

You can call me Al

Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's former press secretary and New Labour's chief spin doctor, appeared at the Ilkley Literature Festival to promote his political diaries. Tony Greenway meets up with him back stage

IT'S a quarter to seven on the opening night of the Ilkley Literature Festival, and Alastair Campbell is just 45 minutes away from personal attack. At 7.30pm he is due on stage for a question and answer session with members of the festival audience – and who knows what will happen, especially if the 500-plus crowd is made up of Tory supporters.

Campbell is in Ilkley to talk about *The Blair Years*, his house brick-sized, best-selling political diaries; but before 'curtain up' he's agreed to meet *Yorkshire Life*. As Tony Blair's Director of Communications and Strategy, he took a 'no nonsense' (and sometimes four-letter) attitude towards journalists in No.10's press briefing room and has talked frequently about his contempt for much of the British media. So we're on guard tonight. But even his critics can't ignore Campbell, a man who was right at the heart of the New Labour project and at Blair's side during the momentous events of the last decade: the death of Princess Diana; Kosovo; 9/11; Afghanistan; the invasion of Iraq; fledgling peace in Northern Ireland; the death of scientist Dr David Kelly; the Hutton Report and his showdown with the BBC.

We're led to a dressing room in the bowels of The Kings Hall where we find Campbell leaning back on his chair with his feet up on the table. Physically, he's a big man, and although this is a large room he seems to take up most of it by sheer force of his personality. But this Alastair Campbell is very smiley and surprisingly non-threatening. 'Yorkshire Life, eh?' he says, as though he never thought he'd live to see the day when he would be profiled within its pages. 'Eee... Grand.'

His Scottish parents moved to Yorkshire early in their marriage and Campbell and his two brothers and younger sister were born in Keighley. 'My dad was a vet,' he says, 'and when I was about 10 he had a really bad accident when he was injured by a sow that had escaped from her



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pen. He tried to keep going with his practice, but it was really hard work so he eventually gave it up, joined the Ministry of Agriculture, and we moved to Leicester. So we've got loads of friends in the Yorkshire area, but no family at all.'

For a Yorkshire boy, Campbell has committed the unpardonable sin of supporting a Lancashire football team. 'When I do come back to the North,' he says, 'it's to Burnley for the football. Sometimes I'll come to Keighley, stay overnight and take the kids to see where I grew up, which they are completely indifferent about.' Campbell has three children with his long-term partner, Fiona: Rory, 19, Calum, 17 and Grace, 13.

After graduating from Cambridge, Campbell began a career in – irony or ironies – journalism before taking the job as Tony Blair's Press spokesman in 1994. In opposition, he didn't get that rough a ride. In power, though, he became known as Labour's king of spin and was dubbed 'the real Deputy Prime Minister' by the Press. Surely, as a former reporter, he shouldn't have been that surprised by this treatment? Yet, somehow, he always was.

'It's not (that I was surprised by) the way they treated me; more what (the Press) had become,' he says, citing 24 hour news as a reason for a decline in journalistic standards. 'I started out on the Tavistock Times when I was 22 and the Press was different then. The nationals were 24 pages long and most people only ever saw one paper. You watched the news once a day for five or 10 minutes. Now the scale of it is so immense and it's so noisy and judgemental.' One thing he really hates, he says, is TV journalists commenting on each other's stories. 'Some (television reporters) who stand outside Downing Street and blather all day... I just can't stand them. They talk b***** most of the time.'

Campbell is a man who provokes strong reactions. From

what has been written about him, it seems that people either loathe him, or really detest him. But why? Was it because of the job he did or the way he did it? Or does he just rub people up the wrong way? 'I don't know, really,' he says. 'Someone asked me recently: "Have you always provoked very strong reactions in people?" And I don't know if I have. I don't remember (doing so) as a child. But I do. I really

do and I'm very conscious of it. You'll probably see it tonight when I go out on stage.'

In *The Blair Years*, Campbell is – how can we put it politely – 'forthright' about many of the people who cross his path, some of whom are supposed to be on his side. Campbell's loathing for Clare Short, for example, is hilarious. He gives her both barrels, calling her 'a totally ridiculous figure' and writing 'God, she does turn my stomach' (Short shrift, you might say). Elsewhere in the diaries, Campbell starts 'screaming abuse' at Charlie Whelan, Gordon Brown's former Press Secretary; and he actually comes to blows with Peter Mandelson.

But if Campbell inspires occasional animosity from his allies, just imagine what his political enemies think of him. We tell him we once interviewed Mrs Thatcher's former Press Secretary Sir Bernard Ingham. During the conversation, we said the magic words 'Alastair Campbell' and Sir Bernard's head nearly exploded. Campbell gives a Cheshire cat grin to rival Tony Blair's. 'I know,' he says. 'It's sad, really isn't it?' Campbell does refer to Ingham in *The Blair Years*, but we can't tell you what he says in detail because this is a family publication. Let's just say the description he uses has an Anglo-Saxon twang to it.

The thing is all these characters still move in the same circles as Campbell. What does he think about meeting them again now the book has been published? 'I don't care, really,' he says – and he truly looks like he doesn't. 'What do I say to them? I don't know. I bumped into Charlie Whelan the other day and the person I was with said: "I can't believe you shook him by the hand." I saw some piece that (Andrew) Gilligan wrote the other day about how he was at some function at the Labour Party conference; and he thought about coming over to shake hands but how I hadn't got over it because I called him utterly disreputable at a meeting; which I did because that's what I thought.'

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Gilligan, of course, was the Radio 4 Today journalist who made the original claim that Campbell had 'sexed up' the dossier on Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction.

After the stress of the No.10 Press job, Campbell was glad to leave it all behind in 2003. 'It's quite difficult,' smiles Campbell, 'when your job is to be in charge of the Prime Minister's media relations, but you can't stand 90 per cent of the media. It was time to get out. So, most days I'm glad I'm not there, although I miss that sense of having an absolutely driven, defining purpose. I don't think I'll get that in the same way again and I'll just have to accept it. But the one thing I really don't miss is having the Press around my neck the whole time.'

Even so, it must have been hard relinquishing all of his power. 'I didn't view it as power, you see. I don't think I did. But I did have a big mental and physical crash after I left because when I'm doing something, I'm the sort of person who has to do it full-on. Even though I knew I was leaving, I hadn't given a moment's thought to what I was going to do because I was still doing the job. I didn't have anything lined up at all.' The only official position he holds now is as chairman of fundraising for Leukaemia Research.

'It was funny,' says Campbell. 'David Blunkett came round for dinner a few weeks after I'd left and said to my daughter: "Is it nice having your dad home all the time?" And she said: "Yeah, really nice." And he said: "What does he do all day?" And she said: "Well, that sofa you're sitting on - he's sitting there when I go to school in the morning... and he's lying on it when I get back in the afternoon." That was true. I did crash out for a bit.'

Oh, God. You didn't stoop to watching Tricia, though, did you? 'No, I never watched daytime telly. But Tony would ring me and say: "Anything good on Kilroy? Are you watching Jeremy Kyle?"'

It's time for Alastair Campbell to face his Ilkley Literature Festival public. On stage, he goes down well with the crowd. He's frank (especially when asked a question about Clare Short: 'I mean what do you do...? Nul points...') and entertaining. He tends to bang on about his dislike of the media a bit too often and is probably the only person in the room who thinks invading Iraq was a good idea; but not doing the No.10 Press job obviously suits him. And he still doesn't give two stuffs about what people think of him. 'I don't really care,' he tells the audience, 'as long as I'm liked by the people who matter to me.' ■



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