

Interview with William Hague

In August, the editor met William Hague – Foreign Secretary, MP for Richmond, and a former patient of the Memorial Hospital. This is a summary of their discussion.



Ed: Thank you very much indeed for agreeing to speak with me today.

WH: It's a pleasure.

Ed: I wonder if I could ask you first of all a few questions about your background. Your roots are around Rotherham aren't they?

WH: Yes they are. I was born in Rotherham to a Yorkshire family going back a long way.

Ed: Are there any political roots in the family?

WH: No, not really. Very, very limited – one of my grandmothers once stood for the council – but that's it. And she wasn't elected! Not many Conservatives are ever elected in Rotherham. Those that are do very well! So no significant political background in the family at all. There were political views in the family - a family that owned a small business – soft drinks manufacturing and distribution. So there were small business values which I think I continue to represent. But no political activity in the family – I'm a "one off" in my family!

Ed: You're the youngest of four with three big sisters. Do you think that birth order has a significant effect on personality? If you had been the eldest with three little sisters would you have been a different person?

WH: Possibly, but on the whole I suspect not. I tend to the view that quite a lot is hard-wired into you – the sorts of things you're going to be interested in. But it

must have some effect at the margins. Certainly coming after my three sisters and there being quite a gap, I was always a bit different from them. It almost felt like a different generation when I was five and all my sisters were teenagers. So I think I was quite consciously interested in things they weren't interested in, and the gap might have reinforced that tendency. I was going to go to university and I was interested in politics. And I was going to get up early in the morning because teenage girls didn't! There was an element of "I will be distinct from them", but only a bit – I wouldn't want to exaggerate that.

Ed: If there was a big gap between you and your sisters, did that mean that for quite a lot of your childhood you were in effect an only child?

WH: Just for the teenage bit. My youngest sister is seven years older than me. When I was about ten all my sisters had left home to work elsewhere, so from then on I was the only one at home. But I don't think that counts in any way as an only child. I was in constant correspondence with my sisters – long before mobile phones and texts - so we actually had to *write* to each other even as children. But until I was ten they were mainly around, and three of us were, for many years, crowded into one bedroom together.

Ed: Briefly you went to Ripon Grammar School didn't you?

WH: Very briefly yes.

Ed: That wasn't a success was it?

WH: No, it wasn't the right time to leave home for me.

Ed: You were boarding?

WH: Yes, that's right. I didn't settle there at all and also was away from all my friends. So actually I settled much better and rapidly into Wath on Dearne Comprehensive School in Rotherham and never looked back from that really. A local school just a few miles away and I could just get on a bus. It had only recently changed from a grammar school to a comprehensive school, and was a big school – 1800 pupils at the time. I think I owe a lot to that school and was part of a particularly successful year looked at in retrospect academically, in terms of what people have done afterwards. And I'm still in touch with several of my friends from Wath.

Ed: Presumably you must have been quite unusual as a teenage Conservative in a place like that?

WH: Fairly unusual. Certainly a minority! Not an extraordinary rarity. When I stood in the mock elections in 1979 I think I got about 30% of the vote.

Ed: Of course that was a couple of years after your appearance at the Conservative Party Conference wasn't it?

WH: Yes. It was. That was quite an event in the school. I became quite well known when I was sixteen which had its upsides and its downsides. ITN filmed my return to school the following week and 500 people were gathered at the gate. This was meant to be "William Hague going back to a normal day at school". Of course it wasn't normal at all. However it soon became normal again. I knuckled down to the A levels and everybody took it in their stride

really. It was very important not to get too carried away with having given that famous speech. I was offered columns in newspapers and so on. My mother was always very clear – "no you don't do that, you go back to doing your A levels and getting to university". Which I did!

Ed: You went to Oxford and you read PPE there and after that you were with McKinsey for a time?

WH: Yes. I went to Shell initially and then to McKinsey for four or five years.

Ed: Was it under their aegis that you went to Fontainebleau?

WH: Yes. In many ways that was the most enjoyable year I've ever had – the year at Fontainebleau doing my MBA in a class of 80 made up of 25 different nationalities. Those who didn't live on the campus lived in villages (as I did) around the Forest of Fontainebleau. So we worked hard but we also had a fantastic social time. We did our MBAs within a year and then I went back to McKinsey.

Ed: Was the medium of teaching there French or English?

WH: It was predominantly English, but some of the course was in French. But the French was constantly corrupted with the intrusion of English – something that has happened even more in the decades since then. We were told that the French for cash flow forecast was *le cash flow forecast!* Marketing lessons in French would rapidly move into English and people started asking questions and referring to cases in English. A rearguard action was being fought for French in the business world and in MBA courses at that time.

Ed: But you are comfortable speaking French?

WH: Well I'm comfortable listening to French. I did a crash course in the economics and business side of the French language before that. So I was fine for speaking French that year. I'm quite rusty in it now. Often with French politicians they speak French and I speak English directly to each other without any translation. We're happy doing it like that.

Ed: From your teenage years you had an ambition to be an MP. When you were with McKinsey were you tempted to stay with them?

WH: Yes, I was a bit tempted then. I really enjoyed it at McKinsey and enjoyed the business world. When I was 27 it meant taking a pay cut to be an MP. But I do always think you should take the opportunities to do what you have always really wanted to do in life. You don't want to look back when you're 80 and say "I wish I had tried that". At various stages in my life that has led me to do things early on, the first of which was to become an MP. So I put my name in among 363 approved Conservative candidates who sought the nomination in 1988 for Richmond for the by-election and I came out on top. What a long fought by election after that – it was quite a long process!

Ed: As a former patient of the Memorial Hospital I am bound to ask you some NHS-related questions, although I appreciate it's not your brief. I'm aware that your department has perhaps taken more than its fair share of austerity cuts. Do you think it is sustainable that the NHS can be protected from cuts?

WH: Yes I think so. There are so many factors driving up costs all the time – demographic and scientific. And so holding NHS spending steady and increasing it with inflation still requires money to be used

more effectively, as everybody in the NHS knows. There has been a big drive to reduce the amount spent on administration and increase the numbers of doctors and nurses. So, yes, it's proved sustainable in this parliament – even in very challenging economic circumstances. It means we have had to save more money in other departments in order to do it. But we have done that as well! In most Government departments we are managing to do more with less money. I am actually opening 20 British embassies and consulates around the world, enlarging British diplomacy with a lower budget. That's what we all have to do in the modern world. Our ability to do that in other departments is helping to fund the National Health Service.

Ed: Although presumably you don't think that spending more money on health means you necessarily get better healthcare?

WH: Of course not, no. Just as in other departments you can get better results with less money. But in the Health Service, because of the factors I've described – the higher proportion of older people in the population and the constant and necessary advance of medical techniques and science – clearly it would be difficult to have a reduction. But we do see that having the same amount of money doesn't always produce the same result. We can point to some of the issues for the Health Service in Wales for instance which has had some worse outcomes with different policies and different administration.

Ed: Do you think that in the wake of Mid Staffs and the Francis report a spin off has been that it has punctured the deification of the NHS, and that people can now discuss things and suggest things about the Health Service that couldn't have been

contemplated a few years ago?

WH: Well I wouldn't put it exactly the same way – I wouldn't say "punctured deification". I wouldn't want to use language like that. But it has widened the debate about the National Health Service. In my experience as a Member of Parliament, people have always been ready to make criticisms and to suggest improvements. They have regarded the NHS as something very important to them, which it remains, but not something that cannot be criticised. I don't think that's ever been our attitude here in my constituency. So I don't know how much of a change these events will bring. But I think they will make people demand greater accountability, more scrutiny and be alert to performance – good and bad. It will have enhanced all of those things, and if so, some good may come of these terrible events in the end.

Ed: Some people have indicated that there are too many hospitals in this part of the country. Do you agree?

WH: I'm a defender of rural hospitals. I can't speak for the whole country – I'm only speaking as the local MP. I don't suppose there is any perfect number of hospitals in the country. You can see all the pressures for greater specialisation which can lead to a smaller number of centres of medical care. I just argue that there is a balance to be struck between that and sparsity of population. Access is important as well. People have to have access within a reasonable distance – hence the arguments here about maternity services at the Friarage Hospital – something we feel strongly about. In a very sparsely populated area people may be well over an hour's journey from the nearest hospital. So there is a balance there, and going for specialisation and nothing else can take you too far away

from that balance in the rural areas. I'm not trying to make the same argument for anywhere else. As an MP it's the rural areas that I know about and understand.

Ed: After the 2001 election you resigned as Conservative party leader. Do you think it is right for leaders these days automatically to resign following an election defeat? Churchill didn't and Harold Wilson didn't and they went on to win elections subsequently.

WH: Well they did come back as Prime Minister in those two cases and it will vary from case to case of course. In the modern world with its rapidly moving media cycles people do quickly move on to what is the next issue and therefore if you're going to resign at all in the weeks following an election it is better to take the initiative and do it. People can then focus on who is going to be the next leader. So I certainly felt it was right to resign, although some of my colleagues tried to persuade me not to – or at least not for the moment. But most of them were very supportive and saying if, once you've had the election and you've decided you're not the person to win the following election then you might as well go straight away. I never regretted becoming leader of the Conservative Party and I never regretted stepping down from it either.

Ed: When you did step down it allowed you to devote time to writing didn't it?

WH: Yes it did, and this is my other passion apart from my political work. It's been immensely satisfying – the two books that I've done on Pitt and Wilberforce, and I will return to writing in due course.

Ed: That was going to be my next question! Do you have any other books planned?

WH: I don't have any others planned. I hardly

have time to read a book at the moment, let alone to write a book or plan a book! But it is my intention, once I've done everything I can in the political world, to write. To do various things, but writing is top of the list, and I think I would write further books about the eighteenth century and early nineteenth – that is my favoured period, my natural period to write about, so I will return to that eventually.

Ed: Did you find that researching about Pitt and Wilberforce had an effect on you?

WH: Although it would be nice to say yes, perhaps no. In Pitt I felt I was writing about someone who was like me in many ways, although more successful than me! He was Prime Minister for 19 years.

Ed: In 1977 people were saying that you were another Pitt.

WH: Yes, but he has held higher office and for a longer time, although he was also dead at the age of 46! There were things to learn from Wilberforce, particularly the sheer persistence of a long campaign over the years which eventually made a great breakthrough - the campaign to abolish the slave trade. I sometimes feel some inspiration in my campaign now to prevent sexual violence in conflicts, which is my global campaign on which we are making some progress in the United Nations and elsewhere. I'll be doing a lot more on this later in the year. But it also requires persistence, maintaining the pressure for years and winning allies all over the world. Wilberforce went on for decades carrying his campaign to success. So he is quite an inspiration when it comes to mobilising people behind a campaign.

Ed: And of course he had a very profound Christian faith didn't he?

WH: Absolutely, yes, which fortified him through

all those years. But his allies included people who were not Christians. It wasn't a requirement, but for him personally that was something that kept him going as he felt he would have to answer to God for how he had used his time on earth, including whether he had accomplished this campaign.

Ed: At a tangent to this, it seems to me that so many books these days have just had the Spellchecker run on them and haven't been properly proof read or subedited. Do you think that's right?

WH: I think that books are more lightly edited than perhaps they used to be in general. Indeed there are so many new ways in which you can publish books now – you can self publish. So the editing of a book has become a rarer thing. But I found with my publishers (Harper Collins) the subediting in particular was of a very high quality.

Ed: Did they change very much?

WH: No. Only at the subediting level. Both books were much longer than they had asked for and more than I had originally intended. Roy Jenkins before he died had given me some great advice on writing books as a politician. He said "take no notice of the word limit. If you're enjoying yourself, the reader will enjoy it - just go on". So I did, and they didn't cut out anything actually - they didn't mind the length. But the subeditors were very good, ensuring consistency of punctuation and presentation. I think they did a very professional job at that. So that trade still exists in Harper Collins. I don't want to criticise others!

Ed: I understand the other thing you did when you left front line politics was you taught yourself the piano.

WH: Well I taught myself a bit, but I had a good teacher as well.

Ed: Are you still having piano lessons?

WH: No. When I became shadow Foreign Secretary (and it applies even more as Foreign Secretary) I closed the piano lid. If I'm not going to have enough time to keep improving, I'm not going to play. And so another thing I will one day do – on the day I cease to be Foreign Secretary whenever that is – I will open the piano lid and start again.

Ed: So you don't do any playing now?

WH: No - it's just not possible. It's quite hard to describe quite how full my time is. But there are no gaps. I'm on duty 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. When I'm not on engagements, I'm on the telephone. So there is no possibility of playing the piano. But I had four years when I could play a bit. I had a good teacher. I learnt to play some Bach, some Beethoven, and some Mozart. I was just learning to play the Moonlight Sonata at the time I stopped. So I will have to go back a bit and then I will try and pick up the Moonlight Sonata.

Ed: You didn't do any grades?

WH: No – I thought I'd had enough of exams. I just played for my own satisfaction. So again, something good to return to. Music and writing go very well together. If you're having a good day's writing, to intersperse the writing with a walk in the Yorkshire countryside and a half hour now and again on the piano really adds to the freshness of the writing.

Ed: Are you still doing judo?

WH: A little bit. But all these things are pole-axed by being Foreign Secretary. I still practise a little bit. The one thing I try to build into my day come-what-may

is exercise. I run, I swim, do a little bit of judo. Unless you keep fit you can't do this sort of work for very long or very successfully.

Ed: You got to know Ffion when she was teaching you Welsh. Is she still teaching you Welsh?

WH: I have picked up bits of Welsh from her. This is one of the things (there's a long list!) to resume one day. She taught me to sing the Welsh national anthem very quickly when I was Welsh Secretary – which was essential. So I know what people are talking about in Welsh, and it's a beautiful language, but again I haven't had the time to master it. Maybe one day!

Ed: Something I always like to ask my victims, is what book you would take to the mythical Desert Island?

WH: I would take a book by Robert Caro *The years of Lyndon Johnson*. This is in fact the book I chose for the actual Desert Island.

Ed: I wondered if you might have changed it!

WH: No, I haven't. And in fact since then there has been a further volume – there are now four volumes. I don't know if you're allowed four volumes.

Ed: So would you like us to try and get them bound into one volume for you?

WH: Bound into one volume. The fifth one is yet to come! It's almost a life's work by Robert Caro. He is the author who shows the best understanding of politics of any that I've read in my life, makes it an incredible read, and he's also writing about a fascinating time.

Ed: You told Sue Lawley on Desert Island Discs that your luxury would be a dojo*. Would that still be your luxury?

WH: Well I wouldn't mind a dojo still, but probably I would make less use of it than I would have done then 12 or 13 years ago. But what would I take now if not that? There'd be somewhere to run wouldn't there ... a luxury now would have to be a telephone because of the amount of time I spend on it.

Ed: I'm bound to ask you, seeing Margaret Thatcher's portrait looking down on us, was she right to veto your appointment as a Treasury Special Adviser at the age of 21?

WH: I assume she was right about things like that. Actually it worked out very well working in the Research Department instead. Since she supported me to be leader of the Party I can hardly complain! She supported me when it really mattered.

Ed: Lastly, you told Sue Lawley that you lived your life backwards and that you get younger as you get older. Can you still say that?

WH: I think Foreign Secretary has interrupted that a little and has made me get older as I get older, but nevertheless there is still something in that. I still intend to have a great deal of fun and activity as I get older, making up for the rather serious youthful time.

Ed: Remember the old saying – *just because you're getting older doesn't mean you can't be immature.*

WH: Exactly. I'm ever hopeful that is correct.

* A dojo is a practice ring used in judo