

Panorama: The Thatcher Interviews and the NHS

David McQueen

In the second volume of Margaret Thatcher's memoir 'The Downing Street Years' while recollecting the 1983 General Election campaign she describes the different television interviewers she encountered as follows:

Brian Walden on *Weekend World* would ask the most probing questions. Robin Day on *Panorama* was probably the most aggressive, though in this campaign he made the mistake of plunging into detail on the problem of calculating the impact of unemployment of the public finances – a gaffe when cross-examining a former Minister of National Insurance. I made a gaffe of my own calling Sir Robin 'Mr Day' throughout. Alistair Burnett specialized in short, subtle questions which sounded innocuous but contained hidden dangers. One needed all one's nimbleness of wit to make it unscathed through the minefields. (Thatcher 1995, p. 293)

Margaret Thatcher's 'gaffe' in the *Panorama* interview was seized upon by the press and many in the public (probably incorrectly) as a calculated snub to the BBC's venerable 'Grand Inquisitor'. In fact, Robin Day recalls in his memoirs how when this was pointed out to her after the interview by her TV adviser Gordon Reece she apologised 'charmingly':

Oh dear! Said the PM. Robin, you don't mind do you? Did I call you Mr Day? To which I am said to have replied, 'Eight times, Prime Minister. But never mind. It's not important. It does not matter to me, but the viewers will notice.' (Day 1990, p. 230)

When Thatcher was interviewed by Robin Day on *Panorama* four years later for the 1987 election the memory of her gaffe was clearly still in her mind. At one point she does call him Mr Day and then corrects herself saying 'I made that mistake last time I won't make it again'. Robin Day puts a series of searching questions to her including (30 minutes into the interview) several on the NHS – perceived by many to be a vulnerable area for the Conservative Government. Thatcher's interview style comes across clearly in this extract which Robin Day describes in his memoirs as like being 'confronted by a steamroller' (p.232). In the best *Panorama* tradition Day calls upon senior, respectable expert testimony to challenge Thatcher's record and also, I would suggest, to prevent her reverting to her standard response of burying the question with selected statistics:

I want to put a quotation to you which is not from Michael Meacher or some critic of the Government or some opponent, but is by an independent medical expert Sir George Godber, (please note the honorary title) formerly Chief Medical Officer of Health to the DHSS. He says quote: 'Ministers endlessly relating a few selected statistics will not convince us that the NHS is safe in their hands'.

Mrs Thatcher's first response 'Well I'm very sorry he said that' is rather like a headmistress expressing disappointment that a high flier has gone bad. She continues undaunted, but

Careful in this answer at least not to revert to statistics. We can see what Day calls her 'steamroller' style in the use of repetition and heavy emphasis. Words are given strong stress in almost every sentence and then there are other words that get a kind of super stress – like a school teacher making a point VERY firmly to a class of rather dim children. The language remains simple, concrete and unassailable, as she methodically lays out the facts and arguments brick-by-brick to build an unassailable wall - an electoral fortress wall. We see this here especially when she makes use of old headlines to make her point VERY clearly that the Conservatives are investing MORE and doing a BETTER job than the discredited Labour opposition ever did in power. We can see this in her two minute answer here, a part of which is obviously prepared,

you cannot ignore the tremendous extra resources that we have put in, the extra number of hospitals that have gone up, the extra nurses. The ordinary taxpayer pays. But I sometimes do feel that every single case, and there are a million people employed in the health service, that every single case of difficulty is brought to us. May I remind you of what actually happened under the alternative government? Under Labour. These are headlines which eventually I took out.. (and here as she turns to pick up a pile of photocopied front pages from the 1970s.) What happened to the health service under Labour Government? This is February 1979: "Target for today sick children". This is also under a Labour Government "Have mercy on my son" This is another one ..and another one .."

in an apparently endless stream.

Before we continue with Robin Day's next question I would like to read what he had to say about the effect of Thatcher and Kinnock on the television interview – a serious allegation about the devaluation of the political interview which he claims has been 'hijacked by the top politicians, presumably on advice from their media advisors'. He describes Margaret Thatcher's achievements as a PM including 'winning three elections', 'curbing the unions' and 'burying socialism' and but adds that she also succeeded in devaluing the set piece television interview as an instrument of democratic dialogue.

In the sixties and seventies such interviews, on both BBC and ITV, [in which Prime Ministers or other political leaders were closely and vigorously questioned in seriously detail for forty minutes] were highly significant and newsworthy events. [...] In the eighties, however, even during general elections, the significance, news value and appeal of the set piece television encounter greatly declined. The person mainly responsible for this has been Margaret Thatcher, aided and abetted by Neil Kinnock. Both, in their different styles, have been determined to make the TV interview a platform of their own. The interviewer's questions, or attempts at questions, have been treated as tiresome interruptions to the impressive flow of Thatcherite statistics or Kinnockian rhetoric. Interviews have tended to become a series of statements, planned for delivery irrespective of the questions which had been put. This technique has gradually brought about the decline of the major television interview. It is now rarely a dialogue which could be helpful to the viewer. A few years ago in an after-dinner speech, I cracked a little joke about going to No. 10 and beginning my interview thus: 'Prime Minister, what is your answer to my first question? Among those who laughed loudest were several members of Mrs Thatcher's Cabinet. (Day 1989, p.283)

In this short presentation there isn't time to play more than two or three questions mainly because the standard length of Margaret Thatcher's answer is between a minute and a half and two minutes. She often returns to the theme of the ordinary taxpayer I presume she grew up in a house where they played a lot of 'Just a Minute' where no hesitation, deviation or repetition is allowed. Press the buzzer if you hear any hesitation or deviation (there's a fair bit of repetition) in this answer and notice how Robin Day tries in vain to intervene to pose his next question towards the end.

"Day: [quotes] Without extra resources the future of the NHS looks grim.

Thatcher: There have been extra resources. From 8 billion that was the general family of four paid £11 a week when I came into No 10. Now they are paying £27, £28 per week in taxes every family of four to the NHS. That is a very considerable increase.

Resources don't come from governments they come from tax payers."

Mrs Thatcher's defence of her policies rests on a strong appeal to common sense. "We" are spending a lot more on the NHS than Labour, the money comes from ordinary taxpayers, ordinary taxpayers do not have bottomless pockets. Furthermore, revenue for the NHS also depends on a strong economy which the Tories have provided. The logic is tight and requires informed and expert counterargument, but Robin Day is not lured into the trap of disputing statistics again. He made that mistake in the 1983 election interview and barely escaped alive. Now he goes for the gut question, the question of Margaret Thatcher's reputation as a hard, uncaring person. Here, statistics won't do so we see Thatcher adopt a different counter-attack:

Thatcher reminds the audience that the accusation comes from people who brought the country low, reminds them of Labour's record in government (which was 'a disgrace') in being unable to borrow a 'penny piece' because of their spendthrift ways. 'A penny piece' - the language of the Victorian playground - 'Can't catch me for a penny piece' or of the corner shop where she was raised - a penny piece of toffee or any commodity sold for a penny to the poorest in the street. Almost a taunt against Labour - you were so bankrupt you couldn't raise a penny piece.

So the accusation that she is 'hard' is one levelled by the left who have no right to make such a judgement given the mess they made of things. A bankrupt crowd and ideology compared to the Tories' 'excellent record'. A finally, somewhat desperately I think, a softer tone, an admission of her charitable works: Margaret Thatcher admits she gives 20% of her income to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and her husband Denis (why he's brought into it is a puzzle) supports a sporting charity for the young and disabled (The Lord Taverners). So she is human and as Robin Day desperately tries to move on she has one last comment on the accusation:

It is intended to upset me and it would, but for one thing. I look at the people who make it and know what they are up to.

Her voice almost lowered to a threatening whisper here. Again the language of the Headmistress - I know what you are up to, I see through your rebellious behaviour and I won't tolerate it.

David Dimbleby's Interview

The second Thatcher interview with David Dimbleby takes place in January 1988. Dimbleby's interview style is less abrasive than that of Robin Day and his line of questioning, while persistent, is softer in tone and moves into what I consider very interesting new territory that I will look at shortly. As with the Day interview, Dimbleby struggles to control the interview as Margaret Thatcher's answers stretch to around two minutes in length with almost no opportunity for interruption, interrogation or follow up questions. As with the Day interview Thatcher's heavy stress, repetitive inflection and steady, unrelenting pace gives the interview an inescapable, endless feel, which combines in a deadly fashion with her frequent use of figures and statistics that punctuate the monologue like a battering ram.

In the final and in some ways most interesting section of the interview, Dimbleby asks why Thatcher is 'dithering' on Health. He asks why she doesn't begin a 'radical review of the health service'. It becomes clear in the follow up question that Dimbleby is asking why more privatisation is not being introduced into the NHS as some in the Conservative Party and Private Health Industry would like. With so much of what was once publicly owned in a mixed economy having been privatised in the 1980s (BT, the steel industry, British Airways, water, gas, electricity, the railways, buses etc.) Britain by 1988 is effectively a market economy with market values and assumptions at its core – and the last bitter arguments against privatisation have been laid to rest and the 'inevitable' logic of the market reigns supreme.

Dimbleby: Is it inevitable given the scale of increase in demand for the health service... is it in your view inevitable that this country moves towards a much greater private element? We are way behind France, we are way behind Germany, the amount people spend privately on health care. Do you want to see a national health service paid for by the tax payer and the private sector paid for by people through health insurance, do you want to see them come together and private sector increase?

It could be argued that Dimbleby is trying to flush Thatcher's real views on the future of the NHS out here, but we end up with the extraordinary situation where Thatcher appears to be defending the core value of the NHS despite her privatising zeal elsewhere, against an interviewer appearing to lay out the need for privatisation in the NHS and asking why the Government is not privatising more quickly. I would argue that this shows us how successful Thatcher was in the space of a decade in turning the economic and social agenda or terms of debate completely around so dramatically that it would seem perfectly natural for a senior BBC reporter to be asking why the Conservative Government was not privatising parts of the NHS more quickly. This, like New Labour, is perhaps Thatcher's greatest achievement for the right – in putting the neo-liberal agenda (an agenda so unthinkable in 1979 that privatisation of any industry was not mentioned in the Conservative Party election campaign) centre stage in British political life. Here the most popular and last bastion of the post-war Labour Government's Welfare State is being challenged, not by the Iron Lady, but by the reasonable, mild-mannered logic of *Panorama's* David Dimbleby.

Sources

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David McQueen is a lecturer in Bournemouth Media School. His PhD is on the history of BBC's current affairs series *Panorama*. He is the author of *Television: a Media Student's Guide* Arnold 1999