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# TURNING THE TABLES

CHARLES KENNEDY INTERVIEWS DAVID DIMBLEBY



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# High priest of the hustings

Charles Kennedy talks to David Dimbleby about the political significance of *Question Time*, the state of the BBC, and the vital work of a charity set up after his father's death from cancer at 52

Charles Kennedy is a Liberal Democrat MP and an associate editor of *The House Magazine*

Dimbleby Cancer Care – a family charity established in the wake of the death from the disease of the legendary BBC broadcaster Richard Dimbleby in 1965 – is about to mark its 40th anniversary. The charity offers care, comfort, information and support to thousands of patients and their carers through centres at Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals.

It also funds research into how better to care for people living with cancer – an area that attracts very little research spending in the UK. Indeed, according to the World Health Organization, only 0.18 per cent of the entire UK cancer research money is devoted to research into care.

To mark the anniversary the charity will be launching a major campaign to raise the level of cancer care across the country. Its aim is to increase annual cancer research spending to £1m a year, making it one of the largest charitable funders of such research.

David Dimbleby chairs the family charity and welcomed me to his central London home to discuss its work – and a few matters concerning the day job.

**CK: Explain what Dimbleby Cancer Care does.**

DD: We have always seen ourselves as a charity that looks out for new ideas and new ways of doing things. We're not on the same scale as Macmillan or Cancer Research UK, but quite soon we had enough money to endow a professorship which cost £5m. None of this money had been raised by fundraising – it had all just come in. With that £5m we endowed St Thomas' medical school with a full-blown professorship, staff, and a laboratory.

So that's one side of our work. The other side, which is the side that isn't endowed, which we can spend, is another £5m, so we've got a total of £10m to spend in two bits.

Previously we funded simply a room where people could sit and have a coffee and didn't have to be out in the corridor with trolleys going back and forwards. That has now built up into a substantial operation at both St Thomas' and Guy's. We have a day care centre that gives just that if you just want to go and sit there, but also pro-

vides psychological support and practical support about things like getting benefits, aromatherapy, massage, and places to talk. And that's working very well.

So we set up an advisory committee, with a number of people expert in the field. We have put in £1m over three years and we've now put in another million from our funds. And we simply say if you have got good ideas that need researching, apply to us and we've got money to fund this work. And where it will take us I don't know, but what it does do is for the first time focus on the needs of people living with cancer. So we're now into the business of fundraising on a big scale to support this. We are spending £1m in the current year and we need to raise that year on year.

**CK: Purely coincidentally I spent a good chunk of Sunday night watching on the Parliament Channel the reruns of the devaluation crisis, featuring a very young David Dimbleby –**

DD: With a lot of hair.

**CK: Indeed. One of the things that struck me, comparing the method of discourse between the three main parties, is that I would have learnt a lot more listening to the debate than I think I would have done now.**

DD: It is a terrible indictment of television and radio if it was more informative in 1967 than it is now. If the sound and fury of modern interviewing is actually preventing any message getting through I think that would be a terrible thing.

When I first interviewed with Robin Day I interviewed Harold Wilson. And we spent a Sunday afternoon trying out questions and answers, which is a technique I have always used for big interviews. You don't just write your own questions, you get the producer to ask you the questions you're going to ask and see if there's a loophole or a way out or if you can lead the interviewee towards the point you'd like to make. In terms of what happens now, I think there is an obsession with pace that is an error. People don't get enough time – though mercifully on the *Today Programme* they now seem to have got into a good habit of a 20-minute interview after 8am. But the number of times when you hear, "That's all we've got time for," I'm afraid, is desperate. Because it shows that very often the agenda has been drawn up by an editor desperate not to lose audience, and actually it does a disservice because you don't get the long, interesting examination.

**CK: What about *Question Time*?**

DD: *Question Time* is the only place left where the public gets to have a go at the politicians face to face. And both sides learn from it. The viewing audience learns, because they get a feel for how the 150-sample of the public is thinking. And politicians learn because they so rarely – particularly ministers – come face to face with the public. I think that's a huge service, and it does a great service to the people who come on it.

I think politics becomes *more*, not less interesting, the more you can explain the complexity of the decisions that are taken. I think it's worth putting effort in to do that. What is the BBC for, if it's not to do that sort of thing? The pressures on those bloody audience figures have been so great that controllers tend to retreat.

**CK: How do you see the future trends in terms of the BBC as an organisation?**

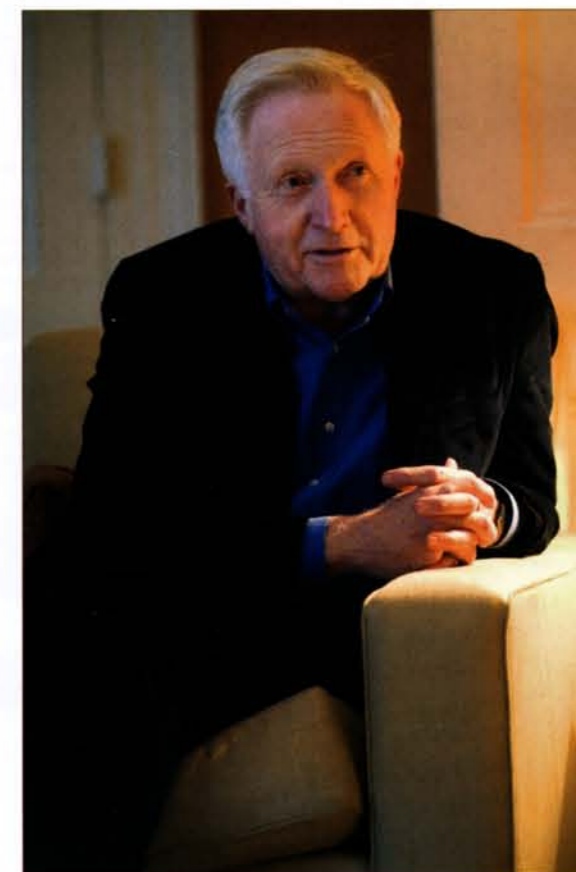
DD: I think that any big organisation, and the BBC in particular, can find ways of cutting its costs. And if it's carefully done and cleverly done, and the money is kept in programming, in what goes on screen and on air, and in the best of that, it shouldn't suffer. Of course people are very upset and worried when they are faced with voluntary or involuntary redundancy. What's happened with the BBC, particularly in the bit that I know, the news and current affairs side, is that it has expanded a lot, and each time it expands another unit is set up, and I think that this attempt to bring it back together is quite good.

I detect absolutely no appetite in the public for the abolition of the licence fee or the disappearance of the BBC. I don't think that the market argument, that people won't pay 100 odd quid for the BBC, stands up for a moment. I think there are enough people who still value what the BBC does to guarantee its survival. It will have painful moments and painful settlements, but that any government, as far as I can see, this century, would want to dismantle the BBC – I think they'd be off their heads to even contemplate it.

And the one person who thought about it? Margaret Thatcher. I said to her once: "What happened to your plans to break up the BBC?" She said, and this is very interesting: "Every time I tried to do anything about the BBC, people came out of the woodwork to defend it."

**CK: You've started doing single-party specials around leadership contests. The Lib Dems very generously seem to provide you with one almost every year. What happens to your viewing figures when you focus on a single party for an hour?**

DD: It dips. But it doesn't dip catastrophically. The ones we've done recently are the Lib Dem leadership and before that, the



Dimbleby believes passionately in the value of *Question Time*: "Both sides learn from it"

deputy leadership of the Labour Party. I think our view is very simply – and this is real public service broadcasting stuff – that it is very important that when parties go through the process of electing leaders, the public get a chance to see the candidates. And it's a wonderful opportunity for us to probe what they are thinking and how they are different from each other. The two Lib Dem candidates protested they were really the same, and within a few days it was quite clear that they weren't. My money's on Vince Cable coming through!

**CK: Do you think we'll ever have televised prime ministerial debates during a general election, and if we had would you favour it, or is that too much in a presidential style for a general election?**

DD: I would favour it because I think you have to go with the flow of politics and I think the flow at the moment is that the party leader is of crucial importance to the voters when they make up their minds. Increasingly they decide by the feel of the party as represented by its leader.

It will be a bold prime minister who decides to go along with the debate. But I would like to think is, it needs both courage and conviction. Your arguments will win, to get

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