learned anything. Nothing's happened here. It's dead drama.

I see you arguing with numpties on Twitter quite a lot and, in one sense, you're like Rob Burley of the BBC, where it's admirable that you do it, where you take people to task, but part of me thinks, why do you bother?

It's all research. It's all research. Sometimes, somebody like Rob Burley will get into a discussion with people who essentially have got a kind of conspiracy theory about the BBC. Now, part of him, I think, is actually engaged in an argument, "I want to put you straight." And there is a bit of that. But there's a part of it that wants to see where this goes, what the line of argument will be, and what the connections will be. One of the things that, one of the things, not the main thing for me, but one of the things that Twitter is quite useful for is connecting the dots up on various kinds of positions, so that coherent ideologies can be spotted. But actually the people who hold them barely even know they've got themselves. You can see them, and you can see what the trends are, and you can see where they came from and where it's all going. So part of me just explores, and lets it kind of tick away a little bit. So you'll quite often find in my tweets, they're not exactly putting people straight. They're more kind of a way of teasing out their next position as well so that we can kind of map their ideological DNA. And I have found that quite interesting. More interesting than I should, because there are other things to do and I should be doing them.

Many years ago now, you brought out Voodoo Histories, your book about how everyone seems to dwell and delight in conspiracy theories, which I thought was magisterial. But I was reminded of it a few months ago when my niece,

who's 15, confidently said at a family barbecue that the moon landings were faked. And I said, "Ah, no, they weren't." But, like you, it was interested to tease out why they were. And I said, "Well, there's a big mirror on the moon for one thing that you can buy a £3 laser from Argos and bounce it off yourself." So then her position evolved to, "We did land on the moon, but the moon landing footage was faked by Stanley Kubrick." And the interesting this shifting sands that it's more of a conspiratorial lens through which they look at the world.

Well, she's obviously happened upon a personal website that...

It was a YouTube video. And then the algorithm says, "People who watch this ridiculous conspiracy video also watch this."

Yes.

And that's why she thinks it.

"You are an idiot and therefore you'll probably enjoy this."

Yes, because you saw all the clicks they're getting. There's six clicks. And she's watched up to six videos that have reinforced her view that the moon landings were faked.

Well, what was it, about eight, nine years ago it was the Illuminati were big in the schools and so on. And I suppose I'd moderately prefer the moon landings to the Illuminati, because the Illuminati really is a crazy idea. Whereas the moon landings at least purport to have some kind of scientific basis. I mean, although as you experienced quite easily with her, she backed down very, very easily and it wouldn't take very much to get her to back down from the rest of it either. All you need is that website that shows you the explanation of why it is not true that there is a false flag waving in the wind, and it's not true about the shadows and all that kind of stuff which is claimed to be true about the photography. And then finally, you have to tell her. You have to tell her. Anyway, this was all a movie, you know, it was called who I hand Capricorn Nine, about people who are going to go on a Mars landing, but of course they couldn't actually get there. So what they did was they faked it and they had to put these astronauts in the desert. So they take all these astronauts and they put them in the desert and so on, because of course they're supposed to be on Mars, with the idea that they're going to be held there until the trip is deemed to be over. Well, of course the astronauts kind of work out that that's going to be rather tricky actually, if they're let out and so on, because the only basis on which this can possibly work is if they say absolutely shtum. And so they try to escape what is certain death, etc. And I think, I think at the end, one of them actually does. I can't quite remember. But it pointed out quite clearly, this film, the huge flaw in anything to do with this, which is you'd have to have thousands and thousands and thousands of people silenced forever. And it's not possible.

But it's, it's the advantage that the CID detective has when he's investigating an armed robber. Because if you get three lags that have robbed a bank, one of

them, ultimately, is going to cough or one of them might even have a bit of pillow talk five years later to someone. But ultimately the truth will out, because if you get more than a conspiracy of two people, it's going to leak.

By and large. There is an exception to this, which funnily enough, which is Bletchley Park. But that was a context within which everybody knew what their role was and so on. It's a rare exception.

Is there any truth to the old adage then, that you can't reason someone out of a position that they're not reasoning themselves into?

Well, there's an awful lot of debate about this. And this is one of these things which is kind of fascinating at the moment. And it falls into this kind of whole bracket of discussions about whether or not anybody takes the blindest bit of notice that anything that anybody says unless they agree with them in the first place. And the really pessimistic view is that we pick a side and then we will do whatever that side tells us to do. And wherever it... including being prepared to believe any ridiculous thing it says, and being prepared to disbelieve any sensible thing that the other side says.

Well, doesn't that apply to, you know, the Corbynites and the Trumpites?

Well, yes, for sure. So there's, you know, the problem of confirmation bias, and you'd say that Trump was huge and heroic. And actually, something else seems to happen, which is that people's perception of what's right and wrong actually can go through dramatic shifts according to the side that they've picked. So, you know, you can see Republicans saying things like, "Well, this isn't proof that Trump did X, Y, or Z." And then when the stuff comes forward saying that there is proof, they say, "Well, it's not impeachable."

Evangelical Christians support him even though he had an affair with a porn actress after he got married, and it's not even denied.

Yes, I think actually most Evangelical Christians do that, it turns out. As my psychoanalyst friend says, "The bigger the front, the bigger the back."

Indeed.

Christopher Hitchens had this wonderful phrase about, you know, the next time you hear some kind of Republican Senator going on and on about homosexuality, you just know that at some point or other they're going to be found on their knees in front of some wretched rent boy.

So I suppose a very profound and almost existential question is: what's the point?

Yes, that is exactly... that is the point. I mean you often think that to yourself. Are you simply... I mean, and that's why, at the base of it, the only column that I think is good is one that I think is good. If you see what I mean. It's not... it's nice if you think it's

good. It's not great if you think it is dreadful. But the person I'm writing for is me. Have I got as close to the thing that I want to say about something, and I think it's true about something, as I possibly can and done it in an elegant way and hopefully with at least a couple of laughs along the way as well? You know, because we need a bit of light and shade. And the world is frankly incongruous, and often sometimes ridiculous, and it does... in the sense that the ridiculous is important, but that ultimately is it. Because I also present The Briefing Room for Radio 4 in which we have no politicians and we have no people who are party-pre, but we just have people as close as possible to being experts about a particular area, and for 28 minutes we find out about that particular area. I don't have an opinion in the whole thing. It's such a relief! I can just be curious, wonder about this, wonder about that. I can even come to conclusions based on what they've told me that don't really sit with what I might have written on the same subject six months before. That's fine. That can happen. And it is a bit of a relief. And so I suppose in that sense, the conceit is that there are people out there whose view of things will be shaped by what they discover to be true about it. I'll give you an example, because it slightly applies to me. So during the height, again, of this prorogation crisis, we did a special programme on the constitution.

I listened.

And people got again interested in the constitution. You know, British constitution when I was at school was the thing that boys did if they couldn't do anything else. And it was taught by the most boring person in the entire school. Here we had a programme which was about the constitution, and people were really kind of listening. I had gone into it with the usual kind of, I don't know, sort of radical presupposition that something different will be better, i.e. it would be better to have a written constitution, to write it all down. By the end of the programme they'd pretty much convinced me that that was not going to be the best thing to do, for all kinds of reasons.

You get caught up in all kinds of knots. Like, for example, the Supreme Court, the U.S. constantly trying to interpret what the meaning of a single word written 200 years ago.

That kind of thing. Yes, absolutely. That kind of thing. And some of these things I hadn't really thought of before, and I just kind of, you know... in my past I have been very much in favour of a written constitution. I thought that the membership of parties and voting for their leaders was a superior system to the members of parliament doing it. Well that doesn't look quite so clever now.

Not in the age of social media and giving people the right to vote for three quid.

I mean when I joined the Labour party had to wait a year before he could even sell it to local council to prove yourself. And you have to pay £100 for every vote!

Damn right we did! And now any Tom, Dick and Harry can join online for three quid and vote for Jeremy Corbyn. My Tory friends joined and voted for Jeremy Corbyn.

I thought that was an urban myth.

Oh no, I've got quite a few of them. Some of them in the media, which I won't name.

Why?

Well, because I don't want to break their confidence.

Oh, I don't know. I don't believe in confidences like that. I think that kind of confidence definitely deserves to be broken.

Well, I'll break it. I'll break it after. Once we've turned the tape off.

Ha, okay. So, referendums, one member one vote in political parties. Although actually, there is a big problem with that. But you know, maybe I'd go outside for primaries now. I was always in favour of there being primaries for the leaders...

Even first-past-the-post, the so-called having a strong government with an executive that can deliver a huge majority. Sometimes that can be a good thing. Sometimes it's an absolutely shit idea.

No, it doesn't work. I mean, it doesn't work for long term. I mean, we had two major class-based parties from the 50s onwards. We don't have the same class structure. We don't have the same affiliation. We don't have the same generational history. Younger generations have no such connection with political parties automatically. They're not going to say, "I vote that way because my father did, my grandfather did, and his grandfather did. We've always been Labour around here." They're not going to say that. It's not that kind of world anymore.

The big issues of the day now cut across political parties. I mean, there are Labour Brexiteers and there are Tory Remainers.

Well, actually, there always were some issues that cut across a bit. But nevertheless, you're right, which is that people are much more likely to have a kind of portfolio political approach. I mean, a lot of people joined the Labour Party under Corbyn simply because they have this kind of notion of what Corbyn was, which was a sort of, you know, I said it's a bit like having a scarecrow in the corner of your field that you dress up in the clothes that you want. You say, "Oh, there he is."

A magic uncle.

"Oh, that's right. "Oh, he's a clergymen today." Oh no, no, no, no, he's, not. "He's lovely." "He's an old grandpa," etc.. And then took no notice at all about what he really was or what his history was or anything like that. And what was funny about

that... it was impossible to tell somebody, once they had taken that trip, once they had dropped the tab that they were wrong about... there they were, they were into psychedelia, and there was nothing you could do about it until they came out the other end and went cold turkey. And quite a lot of Remain Corbyn supporters, but also Remain supporters, really didn't understand that his section of the Labour Party has always been hugely against the common market, and then the European Union, because they were somehow or other, it was a capitalist club which was ganging up, first on the Soviet Union, and then on the right of the workers to own everything and run everything.

Well, basically he was a Leaver then and he's a Leaver now. I mean, all of his speeches even during the referendum were Leave speeches and then he'd finish off with, "Vote Remain."

His hero, great hero, was Tony Benn. I mean he loved and revered Tony Benn, although he was actually always to the left of Tony Benn. And Benn was a committed Leaver for his entire political career. Except for maybe, maybe he had a kind of little moment in the white heat of the technology when he wasn't.

Can you talk us through the process of writing a column then? I know we mentioned it briefly earlier, but you know, do you have the same problem after doing it after all these years that the last person to talk on a subject on the question time panel has? Which is that anything that's of interest that could have been said on either side has been said. Or you know, how do you revisit a topic that you might have covered before? Do you constantly find yourself scratching around for stuff, or are you just inundated with things you might want to write about?

Well, it really depends on the circumstances. I mean, the whole thing is whether or not... if you look at a subject, you're thinking about subject, you can feel the tug of a thread inside your mind. You know, "If I pull at this, it comes easily, it comes out. There's an argument here. There's something to be said, or there's a connection here, which can get us to think about this in a particular way or in or a new kind of way." I don't like the feeling that I'm writing something that I wrote two months ago. Which is a bit of a problem. You know, it can be a bit of a problem in the middle of the kind of big political crisis, because one thing that you sometimes want to do, as the argument goes, is to kind of reiterate your position. But it's tiresome, really. I know, you know, if people get more tribal they tend to appreciate it. And so I've had people sometimes say to me, "You're not writing about politics at the moment. Have you given up the fight?" And I've said to them, "No, it's not so much that. It's just that I don't actually have, at this moment, that new insight which would satisfy me and should satisfy the reader". But it is also true... we have quite a lot of political specialists on the Times, there is quite a lot of pressure on me to come up with non-political subjects simply so that they don't have the page absolutely dominated by politics. And the other problem I have is, you know, people have editors, comment editors, etc.. They get little fashions, little kind of bees in their bonnet. So I used to write quite a lot about foreign policy, but then all of a sudden it was put to me that the editor had begun saying, "Well, we have foreign policy writers to do that," and the comment editors interpret this as maybe you shouldn't do a lot of it. Bang, there it is. All the kind of stuff you write about foreign policy tends to be something you'd have to

argue hard in order to do. And it isn't. There's no question about it. It's become much much… when I first was a comment writer, I pretty much would say I want to write about this, and they would pretty much say, yes. Now it's like a Turkish bazaar. So and so's doing X, so and so's doing Y, there's been too much of this on the page, been too much of that on the page, I don't know whether any of this is related to any statistics that they take on the basis of who does what online. I don't think it is, I think it's all kind of pricking of the thumb stuff. But I don't think there's any doubt about it that my job has got significantly harder in the last decade.

Oh, I don't doubt it. And you touched on my...

Has anybody else said that by the way?

No, but...

Well I'm surprised.

Interestingly though, we talked about how you would view a success of a column as the columnist, as the writer, but do you have any sympathy for these anonymous faceless managers? Because they obviously would have to interpret and measure the success or otherwise of your column in a different way. Is it clicks? Is it impact, is it retweets? What is it?

Well, let's put it this way. We in the broadsheet industry, facing firstly the need to move a significant amount of what we did online and to reshape across online patterns. And then, and this is much bigger, facing the loss of almost our entire advertising through Facebook. You'll have done this a dozen times on Media Masters, but it absolutely shapes the entire environment and world in which we work in. And one of the consequences of that is we all do three or four times as much as we did a decade ago. No two ways about it, because there are fewer of us. And we have to cover more ground. And so, the whole thing is much less leisurely in terms of the kind of comment pieces. Some people would say, "Well that's fair enough." Our editor at the time, John Witherow, has presided over the Times going to a break-even position from being a big... you know. And it wasn't just him but people before, but he's done a lot about it. So when you're talking about his judgements about what makes a successful newspaper, it's very hard for me to turn around and say, "Well, he doesn't really know what he's talking about," because the achievements speak for themselves, really. So the answer to your question is, yes, I do have a lot of time for them because otherwise you don't exist. I've been at papers that very nearly didn't exist, and left them before they ceased to. Until recently, when the Times went into the black, I had never worked in my entire working life for an organisation, or for a part of an organisation, that made money. Ever. It had all been subsidised by something else, or in the case of the BBC obviously was...

Subsidised by us, the licence fee payer.

Subsidised by us, the licence fee payer and put in place by the charter, and the needs of the charter, to do what it does. So to be in a position whereby you can offer

a high-quality product in terms of a newspaper and actually still be in the black, it's quite a new experience.

Because the old newspaper proprietors, in the '80s and early '90s when I was growing up, they were evil, they were the Robert Maxwells of this world, but in a sense at least that gave them the motivation. There were proto-Bond villains, but that's why they owned the Daily Mirror, so that they could get their message across. Now I kind of feel a bit sorry for people like Evgeny Lebedev because he just views The Standard as a PR rag and just wants to be photographed with Ian McKellen on the stage. He doesn't actually want to kill us all and have a hollowed out volcano with a monorail. And that's to his discredit.

Every now and again, somebody will say, "Oh, Rupert's in today." I've never seen him, I've never met him. I've had no communication with him, ever. And you try and sense whether something has different slightly has happened as a consequence of his existence in the building, and in the meetings and so on. But I've never really been able to put my finger on it. And I don't really think Rupert Murdoch has an ideology, in that kind of clear sense. I mean he doesn't like backing losers. He really doesn't. I do get that sense fairly kind of strongly. It's quite interesting, in 'The Loudest Voice in the Room', the... have you seen that? The Roger Ailes thing? The Murdoch figure is quite, what's the word you would give? He's not straightforwardly, his attitude towards Fox News is: it works, and it makes money, but please don't take it too far.

That ship has sailed.

Yes, I felt that. That ship has sailed as well. Or one of Lachlan, or James will come up and say "No, this is a kind of a bit ridiculous and we don't want this kind of thing." So there are kind of tensions there. So, firstly, he likes to win. And secondly, he's obviously incredibly mischievous, just has been all his life. He's into making mischief, which can be interesting, can be a pain in the arse. And the third thing obviously, is he is actually interested in journalism surviving, or he has been, because if he hadn't been, we wouldn't.

Well, you wouldn't have got through all those dark years when they were making no money.

Not a chance. Not a chance.

I mean, we've had quite a few people who've worked directly for Murdoch. We had David Yelland in here a couple of years ago and we've had Les Hinton in. And David said something quite interesting. He said Murdoch had never said to him anything about how we should edit the Sun when he did so, but he didn't need to ask because he "just knew". An eyebrow raised here and that was all that was necessary.

Yes, I mean that may well be true of particularly the editor of the Sun.

Well we had James Harding in here a couple of weeks ago. I mean, he was basically given his marching orders and no one overtly told him why. But I think everyone could guess, including James.

Well, everybody's had at least three guesses at that one.

Oh, yes. Including him!

Well, yes, the first one was that we should have paid all that dosh to the person who nicked the disks with the MPs expenses on them like The Telegraph did, because although that was pretty close to being illegal and very, very over the ethics line, and so on...

It was a scoop.

Actually, it was a great... well, yes, a scoop. A scoop? Somebody comes up to you and says, "I've got this bloody great story, for £100,000."

And the rest.

You can't say, "I got a great scoop." You've got to say, "I paid £100,000!"

Piers Morgan says when he interviews Trump on Good Morning Britain, that that's a scoop. And of course it isn't, because it's not a real interview. It's a load of nonsense.

No, no, no. The idea of what a scoop is kind of... I mean, it is true that a lot of scoops will actually come from people who actually just land you with the story. And I suppose insofar as you've been the one... I do remember when Glenn Greenwald, Edward Snowden was chasing Glenn Greenwald around trying to give him the story. And ever since then Greenwald's been kind of going, "Ah yes, I've got the scoop". Snowden tried so hard to get him to do it because Greenwald just couldn't get his head round it.

Well, we had Martin Bright sitting in that chair a couple of weeks ago, and of course, Yvonne Ridley came to him with the GCHQ whistle-blower document. And the first thing is, not only is it authentic, but also what's, what's the angle? What's the agenda of the person giving it to me? And if it's anonymous, you're having to take a lot on trust that you maybe shouldn't do. It's risky.

It is risky. And going back to what James, because I could, we could digress about this. So there was that explanation. And then there was the explanation which was given from the organisation, which was that he was spending too much money, and then there was the explanation that he was too hard on the tabloid part of the operation when the phone hacking business happened. As it happened, I got a column out about that on the day. And it's the only column I remember having to discuss in the editor's office.

And you mentioned earlier about your journey in terms of left to right, but I mean, you had a pretty unconventional childhood. I mean your parents were British Communist party activists, were they not?

Yes.

So how on earth have you ended up writing for the Times and working for the Illuminati?

It is – ha – it is funny really. Because you know, the newspaper of choice at home was the Daily Worker and then The Morning Star, as it became. My mum liked the Observer because she liked Katherine Whitehall and a bit of that, and we will occasionally read the Guardian.

And did that inspire you even then to want to become a journalist? Or work in the media?

No, no, no. I had absolutely no desire to become a journalist until I was in my mid, late twenties. I had no thought that I would become a journalist until then.

What did you want to do originally?

Well, it wasn't a question of what I wanted to do... what seemed to be the likely succession of things to happen to somebody like me. So I came from a very left-wing family. My family, as you say, my dad was a full-time worker for the Communist Party when I was 13. I was steeped in politics.

You created a mini-Soviet Union in your household, didn't you?

Yes, no camps though. It was actually very tolerable, oddly enough. The one thing they didn't do was have a place to bang dissidents up.

I think every family needs that, independently of their politics. But anyway, we'll move on.

So I then became President of the National Union of Students, and I think at that point, up until then I'd been thinking I'd be a trade union official. I knew lots of people who'd gone into, particularly from the NUS. I've gone in, you know, become kind of deputy general secretary of NUPE, most of them don't exist anymore.

BECTU.

BECTU not so much. Although one of the arms that became BECTU was actually run by a guy called Alan Sapper, who was a Communist Party member, or had been, and there were lots of communists or ex-communists in the trade union movement. So, that seemed like an obvious place to get a job, and other NUS people had gone there. And then my predecessor at the National Union of Students, Trevor Phillips, went into television at London Weekend Television, and I hadn't really thought about it before. I'd done a couple of Question Times by then and I thought, "Actually, I quite

like all this." And don't laugh, I thought – well, you can laugh if you want – I thought when I'm on that stage, "I'm not bad at all this stuff, you know, this sort of presenting malarkey. Maybe I can become the next Michael Parkinson!" You know, who knows? "Maybe I could, you know, I'd have the personality." You know, you learn rapidly.

Aren't you the thinking man's Michael Parkinson now, then?

No, I'm not really. I mean, I now realise there's a kind of combination of personal characteristics and physical characteristics that you need to have to carry that kind of thing off and that's just probably not me. In fact, certainly not me. Although I did stand in for Michael Parkinson on his radio show for about five years when he was away. So, I got kind of close but no cigar. And so I went into London Weekend Television. I went to see them, said, "I'm president of the National Union of Students. Might you have anything coming up?" They at that stage, this was an organisation which had John Birt as director of programmes and a whole series of incredibly bright people in the kind of lower rungs of creative management, and a big range of output for ITV, which was, at that stage, still a "licence to print money", they called it. Because the advertising revenues were so buoyant, and there were also serious demands made upon the conditions of them getting the licence, which included them doing things like religious programmes and current affairs programmes and so on, which they, which they kind of had to do. And then, not very long after I went there, Channel 4 popped up, and all the Channel 4 programmes came up with the possibility of working on those. They were headhunting really. I mean, they were looking for talent, etc., and I got given, I applied for four jobs, I remember. One in the new TV-am, didn't even get an interview, didn't get a look-in. One for Southern TV, didn't an interview, didn't get a look-in. And I applied also at London Weekend Television and Granada. I got both those jobs, but Granada had had a big problem with a researcher called Jack Straw – later home secretary – who'd defended the Tories by being party-pre. And I had to go back for a third interview where I promised that I wouldn't be all dreadful and party-pre, and right in the middle when they were doing that, LWT stepped in and offered me the job in London. Otherwise, I'd have gone to Granada and worked in Manchester. A fact which is of no interest to anybody other than myself.

That's quite a few hundred miles away, and it would have changed the course of your life.

I went to college there, so I knew the city. I know, it was not, it has to be said, back then it wasn't the city it is now. You know, this was in the early 80s and it was rather depressed. But anyway, so I went to London Weekend Television to work and, well, they called me back and they said, "We've got some jobs coming up on The London Programme and our current affairs flagship Weekend World." And actually I knew somebody else who was going up for a job at a Weekend World. It was a guy called Peter Mandelson, who I'd known at the National Union of Students because he was in charge of something called the British Youth Council, and we both went up for this one job. And Peter, you will remember, I got it. He went to The London Programme and I went to a Weekend World. It was the programme on which Brian Walden, who died this year, presented.

And did you see it as the first rung on the ladder to ultimately becoming the next deputy?

No, at this point I didn't have any view of rungs on the ladder. I didn't know what I was doing when I first started. The thing about Weekend World, it has some such clever people on it. And when you first come into a kind of ready-formed journalistic world, with people who know what they're doing and are working at great speed, you just watch the ideas go – pop, pop, pop – and they all know what the other one's talking about, and they all know what the thought is that comes next after the one that's just been said. And you don't. And you just think, "I'm never going to get the hang of this. I'm just never going to get the hang of it." But there was essentially an important thing. It was part of what John Birt called his "cutting against the bias against understanding" which he said existed in other media, which is, and you've seen it at work, which is you get no context. You get no understanding for what the thing is. You get contradictory information day one, another bit of contradictory information day two. The viewer, or the listener, is absolutely none the wiser by the end of this process. So Weekend World was one of the programmes that was set up a Sunday lunchtime programme to try and deal with that. And by and large, what it would do is it was set up a problem, which would become a set of dilemmas for a particular figure, who would then be quizzed by Brian Walden, who was so brilliant at it. It's hard really to describe how good. He got so good at it that after a while, no politicians would come on the programme.

And it also wasn't 12 minutes, was it? It was about half an hour.

It was an hour!

It was genuinely in-depth.

It wasn't an hour. It was a broadcast 48 minutes or 52, I can't remember.

With one person.

It could be. That did happen. If you've got somebody really big. More typically, it would be about half an hour set up and half an hour on the interview itself. But the point is the journalistic organisation that went into this, the way you had to think was this: get rid of all your a priori thinking about it. When you dig down into this particular issue, what, at the heart of it, is the fulcrum upon which this question turns, and what is the problem for the person trying to make the decision about it? In other words, what's genuinely important? Cut away, bit by bit, the penumbra, all the bits that get in the way, all the other things that people kind of chuck into it. "What about? What about? What about?" No, what's central to this kind of particular question? Middle East, for instance. What's central to this question? Well, we know that the Israelis and the Palestinians want two contradictory things, and we know at certain point or another that a compromise which would bring them together is very difficult for both of them. They had to give stuff up. Right. Okay. Here's the Palestinian thing. What's going to get the Israelis to give stuff up? Well at the end of the day, it's probably, this is how it was back then, it's probably going to have to be American pressure and American diplomacy and so on. When you pare it right back down, this becomes a question or became a question for the American Secretary of State or for somebody

standing in situ of the American Secretary of State. Now, this is a terrific way of disciplining your mind. What does this come back down to in the end when you get rid of all the nonsense and all the kind of claims and counterclaims? What is the problem? And I just think, every week, I think, if only there was a Weekend World run to do, what's the problem with Universal Credit actually? How's it set up? Why was it there? What are the problems with person trying to deal with it, because they won't want to get rid of it because it means you have to have another system entirely. So that leaves you a set of dilemmas about how you deal with it. Likewise with a whole kind of series of other issues. I found those four years the most intense journalistic training that you can imagine. And people who worked on that programme – honestly, I'm not joking, Paul – they have an immediate way of looking at the world that I completely understand. I can touch into. Even though when I first went there, it just went straight over my head, the way that they used to talk. And it's a really useful way of looking at things. The other thing I was told was, "We don't want your opinions in here." We don't want your a priori prejudices in here. They're no use to us. You've got to get rid of them and try and get as close as you... now, it's true that when you become a columnist, you can't really always act on that basis. Sometimes you've got to have the pleasure of the writing, the animal spirits of the writing, to kind of rise through and some of that is bound to arise from your own kind of preconceived ideas and thoughts and so on. But at the basis of it, I would hate to write a piece that I thought had missed the real point because I was indulging myself in something else. And also, as I said, I would also hate it if I felt that this thing had never gone anywhere. Not that I haven't written pieces like that. Every now and again it's got 1,100 words and it's a searing condemnation of blah, blah, blah... you know, it's really difficult to write your piece. Let's say Hitler was alive again today. It'd be quite hard to write a piece that started off with, "Many people will think that Hitler is quite a good bloke really. And you know there is, you know, the Jewish problem is a bit of a problem. You might want to, kind of, want to deal with it." But the problem is, this is, you know, if you go here, you go here, it leads eventually to something like Kristallnacht and then eventually to far worse things. And so, so there are kind of limitations to the way in which you would make that work.

But even climate change, you know, the science is settled, and yet whenever journalists try to present most topics as, "Well, here's something on the one hand and here is the other." Some things can't be presented as just two opposing views.

Well no, but then you wouldn't do it in that kind of way. I agree. I mean, in The Briefing Room, I'm dealing with a climate change thing. We had this discussion, I said, and we agreed, we're not going to start this from the position of some people say X and some people say Y about whether this is true or not. We've got to start from the basis that this is a settled problem. We don't know entirely the full extent of it. There's all discussion. There can be a lot of discussion about that. We don't know entirely which would be the best remedies. There's a lot of discussion about that, but what we're not going to have is a great big discussion about whether or not climate change is happening and whether or not there is a human-made component, a human-cause component for it. It's so bloody obvious that the strength of opinion and weight of research amongst those people is so overwhelming, but this becomes a waste of time. And if they've all made a mistake, well, then fair enough. Then we'll rest on the mistake that they make as the worst that can happen is that we take

action that wasn't then necessary in order to avert a problem which, if it is real, is going to be catastrophic for all of us. What do you actually lose from energy conservation? Nothing really.

We mentioned Peter Mandelson earlier. One of my first memories of working with him was I stood for Parliament in as for the Labour Party in a very strong rural Tory team in 2005 and he gave me a piece of advice that said, look, if you knock on the door of an average voter and they say, "I'm not going to vote Labour because of immigration," he said, "You can reason with them and tell them the immigration is clearly good for the economy and good for the country. But the reality is, that's not going to win you any votes. Just listen to them and make them feel heard." And I think that this is perhaps where the Remain campaign went wrong because I'm still agonising over the ethics of that, because is it cowardly to actually not challenge that person? Because his version, his argument was, pragmatically, is you will never change that person on their doorstep's view. And if you try and reason them out of it, not only have you not persuaded them, you've just joined the ranks of those conspiring against them.

Okay. What he's done, is he's sort of skated over his problem, and your problem, and the long-term problem with this. Firstly, when that person says, "But what is your view about immigration?" You give it?

I'd say, "You don't have a clue what you're talking about, son."

But let's say, you know, there we are on that doorstep. Maybe we're canvassing together, and we come up to somebody who says, "No, I really don't like Labour because of immigration." Yes. Peter Mandelson says, just listen. "Oh, that's interesting. Oh, tell me more about that."

"How do you feel?"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, that's right." Find an opening maybe, you know, "Oh, and I think, you know, I'm not against them all. In fact, my daughter's best friend has married a Nigerian, and he's not a bad chap."

When I was a kid it was, "I don't like black people, but Frank Bruno is a good boxer. He seems alright." Ridiculous. That's what I used to hear.

Those of us who travelled around with London cabbies a bit in the bad old days got very used to these sorts of mechanisms for discussion, because frankly you didn't want to have some bloody great row and you didn't want to concede the ground either. But there comes a moment where they say to you, "But what's your policy on it and what's your feeling about it?" And of course maybe they just want to sound off and maybe it does kind of work, but you're going to have to have a position on it. And one of the very unsatisfactory things that happened in the years up to 2016 was that Labour, amongst others, just simply bought into the idea. Do you remember Ed's... I've got one, because Lord Finkelstein of Pinner kindly bought me one, because he

knew that it pissed me off so much, which was one of their little mugs, they had the kind of five pledges. It was ‘control immigration’.

I do like Daniel.

We already bloody controlled immigration! What was he talking about? So the message he was giving is, “We agree with you that immigration is a problem.”

Points-based system. I love it. Who was it who said that’s like saying we want a food-based diet? All immigration systems are based on points.

Yes. Anyway, so I felt if you just said, “I agree with you about controlling immigration,” you just made the problem worse.

Well, his advice explicitly was to not agree with them. It was just to have them “felt heard”, that they’d been heard.

I know, and that’s probably right from canvassing the door and we’ve all kind of in a way... I don’t have to do it in a column at all, but we’ve all done it in a way with people have been talking to, because to continuously face people off with your opposition, I mean we all...

But, evil triumphs when good men do nothing. I mean maybe I had a duty as a citizen and as a parliamentary candidate to disavow that person on the doorstep...

Well...

That troubles me because actually I think the ethical imperative is to say, “Well actually respectfully, Mr. Bloggs, you are wrong on this.”

Hold on, here’s an example of what our problem is. What’s our person on the doorstep, Mr. Bloggs, actually saying? Is he saying, so he says, “They all get preferential treatment in the housing queue.” Now it was Peter Mandelson’s view that you should say, “That’s an interesting point of view, and why do you feel that?” as if you’re their psychotherapist.

That was literally the example he quoted as well, back in the day.

Okay, now I find it really hard, not under those circumstances to say, “Well, actually you do know that’s shit. You know, it’s just not true. That’s not how it works. Not how the system works,” and so on. Though I can see why that’s not very productive in terms of immediately getting their vote, but if you’re getting their vote on the basis that you’ve made them feel that you agree with them, that immigrants are getting housing when they’re not, there is something fraudulent about that. And I find it hard to believe that somewhere along the line you don’t pay for that fraud, both in terms of their attitude and in terms of your own soul.

Well it leads to people voting leave. I mean, but the other thing is, Mr. Bloggs, is that you're a local window cleaner. A quarter of your customers are people that have come this town from abroad. They are immigrants, and they're buying your services, and you can employ three sub-window cleaners and your business is having prosperity because of immigrants.

Oh, I know. I remember just after the Brexit campaign, I went up to Wakefield to talk to people who were Leave voters, and firstly I have to say, there wasn't one of them I didn't like personally, and several of them I really took to. The second thing is that there wasn't one of them that didn't have, almost immediately, a set of propositions which were totally contradictory and which could not be reconciled, and they were absolutely determined not to say that they weren't contradictory. So I had one woman, and she was such a nice woman. She had had to have a lot of cancer treatment, she was probably in her late sixties, and she was incredibly grateful to the NHS and I said, "But you know," but she wants restrictions on immigration. I said, "Didn't you find quite a lot the NHS staff were immigrants?" "Yes." she said, "But I think their jobs should go to English people." And I said, "Well, why do you think they're not going to English people?" Upstairs, her unemployed grandson in his mid-twenties was playing his computer game, which he'd been doing for the best part of a week. And when he came down, he barely acknowledged that we existed. And you thought, "This is an absolute bloody tragedy, because what she really wants is for him to be good enough to get a job in the NHS."

The NHS didn't want him, or doesn't want him.

He didn't want it either. He didn't want to do that kind of stuff. He saw it, probably saw it, as just something that wasn't there for him. The thing that she wanted to happen was impossible and she had the absolute proof of it sitting upstairs in her house.

But how can she take the proof of the opposite of her view as evidence that she's right in the mistaken view?

This falls into the field we always call cognitive dissonance, doesn't it? Which is there's a thing here over here that we believe, there's a thing over here that we believe, they contradict each other, but if we don't put them in direct opposition to each other... I mean, sometimes journalists, we sometimes do this. One of the things I had against John Humphrys a bit, although he was an excellent journalist in many, many, many ways, was he would get riled up in an opposite direction on two separate days. He would say, "Why don't you do more of this, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And on the next day he'd say, "Why have you done so much of this?" It would be the same damn thing with the opposite set of arguments applying to it! But never in these discussions did he recognise that there had been another argument. I think actually, the BBC has got much better at that now. Some of the younger presenters, people like Nick Robinson and Martha and so on, Evan Davis, I think they're really quite good at seeing that there are other arguments and they actually put them into a much more rounded context. And in some ways, the best of our journalism is as good as it's ever been, I think.

Do you prefer writing stuff or do you prefer being on air, whether it be TV or radio? What type of journalism is best for you?

Oh no, no, whatever I prefer, it's not television. And one of the things I'm conceiving a real dislike of at the moment, and maybe an exaggerated dislike of, is the 'punditocracy' aspect. I get asked four or five times a week to do the paper reviews and things like that. And I'd say there will come a point when the Times has had enough for me, when I will be desperate for gigs like that. And so on, although I don't think so. I think it's having a really bad effect on, I think this is the reverse side. I think this is poor journalism. I think stuffing your programmes with talking heads who are not experts but are opinionated, eventually you go not for the people who have the most sophisticated opinions, but for the people who have the loudest opinions. And these are the circumstances under which, for instance, all of these kinds of idiot Corbynistas started appearing on all these programmes. They are about 25, they know absolutely nothing. They won't be Corbynistas in 10 years' time. They will almost, and we can know what they will be, they'll be kind of middle managers at GlaxoSmithKline or whatever it is, but they're not going to be...

If they're lucky.

If they're lucky. They're not going to be that. You can tell the word 'dilettante' covers them as far as I'm concerned. I might be wrong. I may be doing them a great disservice, but I don't think so.

No, you're right. But I think what annoys me even more is, with the greatest respect to both of these people I'm about to name, and they'll say, you know, "Welcome to the Sky paper review. We're now joined by Kris Akabusi and Henry Kelly from Going for Gold."

I think they're a step up from Kevin Maguire and Andrew Pierce. I mean, what's that about?

I'm friends with Andrew. He is, you know..

Oh, everybody's friends with Andrew, as long as you're not the subject of his piercing scorn.

Well, that's one of the reasons why I, you know...

No, that's right. And I, you know, the famous Alice Longfellow Roosevelt thing, "If you've got nothing nice to say about anybody, come and sit next to me." So there is that kind of element to it, but it's now so ubiquitous, and these clips are now clipped out onto social media, of people just saying perfectly stupid things but in a very partisan way, as if there's some kind of wisdom. It's not wise. It's not clever. It's not even particularly interesting. It just happens to be a thing, you know, they kind of bring together something you think and you agree with. Well, okay bully for you, you've got nowhere, great. And we've understood nothing better than we'd understood it before, but your side has got a point.

And it got the clicks. Which journalists do you admire and, I mean you've named Andrew, but are there any journalists that you admire less?

I know that Andrew has done some stuff in the Mail, which is just awful attacks on people, but mostly in the Dacre days when he was probably set about it.

Dacre does that himself now by writing to the FT.

Yes, exactly.

That was one of the most extraordinary things I've ever seen, genuinely.

You know, the worst thing I think I ever did as a writer was when Janet Street-Porter came to do her brief stint of editing at the Independent. She asked me, in effect – and I didn't really know what to expect – to write, not a hit piece, she didn't put it that way, on Nicky Campbell, because she didn't like him. And I didn't quite fulfil it, but I, in the act even of trying to do it, something went dead in me, really. I just thought, "This is not something I want to do. I don't believe in it, and I don't think it kind of adds anything to human existence." I can quite see why it might entertain people who enjoy that kind of animosity, and I'm quite capable of being perfectly sort of… you've seen my review of Rod Little's book before last, for instance, I think it's a kind of a maligned work of art, that review. Likewise with that appalling biography of Cameron, done by Isabel Oakeshott, supposedly with Lord Ashcroft. Ha, ha! You know there is a kind of, oh, I don't know, what's the word? There's a kind of ethics-free area almost, or half ethics-free area, in some journalism.

Groucho Marx lamented, "Those are my principles, but if you don't like them, I have others."

Yes, yes. I don't like that feeling, and I don't enjoy that.

Who is incorruptible then? Who are the modern-day Woodward and Bernsteins?

I think there are quite a few journalists who are pretty good. I mean, obviously you know most of my Times colleagues, I've got lots of good Times colleagues. I don't know very many who would actually write something they didn't believe in, or they believe the opposite or in their column. I just can't think...

The Times has got some great columnists really. I'm a huge admirer of Sarah Baxter. Danny, obviously. You've got some great writers.

No, we have, I mean you've got incredibly fierce, brave writers like Janice Turner. You've got thinking, questing writers like Danny is, you know, about politics.

Too thoughtful for his own good.

You've got kind of, you've got poets manqué, like Phil Collins, you've got humorous, like Hugo.

Hugo's a legend.

Yes, you've got kind of very cool, detached writers like Rachel Sylvester and so on. Obviously these are the ones I'm most conversant with, and most of the time, it's safer to go on Times people. And the other thing is, if I'm perfectly candid, is, I don't actually read that many columns.

Is that because if you're like a comic, if you go to see other comics, you always run the risk that a misheard joke from four years ago, you think it's genuinely your joke and then it turns out...

No, there is a degree of truth in that. And then as you kind of apply it, which is that, somehow or other, not so much imbibe their idea necessarily, but that you get to the point where you think, "There's nothing I can add to any of this so I'm not going to do it." So if you keep reading... I mean, some of my colleagues really are avid readers of other people's columns and I'm in awe of them for doing it. It's a bit like, I shouldn't say this because they're never going to have me on again, or maybe I should say, I would never, ever watch a Question Time I wasn't on. Ever. I don't know why people put themselves through this. I just don't get it. But obviously they do and some of them like it.

My blood pressure can't stand it now. I used to watch it avidly, but now I don't know which part of the screen I have the most disdain for, the panel or the audience.

Well, exactly. Actually, the last Question Time I did actually it was pretty good because I say, they've got the audience in that we were in South London and there was, knife crime was a big issue. And they had some people in the audience who frankly knew a lot more about knife crime than we did, they had much more kind of experience. They let them talk a little bit, and because it was early on, it completely changed how the discussion happened on the panel for every subject we had. We had this supposedly kind of fearsome Jordan Peterson and it was going to be this kind of appalling... he was incredibly reasonable, and so on. Diane Abbott was reasonable.

I must have missed that one then.

I know, I know. It was sort of, it was remarkable. It all, everybody started thinking a bit about what they were saying. Nobody came up with their line. And mostly because they'd started it off, they'd located the beginning of it with these interesting people who were in the audience. Staff it up as a bear garden, cast it as a bear garden, what are you going to get?

But you highlight that one as an exemplar of what's good because of course that's not the case, that's the deviation from the norm. Most of the time it's not a kind of Socratic inquisitorial exploration of an issue. It's people going there to defend the party line and then getting brick bats from the other side.

I mean, it started quite a long time ago because I remember I went on a Question Time, it must have been 2011, something like that, and I was on way or even earlier, George Galloway and we had a great big bust-up, because you can't not have a bust up with George Galloway. And then I realised that this is what they were trying to engineer again and again. Every time they had me on. If they couldn't kind of get quite get it, then they were unlikely to go with it. And I just am not their tame bear, you know? I mean, people who were prepared to do that maybe, but I'm just not. And likewise, I like Newsnight quite a lot of time. I like their films, etc.. I like the people who present. But at some point or other, somebody says, "Rod Liddle's got a new book on, we'd like you to come on." I said, "No thank you."

Can't be bothered.

No, I can't. Firstly, he's not very interesting. Really, no, I mean, he's genuinely not very interesting and I'm not very interested… and the other thing is, I don't like what that kind of situation does to me. It does not bring out the best... the side of myself that I want to encourage. You know, maybe when I was younger and less reflective and so on, but I'm just not interested in having big barneys with people, and at the end I have somebody saying, "Oh well, you won that," if they're on my side on Twitter. And, "Oh well, you were owned there," if they're all not on my side. Oh, it's pointless.

But I understand that producers lament of things like Newsnight and Sky because sort of five, six, seven, eight years ago, I used to want to be the talking head all the time and go on there. It was par for the course that Newsnight would ask me on, and then an hour before they'd say, "Oh, Dan Hodges is coming on instead." You know, and that's great. I would never take it personally, but you'd have to cancel all your plans and you have to truly want to be that type of talking head person and be prepared to cancel anything at short notice. And I just couldn't be bothered.

In the end what I've gone for with this is, if the subject we're talking about is something I think I know something about and I feel importantly about. So firstly, I know more about it than somebody else might do, because I've done the work, and secondly, I care about, then I'm likely to go on. But if the idea is, "Here's a subject, we haven't got anything else to come on but you're a good turn". No, I think this is killing a bits of discussion. I've come to this conclusion fairly recently. I think these paper reviews should be stopped except in very kind of, you know, in certain kind of ways where people do it, but certainly as bear gardens between two people of opposite views, knocking five kinds of etc. out of each other. And I think it's really, it's cheap casting. It becomes lazy casting. Although I understand that producers are under a lot of pressure, and I can quite see that, you know, if I was starting out in the business, I would be that person desperately phoning me up and getting the dusty answer from this kind of old chap on the other side, who kind of feels that it's beneath his dignity. So I might be cursing myself.

What's next for you? More of the same? More columns, carry on in perpetuity? More radio?

In perpetuity?

Yes.

What does that mean?

It means until you meet your maker.

Until I meet my maker?! It's funny, because I tweeted out, when The Irishman came out, the film, I tweeted out that how good I thought it was. You've got the kind of heroes of my youth; Pacino, who first became a big star when I was 18, De Niro who became a big star really about the same time.

The first film they've ever truly actually starred in together. Because in Heat of course, they shot that cafe scene in the middle separately because they still hated each other at that point.

Right. Well, you know more about it than I do. And in The Irishman, what you've got is a set of absolutely extraordinary performances from a film director who is also quite old, but is absolutely brilliant. It's three and a half hours. It's a brilliant, brilliant movie. Anyway, I put this on Twitter. Within literally 30 seconds, I get a GIF of Emma Stone from La La Land saying, "Okay, boomer." Now, I wasn't familiar at that stage, what that phrase meant. So I went back and said, "What do you mean?" to this guy who sent it, who was a guy, a journalist working in Ireland, and he said, "Well," he said, "I don't think we need any more of this." he said, "This is a film for a certain generation." he said. "No one knows who Jimmy Hoffa is, and no one needs a CGI James Dean. You need to get new actors." I just thought… actually what I thought is almost unprintable, but it does kind of set a kind of a problem, which is what the person was effectively saying was, "By the act of seeing what you've seen, and knowing what you know, and living the life you've lived, you're too old to be relevant, you should just bugger off." I just thought, "Well, you're young enough just not to understand what it means to talk to somebody like that, or to other people either. Because what you're saying is, a thing that is true about you now but that is universal, because you, young man, this is what you will be as Al Pacino was young and is now older, but he's still an absolutely bloody brilliant actor. And if you can't see that because of his generation, the joke's on you." Right. Well, so that's a common point at which you, because one of the things you have to do as a columnist is you have to stay current. So it's nice to still know as much, and there are things that I've become more interested in, such as bits of scientific advancement in journals, which I've really had to try hard to understand and comprehend what the future's going to be. And then other bits, which I've just had to let go of because you can't just kind of do it all the time. And so, as long as I think that I can kind of maintain the degree of current and be interested in it, then I think I will – but it does get harder in some ways. It does get harder, and there comes a point, particularly with politics, where you do begin to think, "Oh, just let them have it." It's like, "What's the point of kind of fighting this one?" This is a young or a middle-age person's game. We're going to have people come bounce up and down off your doorstep. There are some people love doing that at the age of 60 but not kind of most people. There are actually other existences and things that you can do. I mean, for instance, in the summer I took a

month off; the first time I've ever done it. I've never done it, no work, nothing in that, in that period. Although kind of there was some email that had to be done, and I thought I would feel very awkward, but I loved it. But then you've got to re-enter. If you're going to do the thing properly. If you're not going to do the thing… I mean, I'm not going to name names here, but most columnists know of columnists who essentially do the same thing over and over and over again. Some of them remarkably young actually, and there comes a moment really when you are amazed that they find this sort of satisfactory.

Well, David, for as long as you'll be writing the columns, I'll be reading them. Thank you ever so much for your time today. I really appreciate it.

You're welcome.