

## [Transcript] The News Agents / Broadcasting's past, present and future - with David Dimbleby

Well, it's the end of our birthday week on the news agents and the end of the summer. So before Parliament, and more importantly for the affairs of the nation, Maitlis returns next week. We thought we'd take advantage of this liminal bit of the calendar. This is a show about the news, but it's also about three people who, to their fingertips, love the art of the broadcast. How it's done, how it's changed and changing, how it could be better. This week, I interviewed a Titan of our craft, David Dibbleby, a man who by his own admission has probably done more broadcasting for longer than almost anybody else who has really been around for nearly as long as political television has existed in this country and been a huge part of it. He in so many ways set the terms of trade dictated how we do political news. So we thought we'd bring you our conversation between a youngish broadcaster just about and one of a much finer pedigree at length on broadcasting, the future of the BBC and politics. We hope you enjoy it. It's Lewis here. Welcome to the news agents, the news agents.

So we're joined now by David Dibbleby, Broadcasting Titan. Actually, I mean, this sounds really cringy, but actually one of my broadcasting heroes really. I mean, when I was in, well, I used to watch you, David, when I was a kid, you know, politics obsessed teenager in Birmingham, watching Question Time and so on. Well, I'm flattered. Well, you should be flattered. We'll see where we go. You might be flattered by the end of it. It's only just because I've been doing it a long time. Well, perhaps. But you know what? If you stick around for long time. You're a very young man. Well, I'm a very old man. So of course. Well, there you go. Exactly. Your book, which is very interesting, you have brought in a copy of your book and a copy of Dostoevsky's *The Devils*, but I just only have a copy of *Keep Talking*, which is your... I only brought in my books. I thought you might not have it. Well, I do have it. I don't have the *Devils*. I read the Dostoevsky on the train. And then I looked through mine to see if I said anything I'd forgotten. Does Dostoevsky any good? Are we here? Dostoevsky amazingly complicated. You have to have a notebook beside you to write down who's who. Well, yours is much more straightforward and very interesting. In terms of political broadcasting, I mean, in a way, the book is entirely about a kind of history of political broadcasting, really, because you've been in it for much of its existence, certainly its modern existence in one form or another, and watching all of your many, many different appearances and different general election nights, and it is a catalogue of British political history in a way. How has it changed in that time? I mean, when you first started? It's changed because when I began, it had hardly begun, really. I mean, I wasn't there when Robin Day did his first interview with Harold McMillan, which was the beginning of a serious attempt to cross-question politicians. How do you feel, Prime Minister, about criticism, which has been made in the last few days, in conservative newspapers, particularly, of Mr. Selwyn Lloyd, the Foreign Secretary? Well, I think Mr. Selwyn Lloyd is a very good Foreign Secretary and has done his work extremely well. If I didn't think so, I would have made a change. I do not intend to make a change. Simply as a result of pressure. I don't believe that that is wise, and it's not according to my idea of loyalty. Is it correct, as reported in one paper, that he would like in fact to give up the job of Foreign Secretary? Not at all, except in the sense that everybody would like to give up these appalling burdens, which we try and carry. Would you like to give up yours? In a sense, yes, because they are very heavy burdens, but of course nobody can

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pretend that it isn't. We've gone into this game, we try and do our best, and it's both in a sense our pleasure and certainly our hope, our duty. Up until then, politicians were treated with kid gloves. So I was in very early on, when we used to do regularly on panorama, for instance, every year, a long 45-minute, 50-minute interview with the Prime Minister, and at a time when I think

the idea of what it was you were allowed to do and what you should do in interviewing politicians was just beginning to germinate. And Robin Day, who in my mind was the best political interviewer of that period. And since? Pretty much so, yes. Because you're right. In my mind, it's a two-way street. You can't be an effective political interviewer unless you have a politician who rarely is interested in what they're doing and wants to talk about it and persuade you that what they're doing is right. And if you engage in an interview like so often nowadays with a politician who simply wants to bat away any question and stick to a brief they've been given by their press people and all that, which is increasingly the trend, then you don't get very far. But in those days, I mean, Thatcher, I think, is that McMillan sort of didn't have any difficult questions. Thatcher was the first really interesting politician to me because she had an agenda and she was obsessed with getting it across. And whoever interviewed her, whether it was Robin Day, Bram Alden, me, anybody else, she took it really seriously. She wasn't there to bat away questions. She was there to persuade you that what she was doing was right. And so it involved a lot of work on your part to make sure you understood what she believed she was trying to do and then to raise the objections to what she was doing. And it was a proper engagement.

Were you right about her taking you up to the Downing Street flat for a whiskey after an interview? What was that like? I mean, that was a very weird thing. We used to do a regular yearly interview with Thatcher. And one time we went in and we were doing the usual going the rounds of whatever the issues at the time were. But one of the ones, as ever, was the NHS. And she was obsessed

with the idea that there was inequality of treatment between north and south. She'd had the statistics

for the north and the south. And she thought that in the south, you've got much better treatment than it was in the north, which may well still be true. And so suddenly in the middle of this infusion, she said, I'm going to have a review of the entire NHS. We're going to conduct a complete full scale, wide ranging review. And the people in Downing Street with her hadn't a clue, her own people, hadn't a clue what she was talking about. And they came up after and said, what was that she

said? What was that she said? And it hadn't been thought out. She did it spontaneously. Completely spontaneous, it seemed. She then appointed the Minister to do it. But anyway, we went upstairs and she said, would you like a whisky? And I said, thank you. She always had a whisky after an interview, thank you very much. And she began going through all the statistics.

And I sort of interrupted because I thought I really can't take another half hour of the stats on Liverpool as opposed to Chim or something. And I said, could I just ring my wife? And she looked at me, actually, and she said, yes. Yes, David, aren't we both lucky to have one?

Which was Dennis, her husband, who used to be her cheerleader. But I was like, it's such a revealing kind of power balance line, really.

But as you alluded, I mean, one of the things that's fascinating about her is that she

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enjoyed the combat. She enjoyed the combat of the interview.

And was nervous about it and worked very hard at it. And used to write to people afterwards saying, how did you think it went to her own kind of friends? And say, I was very nervous. I hope you thought it was all right.

But you wrote in the book that political interviews or the political interview risked terminal decline, a victim of its evolution. What do you mean by that?

Quite simply that people less committed on policy than Thatcher, who was very committed.

Blair was committed. But by then, the idea of what you said on air had to be carefully thought through and under Alistair Campbell's benign or less benign oversight,

serve your political purpose had taken root. And I think Thatcher, for instance, used to really say what you thought. I think Blair was very calculating in what he said.

And it was this beginning of being aware of the impact of political interviewing that led to politicians becoming more and more cautious in what they said.

Until nowadays, frankly, very often, you might as well not bother to interview them at all, because the blandness with which they answer, the way in which they avoid questions, the failure really seriously to engage with huge political problems we have now, which are as massive as they were under Thatcher or Blair, clearly. And the willingness, I don't know if you find this, but the willingness to sort of seriously talk about it and not just bat away your questions. But is that partly because of us?

I think it's partly because of the failure of organisations like the BBC to stick with the long interview form. I mean, the long interview form

is very important. If you have half an hour, you can get somewhere, because they can't go on just batting away the questions. But also, if you have 10 minutes or seven minutes on the Today program, you can't actually get into the heart of the programme. But also for politicians to be willing to submit themselves to that, right? Yes. I mean, you know, if you go back again, so you're, I'm always so struck when you look and watch, you know, Sad Political Geek that I am, because they're all on YouTube and so on. But you watch the sort of old panoramas, you know, you see, like the Prime Minister, for example, Margaret Thatcher, Blair even, you know, willing to subject themselves to long interviews to get their point across. I mean, that almost never happens now. I mean, Sunak almost never does it. No.

Stammer almost never does it. So, remember Sinex's first interview as Prime Minister was on the breakfast sofa, wasn't it? Talking about some ludicrous, I've already talked about some joke about what he was doing. But this is very, very, very dangerous.

It is dangerous. But what they all want to do is do pool clips. I mean, I've done this, you know, as a political correspondent many times, you know, they just want to literally go and do the five minutes that you have with a designated pool reporter when you can't really ask them any questions, because it has to be clipped up. Or, as Sunak did when he was Chancellor, deliver your budget, then go and sit in your own studio and have six, eight political interviews come in given five minutes each to ask you questions. So, they don't have a chance to do anything. I mean, the only time when this has fallen apart, interestingly, was Liz Truss.

Do you remember when Liz Truss decided to give, just before she'd resigned, I think, and they thought that, oh, well, we won't put her in front of some tough political interview like you, you know, we won't give her a rough ride. We'll go to all the regions and the local reporters,

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the local political people were brilliant because they all just said, you know, what you're talking about? Have you been up here? Do you know what's going on? Because they had nothing to lose. Good morning, if you're just joining us. Just gone 8am on this Thursday morning. And joining me now is the Prime Minister, Liz Truss. Good morning, Prime Minister. Good morning. How are you? How are you doing? Have you slept well? I have. Thank you very much. And it's great to be here on Radio Leeds. I am really glad that you are here as well. Because since Friday, since your Chancellor, quasi-quartens, mini-budget, the pound has dropped to a record low. The IMF has said that you should re-evaluate your policies. And the Bank of England has had to spend £65 billion to prop up the markets because of what they describe as a material risk. Where have you been? No one can deny you entered Downing Street with a difficult job on your hands, but you've made the situation worse so far, haven't you? Well, let's remember the situation we were facing when I entered Downing Street. Scott Benton, the Conservative MP for Blackpool South, in a tweet says he believes that people in Blackpool South do not support fracking. This is the Tory MP for filed. Mark Menzies in the House of Commons. If the Prime Minister is to remain a woman of her word, a woman that we can believe in, which I believe she is, can the Secretary of State outline how that local consent will be given and demonstrated in my constituency of files? What does local consent look like, Prime Minister? Well, the energy secretary will be laying out in more detail exactly what that looks like, but it does mean making sure there is local support for going ahead. And I can assure Mark Menzies. Well, there are various detailed issues to be worked through. The problem with the political interviewer now, I think, for everybody, I mean, you listen to what they say about it, is you have to do what the organisation you work for does. I mean, it's a duty for a big organisation, independent or the BBC, to actually force politicians to do long interviews, because that's the only way you'll get anywhere. You've, as you describe in the book, I mean, you've interviewed all the Prime Ministers, I think, since Wilson? Not Latterley, but... No, no, but the bulk of them since then. How do you rate Sunak in terms of how he deals with the media and in general, in terms of his offer, and in terms of him as Prime Minister? I mean, he's in a deep ditch, isn't he? I mean, everybody's in a deep ditch at the moment, because there seems to be no way out of the chaos that we're in and the poverty and the breakdown of the health service and the breakdown. Everywhere you look, it seems to me, we're in a slough of despond. And I don't think any politician has a way out of it at the moment. The constraints are too great. I think you yourself has written about it. There's no money. You have a huge deficit. It affects not just us, it affects Germany, it affects France, it affects Italy, it affects the United States. I mean, we're all stuck. And I think Sunak doesn't have any kind of magic wand to wave. But I agree that he doesn't, if that's what you're saying, he doesn't actually give you any clear vision of what he's doing. You always have to resist, I'm sure you'll agree with this, resist the idea and temptation that politicians were always better in the past and sort of more titanic in the past, but they had a... Might it be, I mean, you know, I mean, again, going back to the sort of 70s, you were around then, and when one thinks of the cabinet, say the 74 to 79 Labour cabinet at that

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time, and you think about, you know, you had Wilson, you had Callahan, you had Healy, Shirley Williams,

Tony Ben, even some of the people that have been sort of lost to the time, like, you know, Eric Gavalí or Silkin and all of these sorts of people, they were John Stonehouse.

John Stonehouse, perhaps not Stonehouse. But, you know, these were big people, and they had big hinterlands. Or maybe you disagree, maybe because you were up close to them, they didn't seem that big at the time. What do you think? Do you think politicians have declined? Or is that just always a temptation that we shouldn't go down?

I don't know that there's an objective answer to that. There's always a danger. I mean, what they used to say was politicians who'd lived through the war, who'd, like Dennis Healy, you know, been at Monte Cassino or the landings in Sicily or something, they were people with, use the crude word, real bottom, people with substance. And that may be true. But I think much more important is that I think politics then was a much more creative business than it is now. It wasn't trampled as it is now by globalization, by problems that nobody can really see a way out of. So maybe it was more attractive. There was a bigger difference between Tory and Labour than there is now, because both sides felt they had, you know, on the Tory side, free the market up on the Labour side, there was a lot to do with the NHS and with improving, bringing in comprehensive educational kinds of things. So there were real political divisions. I don't sense any very great political divisions at the moment. I don't know many politicians, but I don't think people who go into politics are of a lower calibre or less committed. I think the political scene makes it almost impossible for people with original ideas, ideas that haven't been sifted and chewed over, you know, by all their press people and by people like you, to emerge. It's a much more complex world, I think, than it was in the 50s and the 60s and the 70s and indeed in the 90s. I think this century is much, much more difficult with globalization. Social media.

Well, yes, with social media. I mean, I'm not on social media, so I don't know what the... You should be, David. You should be. Get on Twitter. You were briefly, weren't you, the Dimble Bot and all that stuff?

No, that wasn't me. I know it wasn't really.

Now, I've never been on social media, so I don't know what the sort of effect of the very tuperative attacks on a politician are.

Well, I think it makes them narrow. It makes them more worried. It makes them more cautious. Not least because if they make a mistake, I, you know, if you had a politician make a mistake, if you were interviewing them in the 70s or 80s or 90s, it could just die.

Now it just lives on.

On and on and on. The mistakes they made 20 years ago picked up and negotiated against. But the jeopardy is less there.

Is it possible to be a politician without being on social media?

Probably impossible. In some form now, I think probably.

Because you kind of don't exist unless you're on social media?

Because the arena of so much of politics now is social media, specifically Twitter or exes.

Yes, yes.

You know, when they want to make an announcement, when they want to say something,

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sometimes when they're even interacting, it's done on Twitter.

Yes.

In a way that unimaginable, even 10 years ago, 15 years ago.

Then again, I mean, someone like Trump uses Twitter.

Well, now he's allowed back, isn't he?

Yes.

Trump uses Twitter. You may hate what he says, but he uses it very effectively.

So you maybe...

It's a tool. They use it well.

If you can marshal it well, it works.

I still have an admiration for people who go into politics.

I mean, unless you're completely corrupt, there's not much money in politics.

There's not much chance of getting ministerial office.

You spend a lot of time in your constituency looking after people's problems of a very mundane, but important kind. How it's going to change, I don't know.

I mean, is the world going to change? Is the effects of globalization going to change?

Is politics in one country going to become more feasible?

Not attached to what everybody else does.

Well, you talk about going into politics.

You talk about Robin Day in the book, and of course, as you say, he had wanted to be a liberal MP and it didn't quite work out for him.

Had you ever thought about going into politics?

Never, ever, ever, ever, ever.

Never, never. You can cross your mind.

I'm a family of journalists.

My great-grandfather had newspapers in Richmond.

My grandfather was the first political press officer for Lloyd George in the 20s.

Is that right?

The first one ever, yes.

Wow, that's amazing.

There was a lot of criticism of it.

They said the Times, I think, wrote a leader saying, they're a bit uneasy about having a press officer.

I always tell Alistair Campbell this.

We're a bit uneasy about having a press officer, because we'd rather hear from the horse's mouth.

But he was the first press officer and he was a political editor in the House of Commons.

My father was a less political but a broadcast.

Well, a very, very famous one.

Yes, but we've always been observers in that sense, I think, as a family.

I mean, four generations of us have done that.

And I've never had the instinct to be a politician.

I'm interested in watching and observing and trying to explain and understand



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how power works and why power works and...

And when you were looking at your father, Richard Dimbleby,

I mean, he really was a pioneer in terms of commentary and political broadening and so on.

Did you just look at it and feel, I must do that?

No, I didn't actually. I wanted to be a lawyer, first of all.

And then he rather wanted me to go into the Foreign Service, Foreign Office.

But I slid into it because I always imagine it's because I sort of saw him enjoying it and thought it's an enjoyable way of life and interesting.

Reading the book, something that struck me was how often you were in trouble at the BBC.

Or that the BBC were happy with that.

Well, it comes across that way.

Well, I mean, when you write a book, you write about the troubles of it.

You write about the herograms you had.

That's true.

But I suppose, nonetheless, I mean, I suppose maybe it's inevitable over a long career and perhaps it's inevitable, but it happened quite a lot.

I mean, obviously the most famous example.

I mean, I was aware of this because I've seen the, you know, again.

The Wilson.

The Wilson as yesterday's men and so on.

I mean, that must have been extremely uncomfortable.

I'm quite fascinated by Wilson as a political actor.

Yes.

But it must have been quite an experience.

Just explain to people what happened there.

When Labour was defeated in 1970, it came out of the blue, the June election, the Rose Garden election, because Wilson thought it was a shoe-in.

And it turned out not to be.

And Ted Heath won.

And Labour were absolutely devastated.

But much more interestingly, people quite astonished that they'd gone.

And they were the big figures you've talked about that had gone.

And I did literally dream it up in the bath.

I thought, what earth can we do about this?

I know.

Because I'm interested in power.

What's it like to lose power?

What's it like suddenly to have it taken away?

And so I sold the idea to the BBC of making a film called Yesterday's Men.

Yesterday's Men was the title that Labour had used against the Tories in that very election.

They're yesterday's men.

So we used that rather mischievous title.

And we went around interviewed half a dozen or so of the top politicians.

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They were really good.

Half-hour long, half-hour interviews about how they were coping with being out of office.

Then came Harold Wilson for the last interview.

And I asked him a question that was done tongue-in-cheek, really.

He'd written his memoirs.

And the Labour Party had been complaining that he wasn't fighting in the House of Commons for opposition.

He was busy writing his memoirs instead.

And he made quite a lot of money from those memoirs.

And they said he was making a lot of money.

And I simply said, can you set up mines at rest about how much you really earned?

And he exploded.

I've never seen anything like it in all my television, except once with Bill Clinton, when I asked him about whether oral sex counted as sex with Lewinsky when he exploded.

But I thought it was a reasonable question.

But anyway, Wilson completely exploded.

And this question, not to be, this film is to be stopped.

This interview is not to take place.

His press officer, Joe Haynes, complained immediately to the BBC.

The BBC cravenly said, no, no, we won't use it.

Why not use it?

And the whole thing then fell apart.

The Labour Party tried to take an injunction to stop this film being shown simply because of this one thing.

And the film was a really good film.

And I think it was, the BBC said they would never show it again in Wilson's lifetime.

I think it has been shown since.

But I think the crucial thing is quite inadvertently, and this can happen in an interview, we touched on something that he thought I knew about, but I didn't, which was how he was being paid.

And I think there was a tax avoidance measure he'd taken, which was to sell to the Sunday Times the book and get paid a lump sum.

And you could not pay in context.

There was some simple thing like that.

But it was quite unreasonable, his reaction.

And his first reaction was, where are these Daily Mail questions coming from?

Did you ask him how he paid for his yacht?

Ted Heath had won the election.

Who indeed had, suddenly out of the blue, had an ocean racing yacht provided, presumably by hedge clippers who were hedge fund managers who were, we call them hedge clippers, but hedge fund managers who were, or bankers or something, who wanted the Tories back in.

But it was just a mad reaction.



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Then there was a full inquiry by the BBC, which went on and on and on.  
They analysed every interview that I'd done, and all the questions I'd asked,  
whether they'd been given balance in the film.  
And we were exonerated, except for we had the scaffold of the pop group,  
do make a wonderful song called,  
There Yesterday's Men and It's No Fun at All.  
We were criticised for that, and we were criticised for not telling people  
the title of the film.  
Like, when we sat down, we didn't say,  
this is called Yesterday's Men.  
How does it feel, you know?  
Did Wilson talk to you again?  
Did Wilson never be interviewed by you again?  
Never, ever, ever.  
And one of his people wrote a thing saying,  
we'd always thought he was a friend.  
I'd never been a friend of any politician.  
We always thought he was a friend.  
Marcia Williams.  
He used the word craven there.  
Do you think the BBC has become more afraid of the government,  
of politicians, of power over time?  
I don't know, because that said,  
they were running pretty scared.  
And they were in opposition then.  
And they were in opposition.  
I mean, I think there's always sort of panic stations  
at certain points on politics that the BBC gets into.  
I mean, you recount this story in your book of,  
during the 97 election, you're presenting the 97 election program.  
Oh, the Blair victory.  
And Blair has won, and obviously has won this enormous majority, 179.  
And you were being, doing what you normally do,  
and you were just being reasonably,  
just as you were with conservative politicians.  
And then the director comes in your ear  
and tells you maybe to change your tone.  
Well, it was an odd thing.  
There was a mood, you see.  
I had great admiration for this bloke, the director at the time.  
But what had happened was that the Labour Party,  
Alistair Campbell again, being very savvy,  
had realised that when Thatcher came in,

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in her big victory in 79,  
Downing Street was full of people cheering as she arrived at number 10.  
And so they thought we must do the same for Blair after his victory.  
So the following morning, when Blair came into number 10,  
there were people waving flags and union flag and all that.  
And one of our reporters down there said,  
oh, these are all ticketed, actually all ticketed by Labour.  
So it wasn't the public.  
In fact, there were gates up on Downing Street then.  
So you couldn't just walk into Downing Street because of the IRA.  
They'd put gates up to protect number 10.  
And so he said, I remember these words exactly, steady on.  
Steady on, David, this is a very important moment.  
And I thought, that's odd.  
And then a day later, there was a funny period when he  
suggested that political intervening should change,  
because Labour had in some way created a new consensus  
about what should be done, which is a view that he actually withdrew  
after two or three days.  
He realized it was nonsense.  
There was a moment when there was a kind of,  
the idea that there was a sea change had to be reflected.  
The BBC is good at that, isn't it?  
It's quite good at sniffing out where power is  
and where received wisdom in the country, isn't it?  
It feels nervous about stepping too far outside of it.  
And that that that receive wisdom could be left or right.  
It's not necessarily political as such.  
Where would you be today, for God's sake?  
I mean, you know, I think the BBC is in an incredible  
difficult position because all every minority,  
every grouping is now so vociferous.  
And if you're the Director General of the BBC,  
you're bombarded day after day after day  
by pressure groups on every issue.  
And at the same time, you have the statutory duty to be objective,  
whatever objective means, and to reflect all these opinions.  
I mean, I think it's getting harder and harder.  
This is The News Agents.  
So, here's something I've had fascinating about the book.  
Obviously, there's a whole section on election programmes.  
You don't like exit polls.  
You're sort of the master, the king of the exit poll,

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and you don't like them.

I'm not the king of the exit poll.

Well, no, John Curtis, I suppose, is the key accent.

John Curtis and David Butler.

Crown Prince.

David Butler. No, no, I just broadcast what I'm told to broadcast.

But you don't like exit polls.

I don't like exit polls because they spoil the fun.

Five minutes to ten, you get the result

or you don't get the result or you get the wrong result

and you have to announce.

And at 10 o'clock, we can reveal what our exit poll says.

Labour's back with Conservatives back.

It's going to be a hung parliament.

Well, if it's obvious, what's the point?

How do you keep people watching until four in the morning?

Well, you've got to have something to talk about for the next three hours.

Yeah, and what do they say?

All the politicians come in and say,

well, it's just an exit poll, David.

It's just an exit poll.

Let's just wait till we get the results in, you know.

I'll tell you what, the best example was Farage.

Nigel Farage on the Brexit night, 2016.

Oh, yes, yes, yes.

The exit poll was showing and he was saying, we've lost, you know.

Two hours later, he was saying, oh, funny that.

Seemed not to have lost.

Polling is a mysterious business and I have a huge respect.

And I love John Curtis's work.

And I mean, I watch every little thing.

But it is amazing.

I mean, I've done two election programs in the Sephology before.

And it is an amazing thing.

Did we do one together?

No, no, we didn't.

No, no, no, no.

No, no, unfortunately not.

Alas, no.

Because there's still time.

But the sort of the majesty, the magic around the exit poll

and getting the, I mean, the first one I did was in 2017

when obviously everybody thought May was going to win.

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And then suddenly they came in having opened up the exit poll and said, oh, have we got a coalition bill?

I did 2017.

I know you did.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

So we did do one together.

But I was at Sky then.

And it is a sort of extraordinary bit of kind of political theater, isn't it?

Yeah.

I mean, the glory.

It's, I mean, if you like being centre stage, which I have to admit at times I do rather like being, being centre stage is a general election.

There is absolutely nothing to beat it.

I mean, you walk into that studio,

this huge studio with maybe 150 people in it,

all analysing things, other people doing interviews,

people down the line, people explaining and re-explaining.

I mean, it's a thrilling thing to be master of ceremonies of.

It's tongue-in-cheek to say I don't like the exit poll.

What I mean by it is, if an exit poll says the game's up, you know, then it's...

But in the next election, I guess is the exit poll will be...

Well, we do elections like that, weren't it?

Well, there's one thing, talking about British exceptionalism, there is one thing we do better than I think any other country, which is election nights.

The drama of a British election night is so much better than almost anywhere else.

Yeah, but that's so obvious, because it's first pass the post.

Because it's first pass the post exactly, and it's not necessarily worth it.

650 constituencies, and it's not...

I went to Canberra once for the Australian elections, man.

Oh, yeah.

God, they're born.

The BBC sent you to Canberra.

Yes.

God, I was born too late.

I know, yes, you were born far too late.

No, those were the days.

We didn't do the election in Canberra,

and all it was was polling, creeping along, you know.

Oh, yes, good for.

And you can say what you think about our first pass the post system.

**[Transcript] The News Agents / Broadcasting's past, present and future - with David Dimbleby**

But what it does do, which is really important,  
is it engenders a real excitement in politics.  
Yes, and I do think politics has to be exciting.

I agree, yeah.

People have problems of their own, but actually at some point,  
even if it's only once every five years,  
for people to focus on the fact that these people are going to,  
you know, they may have some influence on your life,  
is that's a magical moment.

People often underestimate the importance of politics being interesting.

People often complain in the last few years saying,  
oh, politics is so much going on, it's too much.

No, like that's, politics should be like that.

Well, it's been very, yeah, but it's been murky and complicated for a long time.

I want to, just on election night though,

perhaps one of the most famous really ones that you've done now,  
certainly recently, of course, was Brexit referendum night.

And there was one bit of it that obviously has lived on  
and will always live on, which is the bit where you announced the result.

You say that the British people have spoken,  
the common market decision in 1975 has been reversed,  
and that's it, we're out.

Well, at 20 minutes to five, we can now say the decision taken in 1975  
by this country to join the common market  
has been reversed by this referendum to leave the EU.

And that's the result of this referendum,  
which has been preceded by weeks and months of argument  
and dispute and all the rest of it.

The British people have spoken and the answer is we're out.

Some people have criticised that since,  
because some people have said that it produced a moment of finality,  
that some people watching them might even think,  
right, that's it, that is it, we're out now.

Or Brexit means Brexit.

Well, yeah, no, but in the sense that as if we would wake up the next morning  
and we're out, and of course it was only the beginning of a process,  
and that maybe it was the kind of wrong emphasis in a way.

Nah, it's a quibble, nah, nah, it's rubbish.

No, no, the thing, I'll tell you what though,  
the BBC very fastidious about any results of democratic vote,  
they wait until it's absolutely impossible for it to be wrong.

And they kept us waiting,  
and we had this whole chart of the whole country,

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every constituency showing which way it had to go if it was to be pro-remain or pro-leave. And it was perfectly obvious what was happening, but John Curtis wouldn't allow us to say for certainty. And when it came, I didn't know what I was going to say really, I hadn't thought about it. I kept talking and talked from the thing to the director, I kept saying, can't we say it now, come on, it's fall in the morning for God's sake, it's perfectly obvious what's happening. No, no, just hang on, just hang on, and it was around about 4.20 or 5.30, and I suddenly thought, oh boy, I better say something, because this is a big moment, I can't just say, well, the vote's gone this way. And I then, I suddenly remembered I'd done the 75 referendum when we went into the common market, as it was, and I just scribbled down a little note to myself, and that's it, we're out, because that's what it was, we're out. You know, we had voted to leave the EU. I want to move on from the BBC, but I want one other question about it, which is, we've obviously had recently the, quite recently, the controversy over Richard Sharp, the BBC chairman, you yourself was interviewed for that position at different times, I think. Do you think that it's time the government stopped appointing the chairman of the BBC? Or anything. Well, yeah, all the members of the board, for example, and so on. Well, a chance to be a fine thing. I mean, you look at the appointment of Duke Hussey by Thatcher. The sect of Alistair Milne. I think it's wishful thinking that these powerful positions won't be appointed by the government, but what one hopes for is that there is an idea about that you should have a kind of impartial commission to decide, not just the chairman of the BBC, but the chairman of the big museums, the people of influence, you know, that these should be dispassionately done in an ideal world. You describe Michael Raid as a Tory crony.



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Well, he is, isn't he?

You think he is?

Yeah.

Sheriff Ofcom, Tory crony.

Well, I mean, you know, Tory, well,  
he's an unashamed Tory supporter, isn't he?

Anyway.

Something I was really struck in the book,  
when you were talking about one of your sort of more  
non-political roles at the BBC,

I doing state occasions, commentary and so on,  
you said you didn't like deference.

Now, I find that so fascinating,  
because I think for a lot of people,  
they might associate you with deference.

I mean, no, I think they would because,  
you know, you talk in these hush, you know,  
and you do it brilliantly.

Well, hush tones is sort of,  
and there's, you know, the markiness of Chumlee  
walking along there with the sort of orb of destiny,  
or goodness knows what.

And that's your job, that's what you're doing.

But in a sense, some might say that you are  
part of that differential system then,  
in the commentary role.

Well, I'm very, I've always been very puzzled by it,  
to tell you the truth.

I've done those commentaries on state occasions  
because they're interesting broadcasting.

And in a way, along with elections and political interview,  
actually, I can make a whole lot along with elections,  
political interviewing and reporting.

But it's one of the facets of broadcasting  
that I find really interesting,  
about how to comment on pictures  
that actually virtually speak for themselves.

The technique of doing that, of just,

I think I say in the book,  
of being like somebody sitting on the sofa saying,  
you know, that's the king, that's the markers of Chumlee,  
that's the golden orb or whatever it is,  
and just describing it.

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But I've never been one to sort of eulogize that.  
And in fact, I'm working on a series now  
with the title, What's a King For?  
Because I'm absolutely fascinated by why we have a monarchy,  
how we sustain a monarchy in these days,  
what it means to people.  
No answers to the questions,  
but I think the questions are really interesting.  
And as you, again, reflect on in the book,  
the BBC's particular role with the monarchy,  
which is a, can be a tortured one and a difficult one.  
And it never quite knows,  
is it supposed to subject it to the same scrutiny  
as any other public institution,  
or is it there in some way to affirm it?  
And it doesn't perhaps have the answer.  
And that's one of the questions I'm going to be asking.  
What do you think the answer should be?  
Well, I'd say early days.  
I'm not dodging your question, I genuinely don't know the answer.  
The only thing that is curious is the number  
of other European monarchies there are,  
where countries have opted, opted for a monarchy  
as the best way of running,  
avoiding having a president running ahead of state.  
On the day of the coronation, I was in Paris,  
not here in London.  
I was in Paris, we were in a café having a cup of coffee,  
and the waiter took our order and then said,  
mais qu'est-ce que tu fais d'ici?  
Pourquoi vous êtes ici?  
Nous avons tué notre roi.  
Can't do subtitles on podcasts though.  
Well, we killed our king.  
You're crowning your king today.  
Why aren't you in London?  
And I said, well, you know,  
because I don't know.  
Something else I think other people might find surprising,  
maybe just to finish.  
As you said recently, I don't find it easy to talk to people.  
I'm always tongue-tied.  
I never know what to say to people.

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I'm not very good at chat.

I've got no chat.

As a man who spent his life talking and chatting, broadcasting, that's quite surprising, isn't it?

That's a bit of a paradox.

Not that Dim will be a paradox.

You've been asking me questions, haven't you, which is easy.

That's true, but not just with me.

I mean, in general, you've just described it there, you know.

You said millions and millions of words on the television over decades since the 1960s.

And yet you feel shy or you feel shy.

Now, what I was talking about really was in social situations, not working.

I'm fine talking to you.

We're on the same wavelength.

But if I go, this sounds really stupid.

Go on.

Well, I mean, if I go,

for instance, if I go to a party,

even if it's a broadcasting party,

which I don't really go to very often,

or go to a party where there are politicians,

again, don't often do,

I actually can never think of anything to say.

I don't know what to say to people.

That's all.

I'm in my head.

I like listening.

In fact, that book ought to be called

Keep Listening, not Keep Talking, really,

because I'm better at listening, I think.

I mean, I think listening is what broadcasting is about.

Is this why you've taken up smoking in your 70s?

That's a sheer stress.

I read about that as well.

That's a white lie.

I should finish, I think.

What would you all be if you could go back into that question time chair position for one night, and you could have your best five guests go on?

No, I won't do that.

No, go on.

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It's like, who would you have at your, you know, if you had a dinner party, would you have soccer teams?

Well, exactly.

You must know.

I bet I know what you're going to say.

I bet you would say, like, Ken Clark.

Well, no, that's just going backwards.

I mean, the great panellists, there are...

Question time is exactly a reflection of the political status.

I'm a pro at the time.

So the best question times were always when you had these outspoken big beast politicians.

Tony Ben, Ken Clark, Shirley Williams, didn't give a damn what they said,

didn't care for being ticked off

by conservative central office

or the Labour Party afterwards.

They just said what they thought

and believed that engaging in politics

that way was what mattered.

And you did actually say things that your prime minister or your press officer might not want you to say.

You said them because politics is a serious business and you have to engage with people.

So, of course, those are the people I would go back to.

Not me, the politicians terrified they're going to be ticked off when they get back to headquarters

for not having said this and not having said that.

Of course.

And that's the change in politics.

And it's to do with all the things we've been talking about, social media and global problems,

which make it much, much harder to take a stand

and say, this is what we should do.

Look what happened to Jeremy Corbyn.

You know, this is what we should do.

And bang, out he goes.

So it's...

Do you think he was treated unfairly?

No idea.

Well, by the electorate.

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No, no, by the political culture.  
I don't know.  
After my time.  
The BBC rang you up.  
I said, one more general election, David.  
And they're not going to do that.  
Listen, the work for a general election  
begins five years before it.  
Yeah, but you've done enough of them.  
You've got enough practice under your belt.  
If anyone could do it, you could do it.  
Don't tempt me even to think of the question  
being asked or of answering.  
It's completely out of the question.  
The BBC's got to find somebody new to do it.  
David, it's been an absolute pleasure talking to you.  
I'm fascinating.  
Thank you so much.  
Thank you.  
This is The News Agents.  
Well, I found that thrilling.  
And I hope you got out as much of it as I did.  
What a man.  
That is all from us, though, this week.  
John and Emily, we're hoping to enjoy one last twist of summer.  
But thanks to what happened in air traffic control,  
are still on the tarmac at Luton Airport,  
Rubber Ring and Parasol in hand.  
If you see them, treat them to a G&T in a can, will you?  
It's their favourite.  
We also wanted to thank all of you  
for taking part in our first birthday special  
with all of your really lovely and insightful,  
interesting questions and comments.  
Some not so lovely, but we're journalists.  
We live on a bit of bracing contempt now and then.  
We are going to bring you more into the show  
in all sorts of ways in our second year,  
so stay tuned for that.  
And we also thought we'd bring you  
one of the nicer messages we received.  
And it is from James, and he says,  
Hello, News Agents.

## [Transcript] The News Agents / Broadcasting's past, present and future - with David Dimbleby

I realise I have missed the first birthday,  
but I just had to send a note.  
I am one of the 200% of saddos  
who have listened to every episode of The News Agents  
and The News Agents USA.  
Please let us know when you'll be sending out the badges.  
What have we done?  
Perhaps even more impressive or sad,  
as Lewis would probably put it.  
Well, anticipated.  
Is that I don't even live in the UK.  
I live in Toronto, Canada.  
My only experience with the UK  
is the layovers I had in Heathrow Airport  
to and from Paris on holiday when I was 16,  
well over a decade ago now.  
Your podcast comes out around my lunch break every day,  
and it is something I look forward to.  
I get annoyed when the UK has a bank holiday  
and there's no episode,  
but I, of course, still have to work in Canada  
and don't have that to fill my lunch break with.  
I'm not sure, James,  
we can really cater things around Canadian public holidays,  
but we're looking to it.  
Thank you so much for all you do.  
It's been a great source of laughs  
and entertainment for the past year, James.  
What a lovely community we have here.  
News Agents, one and all.  
Fags, mags and Twix's in hand.  
Thanks as always,  
and in particular this week  
to our top shelf production team on The News Agents,  
Gabriel Radis, Laura Fitzpatrick,  
Georgia Foxwell, Will Gibson-Smith,  
Alex Barnett and Rory Simon.  
Our editor is Tom Hughes.  
Without them, we'd just be three very excitable people  
talking in a box,  
which is basically what we are.  
The News Agents is presented by Emily.  
My family put me in the boot make list.



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John, the Swear Jars, Full Soap,  
and me, Lewis Goodall.  
We will be back on Monday.  
Have a lovely weekend.