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Jason Cowley

Editor-in-chief, the New Statesman

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined down the line by Jason Cowley, author, writer and editor-in-chief of the New Statesman. Since taking over the magazine of the progressive left in 2008, Jason has pushed print circulation to a 40-year high and seen its registered online readership soar to more than 300,000. Revitalised editorially and commercially, the New Statesman now has global expansion plans and demonstrated its ambitions by signing Andrew Marr as its political editor. Jason has previously written for The Times and the Observer and was a judge for the Booker Prize for Fiction and his third book, 'Who Are We Now? Stories of Modern England' has just been published. Jason, thank you for joining me.

Good to be here, Paul.

Well, I've been a huge fan and a reader of the New Statesman for many years. Congratulations on your success.

Good. Well, it always helps to be interviewed by a fan, so that's a good start. And thanks very much. It's going well for us at the moment.

It is. Andrew Marr is already making waves. What a great signing for the magazine. I was doing some research into this and you're on the record saying that you feel like a football manager finally now having transfer funds.

Yeah. That was a joke. And it has travelled that quote! What I meant is because we're stronger now than we've been for a long time, the New Statesman has benefited from a period of stability and indeed success and now investment. So we're able to bring in journalists of the calibre of Andrew Marr onto the staff, which is fantastic. And he's joined us as our new political editor after Steven Bush left us to join the Financial Times.

Tell us about the pivot, the reboot, whatever label you want to put on it. There's been a redesign of the magazine, a launch of the new website, tell us how it came about, and frankly, how it's going.

During lockdown we were working remotely from home. And what we thought we might try and do was use the time when many of us were stuck at our desks, and not getting out and about as we usually were [to refresh the magazine]. I used the opportunity to particularly improve the website. If the New Statesman's going to internationalise and grow in the way that we want it to, it will be through digital. We hadn't worked on a new website for a long time, and we also had to improve the infrastructure of the site. And because we wanted to launch a new website - elegantly designed, but also very easy to use for the reader and visitor to the site - we thought we'd use the opportunity to coordinate with a refresh of the print magazine. So we worked on the two projects simultaneously with an excellent editorial designer called Mark Porter, who for many years was at the Guardian but who has worked on some exciting projects across Europe. It was all done by Zoom. It was all done remotely. The new-look print magazine launched before the website. I thought the website was an immediate success. I loved it, how clean it was and simple and elegant, and how it showcased our good writing. And the magazine I thought was less successful on launch, but it has developed very well over the last few months as I've played with it and tinkered with it; it has settled down very well. I thought, at first, the magazine, which is a weekly political and cultural magazine, was almost too glossy. It was too lush for what it is. It's not a monthly, it's not competing with the big monthly magazines. It's a weekly magazine reacting quickly to news and current affairs and political events, but also it's committed to good writing and running long reads and essays and good cultural criticisms. But nevertheless, I thought the look was too glossy and we've refined that and I'm much happier with it now. So the two projects worked simultaneously, and I think they've landed very well.

Tell us about the global expansion plans. Is the Atlantic the model for the Statesman?

We like the Atlantic. And we like particularly how the Atlantic reinvented itself some years ago, more than a decade ago, as a print-digital hybrid - particularly investing in digital spin-off websites, such as Quartz, which it subsequently sold, and Cities Lab. The Atlantic for a long time didn't quite know what it was. It was almost trying to be a monthly version of the New Yorker, I thought, operating out of Boston, but you can see the thought that's gone into its reinvention over the last decade or more. We're a different magazine from the Atlantic. We're still a weekly print magazine and we have an expanding digital operation, and we are now publishing across multiple platforms and multimedia, but where we're similar [to the Atlantic] is that we are committed to quality, and we're committed to the essay. We're unpredictable in our politics, we're a liberal-sceptical publication, but above all else, we're interested in good writing and smart analysis: trying to understand the forces that are driving change in the world. And I think the Atlantic does something similar. It's not a model, but it's a publication we like a lot. We also like the Economist, which very successfully over many decades, and as a consequence of huge investment and huge ambition beginning perhaps around the late seventies, early eighties, and then into the eighties - it was interesting to watch how the Economist grew, internationalised, and found an entirely new global readership. We know we are a long way from doing something like that, but we have ambitions to grow beyond the UK, particularly strengthening our coverage of European politics and European affairs, which we've done over the last couple of years through the hire of Jeremy Cliff, who we bought over from the Economist. Jeremy was writing the weekly Charlemagne column and was the

Brussels bureau chief. And we pulled him out of the Economist to lead our international expansion, which he has done very successfully. We're still a UK-focussed magazine, but certainly one with ambitions to grow.

One thing that you're not doing is sort of chasing clickbait, it'd be very easy to get sucked into the so-called culture wars with provocative clickbait articles and rightly you stay clear of that.

We do. We had a larger, more transient digital readership around 2015, 2016, the time of the Brexit referendum, when we actually didn't have a paywall on the website. It was an open-access site. And we had many millions of unique visitors to the site every month, but many of them were transients, they came in for one or two pieces and didn't return. What we are interested in doing is building engaged communities, certainly since we launched the paywall, which is why we are pleased to see the growing number of registered users for the website and indeed paying users. So that's the ambition, to grow those visitors who return again and again and again, and then you create a community around the title. So it's certainly not about chasing clickbait and numbers for the sake of it. We are growing our digital-only audience, we certainly want to do that, but it's also about attracting the right audience to the New Statesman.

I know a history is written by the victim, you are doing an incredible job, but back in 2008, when you came in with print in decline, the title's future was genuinely in some peril, was it not? How did you come to take the editor's chair and what were your initial priorities? How did you turn it round?

It feels like a completely different era when I became editor. The New Statesman, it was a very successful publication through the Second World War. It went into the Second World War with a circulation of about 24,000 and despite paper rationing, it came out of the Second World War with a circulation of about 70,000 under the editorship of a famous journalist called Kingsley Martin. It roughly held that circulation through the fifties, into the sixties. And it was in many ways the dominant publication of the liberal centre-left in the United Kingdom. If you were interested in politics and indeed in good literary criticism and cultural criticism, you read the New Statesman, no matter what your position on the political spectrum. In the seventies, the New Statesman had some brilliant young talent on it. Martin Amis, the young Christopher Hitchens, James Fenton, Julian Barnes, they were all working on the New Statesman at the same time. Although when I look back at the circulation figures, that's when the decline began, in the seventies, not because of the failures of the New Statesman, it was just because the media landscape was changing. Newspapers were launching new sections and becoming bigger and stronger. New magazines were being launched. Broadcast media was expanding, and it was just a really competitive period for a traditional weekly current affairs title. And similarly, the Spectator's numbers were very low during the 1970s and into the early eighties. The New Statesman struggled through the eighties and nineties, periods of both growth and then of decline. It was often crisis-stricken. When I turned up at the end of 2008, it was about to be bought by Mike Danson, the businessman. And he hired me as editor. I was working at the time as editor of Granta, the literary quarterly. I'd left the Observer where I'd been working as an editor and writer to work at Granta, which was owned by the Rausing family of Tetra Pak fame - a high quality literary quarterly.

Our offices were a beautiful Holland Park townhouse. We only came out four times a year. I had the freedom to commission exceptional writing, fiction as well as non-fiction. And I thought I might try and turn Granta into a London version of the New Yorker - although we were only going to come out four times a year rather than weekly as the New Yorker does. But [I] also planned to build a big powerful digital operation behind the Granta brand. And then I was approached about joining the New Statesman. I wasn't interested. I heard their editor had left. They didn't have an editor, and they had an acting editor. I was asked whether I'd be interested in applying for the job. And because I had just joined Granta, I wasn't interested. And then, oddly, they came to me about four months later, and I was aware that they'd been talking to other journalists about possibly becoming editor of the New Statesman. They'd made a couple of offers and nothing had happened. So by the time they came back to me and asked if I was interested, I was interested that they hadn't found an editor. I was also interested to hear that they had a new owner coming. The previous owner, Geoffrey Robinson, was a Labour MP, very close to the Gordon Brown camp. But I wasn't interested in working as an editor for a publication that was a mouthpiece of the Labour party. I said that explicitly when I had an informal meeting with both Robinson and the new owner, Mike Danson. I didn't formally apply for the job. And I told them if I was to join, this is what I would want … I laid out some plans, particularly for an editorial budget. In retrospect, I should have argued for a marketing budget, but I didn't at the time, I was just talking about editorial investment. I went away and wasn't particularly interested in the job. I didn't think if I was offered it, I would take it. But then I *was* offered the job. And the reason I took it was because they had a new owner, and I thought there was an opportunity to do something different with the New Statesman. It was a great title with a wonderful history. It had suffered periods of decline and it was in some trouble. And I thought if I don't take it, what happens if someone comes in and actually turns this title around, what a worthwhile project that will be. So what I did, I took the job and embarked upon this long journey of transformation. So we are where we are today, but initially it was very challenging. The circulation was falling. We didn't really have much web traffic to speak of. We had to find some new writers and build a new team, but also build infrastructure around the title, which then was really just a struggling print magazine.

I imagine those early years of turnaround whilst you were sort of super motivated and excited at the opportunity to turn it around, the actual process of turning round's quite tedious, isn't it? Hiring the right people and systems and sort of taking a risk on changes that you're gonna make to the editorial line. Was it quite a challenging couple of early years in your editorship?

Yes, it was very challenging but I had a clear idea of what I wanted to do with the New Statesman. And I was aware of its history. It was founded in 1913 as a weekly review of politics and literature by Beatrice and Sidney Webb, who were also co-founders of the London School of Economics and the Fabian Society. And they had £5000 pounds worth of donations from friends, including £1000 from George Bernard Shaw. They had a group of writers who orbited around the New Statesman. But from its earliest day, there was always a tension between the politics and the literature, between the front half and the back half. The Webbs had a clear view of what they wanted their magazine to be. In other words, they wanted it to be a vehicle for their progressive ideas and what they saw as their scientific socialist transformation of

society. But the magazine - or the paper as it was then called - was never meant to be attached to one particular political party as it became attached to the Labour party. And there was always a tension between the first editor, a guy called Clifford Sharp, and the Webbs - because the Webb's wanted the magazine to focus more on the early years of the Labour party (the first Labour government was in 1924) and Sharp's instincts were to lean more towards the Liberal party. He was closely associated with the Asquithian Liberals at that point. So I was aware of the Statesman's history as a political and literary magazine. And what I wanted to do when I took over was to bring the two together. I wanted to bring the politics and literature together. In other words, the good writing. I wanted the politics to be informed by a cultural and literary sensibility. And I wanted the cultural and literary coverage to be informed by a political sensibility. I also wanted to free the magazine from the Labour party. I wanted it to be unpredictable. I wanted it to be independent and sceptical. And also I wanted to reintroduce long reads to the New Statesman. I thought they were publishing too many short pieces, too much comment, too much partisan opinion. And I wanted to bring back the more thoughtful, longer reads - the long profile, the essay, the narrative report, the deeply reported feature. And that's what I began to do. It takes time to change the culture of a publication, but I had an absolutely clear idea of what I wanted to do and how I might go about doing it.

Was there a kind of existential worry though, that you were making these choices and they, it could have, and as they're proven to be transformative and really good for the magazine, but they could also have failed.

They could. But I know what I like as an editor. I know what I want to read. I know who I want to write. I read widely, I have a good eye for talent, I think. A good eye for good writing. And so long as I was able to build a digital operation around the New Statesman - in other words, improve the website and start to grow an audience for it, I knew I could use that website to show how the New Statesman had changed and was changing because the print magazine had a limited circulation. And you are always constrained by the mechanics of print, but online you can take more risks. You can try out some new talent, new voices, and we didn't have a paywall at that time. So we were free to experiment and analyse the results of those experiments, try out new writers to find out which writers attracted a readership, and off we went.

Which bits went according to plan? Were there any sort of surprises, both pleasant and unpleasant?

The pleasant surprises are always when you discover new writers. And one thing I didn't want to do was just bring onto the publication long-established Fleet Street political commentators. I wanted to find a new generation, in the way that Tony Howard, when he was editor in the early seventies, discovered those younger writers, such as Martin Amis and Christopher Hitchens. I wanted to try and do something similar. You do try some writers, they don't always work out, but when you find writers you can work with whose style is thrilling and exciting, whose arguments are persuasive – one as an editor is delighted. And very early on in my editorship, Helen Lewis came to work with me and almost from the beginning, I could see that she was a fresh and original and brilliant young talent. And also she knew things I didn't know. And that's one of the great things as well. You want to surround yourself with a multiplicity of skills and positions and writers who you don't necessarily agree

with, but you want to publish because you are excited by the style of their writing and of their argument. So Helen was one of the writers I put on the paper very early on and promoted very quickly. Within a couple of years, she became my deputy editor and she helped drive the transformation of the digital operation.

I know we joked a little bit at the start of this podcast when you said you were like a football manager finally having transfer funds, but to what extent is it where you have an eye on the talent and up and coming writers in other magazines, presumably you can't read a newspaper or another current affairs magazine in the same way that I would, because you are thinking could we have this person? Could they write for us as well? Can we poach them? Or can you switch off and be a reader of your competitors?

Yeah, it's a bit of both really. Earlier on, through necessity, because budgets were limited, I had to think about discovering new writers and giving them an opportunity. As the title has become more successful in recent years and revenues have improved and the confidence of the ownership in the title has grown, I'm more free to recruit from other publications. I gave the example earlier of bringing Jeremy Cliffe across from the Economist, and obviously we've just hired Andrew Marr. Others have joined recently - Megan Gibson joined us from Monocle where she was foreign editor, we've hired Adam Tooze, the great economic historian as a contributing writer. So I now have the budgets to bring talent in, but I'm always looking for new contributors to the New Statesman to work alongside those who are already established. I always have an eye out for new writing, because if you close yourself off to new writers, you're going to miss the next generational talent, I think.

How do you judge the success of the magazine, obviously in terms of digital subscribers, reach, impact, newsstand, but like in terms of its relevance on the left of centre debate? Labours' hopefully back in the election-winning business, is the key that the Statesman is firmly at the heart of that political debate? Is the fact that Labour has a credible leader that could replace the Prime Minister and could form the next government. Is that good for the magazine?

It's okay for the magazine, but the purpose of the New Statesman isn't to get the Labour party elected; the Labour party has to earn our interest and curiosity. I mean, it's had a long period of decline, and it's been mired in civil war for a long time. And there's been a lot of unrest around the Labour party, which in itself is a good story to write about and report on. [Keir] Starmer has improved in recent times, but they've still got a long way to go if they're to be considered the next government of the United Kingdom. The Labour party's decline is deep. They've collapsed in Scotland … in Scotland, by the way, they were once absolutely dominant, hegemonic in Scotland, one of their old heartlands. In 2019, traumatically for Labour, they lost in many of their old heartlands in the north of England and the Midlands to the Boris Johnson Brexit Conservatives. They're very strong in the cities and in university towns, but the old coalition, which held the Labour party together, the coalition of what you might call organised labour and the Fabian intellectual, that's a very fragile coalition now. And the party's got a long way to go. We're interested in the party. But we don't dedicate enormous amounts of our time and energies to reporting Labour party politics. That's not what interests us. What interests us are the big themes, the big

trends driving change in the world today, the big technological, political, geopolitical themes. And if you read the print magazine week by week, it's dominated by these big themes and our writers' attempts to understand what's happening, what's going on, analyse and explain. So that's our primary interest. Online, we run more political comment, but it's wide, it's broad. It's not just centre-left. We have David Gauke, for example, who was more recently a Conservative cabinet minister.

And Ruth Davidson, you had.

Yes, Ruth Davidson. We're open to good opinion writing online. We have more polemic online than we do in print. And we're about to launch a new comment vertical called Quickfire, which will showcase shorter, more reactive opinion pieces on the website. And the magazine is left more for the longer essays, the longer reads, the profiles, the interviews, and so on.

How was having right of centre people on your platform, in the magazine, like you mentioned, David and Ruth, of course, you're becoming less tribal. I love that. I love everyone competing in the marketplace of ideas, but you do have a centre-left readership. Are they challenged by that? I love to sort of bit up my conflicts and read someone that I respect, but don't agree with. Is that what some of the readers are wanting or do you get some grief for, as they say, quote-unquote, giving a platform to these people?

Less so than we did, we want to grow our readerships. It's great that we've got those loyal long-standing centre-left readers, but also we've got many new readers from the centre or the centre-right, or readers who are just interested in good writing about politics and ideas. So as an editor, I just want to publish great pieces. The politics of the title are what I call independently liberal, they're sceptical. We lean left, we're of the left, but we're not programmatically on the left or with the left. And I think that's made for a much more interesting publication, more unpredictable. And it's also enabled the New Statesman to grow, to transcend its niche and become a bigger, more influential title. For example, when Theresa May was prime minister, one of the first major interviews she gave was with me. I went into Downing Street and wrote a long profile of May because I knew that people around her were reading the New Statesman and were admirers of it. I think it was the first time the New Statesman had interviewed a sitting Conservative Prime Minister since Kingsley Martin interviewed Winston Churchill back in the 1940s. And I published long profiles of Jeremy Hunt when he was foreign secretary, George Osborne when he was chancellor, Nigel Farage when he was leader of UKIP. But also we published long profiles of Jeremy Corbyn when he was leader of the Labour party, John McDonnell when he was shadow chancellor, of both Milibands, Blair, Brown. I don't think any other publication in the UK over the last 10 years has published such in-depth profiles of leading politicians from all parties. But for me, that's a testament to our seriousness as a publication, but also to our growing influence.

How difficult were the divisive Corbyn years? Many on the centre-left suffered huge amounts of abuse.

I think they were challenging for everyone because it was a civil war on the left, but also it was a cultural war and many Corbynites also felt shut out and ignored or

ridiculed by the mainstream media. They felt they were misunderstood or not being given an opportunity. We were very, very sceptical of Jeremy Corbyn because we knew him. We understood his politics. I think he was elected in 1983, the same election that Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were elected to parliament for the first time. He'd never served on Labour's front bench, before he became leader of the Labour party he'd never appeared at the dispatch box in the House of Commons. And he was a career rebel, a serial rebel. It was his rebellions and his radical politics that attracted many young followers to his cause. Corbyn unequivocally rejected austerity. He rejected the mainstream political consensus and a lot of new Labour supporters, particularly those who had come out of the universities burdened by debt, they'd never heard a mainstream Labour politician speak in the way that Corbyn spoke. He became leader of the Labour party in 2015, I think it was after Ed Miliband lost the 2015 general election, it was an extraordinary summer and Corbyn unlocked something long-suppressed on the left. And the Labour party had changed the rules by which it elects its leader, so that it became kind of the equivalent of one member, one vote. You could also pay three pounds and have a vote. And your vote would count the same as a sitting MP. Most of the MPs rejected Corbyn as soon as he became Labour leader. So it was a very bitter time and it spilled over onto social media where it became very dark at times and hostile. I don't look back on that period with any fondness and the New Statesman had to negotiate their way through what was at times quite a nasty war.

Tell us about the readership that you have at the moment. What are your plans for it as you grow?

We've had a dedicated readership for a long time, Westminster, Whitehall, think tanks, other journalists, creative industries, cultural industries. And then of course, the general reader who drops in to find out what we're writing about. We have aspirations not only to grow that readership, but to internationalise it. We've got a growing readership in North America, mostly through our digital journalism, which is really encouraging. In more recent times, I thought our coverage of the German elections and then the French elections was excellent. We put a lot of resource behind both of those elections and that we were writing about those elections so thoughtfully and so seriously was picked up in those countries. In Germany, in France and more recently since the outbreak of the terrible war in Ukraine … our coverage has been outstanding and some of our pieces, particularly by notable writers such as Adam Tooze, have been widely noticed and shared around the world. And that's the ambition really, to bring our loyal, dedicated readers with us, but also grow that readership. And reach some of those people in other countries - opinion formers, politicians, policymakers. And we also have a thriving B2B operation, which we call Spotlight - specialist supplements and publications on energy or cybersecurity or environmental issues and so on. And, therefore, we are growing our business readership as well, which is really important for the long-term commercial success of the group.

How do you cut through the noise though? Because there's so many other things buying for people's attention. I mean that the journalism on the New Statesman is incredible. Is it a question of just getting the name out there and getting recognition because the more people that happen upon the high quality of your journalism, they'll then want to stay with you?

It’s all about remaining committed to quality and the thoughtful, sophisticated analysis, but also we have a very distinct political position, we're a liberal, progressive, sceptical title. And that's always given us a niche in the UK. And I think liberal, sceptical politics are increasingly valued at a time of intense polarisation and indeed populism. Our kind of more thoughtful, dispassionate, sceptical, sophisticated analysis is welcome. Not only by readers in the UK, but beyond the UK, increasingly.

You're not merely a print publication, but you have listeners, your podcasts are huge for you guys. Do you have a typical sort of consumer of your media in mind as in, do they read the magazine or are they engaging with the website? I'm a digital subscriber. I don't have the print version, but I get it on my iPad. Obviously listen to podcasts. Do you want more podcast listeners and not particularly fussed if they don't necessarily read the print publication as well?

Absolutely. We want as many people as possible engaging with the New Statesman’s journalism - with our content in the modern buzz phrase, that's what we want. And we can use our podcasts to grow our circulation. For example, our politics podcast, which is chaired by Anoosh Chakelian, Steven Bush was a regular on it, Helen Lewis was a regular on it, Ailbhe Rea is a regular on it, we have other guests on it as well. I speak to people who said they came to the New Statesman through the podcast because it's attracted a new generation of listeners and they've then gone off to experiment, maybe looked at the website, maybe even bought the print magazine. We can use our multimedia facilities to increase our circulation overall and engagement with the New Statesman. That has to be the way for a modern multimedia company to operate. You can't just be satisfied with being print and having a website. You have to push out into new areas because if you don't, others will, and you'll be left behind.

Tell us about your new book, ‘Who Are We Now?’ It examines the state of the nation through key news stories over the last 20 years.

It's a book about England and Englishness. And it's a book that I began to think about before the pandemic. I began making notes for it after the vote for Brexit, when the British political culture was just so polarised, it was such a difficult time. The Brexit vote had happened. The cognitive elite had been confounded by the vote to leave, remainers were aghast at what had happened and, in many ways, wanted to overturn the vote and have a second referendum. And we began what became known as the Brexit war, which dribbled on for three miserable years until Boris Johnson won his emphatic majority in 2019. And then no sooner we emerged out of the Brexit war, we went straight into the pandemic, the first pandemic to affect us here in the United Kingdom for a hundred years. So it's been an extraordinary period of turmoil and upheaval and what I've attempted to do in the book is understand the forces in play. I’ve done this by telling stories about the last 25 years because the stories tell us who we are. I love a phrase by George Orwell … In 1940, as the bombs were dropping on London during the Blitz, Orwell wrote this wonderful book-length essay called The Lion and the Unicorn. In it he wrote: “it is of the deepest importance to try and determine what England is before guessing what part England can play in the huge events that are happening.” And really that's the starting point of my own book - huge events have been happening and I wanted to try and work out

what England is and who the English are today at a time of fragmentation for the United Kingdom. As Scottish nationalism strengthens and becomes more powerful, more influential, it necessarily forces upon the English a reconsideration of who they are. And this is the question I ask in the book, 'who are we now?' I don't attempt to answer it through polemic or observation or comment. I don't have any preconceived political positions, but I attempt to answer the question if indeed I answer the question, by telling stories. What I'm trying to do is get a sense of the social atmosphere of the country. I'm not seeking to offer solutions or policy recommendations, but I am attempting to understand how we've been changed by the events of the last 20 to 25 years. And I'm including the rise and fall of New Labour, the Iraq war, the Afghanistan war, the Scottish independence referendum, the Brexit referendum, the election of Jeremy Corbyn and the Corbyn wars and then the pandemic. These are huge forces that have shaken us all. And I'm attempting to kind of make sense of it in the book, which is just out actually. And so far, it has been very well received. I'm pleased to say.

Yeah, I can see it has done very well. My copy is on its way from Amazon and will be delivered tomorrow. I was hoping it would've come in time for the podcast annoyingly! I was obviously reading around it and some of the reviews, which are excellent, but obviously the book clearly shows how we've become a more divided and polarised society. And I just wondered what you take on that was as well. We're in chapter three of the craziness. There was obviously Brexit, then there was the pandemic. Now there's obviously the problem in Ukraine with Putin's invasion, which is obviously disgraceful, but it seems to be now that everyone's just shouting at each other on Twitter. I don't know anyone that changed their mind on Brexit, right from the very beginning. It just seemed to be a complete waste of time. When I did A-Level politics, we had mooting and the whole point of winning it is that you managed to win people over, but now everyone just seems very entrenched in their position. And just shouting at the other side, across the pond as well. Everyone just assumes bad faith. I wondered whether you had any sort of good news on the political front, because it just seems to me that quite apart from policy differences, the way we go about politics as a society now is just miserable.

What interests me is what holds a community and a nation together. The question of what holds the United Kingdom together is a big one because the complexity of the UK comes from [its] nature as a multinational state. So that adds a level of complexity to our political debate. And particularly when, as in Scotland, when you have a separatist party dominant, that creates all sorts of tensions throughout these islands. So I understand what you say about polarisation and anger. But also I see possibilities for a new politics [of the common good], a new way of doing politics. I thought the pandemic, though traumatic and stressful and devastating for so many, also showcased some of the best of us. Just think about those 750,000 volunteers who responded to the government's appeal for help in the early weeks of the pandemic, or the processes around the vaccine rollout … or the empathy that was shown for health workers and key workers on the front line of the pandemic, those people who were going out to work because they had no choice but to go out to work, when many of us were fortunate enough to be working from home. We saw many good things in the pandemic and often it's only in a deep crisis that you pull together [as a nation] and get a better sense of who we are and the possibilities of

what we could do after the pandemic as we emerge from this prolonged period of crisis. But as you say, we've emerged straight into a war in Ukraine, which will fundamentally change Europe in ways we don't yet fully understand. These are moments of crisis, upheaval, transformation, but they don't necessarily have to have negative outcomes. We can learn from what happened before, why we became so angry, so polarised, so hostile to one another, and perhaps approach the way we do politics, the way we communicate, the way we argue in different ways, at least that's my hope. And I do try to express that in the book.

You're obviously an exceptionally good editor. You've been voted editor of the year four times in a row by the British Society of Magazine Editors, congratulations. Do you enjoy the process of writing? This is your third book. You did the memoir, The Last Game in 2009, and a book of essays, Reaching For Utopia, I think two or three years ago. Is writing something that is very close to your heart?

Yes, I love editing. I love the craft of editing. I love generating ideas and inspiring my team and looking at ways to transform the New Statesman and grow the business and innovate and I'm always thinking of ways we can cut through and have more impact and be noticed and talked about and lead the public conversation. But part of me likes to spend a lot of time alone. I like to read, I like to think and writing really flows from that more contemplative side of my character. And I found writing the new book very easy. I had more time in lockdown, spending all of my time in my office at home, and I had the time to write and actually, the whole book flowed very easily and very smoothly because I'd thought for such a long time about the issues that animate the book. So writing is fundamental to who I am as a journalist. But I don't find writing difficult. I've always found it something that I wanted to do and enjoy doing. It's not a torturous process. I'm not like Flaubert lying on the floor of my office, beating my fists in frustration that I'm not able to formulate the perfect sentence. I like to write good, clean, simple, elegant sentences, but I also want to get on with the writing. I don't want to spend too long agonising over what I'm going to write and how I'm going to write it. My only regret in the day job is that I don't get a chance to write more and often I can't even get in my own magazine. There are many other writers who I prefer to publish ahead of myself. So that can be a little frustrating when there's not enough space for me, the editor, but that's testament to my team and [to] the quality of the team. I like that. I can't even get in my own magazine! No, seriously. I say that to my team at editorial meetings. Look, guys, you're saying you can't get in, I can't get in! It's competitive to be published in the New Statesman!

The book has just come out, so I always remember Sylvester Stallone was annoyed at Terry Wogan when he was promoting Rocky Four because Terry was saying "are you gonna do a Rocky Five?" And he was like "Rocky Four has just come out, Terry, will you give it a chance to see how it does?" But do you have any other books in you? Obviously, this is your third one. Do you have a plan over the coming years for other things that you want to write about, other books that you want to write and publish?

Yes. I see the writing of books really as a hobby. They're not the core of my work. Being editor of the New Statesman is the day job, as it were. If I pursue writing, that's more as a sideline. I hope to write more books, but I don't have a burning idea at

present. I'd be very interested to see how this book does because I've written it in a particular way. I don't necessarily take strong positions in the book. It's more of an exploration of what I call the social atmosphere of the country. And I'm intrigued to see how it lands. I do have ideas, but not yet a dominant idea. I did speak to my publisher a few months ago when I thought I had the germ of an idea and she said to me can we just concentrate on getting this hardback out and then the paperback and see where we are in six to eight months. I think that was a pretty good answer by her.

Who are your journalist heroes? What other writers and editors do you admire and why?

I'm hugely influenced by George Orwell. I love his journalism. I love his unpredictable politics. I love his scepticism. I love his essays in particular, although I've read many of his novels [as well]. And, indeed, I was delighted to be asked to write the introduction to a new edition of Animal Farm. Orwell's work has just come out of copyright. And I was asked to write the introduction to the collector's edition of the Macmillan Library edition of Animal Farm. So I'm hugely admiring of George Orwell. I don't have particular editors that inspire me. I like particular modern journalists. I like some of the New York Times commentators. I like a guy called Ross Douthat on the New York Times. I like David Brooks. I like some of the Atlantic team, but they're more the writers on the Atlantic rather than the editor himself, Jeff Goldberg - who's obviously a great editor and a very good political writer - but I've never been inspired by editors. I'm inspired by publications. I like the London Review of Books. I think it's serious and committed to great writing and has a certain aloofness, which I rather admire. I like the Economist. I like the formula of the Economist - my favourite columnist, Adrian Woodridge, who wrote the Bagehot column, sadly just left, he's joined Bloomberg. Obviously I admire Jeremy Cliffe, who's now on the New Statesman. I admire the Financial Times. I think it's a terrific publication. I like its ambitions. I like its unpredictable politics, but I think a lot of publications, particularly the FT, particularly the Economist, have been trying to make sense of why liberals have been losing again and again in recent years. They've had to endure the Trump presidency. They've had to endure the defeat of the Brexit referendum. What is it that they didn't understand about the world? Why do they keep finding themselves on the losing side? And these are questions that interest me as an editor. So, I can't name one editor or two editors that inspire me, but I like to keep an Orwellian ethos as I approach my work at the New Statesman.

When was the last time that you were surprised? Surprised? You can't cite this question, which has been tried in the past, "surprised by that question." Well, the old term of an eyebrow-raiser, I'm often presented in my day to day job with things that surprise me for good and for bad. And I just wondered, is there anything that has gone the way that you've thought or a development that has completely come out of the blue that has surprised you?

I can't even describe the vote for Brexit as a surprise because several members of my team predicted it would happen some months before the event, Steven Bush, notably. I thought it would be very close, a narrow victory for remain. I was surprised that Corbyn won the Labour leadership contest. That was a genuine surprise because he came from the absolute margins of the party - began the contest of four, almost didn't make the ballot. Was a rank outsider, was ridiculed early in his

candidacy and astonishingly won the leadership of the Labour party. That was a surprise. But already I understood that the Labour party was in such trouble. We weren't surprised when Ed Miliband lost the 2015 general election. I think Ed Miliband was surprised, but we weren't. We'd predicted that he would lose some months before. But I was surprised that Corbyn won in 2015 – that was a massive shock.

Penultimate question. What advice would you give to someone starting out in their media career? That's listening to this and would fancy if you decades from now being editor of the New Statesman, maybe. They're ambitious, they're just starting out, does someone starting out now have it harder or easier? Because in one sense, there's more opportunities to make a name for yourself with podcasting and blogging, on the other hand, newsrooms seem to lack the investment. There's fewer journalism jobs than ever before. So how do you cut through the noise? Is it harder or easier?

I think media groups after a period of confusion and bewilderment, when they didn't work out what to do about the internet or how to make journalism pay, are beginning to work ways of making journalism pay, introducing paywalls and subscription models, all of which is different from 5, 8, 10 years ago when there was a tendency to give everything away for free on their website and see what happens. Certain publications, I'm thinking of big international publications, have a stronger base now than they had some years ago. If you'd asked me this question five years ago, I would've said print publications were in deep, if not terminal decline. I no longer think that, but print operations have to become digital operations and operate as print-digital hybrids, as the New Statesman does, to succeed. What I would say to a young person setting out on a career in the media is 'follow your interests'. Always be true to what you're interested in. You may be pulled in various directions through the necessity of having to make a living and earn some money and gather some experience. But always be led by what interests you most and be pulled back by that desire to pursue your interests and be true to your interests and be true to yourself. Don't compromise. Don't be cynical. Don't write material that you don't believe in. Don't take positions that you don't believe in because editors will sniff you out as a phoney, just be true to what you most want to do and what you believe in. But, I said, don't compromise, what I meant is don't compromise on your values, but you may have to compromise in the short term to gain the necessary experience. In other words, you may not be interested in financial journalism, but for a period you may have to do some financial journalism. But if I ultimately want to write about the environment, you may have to take detours and different turns before you come back. So always ultimately be led by your interests, by your curiosity, by your thoughtfulness. I always say read as much as possible, consume as much media as possible and not just in your own country. Be curious, learn languages, pursue media in different areas as well.

What's next for you? You've been in the editor's chair since 2008. I've run out of fingers and thumbs to count that on, that's well over 10 years, are you gonna go on and on like Mrs T as you were, or do you have plans in the medium to long term to do something else?

In the short term, I want to stay being editor to the New Statesman. We've come a long way, but we've still got quite a lot to do. We're not quite where I want us to be. And my relations with the owner remain excellent. So while he is the owner, Mike Danson is the owner and our relationship remains good and I have the support of my editorial team, I want to stay. There's much still to do, but I won't stay if I no longer enjoy the job. You have to enjoy what you do. So in a sense, it becomes a vocation rather than a job. And for me, editing the New Statesman is a vocation, it's absolutely fantastically exciting and interesting, every day throws up challenges that I grapple with. And alongside editing New Statesman I want to continue writing as ambitiously as I can. So probably another book, but in the meantime it's essays and profiles, which is what I enjoy writing most of all.

Jason, that was a hugely interesting conversation. As a reader of New Statesman. It's been an honour and a privilege to speak with you today. Thank you for your time.

Thank you so much, Paul. I enjoyed it.