

David Blunkett

- A lifetime in politics

Reading press reports and features about the former Home Secretary prior to interviewing him was a big mistake. Almost all the articles I read referenced his abrasive, harsh and abrupt manner, kept harping on about how he didn't suffer fools gladly and suggested he didn't much like being interviewed. What on earth had I let myself in for?

So it was with much trepidation that I made my way to his office in Portcullis House towards the end of a working day. But what a contrast awaited me. I didn't recognise the figure depicted in those reports. Before me was an empathetic, charming man whose political beliefs impacted on every area of his life. He described himself as "pig headed but very compassionate" and it

is the latter of those qualities that one is most struck by when meeting David Blunkett.

His life has undoubtedly slowed down a fraction since he was a minister. Our interview ran over to 50 minutes – something that would not have been possible when his days were run to a tight timetable. But he still manages to fit more in the average day than the rest of us. When he was a minister he would be up at six and as he puts it, "doing the media from just after 7 onwards". Nowadays his day starts at a more respectable 7.30 and after his regular morning routine, "I listen to the news, feed the dog, put the kettle on, get on my exercise bike, have a shower, do the breakfast and walk the dog", he has a rather hectic schedule of work.

When he is in his constituency he visits local schools and community groups, meets the city council and works in his constituency office. "I love being in the constituency. Like last Friday I did a Football in the Community event and there were 170 youngsters plus all the footballers from Sheffield Wednesday. Then I went onto a community event which was to combat tension and promote social cohesion. That was a great success. Then I went to another community gathering which was to try and get young people and old people to understand each other". And that

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was all in just one afternoon. "That is really my forte. That's where I get the energy and drive from because it's like plugging in to an electric socket. I get rejuvenated by being in the constituency. They've been wonderful to me". David Blunkett is a very popular MP. He gets hundreds of emails every week and still receives a large proportion of handwritten letters. "The constituency is very much a traditional one and, although people are into the internet and e-mailing, the e-mails tend to be about national issues. The letters tend to be about constituency issues. With e-mails people expect instant replies. It's an easy way for people to get to you. I've been reading Richard Crossman's diaries, Barbara Castle's diaries, Tony Benn's diaries. Their workload, as constituency MPs, was a fraction of what is the case today. When I was in the Department for Education and Employment we saw a doubling of the number of contacts in my e-mail correspondence for the four years I was there. It transformed it. It was just the time when the internet took off. Politicians are much more accessible. But we have to think how we handle that. If we don't reply people just think you are ignorant or arrogant". Blunkett receives letters about a wide range of issues - Child Benefit, the Child Support Agency, Pensions, the Post Office closures, Post Office Card Accounts. "We've had nearly 3,000 contacts on Post Office Card Accounts just from my constituency which is exceptional and we have replied to everybody".

He is a very proactive politician. He has recently been chairing a commission on school transport which is all about "getting youngsters out of the car in the mornings". He has also been working on social mobility and poverty, a survey of voluntary and community work. "I enjoy being proactive and I enjoy being positive rather than negative, contributing to party policy". Blunkett is very keen to

make sure his experience in Government is put to good use "because of what I've gone through but also for my own sanity". As he very honestly puts it, "It would be very difficult to go back to pottering around putting questions out to ministers, being a traditional new back bencher when you've been on Shadow Cabinet and Cabinet for all those years". He sets his political ambitions now as "being able to influence the Prime Minister and to be able to continue working with members of this cabinet. For many of them are actually very close friends of mine. So it's nice to be able to exercise influence for the future but also to bring to bear experience and what I've learnt".



DAVID SALEH

Blunkett was compelled to get involved in politics due to his upbringing. Although he was lucky to go to a special boarding school for blind children he had been brought up in a very poor constituency. "Some people were working very hard for very little and so I knew about exploitation. I saw the injustice and inequality, the poor opportunities - particularly for education. I just wanted to change the world and still do. The sharp corners have been rubbed off and I'm a bit more rational. I'm just a bit more tempered but I'm still here for the same reason". Blunkett joined the Labour Party just before he was 16 and has now been a member for 45 years. He was always an active campaigner, "I went to branch meetings, rang up

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the local radio, wrote to the local newspaper, went on anti-apartheid marches. In 1969 the government was not popular and in particular because of the Vietnam War. So it was a difficult time to be, as it is at the moment, an active Labour member but it's most crucial now. You keep things going and in the end you win through. You do good".

He joined Sheffield City Council at 22 around the same time he enrolled at Sheffield University as a mature student. His big break came when "someone who was going to stand for the cabinet in my home ward, got a job in South Wales. They took a big risk. Taking on a young man of 22, blind, who was at least 25 years younger than anybody who was on the council at that time". Blunkett learnt a lot in Sheffield. He counts the former leader of the council Sir Ron Ironmonger as his political hero. It was Ironmonger who taught the young Blunkett the value of debate and tolerance, "he once demolished me totally in a debate and came round and gave me a big hug and said "I bet next time you'll defeat me".

Blunkett worked hard at politics and he worked when he got to University. It had been a struggle to get there, "I'd come the hard way and been to work earning £12 a week and doing evening classes two or three hours a week as well". He would turn up at 9am each day to start studying. "I was working so hard but I don't regret that. Being a nerd got me into the mainstream political arena pretty quickly. I paid the price with my social life".

One can't help but think he has paid the price with his social life a number of times throughout his political career. He admits that he has "always been a bit of a loner partly because I had to put in the hours to be on top of the job". He was a minister for eight years. "I just didn't have time to do what I would have liked to have done which



was to spend a little more time with fellow MPs, having a drink with them, just being there. So I think they saw me as being a bit stand-offish".

Now he isn't plagued by the red boxes things have calmed down a bit and Blunkett feels he is able to enjoy his social life, "I happen to have a really high quality of life. I've got a very good work life balance now. I didn't have. I think I'm a much nicer person because I'm much more relaxed, much more balanced. I like good food and wine. I don't make any apology about that. I came up the hard way. My family were absolutely at rock bottom because my dad was killed when I was 12 and we didn't have any money at all. So I knew what it was like to be really up against it. I don't think there's anything to be in the least bit apologetic about me wanting a good life. You've got to want it for everyone. You've got to want it for others. The idea of

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David Cameron pretending to go on his holidays to Cornwall and then going off on a luxury yacht off Turkey... *The Mirror* gave him a drubbing for that. I'm very happy to say I went for a fortnight to Italy and I was very lucky because I got some sunshine".

Without doubt his happiest political memory was when Labour seized power in May 1997. "I mean it has to be, albeit I didn't dance for joy because I knew how daunting it was going to be. It was just something entirely different to anything anybody had experienced before". But there have been a few other moments too that Blunkett remembers with great pride. "When we got unemployment below a million that was a great day because I was Employment Secretary at the time. When we suddenly realised that the literacy and numeracy program was working. Primary school children went from 57% for English to 79%. That

was great. That made all we'd done worthwhile. Little moments too like when I got the Prime Minister to agree that I could introduce Citizenship into the curriculum in schools. That was great because I believe that in the long term if the schools will only teach it and teach it well it will do what this magazine is doing. It will bring home that whether people like the word politics or not, making decisions, allocating resources, choices about priorities, it's

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what we all do in our lives. It needs to be done publicly with participation and involvement of everyone not just a decreasing number. So the 40% who didn't vote in the last election left it to 60% who did”. Blunkett, a former Education Secretary, thinks it's very important than politicians learn how to engage with young people. “They (the politicians) need to talk. I'm not good on the web side but I know that young people are. We need to engage where they're at. There's no point in engaging where we're at. Going into schools and colleges you see that young people are really interested in what's happening in the world. They're interested in development issues, in injustice and inequality. They're interested of course in their own future. We've got to be alongside them and start talking their language and be honest not just say, ‘Oh yes if you're in favour of that we're going along with that. That's fine’. You've got to actually challenge them. To say ‘How do we deal with your priorities viz a viz an ageing population?’ How do we connect young people with something that seems like a lifetime away i.e. retirement income or their care, bearing in mind that when I grew up, as a youngster the average age of the area I lived in for people was about 70? They lived five years after retirement. Now we're talking about 90 for women and 87 for men. And it will be 100 in thirty years. That means that people will be living, even if people work till 70, which I think will become the norm, they'll still be living 30 years after they've retired. How do you get a young person; 18 when they receive their Child Trust Fund (which I'm very proud of because I funded the research that led to persuade them it was a good idea) how can we persuade a young person to put it into a fund to help them with retirement rather than backpacking round the world or buying a car? That's quite hard. Quite a lot

of what I've been talking about is quite heavy stuff and the question I'd like to put back to young people is ‘How do we not patronise you by saying – we won't talk about the really difficult issues like how are you going to live when you're seventy, whilst making politics enjoyable. I'd like them to tell me rather than me to tell them”.

Blunkett believes there are a lot of positive role models for young people at the moment, “you see them in the theatre and in football and other sports. We've seen some of them in the Olympics who are just good role models but they don't make a big thing of it. The problem with those that are temporarily the stars of the moment is in order to get the publicity they tend to do zany things”. Blunkett isn't a fan of reality tv shows. “I think they demean the people that go on them. They seem to ridicule. I'm pleased that they're dropping in popularity. I think they've been through a phase. It's a strange phase reflected in the political arena as well as on television shows. That was an era where a little bit of spite and being horrible was seen as entertaining. You can have satire and you can poke fun, including at yourself, without being particularly horrible. And I hope we're re-establishing that. I think the best role models are highly successful, really good leaders in their field, champions in their field. To coin a phrase that Tony

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Blair was talking about in Beijing, ‘They don't have to flaunt it and they don't have to belittle themselves in doing it’. They just are good. On that note I've got three pieces of advice for young people. Never take no for an answer. Always aspire beyond what you've already achieved. Take as role models people who have done good things”. Blunkett is proud of the country he calls home and not just because of the medal haul at the Olympics. “I think we belittle it too often. You just need to go anywhere else. You go and look at great democracies like the U.S. where they elect judges. Money talks even within the legal system there. Or countries like Italy where the Prime Minister owns half the media. See how lucky we are?” It is because we live in such a great country that Blunkett who as Home Secretary first floated the idea of ID cards in 2002. After becoming law in 2006 they are due to begin being issued to British nationals in 2009 on a voluntary basis. But does he still think they'll be a success? “Yes I do. They may end up being a universal passport. We need to know who is legitimately in the country. We need to know when you say

who you are that is who you are. We need it because we offer the only free health service in the world, free education and a very substantial welfare state". Blunkett states, perhaps unsurprisingly, that his unhappiest memory in politics was when he stepped down as Home Secretary in December 2004. Blunkett resigned from his cabinet post after an email emerged showing a visa application for his ex-girlfriend Kimberly Quinn's nanny had been fast-tracked. "No favours but slightly quicker" were the five words that spelt the end for his Home Office career. Al-

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though Blunkett had no knowledge of this email being sent he felt the question mark over his honesty meant he had to step aside. He had also become embroiled in a paternity case with Quinn and as he said at the time of his young son, "he will want to know ... that his father actually cared enough about him to sacrifice his career". It was alleged at the time that the leaking of the fast tracked visa came directly from Quinn herself. No wonder then that this is Blunkett's most unhappy memory in politics. "The reason was all to do with my personal life and my fight to retain contact with my son. That was a really, really sad moment because I felt I'd let Tony down in the sense that we had some really big challenges coming up and I'd enjoyed, albeit that it nearly killed me for the three and half years, that I was Home Secretary. Because it was literally at the cutting edge of politics". His compassionate nature made the whole thing an almost intolerable affair, "I'm deeply sensitive and far too thin skinned. I was thin

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skinned over political issues. I was impossibly thin skinned over my personal life. Reflecting back on it I do wonder now how I survived. I just wonder how I came through all that. Still walking. Still talking. Still thinking positively. Just going away hurt. I think there was a lot of sheepishness in the media about what happened to me. A lot of people were involved in reporting have said to me 'Sorry. We got caught up in the pack.' The pack wrote together. They think that if they don't cover it their editors will go crazy. People get carried away. I've drawn a line underneath all that, thank goodness. But I'm very lucky to

be able to do so. To have a good life and still be fighting and still be contributing".

When he is asked what he thinks will happen at the next election Blunkett is remarkably optimistic. "I think it's entirely in our own hands. I think if people pull together. I think it's still winnable. We've got eighteen months. To have been active in politics as long as I have you've got to be an optimist because we've been through hell and back". But it is not only optimism that makes him believe this. He has a lot more time now to read books on history and political biographies, "I have time to read what happened all those years ago and I know that 18 months is long enough to be able to pull it round but only if everyone pulls together. It's a bit like a football team you see. A football team that is losing all the time, continues to lose because the confidence is knocked out of even the best players. We need to build confidence. We've got to be bold. We've got to take risks. We've got to re-establish a connection with the electorate. At the moment as we speak in September they're not listening. They're not hearing the message and it doesn't matter how good the announcements are if it doesn't have a substantial impact, a kind of seminal earthquake, then they won't start to pull-back from what is a very strange phenomena at the moment. If you put to people that in the past there was

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massive unemployment, there were big cuts in public spending, interest rates were high. The world really was very difficult. They say 'yes but'. The but is that over the last eleven years we've got used to having low inflation, low interest rates, high employment, low unemployment, investment in public services and now you're not doing enough and you've not done enough for us with energy, prices, food prices and with housing. It's very difficult to break through that conjunction between what used to be the big issues and how people feel now".

He believes that "Gordon is a profoundly decent man and a totally dedicated politician who's given his life to issues around equality and fairness. I think that what was a strength which was 'not flash just Gordon' has, over the past year, become distorted so that people now want flash. They want a presidential campaign. They want a politician to have telly charisma and I think we've just got to get back to the situation where people are judged by how they handle the most difficult situations". He goes on to talk about Brown's relationship with Blair. "When they got on extremely well they were unbeatable. They were a great combination. When there was fracture sometimes

it was constructive because constructive conflict can actually lead to better decisions and to sharper leadership. When on occasions that conflict led to destructive division it was very hard for them and I think both of them looking back would like to have had a great deal of the first two and a little less of the latter". He is loyal to his former leader, saying that he believes Tony is "a really tremendous man. I think he will be remembered in years to come, when the dust has settled, as a really great Prime

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Minister, a great leader. Tony was a team leader and I was only able to do what I did, Gordon was only able to do what he did, Robin Cook and others were only able to do what they did because Tony gave us the space to do it and made that space by winning people who would never previously have voted Labour. It's still hard to get across to Labour activists that being in perpetual opposition changes no one's life. You can belong to a pressure group if you want, and I recommend it, but it's not an alternative to being in government. You can sit in a pub and grumble if you want but it's not an alternative to changing the world. So making a difference is about actually being there. Tony Blair did that and people still don't get it. He made a difference. He actually shifted the foundations of British politics".

Would Blunkett himself have liked to become Prime Minister? "No. You know you'd be foolish to say that you haven't toyed with the idea but I was very close to Tony Blair and saw what it did to him. I saw the hours he worked. I saw the enormity of breadth of issues he had to deal with. I'd love to come back and do it all over again. But my ambition now is actually just to contribute to making a difference and have a good quality of life. If I can balance the two that's great". And he really does appear to have cracked it. For, not only had he given a ground-breaking speech that morning on the elderly continuing to work past 70 (which had attracted widescale media interest), but less than an hour after our interview Blunkett was on his way home to Sheffield for a long weekend. Finally after nearly 40 years in politics the self-confessed "nerd" has learnt to play as hard as he works.

FYL...

David Blunkett is the Labour MP for Sheffield Brightside. He was the first blind man to be appointed to a cabinet post in 1997 when he was appointed Education Secretary, a position he filled for four years. He also served in the cabinet as Home Secretary from 2001 -2004 and Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in 2005. His guide dogs are nearly as famous as their owner. His current guide dog, Sadie even has her own column in *The Sun!*

Dis-Honourable Members

by Arby

