

Jacqui Smith

Former Home Secretary

Media Masters – June 23, 2016

Listen to the podcast online, visit www.mediafocus.org.uk

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 former home secretary Jacqui Smith. Starting out as a teacher, Jacqui was elected to Parliament in 1997. A known peacemaker between the Blair-Brown factions, she served in the departments of health and education, was appointed deputy minister for women, and also worked as chief whip.

Jacqui was appointed home secretary in 2007, and would go on to tighten prostitution laws, and see minor crime fall year on year, but also face backlashes over detention laws and ID cards. Since leaving parliament in 2010 she has been a regular on our screens and radio, presenting documentaries and hosting her own show on LBC. Now chair of public affairs at Westbourne Communications, she also works with a number of charities and chairs two health organisations in Birmingham.

Jacqui, thank you for joining me.

Lovely to be here.

I'm very excited about this actually! You are what you are one of my political heroes.

You need to get out a bit more!

I do, don't I? Were you like me, did you always want to be an MP?

Well, I like to say that I was a normal young person and not at all naff, but my idea of a sort of good night out when I was a teenager was to go to council meetings with my mum who was actually a councillor in Malvern in Worcestershire where there were only three Labour councillors, and that I have to say was the high point of Labour's representation in the 1970s. But she was a big role model to me and

frankly, I think if it hadn't been the 1970s and she hadn't had three children to bring up she would have been very keen to be an MP herself, so I was politically interested from a very early age. My school friends say, "Oh, we always knew you wanted to go into Parliament," so I suppose I didn't hide it as well as I thought I did at the time.

So did you train as a teacher as a kind of backstop, as it were then?

Well, I went to university I was quite involved in student politics at university. I spent a year with the National Association of Labour Students after university, and then I was really – as many people I think do – looking around for what it was like I wanted to do and I did teacher training, and I actually taught for 11 years and really enjoyed it, so whilst in some ways I slightly fell into teaching, I absolutely loved it when I did it and I taught economics and business studies, so I got to do some of the sort of more... as I would see it, some of the more interesting teaching with young people 14-18, so it was both challenging but also sort of very stimulating to be able to be with young people and to be teaching something that I was really interested in and enjoyed.

And do you think that made you a better MP ultimately, having all that kind of genuine real world experience?

I mean, I'm never quite... I slightly push back on the idea that sort of MP is don't know what the real world is. If you're an MP and you're doing constituency surgeries and you're dealing with the range of issues that you're dealing with and you're out and about on the streets meeting people, you've got a pretty good idea of what's going on, probably better than a lot of people who are just doing straightforward jobs. What I did find teaching prepared me for is I suppose when you have had to stand in front of a class of slightly disinterested 16-year-olds and persuade them that the economics you're trying to impart to them really is interesting, you develop I suppose a bit of confidence about how you're actually going to respond to public speaking, deal with a sort of difficult crowd... so some of those things I think don't ever leave you if you've been a teacher.

So tell us how you came to be selected then. Because obviously you were elected in 1997 at the landslide, that must have been an incredible time.

It was. That was amazing, I had already fought and lost a seat in 1992, as do many people into Parliament, actually it doesn't happen overnight, you spend a long time doing that. I lived in Redditch and I've been on the borough council as a councillor. Then in 1992 I was selected to fight what was then called the Mid-Worcestershire seat. It was Eric Forth's seat at that time. And then there was a boundary reorganisation and in effect an additional seat was created in Worcestershire that became a marginal, or at least a potentially winnable...

But with no incumbent, of course.

And with no incumbent, and in actual fact Eric Forth, who sort of was the incumbent, decided it was too dodgy a seat and went on a chicken run down to Bromley and Chislehurst. So he sort of deserted the battleground in advance of the election. And I was selected quite quickly after '92, so I had, as many candidates also have, that very long period of time when you are campaigning and, because it's a marginal seat, hoping that you're going to get elected, putting the rest of your life pretty much on hold, your career, your family to a certain extent...

It's an incredible risk isn't it?

Well, I was lucky because for me, if you like, the risk paid off. I feel desperately sorry for the Labour candidates in 2010 and particularly in 2015 who did the same thing; put their lives on hold, worked their guts out and then ended up not having a seat in Parliament, having really spent a lengthy period of time, and in lots of cases a lot of money as well, in trying to win that seat – so I can't complain. It was tough, but it always felt in the run up to 1997 that we had a good chance. You know, it wasn't quite as easy... as it didn't feel quite as easy as it subsequently turned out to be, but when I look at today's polls and I compare them with the sort of poll leads that we had in '95-'96, I realise that actually I was very lucky to be standing and to get elected in 1997.

We were all kind of emotionally scarred by 1992, of course, because we all thought we'd win. I do feel especially sorry for some of the candidates in the last election, like you were saying, because the polls did say that it was a toss-up between Cameron and Miliband and there was a genuine chance, or at least we thought if the polls were to be believed, that we had a chance.

There was a feel of 1992 in the last election, I mean I can think back to 1992 when, although it would have been pretty good going for me to win the seat I thought that time, nevertheless we did think... we thought we were going to get elected, we thought Neil Kinnock was going to be prime minister, and the fact that it was so... such a big defeat, and so disappointing, was a big knock-back to people at that particular time. What of course was important about that, was first with John Smith and then with Tony Blair, there was a very clear view in the Labour Party that... there was an argument in the Labour Party about whether or not it was simply about hanging around for another five years in the hope that we would then win, or if we needed to sort of fundamentally do something different. And my enormous respect, actually both for John Smith and particularly for Tony Blair, comes about because they recognised that and they were willing to take the decisions necessary to put in place the policies necessary to have pretty cast iron discipline I have to say,

Rock solid discipline.

In the run-up to '97 about what our messages were, how we repeated them. You know, people now look back with some sort of sneeringness sometimes about the...

It was an amazing media operation. And challenging misinformation and mischief on the part of the then government.

You're absolutely right. I mean, first of all we had to turn around the public's idea that somehow or another a Labour government would be economically incompetent. And actually, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown as a partnership did a massive job in setting out an economic story that enabled us to demonstrate to the British people that they could trust us with the economy, that was really crucial for us winning. And actually yes, you're right. I look back on those days of the sort of response and rebuttal team with a lot of respect; there were people there who were working their socks off both positively getting the message over, and frankly as you have to in politics, responding to the things that were being said about us that were untrue and making sure that everybody was clear about what the messages were and that we all delivered them in an appropriately disciplined way. And I think it's interesting, if you look at campaigning now some people say, "Oh well, you couldn't have such message discipline as there was in 1997," and I suspect to a certain extent that's true; there are far more methods of communication, particularly with social media, now than there were back in 1997, but the principle that you identify your weaknesses, that you have a clear message to overcome them, that you clarify your broader program into a set of clearly understood promises that you can actually discuss with people on the doorstep, that people can relate to, that you can keep repeating so that people have an idea about you, that you have a media operation that enables you to do the symbolic things that are going to exemplify what you will mean if you get into government, that you have a leader who is a good media communicator – all of those things remain the case. And we didn't succeed in 2015, and in my view we're not succeeding at the moment in doing that, and that's reason why we're not having the sort of success that I want us to have back as a party.

We will come to that very shortly, but I just want to kind of get through the time in Parliament if we may. Tell us about the early years in parliament; that was the job what you thought it would be? And you know is it like the cliché of *Yes Minister* where you're literally waiting by the telephone for the chief whip to ring?

Well, first of all of course you get to go to Parliament and it's all exciting and you turn up at the gates of Parliament with – you're advised to bring a copy of your election leaflet because of course, every time there's a general election, particularly when there's a big turnover there as there was in 1997, the people on the doors don't know who the hell you are – so you turn up with your election leaflet, and in those days – I

mean, it's not an enormous lot better now from what I hear – but in those days, you know, you don't have an office, we all got put together in some room upstairs somewhere, you were lucky if you got a telephone. Most of the communication then of course was still by letter largely, so you get of great big wads of correspondence. You've got no staff, you've got no way really...

Did you have a huge pager on your belt?

Oh, no, we did have we did have our pagers, which periodically you would drop down the toilet or something.

Text messaging now. Some of my MP friends, when I have lunch with them it's great, it comes from Labour Whips, this is the line straight away, and it's just text.

Yes.

Amazing.

Yes. Or Labour Whips have of course got a Twitter account now, which is very good. I mean, I don't think they use that for the... for secret things, but... no, our pagers... you know, most of the time to be honest there was a bit of a myth around the pager, most of the time all it said was, you know, there's going to be a vote in 10 minutes – it didn't on the whole give you sort of line to take for every event.

I would have done anything for one of those pagers! I'd declare an interest.

I think I've still got it in some cupboard somewhere or another, it's probably worth some money now as a historical artefact!

I will buy that from you and wear it with pride! And how does it work then? You wait in line as it were for one of these crappy offices, and then what comes next?

Well, then if you're sort of sensible you decide what it is that you want to focus on as an MP, and in my first year in Parliament I did the Finance Bill, so as a backbencher I did the Finance Bill, I got selected to go on the Treasury Select Committee which I really enjoyed, I had a baby in the first year as well, so it was all sort of quite busy and plenty of things going on. And then at the end of my second year in Parliament, after I'd spent a year on the Treasury Select Committee, that was when I was appointed a minister in 1997 as part of a reshuffle, and you're right – because it was my first job, I wasn't... I was hoping, to be frank, but I wasn't necessarily expecting a phone call, and I received my phone call actually sitting at home with one of my kids on my knee, if I remember rightly, and the excitement of a phone call that says. "This

is the Number 10 switchboard and the Prime minister would like to see you today,” was enough I’m afraid to sort of deposit my son on the floor or as I jumped up in excitement. My kids would probably tell you that for the next sort of 11 years that they were largely sort of thrown aside as I pursued my political career, but then I... you sort of... because I was in my constituency in Redditch, you set off to London and I arrived at Downing Street and I got to the gate of Downing Street, and the police officer said, “Who are you, what are you here for?” so I said, “Well, I’m Jacqui Smith, I’m here to see the Prime minister,” and he gets his list out and looks it up and down and says, “Oh, no, sorry you’re not on the list,” at which point you think, “Oh no, there’s been some terrible mistake.” Anyway, I eventually did get in to see the Prime minister and he appointed me to my first job in the Department for Education in a team with Estelle Morris as my sort of immediate boss and David Blunkett as the Secretary of State, so...

Both fantastic ministers.

It is hard to imagine...

Including Estelle, who was amazing.

She’s a brilliant minister. Also in the department with Margaret Hodge, Tessa Jowell, Tessa Blackstone, Andrew Smith for a period of time, I mean it is hard to imagine... Malcolm Wicks, bless him... it’s hard to imagine a better team of people who you could have started your ministerial career with actually, and they were sort of... especially Estelle and David were really inspirational in terms of how I then wanted to go about doing my ministerial career after that.

And is the pressure on at that point as well? Because presumably as you’ve said, you’re ambitious, that’s the first rung of the ladder next. There’s always that chance though, that you might make a mistake, or were you so ebullient and confident at that stage that you thought, “Right, we’ll get this done.”

I can’t say I was full of confidence! If I remember rightly I think I didn’t sleep for a week on the basis of how am I going to do it, it’s all too difficult... but actually with the support of people around me, and because in the end these jobs are all doable, and you bring to it of course your experience of political life and all the experience you’ve built up until then, I really enjoyed it and I did it for two years and then actually... so that was the most junior rung of ministerial life, and then I was promoted two years later to Minister of State in the Department of Health, so I must have been doing something right! I thoroughly enjoyed it. You know, the interesting thing about ministerial life of course is that quite often your first job sometimes bears some resemblance to what you may have done in a previous life, so you know I can remember Tony Blair saying to me, “Oh we thought...” – to the extent that the Prime minister ever gives a lot of thought to the most junior ministers – he said, “Well, we

thought with your teaching background, it would be good for you to be a schools minister.” My next job in the Department of Health as minister of state, I mean I was responsible for mental health, for community care, for children’s services, which were at that point in the Department of Health, none of which I’d had really any professional experience of.

The classic kind of ‘here today, gone tomorrow’ kind of minister, as Robin Day would say!

Haha – exactly! And you know, a steep learning curve and all those other clichés, but of course what you then realise is that as a minister you’re actually not there to represent your former profession or the professionals within it, you’re there to deliver a political program – and effective ministers are those who are clear about what their priorities are, can communicate it, can make decisions, and where necessary defend and communicate the government’s programme. So those are political skills; they are not about whether or not you’ve got a particular... obviously you need to develop sufficient knowledge about the technical areas that you’re working in to be able to make sensible decisions. But you are not there as a representative of the health system or teaching or, you know, police as a secretary, or any of those.

I’ve known a few ministers over the years, in some ways it can be quite an impossible job because you’re balancing an unbelievable amount of conflicting priorities – a political agenda from Number 10, your own career, a hostile media, civil servants that are reluctant to change... it must have been a bit of a nightmare in some ways.

It’s also... I mean, it wasn’t a nightmare. It was the best job you could imagine having if you’re a political person like me, but it certainly isn’t the sort of all-powerful role that you might imagine it’s going to be. Because certainly if you’re a junior minister, for a start, obviously, actually you’re not wholly setting the priorities, they’re being set by the secretary of state or as you rightly say perhaps by the Prime minister influencing, rightly, what’s going on across government. So I think one of the things you have to decide as a more junior minister is where do I think I can focus my efforts and make a difference. You’re not always going to be free to prioritise those things, because you know, one of the things I remember from my time as the most junior minister is the sort of invitations to various conferences and events that came down where at the top of the page was written, “David wondered whether or not Estelle would be interested in doing this event,” and then Estelle Morris had written, “Could you give this to Jacqui to do?” So, you know, so you always realise if you’re the most junior minister that you’re down at the bottom of the pecking order, but quite rightly you’re sort of learning the whole range of things that you’re expected to do as a minister, but you also have some responsibilities where you can carve out a bit of opportunity to initiate things and to really become a bit more expert in that area and to think about what it is that you want to change, and doing that, and

finding the thing that you really sort of want to have made a difference in, is quite important because the other thing – to be fair to David Cameron – one of the things that he has done is to try to keep ministers in place for slightly longer. In my ministerial career I never spent longer than two years in a job. So actually, as well as arriving in a job not necessarily with any expert knowledge about that area of policy, you also know that you probably won't be there for that long and therefore deciding what you want to make a difference about and getting on with it is quite important in ministerial life.

But in a sense you're an ambitious minister, and without kind of overly flattering you, you are cabinet level material – you clearly were a fantastic home secretary. So it's a waste of your talents to kind of just leave you languishing on the kind of lower rungs of ministerial career, so in a sense you know there's always that risk isn't there, where you need to do a good job or not so good that you almost get pigeonholed there.

There is a really interesting... I mean, there are some jobs that are more interesting than others and all of the jobs that I did I enjoyed. When I moved from health to the DTI as it was then and also to do with women and equality, at the time I sort of thought, "Oh, I'm not sure about this," but actually I got the opportunity in that job to take through parliament the civil partnership legislation, so there was something that I sort of felt, "Well, this is really interesting and challenging," and because despite the fact that everybody now suggests that they always supported it, it wasn't necessarily the case at the time, I can tell you.

A lot of opposition.

So in every job there is going to be something that's interesting, but you're right you're also always thinking, "Actually, you know what, my boss is able to make some of the decisions I wish I could make and it would be good to be in that position." And so when I first went into the cabinet I suppose it was a slightly different sort of job because I went in as chief whip. And that was, you know, having done up to that point through three – well, four, because I went back to education again – four different policy jobs, to do something that was really about political management and relationships was a brilliant opportunity, I mean, it meant I was sitting at the cabinet table, I got to see how that was operating, if you're chief whip as well you get to see... if you're a policy minister, if you're not careful you can become quite focussed on your – well, you have to be focussed on your policy area – but you become a bit insulated from the politics and the policy that's going on across government.

Chief whip is the second best job in government as far as I'm concerned.

It's a brilliant job, and to be... and it's political in a way that sometimes you sort of feel... you know, you have to struggle to make sure your other ministerial jobs are...

and you're dealing with your colleagues and you're learning and you're using, hopefully, your political skills in order to achieve what you want to achieve, and in my case, you know trying to do it not in a... I don't think that many Labour chief whips did do it like this, but the idea that as a chief whip you're going around sort of threatening people and shoving them up against walls and that sort of thing is...

We've seen *House of Cards*.

Haha! I killed nobody, can I say! Although of course...

So other people killed on your behalf? Okay...

Haha! In the British *House of Cards* of course, you will remember that the chief whip threw a journalist off the top of the...

That poor young lady right at the top. I used to have lunch there back when I was a pass holder back all those years ago.

Well, when I was chief whip, they closed the roof garden.

I remember that.

It was nothing to do with me. No journalists were in any danger.

Well, not in any physical danger; you might give them sort of light criticism.

But in actual fact of course, it's a lot more sophisticated, the job, than you know, just threatening people because frankly you don't get that far with threats, you have to be a bit more clever about it than that.

Let me ask one media question just so that we can justify the media in the title. Did you find that in the various different departments that you were in that the media treated you differently? So for example, education was a key priority of the government, you've got parents and teachers, but on the other hand you're at least trying to do something positive. Whereas say, being Minister for Women did you get any misogyny, being Home secretary of course ... it's a thankless task in a way because no one cares if the Home secretary does a good job but on the other hand if there's queues at the passport line or if someone escapes from a prison, the Home secretary is always going to get in the neck.

There is a difference in different ministerial jobs and I always tried to do my bit in terms of media coverage, so I was always willing to... you know, junior ministerial life is about being willing to be the person in Millbank at six o'clock in the morning going

round all the media outlets, and the one that stays up to do *Newsnight* and all of those sorts of things, and certainly in education in health there are no shortage of bids for your time to do media interviews. When I went to the DTI actually, interestingly, one of the things I found quite strange was there wasn't the sort of media pressure that there had been in education and health; I can remember sitting down with the press team and saying, "Right, so what are the stories we're likely to have?" and they looked at me as if to say, "Well, actually there probably isn't anything this week that's going to require any sort of interviews." Well, that was pretty unheard of in somewhere like education or health. And then as you rightly say, when you become home secretary even when you've been quite a sort of media involved minister like I had been previously, and even as chief whip of course, the convention is that the chief whip sort of keeps quiet, but I did a bit of media as chief whip and one of the reasons I did a bit of media as chief whip was because of course it was coming to that stage where we were coming to the end of Tony Blair's period of as prime minister and although Gordon Brown took over it wasn't necessarily obvious that it was going to be Gordon Brown.

Until it got close. It was odd.

Yes.

I'd still have Tony now as PM. I'll be the last Blairite standing.

Oh, you'll have a few of us with you.

I hope so!

But when you become home secretary actually, of course what you realise is the Home Office reflects back to people the things that they are most fearful and concerned about; their personal security, the security of their borders, the counterterrorism and general security against terrorism, issues to deal with identity...

None of these are nice issues are they?

One of the things I did on becoming Home secretary was I got rid of a pink jacket that I had, because I said to myself, "Do you know what? At any point something bad might happen. And as Home secretary you will need to be able to respond to this and it would be wholly appropriate if you were wearing something that didn't look suitably serious," so in one way that's a trivial thing but it sort of brought home to me the nature of the job, and you know the fact that you wake up every morning to the *Today* programme headlines and you can be pretty certain that they'll be, you know, one of your responsibilities in the headlines somewhere or another, and every morning – never mind you can have a week without a media focus – every morning you're looking at the papers and thinking, "What's going to... you know, how is this

story going to unravel, or what attack are we going to be under because of this or that?” And I’m like I think Theresa May a bit, and perhaps she’s wiser than I was, I probably did more media as home secretary than some home secretaries have, and that’s partly because you get to... you know, I think I felt... instinctively I wanted to slightly lead from the front when it came to media things, there were some big issues that really needed the home secretary to be prompting them up.

You were also the only woman that had one of the big top four cabinet jobs, offices of state, sorry.

Yes, and it’s important for the government as a whole to have a diverse team representing itself, as we saw in the 2010 election, and to a certain extent last year as well. It is very easy to slip into showing an all-male face and that is bad. Why would people looking at an all-male, largely white, set of politicians talking to them think that they were reflecting their concerns? You know, I think it’s not surprising, if that’s one of the reasons why people become alienated from what politicians are trying to talk to them about.

Do you agree with the assessment that the electorate really do look at the person who is on their screen as much as the policies? Because I think you’re quite a different home secretary, even on screen quite apart from your policy differences with Theresa May, you seemed quite human and quite personable; you were tough but on the other hand you clearly cared, whereas I think Theresa May seems more austere and more formal in her dealings, and some of my friends say, “I don’t like her.” And it’s not even about the policies, it’s like, “I don’t like her.” It might be unfair, but...

I might think it’s unfair but you know, all of the... when you have media training and when people talk to you about how you do media, the hard message is, “Listen – what you say is important, and your policies are important, but actually they are probably... what you’re actually talking about is probably less than 10% of the impact that you’re having on people.” And people are looking at what you look like, they’re thinking about how you sound, as you say their thinking is that is that a sort of genuine human being? In my first two days in the job of course, as home secretary, we faced the luckily failed bomb attack in Haymarket in London and then the terrorists driving the Jeep into the front of Glasgow Airport. And so I was thrown quite quickly into sort of a media appearance at least sort of making statements and things outside Downing Street, and the thing that people most said to me after that was, “Oh, we felt very reassured because you looked as if you were calm and you were in control.” And I thought, “Actually, they haven’t got a clue,” and to be honest I could barely remember what I’d actually said. But there was an element, at that moment in time, what people needed to see was the home secretary in control of the situation and reassuring people, so there is always an element of political life that is about the way you come over to people, and frankly, sometimes what we’ve seen, even with

very clever politicians, is if they can't make that connection with the public, then however interesting what they've got to say is, they will not be able to get that over and make that communication. And the other problem of course is that once somebody has decided they sort of don't like you or they think you're a bit wooden or whatever, it's very difficult to get that back afterwards.

Actually, I do remember the 9/11 Commission when they interviewed then-President George W. Bush, because they couldn't remember what was whispered in his ear. Because if you remember, he was given the news live on television.

In a classroom, wasn't it?

That's right – he was reading. And he said, “The only thing I cared about at that moment was appearing presidential as I received the news. I was clearly about to get some bad news. It didn't matter what was being said to me, what mattered is was my face and I needed to appear authoritative.” I was always struck by that.

And he's right, you know, in some ways people might say, “Oh, how shallow, just thinking about what you look like,” but that is your manifestation at that moment in time; that's what people are going to see, and they want to be reassured. I did think there was a touch of sort of sexism about this. “We were really reassured, Jacqui, because you looked confident,” and you know, I don't know if people sort of thought, “First female home secretary, she's going to come running screaming out of Downing Street going: ‘Oh God, it's all a nightmare, I can't handle it.’” So I think in some ways, not falling over, sounding confident, was a really important message at that particular moment in time. Then of course, what was crucial was what was going on behind closed doors, what was happening in terms of the operation, what that meant for the policy, longer term response to it. All of those things were crucial but, in the moment, how you behave when there is a crisis is really important.

Do you feel the media was overly misogynist to you when... because you're clearly going to get attacked as home secretary, but do you think you were attacked more viciously because you were also a woman?

Well, there's nonsense around that is nonsense for all politicians. It's particular nonsense if you're a woman. So whether or not my top was too low cut, what shoes Theresa May is wearing, those things are just nonsense.

I couldn't care less what she's wearing.

Quite.

I genuinely can't. And I mean it out of respect to her, get on with running the Home Office.

Exactly. But there probably is a different approach to women in terms of things like appearance, what you sound like, those types of things. But in the end, I mean, if you've been a minister for 10 years and you've got to be home secretary, if you worried about the fact that people are sort of noting your appearance, you wouldn't be able to focus on the really important thing so I don't ever say, "Oh, it made the job too difficult," or "I felt unfairly treated." I am now in a position where in some ways almost, I can campaign more up against that than I could do when I was in the eye of it, because when you're in the eye of it you want to get on and do your job as effectively as possible; there's no point whinging about the media. You know when you're actually being a politician get on and think about how you communicate your message. Don't spend your time whingeing about how difficult it is.

You were clearly, or I would say very unfairly targeted, during the expenses scandal, I mean, I'm a Labour Party member and a well-wisher, so maybe I'm biased – but on the other hand you seemed to be singled out for particular vitriol. There were hundreds of MPs that made mistakes and worse on their expenses and you just seem to hugely get it in the neck.

Yes, although I have to say, if you're going to make a mistake, one that involves pornography is probably not... if you're the home secretary, and a woman is probably not the best one to make, you know, I can remember my sister who works in the media saying, "For God's sake, if you were going to get something wrong, this is not the thing to do." And I can understand... you know, it was disproportionate to the level of the sin, but it was understandable in terms of a story.

Yes, I can see it from the journalists' point of view, but I still think it's unfair because what should have mattered... it was an assessment of your performance as home secretary. You have many, many hundreds of thousands of people that you were looking after; you can't check every single bill... you know, to me it just seemed manifestly unfair. And it's a strange thing, because the media seems to criticise ministers on like technicalities like expenses or whether they're having an affair or not. I almost think it's because you know the electorate sometimes don't understand the intricacies of policy decisions when you're home secretary, so they go for the stuff that you can understand, "Oh, he's having an affair, he must be a wrong'un." Or, you know, "There's £30 more claimed on their home phone bill, so she's clearly a liar and a cheat." Over £30. It's ridiculous.

Yes... I mean, I think in the case of expenses of course, what it manifests was there was a big problem with the system. And a story that says, "There's a problem with

the system, and really people should have got round to reforming it,” is not as interesting as...

They're all wrong 'uns.

... “Oh, look, Jacqui Smith’s claimed for a plug,” or, you know, whatever. And it became a just a maelstrom, you know, and there was so much material for people to go at, actually to a certain extent it was inevitable. What I regret about it, I agree with you that the punishment didn’t fit the crime, you know, so doing making a small mistake if it was newsworthy was more likely to get you pilloried than frankly, people who... you know, in the end I didn’t pay back as much money as probably the majority of MPs did, but I will always be remembered as somebody who sort of was at the heart of it. Do I feel cross about that? Not really I’ve got to get, you know... get on with your life and make the most of it, is my view now. I mean, it was horrible at the time. It’s not a lot of fun I have to say, in having TV crews and cameras outside your house from sort of morning till night, and particularly where your kids are. That is horrible. It was a horrible experience, but other people go through worse things in their life and I’m through it and still in one piece, so I can be grateful about that.

What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger and all of that.

Do you know, that Kanye West track... I did a sort of *Desert Island Discs* thing for a church charity. And that was one of the tracks that I chose. That went down well as you can imagine!

But like you say, it was a bit disproportionate, and you mentioned at the time because of... I think you used the word ‘disgrace’ that you said that you would say, turn down a peerage, for example. I mean, a former home secretary, it would be great to see you in the upper chamber.

Actually...

Can you be reconsidered now?

Some people said to me, “Why don’t you just shut up?” But those were my advisers I might say. But the reason why that came up was because after I had finished after as... after I’d resigned as home secretary, so that was about in the June, in about the September or October, *Question Time* asked me if I would do *Question Time*, and I am – rightly or wrongly – I slightly like to sort of march towards the sound of the guns. And I thought, “Yes, I’ll do it.” Because I’m not really... I don’t really think I should be wholly shamed of what I’d done, and actually people still need to be standing up for the government etc. One of the questions I was asked on that programme was, “Do you think disgraced MPs should go into the House of Lords?”

Loaded question.

Exactly. What was I supposed to answer? “Yes, I do think disgraced MPs...” So of course I said, “No, I don’t think disgraced MPs should go into the House of Lords,” which was of course then interpreted as I felt I was disgraced, and I shouldn’t go into the House of Lords.

I think you make a fantastic peer. I mean, it just seems a little bit of a waste that you’re not still there, giving your advice and expertise that you’ve learnt for all those years in parliament.

Well, I’m giving my advice and expertise to anybody who will listen on media outlets!

And indeed this podcast!

Haha. So... you know, at the time I was disappointed, I think I would have enjoyed being in the House of Lords, but I don’t have a yen to be back in parliament. You know, I don’t particularly... you know, I’m not out there lobbying to be in the House of Lords, I probably wouldn’t turn it down if I was offered it, but frankly I’m busy doing all sorts of things which are broadly political, you know, I quite often use the expression that I’ve left parliament but I haven’t left politics. I don’t think I ever will in my life, I think I’ll always be politically interested, so whether or not it’s the work that I do with Westbourne on sort of political campaigns and issues, whether or not it’s working in one of the most political in many ways, public services, the health service at the moment, whether or not it’s the commentary that I do or things that I write, whether or not it’s my involvement at the moment in the EU referendum campaign, I’m always going to be a somebody who wants to get in on the argument and give people the benefit of my supposed wisdom, so I’m always going to have a political life.

Is it a better political life because you’re not in parliament? Was it Tony Benn that said, “I’m leaving parliament to enter politics.”?

Sometimes on Twitter when I see MPs, bless their cotton socks, on a Saturday saying, “Brilliant, I’m off to do three surgeries and then I’m going to open so-and-so fete...”

Five Labour doorsteps, one after the other.

Yes. “Great response on the doorstep.” And I think to myself, “Do you know what? I spent 13 years...” – well, longer than 13 years because in the run up to 1997, every weekend because I had a marginal seat, even when I was home secretary – going out and knocking on people’s doors, attending the fetes, doing the surgeries. You know, I enjoyed it at the time, but that is relentless.

It is.

In a marginal seat, it is relentless – and I don't miss that at all. And what's more of course, I always felt – we talked about message discipline earlier on – I always felt that if you were a Member of Parliament, that you actually should be loyal and disciplined about the party message. That brings with it a certain amount of restriction on what you can say, and after a while actually, a certain amount of restriction almost on what you're thinking. And one of the things I felt most when I left parliament in 2010 was a sense of liberation. All of a sudden I could start thinking things that I...

Allowed.

Yes, exactly. Thinking, saying, challenging. You could say something without it being immediately taken as government policy.

Or as a gaffe.

Exactly. One of the most frustrating things if you're a minister I think, is the media and others are constantly saying, "Oh, why aren't they more themselves, why don't they say what they think?" but the minute you voice something as an idea or you pose an issue, that has to be your policy. You have to immediately know everything that you're going to do in order to deliver it. It's not surprising that people become very cautious in terms of their media relationships as a professional politician because that's what they're driven to. And then when you're not in that position any more, you remember why it was that you came into politics in the first place; because you have strong opinions, because you like ideas, because you want to get in an argument, because you feel passionate about all sorts of different issues. To a certain extent when you're in parliament, yes, you're able to do the things you want to do, but some of that passion gets squeezed out of you – and I feel passionate again about politics and ideas, and that's a good place for me to be.

But that kind of gladiatorial style of interviewing has to be on the way out. I know it is a little bit, but I remember when you were in government I would know in advance of the kind of interview, if you were going head-to-head with Paxman on *Newsnight* or John Humphrys on the *Today* programme, I know what he could say and what you weren't allowed to say. And that John Humphrys knew that. And there's this kind of... it was more a sense of theatre, because I can't remember a single thing any cabinet minister's ever said, but I can always remember the cadences, the nuances of tone; it was more a piece of theatre than actual genuine exploration of the issue.

I think that's exactly right, you know, there was a lot of dancing around and lack of real engagement and...

“Home secretary, I put it to you that you’re quite useless.” You know?

Haha.

You know what I mean? “I don’t think I am, John.”

Haha. “Well, you would say that, wouldn’t you?” Well, I was never quite asked that, but effectively I was asked that, yes. Of course. And that’s quite sterile; people sort of think that sometimes politics is quite sterile, if that’s the way you’re being interviewed, it will be.

And you think that’s why the public are crying out for these kind of so-called characters now, like Boris and even to a lesser extent Jeremy Corbyn? People feel that he’s got a sense of himself and he won’t play the media game, so they’re going to give him a go as it were.

I feel really unsure about the impact that people like that will have. I think you’re right that people say, “We want somebody refreshing who speaks their mind,” and, you know, who isn’t spun and who doesn’t just spout a line, and all of those things. And therefore they’re sort of interested in somebody like Boris or Farage or Jeremy Corbyn to a certain extent, you know, straight-talking politics type stuff. But is that the person that they actually want to be running the country? Is that the person that they have trust in to take the hard decisions and see things through? I’m not sure. I may be proved wrong; in six months’ time Boris might be the prime minister. I don’t know.

I hope not!

Yes, so do I! But I have a feeling that actually when the going gets tough, that type of *bonhomie* and sort of, you know, I don’t really care what I say and tell it as it is sort of stuff, can unravel under pressure – and actually you need to have a thought through position. You need have a coherent set of ideas. You need to be reasonably intelligent – I’m not saying Boris isn’t; in fact one of my arguments against him is that he pretends to be a bumbling fool when it’s perfectly clear that he isn’t – and that type of hypocrisy I really hate.

But if you’re too much of a maverick you can end up on your own. You can’t be isolationist, and you need to be collegiate. I think why I’m a big fan of say, Sadiq Khan, is he’s got a personality in the media, he’s approachable, his dad was a bus driver blah, blah, blah. But you can also sense that he’s disciplined, that he works constructively where he can with the party, and I think that means he’s going to be constructive and work with city hall when he’s there. And I think if it’s just the Boris Show, you’re just you just a brand, aren’t you?

That's exactly right, you know, politics, one it's a team game, and two it's about actually getting things done, rather than being entertaining. If you can be entertaining or at least you can have a personality, that you can deliver what it is that you want to deliver, that is a brilliant politician. But in the end, what matters is whether or not you've got the ideas and you've got the energy and the commitment to deliver what you think you should do. Right? It's collective. It's not individual politics.

Do you like the mix of what you're doing now? A bit of lobbying, the stuff with the NHS and the media? Is it the ideal, or would you rather be doing more media and more consulting? And do you enjoy lobbying? Do you consider it an honourable profession that you're doing it?

Of course! I very much enjoy the range of things that I do. I mean, to sort of... I won't ignore your question about whether or not I'm a dishonourable lobbyist. I think that the whole sort of public affairs world has changed actually, quite considerably. I mean, I don't think it was ever simply about, you know, "I've got this minister's number and I'm going to ring him or her up and tell them what I want them to do." It was never like that, but if there ever was a bit like that is certainly isn't now. You know, I think it's far more sophisticated, it's much more about actually being able to advise our clients about where we think the strengths and weaknesses of their cases are, what we know about the way that government as a whole works; incidentally, at Westbourne we also think it's important to understand that power doesn't only exist in sort of traditional Whitehall places, it's also increasingly becoming dispersed, you know, why is it that senior Labour politicians want to go and be metro mayors? It might be because they think they're not going to get a Labour government, but it's also because they know that there is really interesting and important work going on in city halls around the country, and actually if you're in public affairs your clients need to understand that as well. So you know, just getting a message into Whitehall isn't necessarily going to deliver what you may want to achieve. All of those things I think are interesting, I think they are perfectly virtuous, I think as long as people are very open about what they're doing, you know, people have always lobbied in politics and seeking to persuade on issues that are important to you is not a dishonourable activity.

But I would have no idea how to even go about it. Because when we were running the country, I had Alastair Campbell's mobile number, Alan Milburn, I could give them a ring if I needed to – not that I ever did, I have to put that in, of course –but I would have no idea now how to build connections. Like for example, in the last government, it was obviously a coalition, but I knew no one in the Lib Dems and no one in the Tories. How do you actually build relationships where they don't know you?

Well because it's... I think my point is that, you know, public affairs is not about building binary relationships with ministers; it's more complicated than that. It may

well be about understanding how policy emerges, it might well be having an idea about what types of things are likely to influence the way that governments think about policy development. What's the most effective point in a policy development process to sort of have your say? Who are the people who are likely to be influential, because it is only going to be ministers...

Spads and all that.

There's special advisors, civil servants, select committees increasingly, more power going to MPs, how do they use that?

Devolved assemblies...

Devolved assemblies... the public themselves, you know, actually if you really want to achieve a change in policy, if you can build a campaign amongst the public, that's actually quite an important way of achieving something, so you know before my time at Westbourne actually they worked on the HS2 campaign, and there what's important is actually winning support for the idea of HS2 as well as, you know, it's not simply about you ring up a transport minister and say, "We think this pork project would be a really good idea." Actually, a transport minister can't overcome a massive campaign against them, nor will they prioritise something that they think... that they can't see the case for, that they don't think the public will support, that they don't think will make a difference. So actually building that case, so building amongst the public as well as with politicians, is actually a more modern and effective way I think of persuading people about the case that you want to make.

What are your views on the current state of the Labour Party, then? Indulge me! Because I mean I'm still a member.

I'll need a sip of tea for this!

Well, you know, I'm still a member I didn't resign under Ed, because although I didn't support him I thought, "Well, it can't get any worse, and I'd rather there be a Labour prime minister than not," so I voted Labour. It has got worse in my view, and we need someone that can be electable so that we can get in government and kick the Tories out. Do you kind of share that same concern and what's to be done?

I completely do. I think the 'what's to be done' argument is more difficult. I think one of the problems with the leadership campaign, the leadership elections, last year was people like me are wholly convinced that the reason you're in a political party is because you want to gain power in order to deliver the values and the policies that you hold dear. And I think we slightly had a shorthand. Candidates like Liz Kendall who I supported...

Me too.

And, you know, some of the others, took for granted that in the Labour Party we all assume that what we want to do is to get into power, and I've been frankly quite shaken by... I don't think it's enough to simply make that argument any more, so there are plenty of people in the Labour Party I now meet who say, "Yes, I know Jeremy Corbyn is never going to win an election, but isn't it good to have somebody who speaks their mind," or, you know, who says what we believe. He doesn't say a lot of what I believe, incidentally, but actually even if you did what's the point of him just saying it if he can't win an election and actually do it? When Sadiq Khan was elected in London I was tearful, because I remembered what it meant to have somebody in a...

Who can win.

Who can win because, do you know what, it's going to make a real difference in London, having Sadiq Khan as the mayor.

I'm sure he will.

And I suddenly... the idea that winning is not important or is somehow or another some sort of dubious thing you do as a political party, it is the *point* of a political party. Now, I've been involved in enough campaigns in my time, I still am now. I met my husband on a demo, for goodness sake! You know, I like a protest as much as the next person. But political parties are about gaining and using power to change the world – and unless you can do that you won't. Now, I feel that passionately, but to a certain extent I think those of us in my bit of the party, I suppose, have slightly lost that argument.

Game over.

And we haven't yet... you know, I think we allowed ourselves to be tarred as Blairites. Trust me, nobody is a bigger fan of Tony Blair than me; what we did in that government was massively important, and one of the things I hate most about the current party is the trashing of our record.

It really annoys me too.

But we also have to develop a new set of policies for a new set of challenges, and I'm not quite sure that we've done that thinking, you know... you're too young to remember this, but in the 1980s we went through a process which at the time we called, which Neil Kinnock initiated, called 'meet the challenge, make the change', when we actually said, "Look, we've got a bunch of barking policies in the party. The

world is changing. We need to have policies that both address the issues that people are concerned about and that we could sell to the electorate.” And that was the start of actually making Labour electable again. We need to have that process somewhere in the party; I don’t believe our current leadership can do it. So my answer to the ‘what can be done’ I suppose it’s who and where in the Labour Party that thinking can happen, and who can emerge who will at some point in the future, and I don’t quite know how far away, be able to win back, you know, enable labour to form a government.

The problem is that you’re a Democrat like I am, and I do support the fact and respect the fact that Corbyn has a huge Democratic mandate. It doesn’t suit my political agenda, but I accept that – reluctantly – and that is a problem.

Yes. Well, he has a mandate within the party, but in my view he has a mandate to win elections because that’s what the leader of the Labour Party should be doing. So I always sort of despair when on Twitter or wherever some Corbynista says, “Oh yes, but look, Corbyn’s got a bigger mandate than Tony Blair.” Sorry, he hasn’t until he’s won three general elections, actually. So, yes he won. If we’re to believe the polls he would win again tomorrow. That doesn’t give him the freedom to fritter away any electoral advantage that the Labour Party might have; it gives him a massive responsibility to think about how you actually do translate that into electability. In my neck of the woods I’m not wholly convinced that there are all these new members that are sort of massively enthusiastic to go knocking on doors. When I went back to my old constituency in the last election, there weren’t a load of new faces around I have to say, there are a lot of the good old faces who’ve been knocking on doors over the last 20 years.

30 years, yes, absolutely.

But if there are new enthusiastic members, great, let’s really get them involved and make sure that they are campaigning for Labour, not incidentally campaigning for Jeremy Corbyn, but campaigning for Labour. And sometimes I think those things are different.

Last question. Do you ever feel that you’re a kind of poacher turned gamekeeper now, as it were? Because you were sat on the other side of the ministerial desk as a minister, now you’re a lobbyist, as it were, you know, on the other side of the desk asking for favours, as it were. And then even on the media side, you would have been the person being interviewed at LBC and been given a hard time, whereas now you’re behind the microphone doing the opposing role.

Yes I am, to a certain extent. But I’m also... I hope in all of those jobs that I do, whether or not it’s the public affairs or the interviewing or the commentary or

whatever, I think I'm also understanding of the pressures that ministers find themselves under, so I hope I'm not somebody who will sort of criticise a minister for something that I know is immensely difficult. I always respect ministers for the enormous hard work but I know that they're doing, and funnily enough, not surprisingly, the NHS – I suspect in most public services – there's quite a lot of people going, "Oh, that minister hasn't got a clue what's going on down here on the ground." I quite often say to my colleagues at the hospitals where I work, "Look, actually I think this is the reason why the minister did this or that policy. It was actually quite a good idea when it started out in the ministerial brain, what's happened since then is that it's gone through a whole series of levels..."

It's been gold plated.

Or ruined, it depends on how you think about it! "... and that's the reason why it's ended up like this." but actually it was a good intention the minister had so I hope... I remain massively respectful of people who have got ministerial office. I know how hard it is, I will cut them quite a lot of slack, but I also know when they're not making the right decisions or not working hard enough, you know, I've been critical of Iain Duncan Smith for example, for trying to suggest that the fact that Universal Credit was a failure was not somehow or another to do with him; sorry, if that's your top priority policy, it *is* to do with you if it goes wrong. But Theresa May, for example I have a lot of respect for, I know how hard that job is, she's done it for a historically long period of time, which is why I think she's one to watch as a future Tory leader incidentally, but yes, I'm a poacher turned gamekeeper to a certain extent, but I've still got a bit of sympathy for the pheasants.

Jacqui, if it was up to me, this podcast would be three hours long, but we've run out of metaphorical tape. So thank you ever so much for your time, it's been a joy.

My pleasure.