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## Transcript Q&A

# E-Leadership: Political Communication in a Digital World

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### **Question 1:**

Looking ahead to 2014, 2015, 2016, general elections and referenda and things like that, what impact do you think the modern media will have on that as opposed to doorstep and telephone work? And will it be a good thing? Are there going to be advantages of it, and what's the downside?

### **Alastair Campbell:**

I think it's generally a good thing. Again, Chris, it's great for campaigning. I can remember at the last election being somewhere in Scotland and John Prescott was also around, and we both did a tweet saying that we were going out canvassing for this candidate up there. I promise you we had more people turning out to help knock on doors and put envelopes through the letterboxes than you'd ever get by having a Labour Party meeting.

The thing about the Obama campaign which I think they did brilliantly in the last election was – people go on about the fundraising thing, I don't think that was their success. Their success was in having people at the centre, or in all the campaign headquarters around America, spotting on Facebook people who were expressing support, even if just saying 'like' or commenting about Obama and something he'd said, and then somebody going to them and forming a technological relationship with them, and then turning them into activists and ambassadors for the campaign. I think that's really important because that's what a social network is.

The reason why I think it's exciting for campaigning is because it means that, whereas in the old days you might be able to knock on a few hundred doors in a day, you still have to do that but you can also be getting other people to help you do that, through the use of social networks. It's taking campaigning back to a much more old-fashioned form but doing it in a modern setting and through these technological means.

The reason why I was interested that Alex Salmond only had 27,000 followers is because having won the right for 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in the independence referendum – I mean, the figures for 16- and 17-year-olds who ever read newspapers or ever watch the news at 6:00 pm and 10:00 pm, they just don't. They will consume their media and their arguments through social networks.

### **Question 2:**

I was thinking of the outcomes of elections. Doesn't this lead to populist outcomes? One thinks of the extreme parties that have been gaining ground in northern Europe. Some people say this has to do with the economic situation, but it hasn't been northern Europe that has been the worst affected by this and yet they have been the ones – it may be a reaction to what's happened elsewhere. Governments are elected for a period of four or five years and yet it seems that we're going to be picking governments on a whim.

### **Alastair Campbell:**

I don't think we are. There was an election in Holland recently where the extremes did a lot less well than people expected them to. It's true that Twitter can be a very useful platform for mavericks but I also think it's a very good place where people's lack of substance can be very quickly exposed. So I don't buy that. I think the changes that you're talking about are much more rooted in the economy and people's fears about what their countries are becoming. I think the social networks in this era are a force for good, not bad.

### **Question 3:**

Looking back at the definition of politics, looking at politics as 'war by other means', and looking back at the riots here and in Europe and what has happened in the Arab Spring, do you think this destabilization will be a big challenge, changing the order of Westphalia and the world within the next century?

### **Alastair Campbell:**

I've never really seen politics like that. I sometimes see sport like that. England are drawing 1-1, by the way. Well, they're finished by now; I wouldn't have agreed to this event had I known that the pitch was going to be waterlogged last night.

Something like the riots, some of that may have been an expression of political views and political disenchantment. I certainly think that people's sense of powerlessness in politics will grow because of the growing interconnectedness of the world and of political systems. I think the argument that we're having at the moment about Europe, for example, is really worrying because it's so easy to make a case against Europe but actually it's really

important that politicians and political leaders continue to make the case *for* Europe despite all the faults that it has. I worry at the moment – going back to your point about populism – that the government and the political class generally are moving into a very Eurosceptic position for the wrong reasons. That's not because politics is 'war by other means' but because they're feeling the pressures from their own electorates.

#### **Question 4:**

Talking about Facebook and Twitter, do you think that political communication would be served better if Facebook had a 'hate' button and Twitter had a list of people you pointedly don't follow?

#### **Alastair Campbell:**

Yeah, I don't think that would do any harm. I think you should get onto Mr Zuckerberg and make yourself a few bob with that.

I think the great thing about it is that you can shape it to your own ends. What I like about it is that whereas before you were very limited in where your media was coming from, now you are unlimited. Admittedly, you've got the paywalls and all that stuff. But if you never bought another newspaper again in your life, you could sit on your laptop and pretty much get into any story in any depth that you want to. You can create your own media landscape. Facebook and Twitter are a part of that.

#### **Question 5:**

Following on from that, rather than just shaping your media landscape, do you shape who your followers are just to reaffirm your views, and also have followers who you already know when you follow them you'll disagree with them? Or can Twitter actually change minds?

#### **Alastair Campbell:**

I never, ever block anybody. I know that's quite rare but I actually think the people that come on there to sort of abuse me on a regular basis is – they're sitting there, 'please block me, please block me, I want to be blocked', and I will not give them that satisfaction. So I don't block anybody.

I follow people a bit randomly. This is the other thing, Chris, I don't go onto Twitter very much. I have a look in the morning. I'll tweet just when I feel like it. I follow about 5,000 people but that doesn't mean I look at all of them, I just dip in. So I might see something that gets me going, like recently – talking about blocking – George Galloway said that he was going to block racists and demagogues and so forth, and I asked him, what about rapists? He didn't answer.

So I'll just dip in and out. I don't know the answer to the question of whether I am more followed by left-wing people than right-wing people – probably. I'm followed by a lot of people in sport and I follow a lot of people in sport. That's what I mean about shaping your own landscape. There are certain things that I'm just not interested in and so I don't want people to be sending me messages. I think you do kind of self-select and that's why it's a network. But that's a good thing.

#### **Question 6:**

Looking at the 2015 election, will you be seeking a seat for public office?

#### **Alastair Campbell:**

I don't know. Probably not. The reason I talked about that recently is because at the Labour Party conference, I was asked by several, mainly northern constituencies if I would so do, and I didn't rule it out.

#### **Chris Mullin:**

'The matter is in the hands of my solicitors?'

#### **Alastair Campbell:**

No, not really. I've thought about it and I do sort of think about it from time to time. But I have quite a nice life now.

#### **Chris Mullin:**

You would find being a backbencher, and you'd perhaps not be a backbench MP for very long I think, but you would find that quite tedious compared to some of the other jobs you've done in your career, I think. The worst fate that could befall you is you become a junior minister.

**Alastair Campbell:**

I know, I've read your book. I used to want to slap you around the face, because you kept thinking that these civil servants that you thought were a bit second-rate, that it was their job to do your job.

**Chris Mullin:**

No, no, not at all.

**Alastair Campbell:**

But it was your job to have an agenda.

**Chris Mullin:**

It actually wasn't, there were several people slightly higher in the pecking order who had the agenda. In Prescott's case, he even interfered with the lunch appointments. But it wasn't like that at all. I got on perfectly well with most of my officials. The ones I disagreed with were in the aviation department, who were very keen on concreting over more parts of the south of England, which I think was government policy but I wasn't entirely enthusiastic about that. Anyway...

**Alastair Campbell:**

We do need more aeroplanes flying around.

**Chris Mullin:**

Not necessarily, I'll discuss that with you afterwards.

**Question 7:**

The 2015 election is likely to be about engaging with disaffected voters. Do you not feel that with a focus on Twitter and social media, you're either preaching to the choir or focusing very much on sort of the metropolitan voter who's probably quite engaged anyway?

**Alastair Campbell:**

I certainly think that the Twitter population in Britain is much more political than the general population, I'm sure of that. We're talking about it because that's the subject of what we're talking about tonight, but it's just one part of this debate. I totally agree with you about the problem of disengagement. I think it is going to be a huge factor at the next election. There are all sorts of things at play there, some of which are being addressed but a lot of which I think aren't. I actually do support the lowering of the voting age. I think it's a good thing and I hope we do it for the general election as well. I don't think any of the main parties are up for this but I would move to compulsory voting.

**Chris Mullin:**

What would you do with all those who didn't vote though?

**Alastair Campbell:**

You fine them; you just have a very small fine.

**Chris Mullin:**

In local elections that could be 70 per cent of the population.

**Alastair Campbell:**

It would be now, because they're not voting. But actually I think the political class is way too defensive about saying, yes, everything is the problem of the politicians, the politicians are all terrible.

**Chris Mullin:**

I agree with you on that.

**Alastair Campbell:**

So actually to say, you people, the electorate, you go on about wanting this done and wanting that done, is it too much to expect you to read a little bit about all the options being put forward by the councillors that are going to represent you, and then you have to vote for them? If you don't like any of them, you go along, you can do it online maybe, you can change the way that

we vote. But I just cannot understand why we sort of accept this. People go around saying more people vote in X Factor than vote in the general election, ha ha ha. It just makes me want to scream.

So when we talk about disengagement, I don't particularly like the current government but I do actually defend most politicians and the political class as a whole as doing an incredibly difficult job. I think there's far too much of 'they are the problem and we the public are all-knowing, all-seeing, never do anything wrong'. The public have got a big responsibility in this disengagement stuff as well.

### **Question 8:**

I was wondering if you think there's a danger that social media could provide an inaccurate record and be manipulated. It's possible to delete a tweet or delete a Facebook post, whereas if you had given a comment to a journalist in a traditional way it would be forever recorded in print and you couldn't change the record. Or do you think it's just a quicker way of issuing a retraction, as you would have otherwise done?

### **Alastair Campbell:**

I think if it has any significance at all, it will be recorded somewhere. What was the one recently that got deleted very quickly – oh, the ambassador in Chile. Did you see that one?

### **Chris Mullin:**

I did. Now there's a man who could have done without tweeting.

### **Alastair Campbell:**

Yeah but actually, it was one of those things where it didn't really matter that much. He's probably upset a few people from Argentina and he'll probably get moved to Burkina Faso quite soon.

But no, I don't worry about that at all. It is an interesting thing though. If you're talking about recording history, I've just been reading one of the Robert Caro books on Lyndon Johnson. God almighty, he's got so much source material, and you think if somebody's going to write a book in 20, 30, 40 years – say, about Tony Blair or David Cameron now – whether there is a lot of stuff that's



being lost. Sometimes I try to look for stuff that people have said a few weeks ago and it just takes forever to try to find it, because there's so much stuff out there now. The Obama-Romney debate, the first one, over 10 million tweets – that's a lot of words to read.

So I just see this stuff as 'here today, gone tomorrow', but it sort of leaves a mark. That's how I view it. I don't think we should have a sort of Hansard for Twitter.

### **Question 9:**

It seems from the research I've done that the UK public aren't so trusting of social media as, say, in America, for example. Obama might put his initials before and that's supposedly actually him. How would you suggest the UK's politicians go about using social media to establish more trust in what they're saying?

### **Alastair Campbell:**

I think it goes back to the point I made about authenticity. I think the public is very good at sussing it out. Some of these fake accounts, for example, which can be really funny – but I don't know of a single instance where a real person has an account and the fake has more followers. Somebody may be able to prove me wrong. But that's because the public have somehow worked it out. That's without going through this whole verifying thing, which I don't understand. I keep getting these messages asking if I want to be verified and I think, well, not really, because I know who I am. It's okay.

I think it's about the content. This point about trust is really important though, because if you look at all the polling on politics and the media and business, on banks, the trust levels have slowly gone down. And the church, any of the recognized institutions. That is sort of worrying. But then you say, if that's the case, does that mean that we don't trust anybody? But actually we trust each other – people trust each other. It goes back to the point about networks. I trust Chris because I've known him for a very long time.

### **Chris Mullin:**

I trust you too, Alastair.

**Alastair Campbell:**

Thank you, Chris. And I knew that Chris trusted me. That's where this social network thing derives its power. The genius of Facebook is the 'friend'. It's the idea that you are a friend of somebody, because you trust friends. That's why if I were a politician, I wouldn't worry about that. Somebody else does that, the thing about – oh, Hollande did his campaign, he had a little symbol that was him. I think all that does is – I wouldn't do that, I think it just draws attention to the fact that it's not real if it's not you.

**Question 10:**

Mr Campbell, you were disparaging of the Press Complaints [Commission]. Would you please expand on that and tell us what you would put in its place?

**Alastair Campbell:**

The reason I'm disparaging of it is because it is a body that was created by the press, for the press. I don't know necessarily what I would put in its place. I think the Press Complaints Commission code, updated to take account of some of the things we're talking about, is actually a very good code. Its problem is that it has never been remotely upheld or observed within most of the newspapers. The reason for that is because of its institution, the way that it was set up. If you remember where it came from, it was yet another 'last chance saloon'. It was yet another, let's finally give the press the chance to put their own house in order and let's not have these nasty politicians interfering. What the press are trying to do at the moment, with Leveson deciding what to report, is to get the public to think that anything that Parliament does in relation to this field is somehow government political interference. The Press Complaints Commission was set up by Parliament, and anybody who has an oversight role like that should be set up by Parliament.

So I think something, a body – the model to me would probably be something like Ofcom – that has respect, that has genuine and clearly defined powers, that has the ability to sanction. That kind of body is what we should have for the newspapers. They will kick and scream but actually I think the good newspapers and the good journalists will have absolutely nothing to fear from it.

### **Question 11:**

In the United States, the Democratic Party is recognized as being more adept at using social media, particularly at reaching young voters. So for example, North Carolina became a Democratic [voting] state for the first time in 30 years thanks to the student vote. Which UK party, if any, has the edge in social media? And if no one party has an edge, then why not?

### **Alastair Campbell:**

Good question. They're all at it, but they're not at it very well...

The Tories have used it for a long time, but I don't think very well. I don't think any of us have used it very well. I got very frustrated at the last election because it's partly this kind of attitude that Chris has, that it's a newfangled add-on thing, whereas actually what it should be is just in-built into the strategy as a whole. I don't think anybody has done that yet.

In answer to your question of why not, I think because of a general fear of it when it first came along. Whereas what the Democrats did was sort of embrace it pretty quickly. I thought Hollande used it quite well in his campaign. I think he's pretty much stopped since. It is in a way an easier thing for a protest group to use. I think the next election, we – we as Labour, and also we meaning politics generally – are going to have to get in a better place on that, definitely.

### **Chris Mullin:**

Now just to show how modern we are, we've got a question coming in on – what is that, an iPad?

### **Alastair Campbell:**

Gosh, that is modern. If it was really modern, it would be coming up here across the screen.

### **Question 12:**

We've got a few questions from Twitter and via email. They ask whether you think digital communications can help those who feel excluded by politics, and has digital media changed the public's perceptions of politicians. Are they now more accountable?

**Alastair Campbell:**

I think the answer to the first bit is yes, I think the answer to the second bit is no. I don't think it necessarily makes them more accountable and I don't think necessarily that politicians should be accountable to people who tweet abuse at them. I think government should be accountable to Parliament and then every few years to the electorate.

But I think it should force them to engage more, to listen more and to have a more general contact with people. The point about disenfranchisement and people feeling marginalized, I think it does give them at least a voice. It's amazing how many people who you would say were just, as it were, 'little people' have actually developed quite big followings because they say interesting things. I think that's really exciting.

**Question 13:**

If the famously technophobic Blair were PM now, would you advise him to go on Twitter? Should a PM be using this method of communication at all?

**Alastair Campbell:**

The answer to the second part is: yes, if they want to. Yes, if they think they can do something useful with it. I mean, I don't think everybody should be going around tweeting the whole time.

Tony? Well, he didn't have a mobile phone. That came in very handy when it came to Leveson. No LOLs there. When he left Downing Street in 2007, he finally did have to sort of vaguely get close to the real world and get a mobile phone. His first ever text message said, 'This.' And then the next one said, 'Is amazing'. The next one said, 'You can send words and everything.' So that was him getting into the text revolution in 2007.

Yeah, I think he would have been all right at it. He's not really into it though; he doesn't do much at the moment. I think his office is on Twitter and his foundations are on Twitter but I don't think he's tweeting.

**Chris Mullin:**

Hasn't it given rise to a generation of rather shallow politicians who spend enormous amounts of time attending to their images? One thinks of Louise Mensch, a bright star who flashed through the firmament and was gone within a couple of years.

**Alastair Campbell:**

You don't buy the 'spend more time with the family'?

**Chris Mullin:**

I don't know, but I know she did spend an enormous amount of time attending to her image. I'm just not sure what she achieved on behalf of her constituents.

**Alastair Campbell:**

Other than a by-election.

**Chris Mullin:**

A by-election for which her party will not be entirely grateful, I think.

**Alastair Campbell:**

Well, some do and some don't. I think there is a bigger problem, which goes back to the whole way that the mainstream media is, which is the whole thing about the negativity of politics, which I think has caused a lot of the disengagement and has put a lot of really good people off going into politics. I think that's a far bigger problem. Look, she was quite effective while she was passing through the firmament.

**Chris Mullin:**

Well, at promoting her image she was, yes.

**Alastair Campbell:**

Yeah, she did a bit, she sort of – can't remember what it was, but a couple things. But you're picking on one there. You were a backbencher; you know lots of back-bench MPs. Lots of them do a pretty good job. Some of them don't pay any attention to their image whatsoever, and that probably means that they won't make it in terms of getting up the ladder a bit, which is a problem.

**Chris Mullin:**

Is it the only way up the ladder?

**Alastair Campbell:**

It's not the only way. If it were all about image, Eric Pickles wouldn't be in the cabinet, would he? Vince Cable's not the best looking. I don't think it is all about image. Ken Clarke?

**Chris Mullin:**

I bet none of those guys do a lot of tweeting.

**Alastair Campbell:**

Pickles is on Twitter, I think. I could be wrong.

**Chris Mullin:**

But they are substantial figures, all those people you just named.

**Alastair Campbell:**

Yeah. What about Grant Shapps?

**Chris Mullin:**

We won't go there tonight. That's all we've got time for, ladies and gentlemen. Can I, on your behalf, thank Alastair for an entertaining hour and hopefully one in which we have all learned something. Thank you very much, Alastair.