

Paul Staines **"Guido Fawkes"**

Media Masters – April 21, 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 the political blogger Paul Staines. Paul is feared around Westminster for his political website Guido Fawkes. Known for its tabloid style, the blogger has broken some of the UK's most shocking political stories, and taken a leading role in the expenses scandal. Its exposés have led to the resignation of many politicians and their advisors including Peter Hain, Damien McBride and Brooks Newmark. Paul started what was at first the anonymous blog in 2004 after an eclectic career in politics and public relations, it says here, Paul...

I don't remember that!

Neither do I actually. No one has ever crashed their own introduction, which is actually quite good. It says here, 'including a stint working for rave organiser The Sunrise Collective'. I think I'll ask you about that first.

He was forced to reveal that he was the person behind the Guido Fawkes website in 2007, but the website, and the team behind it, has only grown since then. The blog is now syndicated in the Sun on Sunday and has a full-time staff of four people.

Paul, thanks for joining me.

Hello.

Wow, that's a lot. So what on earth was all that rave thing about? Let's start with that. That was a terrible first question, but answer it nonetheless.

So... I was working for David Hart who was a sort of freelance Thatcher confidante and maverick – he was the guy behind the Union of Democratic Mineworkers – and

I'm about 19-20 years old, and I'm doing playful spin I suppose, doing stuff, bag carrying for him, general junior politico kind of stuff, and my friend, Tony Colston-Hayter is on the front page of the tabloids, organising acid house raves, and it's like, MR BIG OF ACID HOUSE, DRUGS, KIDS, GOING CRAZY and The Sun, bizarrely, had gone from putting out t-shirts with Sun logos and happy smiley faces to THE DRUG TERROR and all this sort of stuff.

Ban this vile...

Exactly. So he phones me up on Monday and says, "I've got a bit of a problem." I said, "I can see that, I've got all the tabloids in front of me." And he said, "Well, you know how to deal with the papers, will you be the front man for me?" I said, "Yes, okay, I'll do that." So I am sort of in these two worlds now. I'm working in politics on, you know, the Conservative side of the political divide, and on the weekends I'm some kind of psychedelic acid house raver spokesman. I was getting more coverage from doing the acid house raving than I was getting for David Hart, you know, what were we doing, we were probably funding rebels in Angola or CIA-backed rebels in central America, whatever it was we were supposed to be doing... so I think we went our separate ways and I ended up in that world for about 18 months.

You had an early job gun running in Central America, helping Reagan-sponsored right-wing Contra groups kill communist Sandinista types. What on earth is that about?

I think my role in that is probably a little bit exaggerated. We did some what was termed in the '80s 'public diplomacy efforts', I think the Reagan administration was very keen on neutralising European... they didn't expect the Europeans to actually supply arms to the Contras, but they didn't want the support for the Sandinistas. And fortunately, the Spanish government was very anti-Sandinista, because they understood the region and knew about it, so I wrote a book, In the Grip of the Sandinistas, which was all about human rights abuses in that country, and helped out on... mainly to do with human rights issues in the European Parliament, and neutralising the very successful Sandinista campaign to make them out to be the good guys, so helped with the international profile of them, and... a major success for us was getting David Owen, who was leader of the SDP at the time, to condemn them, and unbeknownst to me at the time, I didn't realise, but there was military support from the Brits, Thatcher was sending out special forces guys to train some of the rebels, unofficially, I think you had to leave the army for a brief period in case you got caught.

For deniability.

And then I did eventually meet someone who was... I think he was like a Para or something like that who was out there, and I went, "What are you doing here?" "I left

the army and I'm helping out locally." And then he's back in the army after that period was gone.

You've always been anti-establishment. Because there you are, on the rave scene as well as working for Conservative MPs. Because it's quite a unique thing isn't it, really, being on the right of the centre yet also being anti-establishment?

I've always been rebellious. People who don't know me will know I've got a white streak in my hair, and when you have a white streak in your hair when you're five years old, you've got two ways of going – either you stand up for yourself or you comb your hair the other way and hide it. And I think my personality has been partly formed by having to stand up for myself for having a distinctive look. You know, when you're five and people think you're a punk, it gives you some spine, and I think that's part of the reason I was kind of... stroppy.

And did that form your politics then, right from that moment?

I was very opposed to... I went to a state comp, and I was very opposed to equality and everyone being equal – that's probably because I thought I was at the top of the tree... I associate the left and equality with uniformity and boring and...

State knows best.

Yes. So there was a natural rebelliousness, and then I was a bit precocious as a teenager and read some books, as you do, and I decided that I was... I think I was an anarcho-capitalist more than anything else to begin with, then I was a libertarian after reading Karl Popper and Hayek and the usual foundation thinkers for libertarians.

Do people expect you to be so well-informed and well-educated on these kinds of things? Because people might mistakenly presume, because you are seen as a mischief-maker, that a lot of your beliefs come from a deep, really well-considered place.

It's very nice of you to say that. I think people are sometimes confused when I work for the broadsheets or write about economics, and my career included a period of being in the bond markets, so my mid-20s until I was about 30, I was working for investment banks and broking. So I kind of always seem to surprise people, they expect me to be just shouty and 'yah boo sucks' and rock-throwing. But you know, I have my moments.

Let's talk about the blog for a moment. What made you start it? I can still remember you being on Newsnight in silhouette! It seems so many years ago now.

Haha! Well, I'll deal with that Newsnight thing. So it gets started in 2004, as I said I was working in finance, and I had the brilliant idea of suing my backer – I was a hedge fund trader – and me and my main investor fell out, and I learnt a very valuable lesson: never sue someone who is a lot richer than you. And I think we were arguing over a few hundred thousand, and we spent three-quarters of a million between us arguing about it.

It sounds like an episode of Dallas.

It was just immense.

Were you the Cliff Barnes character at this point, and he was the JR?

Yes, and we were both London Irish, me and my backer, and we were both doing too much coke, and we lost all emotional grip, and did two years of litigation in the High Court, and it was a very expensive game. So I couldn't really work in finance at the time and basically declared myself bankrupt.

We've both been there.

Yes. So the litigation was extraordinarily expensive, burnt all my money, and I had a three-quarters of a million tax bill to go on top of that. So I thought, "Boomf." Went bust. So I couldn't really go back to finance, and whilst the litigation was going on, I had been commenting on people's blogs, and it was just the start of blogging, everyone was talking about the Gulf War as it was then, and there were these kind of war blogs, everyone argued about the Gulf War, left-wing ones and right-wing ones. I was commenting on one called Samizdata, written by Perry de Havilland, which is still going, and it was the sort of godfather of political blogging in the UK. I started writing for him and he would kind of tell me... he didn't publish it and he would tell me it got lost in the spam blocker and all that.

The excuses.

In the end, it wasn't the same style – I wanted to do something more like a diary column, you know, gossipy and bite-sized information, whereas the fashion in those days, believe it or not, for blogs, was to be 3,000-word essays, and you would write 3,000 words about another 3,000-word article somewhere else. So I thought, "This is a bit boring."

Up its own backside. Yours is the only political blog I actually read. I read it every day, but genuinely I don't read any other blogs, because they're all boring.

So yes, I always try to keep it like Kelvin MacKenzie's Sun in the heyday, and I try to make it amusing; I don't want to be like homework. With most politics stuff you read, it feels like homework, and you have to think about it, and it's not fun. If we are doing the campaigning stuff, you know, like the expenses, I also want to keep it a bit funny – let's put a pig nose on the face of all these MPs in the trough. I don't want to take it too seriously, and I think that makes it more accessible. And the access we get to people in politics from that, because they're just like normal people, they don't really want to read all these dry, boring pieces, and they love the gossip. The secret that I realised that I'd hit on the formula, was people in politics love gossip; they're addicted to it.

Did you very quickly realise that you had something good here? Because when you started, presumably global domination wasn't on the agenda, but it has taken off hugely.

Well, everyone told me I was doing the wrong thing, people weren't interested in that, it was looked down on. When I started, I used a service called blogger.com, it's a free thing from Google, and that was in for a dig, you know, that was the equivalent of the Trabant, you know, these East German cars, compared to the Rolls-Royce of software that it was supposed to be on. I did everything wrong. You know, the graphics were done on Microsoft Paint, it was all a bit rough edges... the signature thing that we do, we have a sort of payoff line on an article in red, which basically, if you read the headline and the payoff line you should get the gist of the story in my view. That was seen as silly, you know, a kind of, "What a stupid idea," but now I see that copied elsewhere. I was taking my inspiration from the sort of combination between Drudge and Wonkette and Popbitch, so those are the kind of inspirations I was going for, rather than these 3,000-word gossip pieces.

And when did you know you had something?

I found a press release that I emailed out in 2004, and it said, you know, it was going to be a commercial thing, it was very precocious. I mean, I didn't make any money out of it until 2008, my wife was going crazy. She's just married a guy who had three bedrooms overlooking the river and loads of money, and within a couple of years I was broke and had taken to blogging. Famously, I said to her family, legend, as I tell her one day, "I think I'm going to give this blogging thing a go," and she thinks I said 'broking' and she says, "Broking? You can go back to broking, you've got your old contacts, you can just pick them up, you know, you'll work your way back up..." "No, no, no – blogging, not broking."

Was an eyebrow raised?

It was. It was like, "Blogging is never going to pay as well as bond broking." So it was a bit of a cold shoulder for a year or two, and it took me four years – overnight success generally does take a few years, doesn't it? And I would say in about 2008 it was commercially viable. But to do that I had to set up our own advertising operation to sell advertising. So originally, Tim Montgomerie at ConservativeHome, Iain Dale, before he was an LBC Presenter, was actually a leading blogger, the guys who ran the labour website, all of us got together and we sat around and we were going to start a cooperative and sell advertising. That never happened, and eventually I said, "I'll do it. I'll do the VAT returns, I'll set up a company." Probably the smartest thing I ever did because that meant that... I know it's fashionable now to have an integrated digital media operation, we know AOL has an advertising arm, and Huffington Post has its website... we did it by accident, and that means that I have managed to keep all the revenue from what I made, and we needed a specialist sales operation to sell political advertising, you know... we weren't going to make a living out of Google ads and Amazon ads.

I should declare an interest at this point that Media Focus is a customer of MessageSpace, in fact we advertise this very podcast via your network, and on your site. But how do you make money out of it, then?

Well, it's conventional advertising, direct sales operation, like any media operation. There's an office in Clerkenwell that sells on behalf of Guido, it sells on behalf of ConservativeHome, LabourList, LibDemVoice, we do a lot of business with New Statesman and The Spectator... so currently, for instance, there's a big infrastructure about building airports – so Heathrow and Gatwick both advertise to our audience.

Because your audience are exactly the kind of politico, highly engaged people that they want to get on the radar of.

Yes. So generally, political lobbying is done face-to-face, and you get access to the minister. Actually, if you've got a public campaign, you can put it on all these political websites, which are addictive to politicians, if you want to reach Conservatives then ConservativeHome is a good place to do it. Theoretically, if you want to reach labour MPs, LabourList is a good place to do it – so you can get that kind of... by having one sales operation, the advertiser can call, and one call will be all the way across the political spectrum.

I don't expect you to reveal financials, as it were, but is it a reasonably profitable lifestyle, as it were, because very few people are making money online and from blogging around the world. You seem to have made it a huge success.

Well, as my wife no longer works, it turns out that blogging did pay off in some way. Yes, we are profitable, Guido has been profitable since 2008, we have four staff, most of them are in their 20s, they are probably better paid than the average journalist, but they work harder.

If I was a budding journalist I would rather start on your blog than some local newspaper – I imagine you would get more opportunities.

Yes, you get profile, and you know, you're famous for Westminster, as I put it. It's not quite the same as being famous, but all the alumni who have worked at Guido have gone off to great jobs. Harry Cole worked for me for seven years, he's The Sun's political correspondent, very high-profile, gets lots of splashes, you know, front page stories, for them. Juliet Samuel used to work for me, went to the Times, then she's at the Wall Street Journal... I mean, they've all been successful, and there's lots of people with lots of media organisations, working particularly in politics, who have spent time at Guido.

Do you have any friends in politics? Because you've always got that awful kind of tension that you might have to expose one of your MP friends if there's wrongdoing. How does that work?

Some people I just like and I get on well with. I've had really good times, nights out, with Nigel Farage for instance. But Nigel knows that if I catch him with his pants down he's going to get a spanking – unfortunately that's the game, you know, I didn't go into politics to make friends and I've succeeded.

And how are you viewed by the Westminster establishment? Are you part of it?

It's very hard for me to be objective about that. I know that we had a 10th anniversary party a couple of years ago in 2014 and we deliberately held it on Pall Mall in an old establishment kind of location, and you know, served them caviar and champagne, it was a big, sponsored event, and after that everyone was saying, "Oh, you've gone establishment," because there were members of the cabinet there, there was a message from the prime minister, all the parties were represented. I got lots of stick for that. I think we've gone mainstream in the sense that we're popular and dominate our little niche. We're trade press for politics. So I wouldn't say we were establishment, I wouldn't say we were establishment, I think we still stick it to people. And the number of ministers who have had to resign hasn't gone down, usually there's one every year or two... I don't feel compromised in the sense that I'm on first name terms with cabinet ministers, so therefore I can't, you know, knife them in the face.

Do you think the lobby system is knackered in the long term anyway, because obviously you're apart from that in one sense, that you're part of the reason why people go to your blog is that arm's length, that sense of mischievousness, that you won't hesitate to stick the knife in if it's necessarily. But there's a slight cosiness, isn't there, to the traditional lobby system?

There is an inevitable client capture, you know, that journalists who have sources get close to their sources and end up protecting them. The lobby journalists will deny this, and they have got more aggressive, I would say, in the last decade, and they are keen to go after politicians. Generally, it's not the lobby journalists who do that, it's the news journalists who go after them; you often see that when there's a scandal, it isn't broken by the lobby correspondent or the political editor, it's broken by the news journalist. And particularly on the tabloids you will see that because... if you remember when the expenses broke, they were all drinking in the same subsidised bars, they were all fiddling their expenses – journalists are not famous for having... they have fictional expense claims, don't they? So the people who believe most in my thesis that lobby journalism is too close to the subjects of its enquiry are the editors – the editors do not trust their own political correspondent to get the stories.

In terms of the media itself – you obviously call it 'the dead tree press' on your blog – but do you think that newspapers are finished in the long term?

I think newspapers in the form we get them, as in print, will be few and far between. We will have news titles... when I used to say this five years ago, people used to look at me like I was crazy. Well, the Independent is going to go digital only, you go on a commuter train and yes, there's the free papers, which I think will continue, but everyone is reading the news on their tablets or their phones. And I think, "Why would you want a newspaper when you could have..." Which is yesterday's news. Often, it's 48-hours old, the news, so by nature it's yesterday's news, which you've seen if you follow the news or if you're a news junkie, you've seen on TV or on Twitter 48 hours ago. So I think people want the immediacy of delivery, and you can have video, and you can have things that are interactive, whereas a newspaper is just, "Here's the news, and here's what the editor thought of it yesterday."

And how do you get your stories? Because I know you're very famously like... shall we say you like a drink or two? Is it that you're getting your sources drunk in the hope they they'll slip something out that they didn't mean to mention? Do you have a lot of anonymous tip-offs?

We have traditional journalists' methods, which do involve alcohol.

Do you have an anonymous drop box, or do they send you a text?

There is, clearly on the website, a 'send an email' button you can send to, and we have a voicemail that you can phone up and leave voicemails on, quite often, people start their voicemail, I'll pick it up in the morning or whatever, and it will say, "You probably know this already..." and we don't, thanks very much. So we rely on these tipsters all the time. When I first started, a lot of tips used to come from journalists who'd got something spiked or it didn't work with their... or their editor didn't like it, and they still wanted it out there. Now, I say that never happens, or if it does the journalist wants me to pay them.

Ah, well in a sense, your commercial operation... do you pay them?

Fair enough, yes. We do... I shouldn't say that, I'll get nothing for free now. But most of the readers who give us tips we send t-shirts to, and that's great, and they're happy with that – it's quite a prized possession to have a Guido Fawkes Secret Source t-shirt.

I hope you've brought one toady.

No, I'm afraid not. I can give you a mouse mat, maybe?

I demand both! Do you get anything from the comments? Because I read YouTube comments and the comments on your stories, almost for fun – because there's some genuine wit in there, and genuine merriment as well as the mentalists, which is probably the wrong phrase to use.

Below the line is below the line.

They seem to be particularly below the line though, on your blog.

What happens below the line stays below the line! Sometimes we do, you know... when I first started out, I'd get maybe 10-20 comments on a piece, because it was quite insidery and readers were generally around parliament, you would get tips off them and we did get stories out of it, really good stories. Now less so because they are busy baying on about, arguing about immigration or...

Has the fun gone out of it now?

Well, we get 300,000 comments on a piece. We don't read it, and I know the writers of the comments think it's very important that... they are the site, and most of the readers, two-thirds of the readers don't read the comments, because you'll lose your sanity if you do. We had a big clear out; I used to be pretty laissez-faire about it, and then, as inevitably you get overrun by obsessives, you know, people who think 9/11 was a put-up job, and UFO-ologists, and to be honest, racists, so we had a big clear-

out and made people register, and toughened up the comments, so if you haven't been there for a few years, it's a little less raucous than it used to be.

So tell us, how did you move from a silhouette on Newsnight to Paul Staines?

The silhouette story. Robbie Gibb, who was the producer of Newsnight at the time, and is head of politics now, I had known him from back in my days, in my 20s, in politics. And he said to me, "Why don't you go?" I hadn't any public profile, but people knew it was me, I wasn't really that anonymous, pretty early on people figured out it was me. "Why don't you do this?" I said, "No, I don't really want to do anything in front of the media." And Camilla from Popbitch told me, "You can never justify gossip; don't try to, and don't do media." I never see her off the TV and she's always justifying it, so she doesn't follow her own advice. Anyway, I did this piece about the lobby system for them, a little five-minute video thing, and Robbie said, "That's actually... I didn't think it was going to be very good, it's really good. You should do a two-way discussion with Paxman and we'll get Michael White on."

Michael White! That's it. I was trying to remember who it was who had a go at you.

Me and Michael White always bang off each other, and we call him Sir Michael White, and also, whenever he nods off, falls asleep at an event, we always take a picture and put it up there, just over a note. And he said, "We'll get Paxman," and I said, "No, no." And he said, "Look, we'll do it like that Supergrass, we'll put you in silhouette and you'll be like one of those criminals." "Oh, I really don't know..." Anyway, he appealed to my vanity, I went on, and Paxman's first question was something like, "Why are you stupidly silhouetted out there, Mr Staines? Oh, we're not supposed to call you Mr Staines, are we? Guido." And I just realised instantly and my heart sank, and I thought, "I've been stitched up, and I look an idiot." And I was, and I did.

So do you think you were overtly stitched up on that show? Because I just thought that was Paxman going off-book and being a bit of a maverick himself, he might have got into trouble himself with Robbie.

Well, I had, in that video I'd filmed with Paxman that didn't make it past the cutting room, I had asked Paxman was he worth the money for the licence fee payers, and he exploded at me. "You don't know how much money!" So I think perhaps his objectivity, when he came to have a go at me, was not so good, and I think he enjoyed giving me a roasting.

Tell us about some of the big stories that you've broken. If someone has never heard of Guido Fawkes and you meet someone at a wedding or whatever, you

could obviously mention Brooks Newmark or Peter Hain... what do you tell them? What have been the big stuff?

I don't tell them I work in politics! I tell them I work in advertising. I live in Ireland, I fly in on a Tuesday morning and fly back on a Thursday afternoon, but if anyone over there asks me what I do I say I work in advertising, which is kind of more respectable.

It's true.

It is sort of true, but then they will google me and it becomes... people google each other, don't they?

So you don't need to be physically based at Westminster any more?

I do, because you've got to have that face to face contact, and you've got to get out and about and meet people, and also I've got a team to manage and crack the whip on, so I feel like I have to be there. But I work from home Mondays and Fridays.

Where are you going to take the website? Because it clearly does what it does exceptionally well, it's got a loyal readership. For example, have you never been tempted by new territories like US politics, you know, the whole thing going on with Trump and Hillary... why isn't there a Guido Fawkes US?

I'm not tempted by the US because I feel it's very competitive, it's very well-serviced... they have Politico magazine, which is a brilliant operation, so they've got all the hard news there, they have a very vibrant political reporting culture, there's a lot of sites that have political affiliations, they have right-wing, left-wing... it's busy, it's got everything it's got going for it, the TV stations are quite partisan, you know, you've got Fox on the right and MSNBC on the left, whereas their papers are very boring.

It's the opposite to what we have here, of course. We have mental newspapers and quite restrained, sensible television.

Exactly. I'm not so keen on the US, but I quite often get asked why I don't do Ireland, but the thing about Ireland is it has a population of four million, and it's not a big enough market. I don't think I could sustain the business. And plus, everyone in Irish politics knows everyone, they only went to two different schools, for Christ's sake. So I'm not tempted by that either. I am tempted by Australia and India, and I was thinking very hard about that. I've done some research and met people, and everyone says, "Australia I get, India I don't." Well, India is a billion people. It's got a very, very interesting political situation.

It's incredible. I have a couple of Indian clients and go out there reasonably regularly, and it is fascinating, I agree with you.

The only problems are with India is that my wife is worried I'll get shot, and also the Indian libel system, defamation, you get arrested. So if you write a story about a politician, they come and arrest you the next day!

Not a good start.

And I didn't believe this, and then I was speaking to someone at the Indian Times, and they say, "Yes, we have a guy and his job is to spend the night in the cells."

A hostage!

It's like... and he's called 'the publisher', he's paid every now and then to spend the night in the cells and get arrested. And then the politician says, "The last person who said that to me, he went to jail," and everyone's happy. I think that's how it works, I'm not quite sure, I'm sure I'll be corrected. So I'm a little bit apprehensive. And also there's how would I do it, I've got my kids in school in Ireland, and would we up sticks and go.

What you need is a kind of Paul Staines in Australia that's a native Paul Staines. Or would you, the actual Paul Staines, go out there and be that person?

I think what I would probably try and do, I would be a publisher type person, and I would try and replicate the system we've got, which is, you know, the commercial side and the editorial side. So I think I know the approach, but obviously... I have known John Bercow since I was 16, I am immersed in the political culture, I know all the relationships and I've got weird things in my brain that links people to other people which I wouldn't have if I went to a new market. I spent a bit of time when I was thinking about this watching the Indian parliament channel, which is in English, except for when it gets really hectic – and when I say 'hectic', I mean shouting and throwing piss – and then it goes into the local regional dialect, and I assume that's because they want those at home to understand what they're shouting about. So I think there would be some difficulties, but I spoke to journalists, Indian journalists, I think it's possible, it's just a question of management. Also, when I started talking about this, I got loads of offers of funding, and what I didn't realise is that Indian billionaires have their own media outfits, and so the Tata Steel guys who have their media-friendly relationships, and the reliance industries will have their media-friendly relationships, and they expect... it's like owning a sports team, you know, they've got their application. And that wouldn't work for me, I wouldn't want to be paid media, I like to be independent, so it needs to be commercially viable.

I'll go onto the commerciality, or the increasing commerciality in a second, because I want to talk about how you monetise the blog in other ways, like writing for The Sun and so on... but you mentioned about this hostage going to prison as it were, I think one of the things I noticed many years ago about your blog is, it's hosted in Timbuktu and the company is formulated in some jurisdiction I've never heard of. I mean, clearly that must be deliberate so that you can't go bankrupt again?

Er, yes.

Does it work?

Well, I've never been successfully sued, and the only people who have tried to sue me are very rich people.

Because presumably, if you got something wrong you would apologise and take it down.

Yes. As I explained to Justice Leveson, the whole procedure. So people always say that because we have a strong editorial slant on things that we write lies. But we never write lies if we can help it. I mean, if we write lies, it's a mistake.

And it wouldn't do your own credibility any good.

No. I don't do that. I mean, you might disagree with token things, but the facts, we're trying to get right. So if we do get it wrong, and we realise we're wrong, we take it down pretty quick, and most people are satisfied with that. By the way, politicians always claim you've got it wrong. I mean, they are, like journalists, very, very thin-skinned, believe it or not. So I have had politicians profess to me that, you know, everything's wrong, and I'm going to be sued, and it turns out to be right. Many, many times. So I'm a little bit less trusting of politicians than the average person.

You're less trusting of politicians having worked with them so closely.

My view of politicians hasn't changed in the 12 years I've been covering them. It's very hard to get up the greasy pole without compromising and without having starting to, you know, making a compromise here, a compromise there. Idealistic, good, clean politicians tend to be very junior.

They do. And I know this for myself, when I started as a local councillor I was skint, and you do need the vice-chairmanship of the planning committee, because it's an extra £2,500 allowance. At the Labour Party AGM, the biggest fights were always over those committee places, because... I think you go into politics for good reasons, but then you quickly get caught up in the system in

terms of what's going to advance your career up the ladder, and also you've got bills to pay.

Yes. I mean, I wouldn't go into politics, I couldn't take the pay cut. It's kind of... who would want that attention? Who would want somebody poring over your private life, your financial affairs, for what – to be insulted by the voters and be less popular than estate agents? It's a miserable life. But they have vanity and a yearning for power, so they bring it on themselves.

I'm thinking of the Venn diagram with vanity and power overlapping! That's not a nice going on. Going back to the monetisation, as it were. Because you're not just merely selling advertising, you've got your column in The Sun and all that... it's expanded in different ways, hasn't it?

We...

Have we become more traditional?

We have always sold stories to the newspapers. I mean, I think it came out in Leveson under oath that we sold one story to the News of the World for £20,000 – and if it's a story that's going to be on the front pages of newspapers, I realised pretty early on, I might as well get paid for it. So I would say pre-Leveson and the reforms and the scandals of those days, about 50% of the revenue was from selling front pages to the newspapers. And, as a 'tea'... Simon Waters, the political editor of the Mail on Sunday... thank you for putting my kids through prep school. Nowadays it's a lot less, and in fact we don't have the Sun column any more since February, and we've done four years of newspaper column, and what I learnt is, and the Sun were great to work with and paid reasonably well, as I explained to... many times, it isn't that bad in blogging. What The Sun paid was less than one month's revenue.

So why do it? Is it for profile?

The people who work for me, you know, Harry Cole and Alex Wickham now, they enjoy being able to say, "Look, we're from the Guido Fawkes blog, we also write for The Sun and The Spectator." It was a good discipline, and added to their calling card, if you like, whereas after the first year, I did want to get renewed, the contract, because I've always wanted to do the Sun, it's The Sun, for Christ's sake!

It's a good paper, to be honest.

And it's really hard to write for The Sun. I know it's a cliché that it's easier to write for broadsheets, but it is easier to write for broadsheets.

And I think Tom Newton-Dunn, I had breakfast with him last week, it's a very difficult job to write, be the political editor of something like The Sun because you have to...

You have to make it accessible.

Yes, and they are incredibly complicated issues.

Yes. You learn to write tight. I did want to get renewed the second year. The third year they had to pay me more, and the fourth year was like... I wasn't keen on doing a fourth year, and it's only because the guys who work with me wanted to carry on that we did.

So it all boils down to money in the end, that they didn't want to pay it.

I said to the guys that I will make up the loss of The Sun, but I do like having my Fridays back. I used to spend all day Friday working on the Sun column, and when you think, "It's only 600-800 words..."

It has to be all eyebrow-raisers and nuggets of stuff I didn't know.

We had an interesting way of writing the column, which was we would always use Google Docs, so three of you can edit the same document, and it's a sort of process going on where we would each see each others' copy, rephrasing it... but there would be two or three of us working all day on that column.

So it was almost more trouble than it was worth in the end.

Well, it was 20% of our time and not even 10% of our income.

What do you think will be next for the blog? Because in a sense the world is your oyster, isn't it? You can take it in any direction. Or will it be business as usual?

Stick to our knitting, let's not go off in any mad direction, focus on... we are very focused on Westminster gossip, not general politics, not writing opinion pieces, stick to what we do, keep that audience, which is very heavily the people in SW1. People say, "Oh, it's written for the bubble." Yes, it is written for the bubble, it is very much Westminster Village, that is our core audience. We are the trade press of politics, we are not a general audience publication – which, funnily enough, the 5,000 people that run the country who read it, who we're writing for, there happens to be another 95,000 people per day who come to see what's going on – and that's a happy by-product. But we're not writing for the 95,000, we're writing for the 5,000 – and our advertisers are also interested in that 5,000.

What's a typical week like for you? Do you enjoy it day-to-day still?

We're getting more conventional media organisation... so we have an editorial meeting in the morning, Monday I will call the office and have a speakerphone conference call, and we will see what the weekend has brought, you know, whether things happen over the weekend, we'll follow up any Sunday splashes, and we have a kind of routine, we have a formula for what we do, and it's surprisingly... I think people imagine that we're say on our sofa in our pyjamas – those days are long gone. We have a little newsroom, and I sometimes find it bizarre, you know, I have meetings with agendas now, it's kind of...

Yes, I have things like that. Are you still in Clarkenwell?

So the advertising is sold in Clarkenwell, and we have a little operation in Westminster at an undisclosed location, for any of you lawyers out there.

And how does it work in terms of your accreditation, then? Do you have a parliamentary pass, are you a full member of the lobby?

No. No. That is a source of much annoyance to us. So we don't want to join the lobby system, but we would like parliamentary passes, to have access. So we get into the bars in Westminster...

It's a bit like the IRA wanting Sinn Fein MPs, you want access to the...

Well, Sinn Fein do have access! It's a bit much that we don't. We have three times applied, I think, I think Harry Cole was really irritated by it, you know, there are people with parliamentary passes, journalists' passes, who don't even have a publication. There are members of that system who... I don't see how you justify them getting it. There are new publications... we have been around 12 years, we have a very high-profile audience. It's read by everyone in Westminster. As I say, I've known John Bercow since I was 16, and over his dead body will I have a pass, I think.

I had a pass for many years, but the day it was taken off me, I felt like... you know at the end of Superman II when all his powers were taken away from him?

Haha.

When I entered parliament the next day I had to be searched like a normal person! Do you have that indignity every day you go in?

Erm...

And then you have to be accompanied by a pass holder as well!

Well, I quite often lose the pass holder, and the MPs... so I'm in the Strangers' Bar occasionally, and the MPs... well, they know I'm good for a drink, so it's kind of okay, and there's a sort of nodding relationship with the staff there, because there are certain rules, but I think we will be revisiting the pass issue, because as I've always said, the lobby is a cartel. There are anti-cartel laws, and we will be applying for a pass again, and I will not let it rest this time.

Is being seen drinking with you in the terrace the kind of kiss of death for someone's career, or would that person think, "Actually that's good networking, you need to get Paul on board."

Haha. It's more the guys who work with me now who are there. I mean, I'm 50 next year, I don't really want to be spending night after night in the bars around there – I just can't take it any more. Some people prefer to meet discreetly, you know, we lunch quite a lot, I didn't get this waist size from not lunching...

And presumably you're not in the Cinnamon Club, you're away from Westminster, are you?

It depends. Some people are fine about it, some people would rather meet discreetly. We used to use the private room at one restaurant in Westminster, and one day I came out to find Chris Bryant with his ear to the keyhole. He said he'd dropped something, but he was listening in! he will deny that, obviously, but the fact is, we opened the door and there's Chris Bryant, startled! So we have to be careful about where we meet. We're starting to have in-house lunches, so literally we have a dining table in the newsroom, and we have people in.

So they come to you and they get a Pret A Manger sandwich at the desk while they spill the beans?

We do a little bit better than a Pret A Manger! People like to let their hair down in private, you know, politicians don't really want to be frank and candid.

But I asked you earlier about whether you had any friends in politics. Obviously you mentioned Bercow and people like that, but... and I am aware there's that tension, but do you have a kind of go-to list of preferred people who can give you a good bit of background? I'm not asking you to name them, as it were, but do you have the usual suspects on your iPhone or your rolodex?

There are people we can speak to, you know, quite often it's the special advisors, Downing Street press people, sources, people who are scared we're going to do them over, they'll be cooperative, people who want to help because they want their profile raised, and we'll quote them. So I think it's the same for most operations, isn't it? We used to have – I won't say who he is, he's a minister now – but we used to have our PPS, so whenever we wanted a question asked in the house, we would get this person to ask the question to help the story along.

Let's say you were a jobbing media trainer and you were paid for by a politician, and they were frightened of the Guido Fawkes website. How would you advice them to kind of throw you off the scent, as it were? Would they be better hiding in plain sight, for example?

The worst thing to do is when we call, try and avoid us. That's not going to work. There's standard spin techniques, as a spin doctor you will do things like not comment and think it goes away because you're relying on them not being able to do anything if you don't get a comment – that isn't going to work with us. We are going to come after you until we get what we want.

So you're like the T-1000 in Terminator 2.

Yes. Yes, pretty much. And we will terminate you. Dan Jarvis just recently got into a load of trouble, he's raised his profile, and Ken Livingston said, "Dan's the hedge funds man." That is a direct quote from a story that Den was trying to get out of admitting to us for weeks and it made it a lot worse for him because we got, right, every time you raise your head above the parapet we're going to mention that you got £15,000 from a hedge fund. And that's not very helpful if you're seeking to lead the Labour Party.

That's presumably because he was badly advised from a media point of view. He ought to have just coughed to it right away, and then it would have been dealt with.

Yes. He could have said, "Yes, look – here's the situation, this is a long-time Labour donor, there's nothing..." Instead, he tried to suppress it by various means, traditional stalling tactics, which just irritated us.

And are you kind of slightly flabbergasted that even at that supposedly highest level that they are making quite almost elementary, basic mistakes in terms of how they are trying to handle and deal with the media?

I don't know. I mean, Dan's his own man. I was at a dinner once where he was introduced to me, and then he left! So maybe he has got an issue with me. Maybe he

had another appointment, but I wouldn't have thought he was the kind of person to leave before dessert, you know?

You must know who the runners and riders are these days. I mean, do you know who will be the next prime minister, or who is likely to be? Who is the rising star?

I think everyone's got a good idea who might be the next prime minister.

It won't be George Osborne, presumably!

I'm not sure it will be George...

Who will it be, then? Surely not Corbyn.

Well, the bookies reckon that Osborne isn't the favourite any more, and Boris is the favourite.

You think it'll be Boris?

Well, Boris has obviously got a good chance of it. It's not going to be Jeremy Corbyn, is it?

Has he gone on this... well, I hope not, and I say that as a member of the Labour Party, as an ardent Blairite, one of the few remaining ones. But there could be people like Sajid Javid and people like that who could quite easily get it as well, surely?

Well, I think Sajid Javid has, because he's backed the Remain side on the referendum, has ruined his own USP. I mean, his selling point was that he was a great back story, council house, son of an immigrant, went on to be a success in the city...

But he's backed the establishment.

And was a Thatcherite... and that was a distinctive brand. And he's gone the wrong way, so everyone on the right, which was his constituency of the Conservatives, no longer trusts him, and I think he has made a fatal error.

Do you think Boris has been incredibly cynical and calculating in going with the Brexit campaign, or do you think it was inevitable because it was about political positioning for if Cameron loses the referendum, Boris can take over?

I think all politicians make calculations, like when they are making major career-defining decisions... could Boris have gone the other way? Possibly.

Which politicians do you respect, like truly respect, as a politician?

I think I am in tune with Douglas Carswell. I know he's a bit of a maverick, and he has his passions, but I think politically I'm in tune with him. His book, '*E-Democracy*' I think it was, about the way the future is going to go, I am quite in tune with, but I don't socialise with him... I am more likely to be socialising with Nigel Farage! There are a lot of fun MPs you can have a good time with, and from either side of the political divide.

What's the fun: not fun ratio? I've met a lot of very serious MPs, and/or very ambitious MPs who are ultra-cautious, but I have also had quite a few drunken lunches with mavericks and they're hugely enjoyable, though they obviously tend not to be ambitious in the traditional sense; they have already decided that they don't want to be prime minister.

If they are, you know, trying to get into the cabinet or are in the cabinet, they tend not to be that much fun, with a few exceptions, who are a good laugh. I mean, some of them I've known for decades. So who is the best partier... I will say it because he's gone now, Aiden Burley was great fun, but perhaps he was too much great fun, and his sense of humour got the better of him, didn't it?

It did indeed. But have you ever kind of... when you turn someone over, you know, for the right reasons, have you ever had a sense of personal regret that it's happened to them? That even though you've got a duty to do it, and you will do it, and you won't hesitate from it, you also think that it's a shame that it's happened to him, that he's been so foolish or whatever?

I don't like making that call where you have to put it to them – it's a very hard call to make when you call someone to say, "I hear your marriage is broken up." You kind of know this is a difficult time, it's not pleasant, but I don't enjoy that. If it's a financial irregularity or a political scandal, I do enjoy that because I think, "I'm going to get that bastard." But I don't like the personal ones, which frankly if we didn't cover, I mean, people say, "You shouldn't cover their personal life," it's a character thing. You know, if you cheat on your wife, you kind of cheat on the voters as well.

Well, it means you're a liar, you're clearly lying overtly to your wife or you're lying by omission.

Yes. And I'm a traditionalist on that, I think the kind of personality who will lie to their wife will lie to the voters.

And do you think all politicians are effectively liars, then? Or do you think there is any true honour left in politics? Are they all just ferrets in a sack, positioning for the next opportunity?

When you see them squirming on TV when they are being interviewed, they are trying to avoid telling outright fibs. I'm not saying they are liars, but they do make promises that they know they're not going to keep, which I think is... I mean, Cameron, classically, makes promises that he knows can't be kept. All politicians to some extent get into that situation, not necessarily by design.

Even when I was working in politics, I always said that people want conviction politicians, you know, the Philip Goulds of this world that did the focus groups, and Tony Blair would change his position because the public would want something... and part of me thinks, "Do I want a conviction politician who says: 'This is my view and you either back me or you don't.'" or do you want someone who says: 'Actually I've listened to the public, they clearly want this, and as their representative I am going to give them it.'? Because there's advantages and disadvantages in both, is there not?

Well, aren't the people who give the people what they want called 'populists'? That's the thing. And I've never understood that. Populist in a democracy is obviously what you have to do to be successful. I notice that if your opponent wins more votes he's a populist, and if you win more votes you've got a democratic mandate, you know? Democracy has lots of flaws in it, but given the voters what they want is generally the flaw that is inherent in the design.

Sunlight is the best disinfectant, so I can see how you are changing Westminster from within by having this kind of anti-establishment maverick approach that's holding politicians to account – I get that. But is there anything that could be done systemically to change politics for the better? Someone might say proportional representation might actually bring a different class of politicians and mean every vote counts. Is there another tool kit to your armoury?

Let's look at Italy where they have proportional representation, you know, has that been a corruption-free, stable democracy? I don't think so. So I don't think changing the system is going to make a big difference. This is partly to do with my world view, but I would like to go back to having amateur politicians, you know, this idea that it's a full-time job. I think it was Tony Banks, rest in peace, who said that basically, politicians are kind of super social workers now.

On the constituency casework side, they are.

So you basically, because of the welfare state, politicians are basically trying to sort out people jumping the NHS queues, sorting out public housing... I would like to go to a system where politicians decided the direction of the country, and it was an afternoon's work. The ideal is the Athenian democracy where everyone who wanted to play an active part in life was represented there.

Without getting too deep about it in terms of the kind of moral part of the blog is, do you think you are helping to clean up politics, because politicians are in fear of being found out, that they won't do wrongdoing, as it were? What's the ultimate moral purpose of it?

I'd say since 2009, since the expenses scandal, politicians are much more careful about financial stuff, and the new intake from 2010-2015 are terrified of being involved in a financial scandal. On the whole, more careful. Everyone is human, there are all kind of foibles that go on. People tend to take risks with financial scandals if their career is going nowhere, or...

Like if they have left parliament recently, like Jack Straw, Malcolm Rifkind... don't get me wrong, I don't condone what they did, but I also felt a tiny bit sorry for them if I'm honest.

I don't. Hugo Rifkind took me to task about having a go at his father, Malcolm Rifkind, Hugo Rifkind – The Times journalist - and I said, "Come on, it's a little bit cheeky." I think Jack Straw deserved everything he got, he basically said, "Here's my contacts and my role, my position..." he was still... he's an active politician still, isn't he? So I think they deserved it.

I think the thing that struck me about that story is, you are looking at two former foreign secretaries – you would think that they would know better. And that was the biggest takeaway for me, from that story, is how on earth did they fall for it, men of that stature?

I don't know how they fell for it, but obviously you're at the end of your career and you're thinking about cashing in, I think that's probably... and obviously the sting was very well done. It's common, you know... should they be allowed to have outside interests? Yes. Should there be restrictions on exploiting their inside knowledge? There are. But I think they should be allowed to... in other countries, there is a private sector, public service revolving door; it's not necessarily a bad thing, you know, it's always a good idea to have people who know what they're talking about in the private sector and the public sector.

Do you do anything outside of the blog? I mean, MessageSpace is clearly linked to the blog, and has connections to other blogs, but do you consult on the side or do you own a haberdashery business...

I have a young family, and I'm very focused on the weekends on the kids, that time is flying past, they are eight and 11, not seeing them for three days of the week means the time I have with them is very precious, so I try to avoid any other commitments. In terms of hobbies, I kind of trade financials quite a lot, and I'm a pretty well-known political gambler, usually the other side of all the big bets in politics. You could say it's insider trading, but there's no rules!

Final couple of questions, then. Who do you respect on the political scene that's not a politician in terms of journalists or advisors? I mean, we've had Lynton Crosby in here, Alistair Campbell, you know, I've had some really heavy hitters, and I've learnt a lot from them, but even like Alistair for example, he's a great guy and very personable, but like with Lynton, I wouldn't cross him, frankly, you get that vibe straight away!

Haha!

Is there anyone who instils fear into you?

I have crossed Lynton.

I don't doubt it!

And...

Are you scared of anyone?

I'm too old. Too old to be scared of people. You asked about who the journalists I kind of respect and admire. I mean, Simon Walters is a brilliant political editor. The Mail on Sunday is a very politically driven newspaper and has some fantastic front pages, you know, the Tory stuff that he... he was doing that on his own for weeks before everyone else caught on.

Actual old-fashioned breaking stories. Like *you* do!

It's great. On the sort of pundit/commentariat side, I think Peter Osborne is great. I mean, when Peter Osborne is in full flight on an issue you can be... you can imagine his voice shouting down out of the page.

I did the Jeremy Vine Show with him a few weeks ago, and he brought his briefcase in and it was literally held together with masking tape. He literally looked like a shambles, which kind of added to his credibility.

Oh, yes, and his collar's always awry, and you know, like me, he likes a drink, but he's great – and his moral imperiousness is brilliant, so I enjoy that. Matthew D'Ancona, who tends to be sophisticated, and Janan Ganesh, who I find incredibly irritating, but he is really good.

Who are the up-and-coming people, then, including on your blog as well, because at some point, like you say, you've hinted at it a few times of how old you are and the lack of energy, but at some point you will have to retire or move on. Who's going to inherit? I mean, Harry's moved to The Sun now. Are you going to poach him back?

Well... haha! I won't tell him that! I don't think Harry would want to come back; I think he wants to move on. He did seven years, we were pretty close, and it was... you know, when he left, my wife said to me, "Stop grieving!" You know. Alex is brilliant, you know... I work them quite hard. You don't have the situation... you have to go on your wits, you know, it's great training. They're put up front, and it's pretty immediate. That's the big difference between us and the newspaper – we get a story, five minutes later, it's out there.

It's on.

So that... Alex is very good. I mean, Alex just did a big profile piece on Seamus Milne. You think everything had been written about Seamus Milne – Alex got stuff that nobody else knew, you know? And 4,000 in GQ. And I think it's good that they wrote for other publications as well, and it's good that people see that the journalists today aren't all doing, you know, 'Theresa May's cleavage is showing at the budget debate' story, they're doing bigger, more longform stuff.

I can remember some of your blog posts on Gordon Brown about how he used to pick his nose in Parliament – it's strange the things you actually remember.

Haha!

You used to have video clips of the zooming in of the moment that he...

It was some kind of... whenever there's a nose-picking situation, we always seem to get the thing... I mean, during the general election, Miliband at one point put two fingers in his nostril on a train! Anyway... the funny thing about that is people love that, you know, and in some ways we do have a court jester role. That picture of Miliband with two fingers up his nose – one in each nostril, I should say – the Mail and the Sun came to us and bought the picture off us, so we have set the agenda in

nose-picking stories, you know, Alex Salmond picking his nose, we got a video of him on a flight to Scotland doing it... I don't know why, but why would Gordon Brown – it was on a Budget day, back in the day –

Was he sitting on the front bench?

He was sitting on the front bench.

I remember it well.

And he is excavating his nostril, and we made a video out of it, and then we added the sound effects, we had Kylie Minogue, Can't Get You Out of my Head, and every time he pulled his finger out we'd have a splat bogey come up, and it just made it run. We had three quarters of a million hits for that video.

Do you think that if you were to fall under a bus or retire or whatever, that the site could carry on without you, as it were?

Good God, the wife would definitely want it to carry on!

But it's good, so it's called the Guido Fawkes website, so it's not your personal name, clearly you're in Ireland three days a week, and you've got a great team who can run it as well. But in a sense, I try to think me as a reader, would I read it if you were not there, and the answer is probably yes, I would, as long as the quality kept up.

That's very interesting feedback. When Harry Cole took a more prominent role, Iain Dale said, "It won't be as good now Harry has taken the front and Paul has stepped back a bit." When Harry left to go to the Sun, he said, "It won't be as good now Harry's left." So no one's irreplaceable, I try to have a team that can do it without me, and I have to go on holiday sometimes, so I don't deny that I check Twitter and stuff like that, but they are well capable of running it themselves, and it is a big enough institution now that... I sometimes make the comparison with Private Eye – hopefully we will be around as long as then, and it will outlive me.

And I think on that note, Paul, I think you've answered every single question I could possible ask. Thank you for your time, I really appreciate it.

That was more revealing than I thought!

