
## **With Us or Without Us:** extended interviews

**Interviewer:** Edward Stourton
**Interviewee:** Alastair Campbell, UK Government's Chief Press Secretary

CAMPBELL: It was the day of the prime minister's speech to the TUC as you know, and there'd been all this sort of build-up. It was going to be quite an important, difficult, newsworthy, controversial sort of speech and, of course, in the end never got delivered. What was happening was the prime minister was really just putting the finishing touches to the speech and somebody came in and said there's something happening that you should probably come and see on the TV. I went downstairs - the prime minister was up in the top floor room - to where the office had been set up and the television was on, and at this stage it was the first plane.

And of course I think like a lot of people you'd locate yourself in your reality at that time. So I hope this isn't a sort of harsh thing to say, but one of the first thoughts I had was, well, can the prime minister deliver a speech when something like this is going on? And of course at that stage nobody was absolutely sure what had happened. So we had a kind of initial discussion about that, then back upstairs, switched on the television in the prime minister's room, briefly looked at that and then, of course, the second plane happened.

At that point we had to leave [to go] over to the conference centre. As we were going, we'd left somebody back in the hotel who was simply watching the television and monitoring it. It was while we were walking over to the conference centre that the towers collapsed. Now I think we were 95 per cent certain as we left the hotel that the prime minister wouldn't be able to make the speech. When that came through, it was 100 per cent. And so the prime minister then went on to the platform. He made the brief remarks that he did and then we headed back to London.

Q; What sort of conversations did you have on the way back?

CAMPBELL: It was interesting because it's one of those moments where, whilst it was incredible on one level, the responses and the prime minister's response, in particular, was just very very clear. You know we were just discussing immediate practical issues such as who was going to attend the meeting that the prime minister had called for and that he was going to come to and chair when he came back? A number of conversations about that.

People imagine that because you're the government and you're travelling with the prime minister that [you have] all these incredible ways of finding out what's happening and all the rest of it, and the truth is we were listening to Radio Five. We had somebody with us who was just listening to Radio Five where there was by then continuous coverage, and in the meantime obviously people phoning up from the MoD, from the Foreign Office, the Home Office just sort of briefing us as to what was happening

by way of preparation for the meeting the prime minister was going to chair. I know that I'm employed by the prime minister and I work for him, but what genuinely struck me, and I've seen him in many many circumstances, was that he was onto all the main points straight away, including some of the longer-term main points. You know, issues to do with weapons of mass destruction that would possibly flow beyond this, problems in relation to Muslim opinion in Britain, potential difficulties of wedges that people might try to drive between different races, [between] different parts of the world, how the Pakistanis would react, how the Russians would react. In other words, their responses to what was going on at that time were going to be very very important and would help to frame the subsequent responses.

You were hearing people who were saying, not least on the media, the Americans are bound to do something very very quickly, and the prime minister's sense even then was that they would want to build as big and powerful as possible a coalition for any action that had to be taken. And also in a sense because it was, in American psychological terms, such a huge powerful, almost cataclysmic event, I think he understood that George Bush would get from the American people whatever he required and that would include time. [He understood] that in a sense, whilst it was the obvious response to say, ah well, the Americans are bound to want the administration to lash out. In fact the response of the American people in his view was quite clearly going to be the American people would let the American administration deal with this as they saw fit.

Q: What happened at the meeting when you got back here?

CAMPBELL: I think my recollections of that meeting were that it was very practical and it was very focused on what we had to do for us, as it were, here and now. It was about airports, it was about police, it was about similar attacks being mounted. It was a very kind of detailed discussion about what we did here.

Right from the start in all the many contacts that the prime minister had, the sense you got was of people really just framing a response in their minds and then working towards how that response would then be executed. In all three of the main areas that people were thinking about at that time, which were obviously the diplomatic response, the way we were then going to have to deal with the specific problem which, by then, I think everybody believed to be al-Qaeda, the Taleban, and then very quickly on to some of the other questions that were going to flow from that.

I was struck, for example, just how quickly many of the other leaders were onto the point about the potential of the humanitarian catastrophe developing fairly quickly.

Q; Did you detect more nerves in Europe than you found here?

A; I think our sense of those early contacts with the French and the Germans and the Russians and others, [was that] they were in the same place as us.

I think I'm right as well - I can't remember which of the discussions with Chancellor Schroeder - but Chancellor Schroeder making absolutely clear,

which was a huge thing for them, that if it got to the point of German military involvement then he was going to do that.

Q; The plane trip to New York and the phone call to Iraq, can you describe how that came about?

CAMPBELL: It just did really. I think the prime minister just thought it would be quite a good idea to speak to Khatami (Mohammad Khatami, Iranian president) and it was fixed. Done like that. We were on the plane and he got onto the phone and it was organised through the switchboard in the normal way, and the interpreters were put on in the normal way and away they went.

Q; Sort of diplomacy on the hoof?

CAMPBELL: I think, as you know, at that point there was this idea of Jack Straw going there which of itself was going to be quite an important thing. But I think it was all part of the prime minister thinking, everybody's going to be in the same place in relation to recognising that what has happened under the Taleban and was perpetrated by al-Qaeda is absolutely unacceptable. And I think he was thinking to himself to get the Iranians and Khatami to agree too is a good thing to do.

Q; Can you describe the visit to New York when you got there?

CAMPBELL: I think the main event of the visit was the church service and the prime minister attending that and then meeting some of the families. It was pretty emotional and harrowing, I think, to be in the room afterwards with families who were really suffering. It was an extraordinary mix of people, some of whom had given up hope and some who hadn't. It was a very very emotional gathering.

Q: You then had this famously chaotic drive down to..

A; ..because on the one hand the New York authorities have got a massive amount on their plate. On the other, part of the discussion back here was could the prime minister realistically go to the United States with all this going on. So many British families having been directly affected by this and not go. And you only have to ask the question I think to get the answer to that. The prime minister then going and then having this pretty sort of chaotic ride through New York. And then going to this service, obviously meeting the key New York politicians at the time and then going on to meet President Bush. And the chaos then being transferred out to the airport where we had been whisked onto the plane, but the press who were travelling with us having to go through all the security arrangements. And so we were stuck there waiting for the press to get on board and the prime minister really starting to get worried about whether President Bush was being kept waiting while we were waiting for Adam Bolton to get his bags put through the scanner.

Anyway, that was fine and we got down there and then had the meeting with the president. That was all fine.

Q; Can you tell us about that meeting because I know it was suggested that the prime minister and the president talked privately for a while which was the moment at which things were clinched, that it became clear what was going to happen?

A; There was certainly at the start a session that the two of them went.. it wasn't in a separate room. I think they went over to a corner of this quite big reception room that we'd been in and they had quite a lengthy time, just the two of them. And you know, in terms of how the prime minister recalled that afterwards, it was really just obvious that they were on exactly the same wavelength in terms of what had now to be done and how you set out towards that.

Q: What was the atmosphere like in the White House because it was the middle of a crisis, the president was about to deliver a crucial speech? One would imagine it might have been fairly tense?

CAMPBELL: I've been with the prime minister in a lot of situations before big speeches. They don't come much bigger than the speech that President Bush was about to give, and I think we were all just absolutely amazed at how he didn't appear worried about the speech at all and at several points either the prime minister would be saying, don't you need a bit of time, don't you want to go over and work on the speech a bit - no no, that's all done. It's all sorted, it's fine. Very very unfazed, clear. He was impressive at that meeting.

Q; Were you surprised by the nature of his praise for Britain in that speech because it was pretty unusual?

A; The prime minister seemed to have his responses to this clear right from the word go. So the statement that he made in Number 10 that night, "shoulder to shoulder", it seemed to him it was just the absolutely obvious thing to say and it's what he thought. And I think maybe less surprised than by that, we were surprised just by the extent to which what the prime minister was saying and doing in the days following September 11th struck the chord that they clearly did with the American people. But I was sitting just a couple of rows behind the prime minister in the audience at President Bush's speech and it was quite a powerful feeling to be there. And it was obvious that this whole gathering, which represented the United States, was rising as it did to recognise Britain. It was a very very powerful moment.

Q; Is it fair to say that by the end of those crucial few days after the attacks, the script for the next few weeks was pretty much written although not obviously in detail, but that you knew where you were going at that stage?

A; I think what happened there was that the thinking that had been going on and that the political leaders had been engaged in was coming together. And I think what they felt was that they were on the same park, and that the big things that were going to have to happen.. if you like the outlines of the strategy were clear and were agreed and it was then just a question of working that strategy through.

Q: What about the prime minister's own speech at the party conference, because a lot was made of the fact that that was rather different in tone to his usual speeches and suggested that he wrote it himself? Could you describe the process of putting that together?

A; Contrary to mythology, I'd say the prime minister writes all of his conference speeches, but obviously you get drafts done for you and all the rest of it. But I think it is true to say that this speech, probably more than

any other since the first speech that he made as Labour Party leader, was one where he was absolutely clear about what he was going to say and how he was going to say it, and the vast bulk of it therefore was just him sitting down with a pen and a pad and writing it.

And again, in a sense it wrote itself, based upon the responses that he'd had to the events itself, to the discussions that had been taking place between September 11th and the date of the party conference, and to the reality of what he knew had to happen.

Q; You went off to Russia I think pretty much immediately after that.

CAMPBELL: I think again that was important because the prime minister, as you know, has invested a lot in developing a good relationship with President Putin, and has also been keen for President Bush to do likewise which indeed has happened. And there was also the occasion where the three of them spoke on the phone together which again was a pretty extraordinary thing if you think about it, that President Putin had a call arranged with President Bush [who] had happened to invite the prime minister out there pretty late in the evening so that the three of them actually had a three-way call. And again, I can remember the prime minister coming back to the British Embassy that night and being struck by and pleased by the extent to which President Putin was by and large in the same place as we were in terms of what had to happen.

Q: Surprised?

A; Not surprised to this extent. I mean there had barely been a discussion between the prime minister and President Putin up to that point where President Putin had not made his heartfelt case about the threat of Islamic terrorism, in his case in Chechnya.

Q; And then on to Pakistan. Were you surprised by the speed with which they came on board as it were?

CAMPBELL: I think at the start obviously there had been a lot of speculation both inside and outside government, and I'm sure this is the case in the US, elsewhere, about how the Pakistanis were likely to react. What came through quickly and with real clarity was that General Musharraf intended to be supportive of the coalition. That was obviously a hugely important moment.

Q: During that period the prime minister did a lot of travelling. He went to Pakistan, India, Russia, two trips, I think, to the Middle East and Iran. How did he see his role at that stage? What was he trying to achieve with all that travelling?

CAMPBELL: I think he saw his role as being part of a team of political leaders building support for an agreed strategy. His public role was setting out that strategy and building support for that strategy both in our own country, in the European Union and in the countries that he was travelling to.

Q; The trip at the end of the month to Syria before he went onto Israel and Athens, there was the press conference that caused such a ruckus. How did that come about?

A; I think again there'd been these efforts the prime minister and the Foreign Office had been making to try to get better relations with Syria, to try to get some sort of proper dialogue going. Again he felt it was worth seizing the moment to try to develop that relationship at that time. And for all the fuss that the press conference caused, he was absolutely clear it was the right thing to do, and in fact has commented on this several times since then, that the unusual thing that this kaleidoscope threw into being, [was that] for the long term it was actually one of the more important meetings.

If it meant getting a couple of days' bad headlines about "President Bashar giving him a bashing", as the press put it, then so what? I also think in part our media are not necessarily used to hearing what the Syrians have to say about us or the way that they say it, and the Syrians are not used to dealing with that kind of event. So I think they've explained it afterwards that our press probably found that very very exciting and very interesting and believing every bulletin. But for a day or two I think they were saying, "What was the problem, what was the fuss?" Surely the fact that we're here together speaking this way is just an amazing thing, which of course it was.

Q: Whose idea was it, the press conference?

A; It was just kind of agreed that we'd do that. I don't know if it was anybody's idea, I think it just built into the programme.

Q; How did you find Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat when you went on to Israel after that?

A; I think that, what was clear from the meetings at that time with Prime Minister Sharon and Yasser Arafat.. you could see how difficult it was getting. You could feel how difficult it was getting on both sides. I mean they were difficult meetings, not from the perspective of disagreements with the prime minister necessarily, but you sensed just how difficult it was going to be between Israel and the Palestinians.

Q; During that period, you mentioned Lord Guthrie. You also used Charles Powell, Lord Levy. What's the value of people like that, prime ministerial envoys at a time like this? Why do you use them rather than more conventional diplomatic resources?

A; I think the prime minister's view of this is that if you've got people who have contacts, who have insights, expertise, and that can help your general overall diplomatic effort, then it's sensible to use them. I suppose the short answer to your question is actually that they can operate outside the conventional in a sense. Charles Guthrie can go to see President Musharraf both as a personal friend but also as somebody who General Musharraf knows as understanding the prime minister's mind on some of these issues. And he can do that without all the hullabaloo that would accompany a minister doing it.

Q: Bombing began on what was the seventh, I think. what was the atmosphere in Downing Street like when that happened?

A; We got back from this trip and we'd come back from India, and we got off the plane. I think we knew by then what was going to happen, but the prime minister had a call booked with President Bush. We got off the

plane, got into the car and, of course, it was the England/Greece game and, in part because we want to know but also because the journalists on the plane were constantly sending notes down to demand to know the score, the pilot had kept in touch.. and, of course, when we got off the plane as things stood England were not going to go through automatically. We got in the car, turned on the radio and Beckham had this free kick and he scored. So that was a very very happy landing.

Then we got into Number 10. The prime minister had the call with President Bush. Now, by then the military plans were as it were set. The discussions we were then having were with our opposite numbers about how it was going to be announced, when president would go out and speak on television, when the prime minister would do likewise, and these big events like that, they kind of take over themselves.

Q: So what inspired you to set up the coalition information centre?

A; It was really born of our experience over Kosovo where you had a situation where we'd all assumed that Nato - because Nato has got a very strong image for want of a better word and is respected – Nato would have a really great buzzing media operation. The truth is it was Jamie Shay and a few people helping him. I'm amazed how Jamie Shay managed to keep going as long as he did. But what became clear is that in these huge international events, which command attention now right round the world, where deadlines don't matter, time zones don't matter and it's just a story that is happening all the time, an individual country or an individual part of a government just isn't equipped to deal with it. The media now is so fast and it's so big and what happens in one part of the world now, on the television, can have an impact on every single government around the world that's having to deal with it. Something that somebody says, an incident.

So what the CIC (Coalition Information Centre) was about - in a sense a bigger version of what we'd done for Kosovo - was to put together the main parts of the coalition response in communication terms and have systems that meant that they were constantly interconnected, so that we all knew the main things that were happening, the main messages that were being put out by the main players, the main vehicles for that to happen. It's just a way of making sure that you're working together and maximising your resources, and that you are helping each other with the problems that arise.

Q: Were there times during the campaign, late October/early November, when you felt you were losing people, losing support?

A; If you're the democratically elected president of America, or the democratically elected prime minister of the United Kingdom or the democratically elected president of France or any of the other big democracies involved in this, you know you are well known, you are constantly scrutinised, you are constantly made to, as it were, defend your position, you're very very well known to your publics. Along comes a terrorist organisation that is subject to no real scrutiny because nobody knows where they are. That is a subject suddenly of endless fascination to people because suddenly the world is talking about these people who the vast majority of the population in Britain or anywhere else had never heard of, Bin Laden.

Unless they were particularly interested in these issues why should they. So they [al-Qaeda] were able to operate a communications policy that consisted of hiding in a cave and throwing out a video every now and again. And you guys were just absolutely fascinated by this and it became another propaganda success for Bin Laden. If our communications strategy had been to hide in a cave and throw out the odd video, you'd have said we'd completely lost it.

Added to which, the Taleban had these briefings in Pakistan which again were a source of fascination to you guys. They were able to operate according to rules that we wouldn't be allowed to get away with. I mean these guys are sat there, Zaif sat there day after day and just told a pack of lies. And you guys let him. You reported them. He was commanding CNN live, BBC World live, Sky live and the rest of it. I think that again was part of our response in the CIC, actually to say look, we can't let these guys get away with it. We have got to be far more aggressive, pro-active about getting the truth about the situation out there.

It was only at that point where I think you were able to say Bin Laden was quotes, "winning the propaganda war". But it was only at a superficial level because once you actually explored the arguments.. and of course whilst on one level these videos were a great communications vehicle for him, don't forget it was on one of them that he admitted things that up until then he'd been denying. And once they start, once they openly admitted and were clearly boasting about the fact that they'd done this, then in terms of any "propaganda support", they'd lost it.

Q: And at a government level rather than just in public opinion, was there a wobble at the end of October amongst some of the Arab nations?

CAMPBELL: I don't accept that. I think there were two points at which the media started to talk about a wobble and I don't accept, actually, that was in reality happening. I think the message that was coming through to us from most of the Arab countries was look, the sooner it's finished the better. But that is not the same as a wobble.

Q: Were you surprised by the fall of Kabul when it came? A lot of people seemed to have been.

A; I think we were surprised at the speed with which the Taleban appeared to fall, yes.

Q: The president's state of the union address, the "axis of evil" speech - did that catch you by surprise or did you know he was going to say that?

CAMPBELL: No, in fact one of the things that happened as a result of the setting up the three centres in London Washington and Islamabad is that we had people in Washington and Washington had people here. We had one of President Bush's top communications people with us here in Number 10 and the Foreign Office for something like six months, and we had people out there. So we were aware both of the fact of the speech and of the content.

Q; Were you worried about it at all? I mean you must have seen that it is a problem of perception if nothing else?

A; Yes, but I think one of the purposes of a speech like that is to be noticed and to make a big point. Now the point that was being made was the threat of weapons of mass destruction, and it was clear once you saw the speech that it was going to be a speech that was going to come under tension and generate an awful lot of debate. But it didn't pose any particular or insurmountable difficulties for us.

Q; And in broad terms – we won't I'm sure go into detail about this at the moment - but what sort of conversations have you had with the White House about Iraq since then?

CAMPBELL: One of the hopefully long-term benefits of what happened and the way that the various people involved responded to it is that the level of contact at every level between us and the Americans is very very strong. So all of these issues, either in my case when what I do [is] high profile in the media or in the case of somebody like David Manning who's constantly dealing on the policy side of things - some of the more medium and long-term issues - then there's constant contact a real sort of openness and trust. I think that is important.

Q; Just a final question on that. Given that very open contact between the two of you, have there been times when you've said, "Hang on, don't do that because..", and the Americans have said, "Oh good point, we won't?"..

CAMPBELL: ..and times when they've said, "Hang on don't do that." Look we got into a situation in relation to the CICs where we were having these daily conference calls that involved the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon, the NSC (National Security Council), us at Number 10, the Foreign Office. We had the people out in Pakistan and they were very very frank discussions about how to handle - I'm just talking now about you know the communications issues. For example the discussions about the timing of things, when and how to launch something that might be an important communications vehicle.

I'll just give you one example. On the day that - was it Mazar-e-Sharif fell or Kabul fell - when the prime minister was due to be in the Commons, I think it might have been Kabul. Was it a Wednesday? The prime minister was due to be in parliament. I can't remember honestly whether it was prime minister's questions or a statement, but he was due to be in parliament. I think it was prime minister's questions, but anyway the prime minister was due to be in parliament that afternoon and the news was coming through that the Taleban were just falling and falling and falling and falling. And we had sent through to Tucker Eskew, the guy from the White House who was working here, a copy of what the prime minister intended to say. The word came back that the Americans felt we weren't yet in a position to say that the Taleban had fallen, as it were. So you know we changed it, we changed its tone. That kind of discussion was happening all the time.

Q; Transatlantic editing almost?

A; Well it was. We were very open about that kind of thing and the lines that we were taking. Tucker was at every single morning meeting that I chair for the entire time that he was here. Remember the famous Colin Powell speech about the Middle East, for example, which got weeks and weeks and weeks of coverage, the speech that was coming. We were able to get

Tucker who would explain to us where they were on it and where the policy was, where the speech was, when it was likely to be, that kind of thing. Likewise he was able to ask us on a daily basis on any issue: what our line was, what we were saying, what the prime minister was likely to be doing. So it was very very open and useful. And in fact he has gone back to do a job that is full-time [on] these issues of global diplomacy, and we're still plugged in on a very regular basis.

We live here in Britain in one of the most aggressive political and media environments anywhere in the democratic world. Tucker spent six months here and he said when he went back to Washington, I don't think I'll ever complain about the American media again. So that is what we live in. I mean it would only matter if it were true, put it that way. If there was substance to it, it would matter but it isn't true. I mean the prime minister is somebody who develops foreign policy or indeed any other policy based upon what he perceives to be the British national strategic interest. That's what he does. He has always been clear that a hugely important part of his job is to have a very good relationship with the president of the United States which is the most powerful nation on earth. We have a very good relationship, and he sees it as part of his job to nurture and develop that relationship.

Now, in relation to what happened post-September 11th, if you talk to people in the American media, they will say to you, look it's incredible that the prime minister of Britain, which after all is in their eyes a medium-sized to large European power, vis-a-vis America.. the prime minister's got, they think, this extraordinary access and influence and all the rest of it. So if he is able by having a good strong relationship with the president of the United States to benefit Britain in its pursuit of the objectives that we hold and which we set out very very clearly in that party conference speech, then that's a good thing. And if it means that some newspapers and some politicians are going to say he's Bush's poodle, well so what.

If you put to him his relationship with any of these other major players around the world he will explain to you why it matters for Britain and for Europe and therefore for the rest of the world, that he gets on with them. And, therefore, you know he works at getting on with them. What we were able to do -because in a sense we've been trying long before September 11th with, I think, we have to acknowledge limited success - we've been trying to improve our outreach to Muslim opinion in Britain and to Muslim opinion abroad. What I think became very very clear to us after September 11th is just how limited our success in that had been and we set up these regular briefings for the Arab media based in London. But we also set up a new Islamic media unit in the Foreign Office which is carrying on and, I think, now will carry on permanently. [Its] job is to try to improve understanding with the Islamic world about what it is that we're about, both the British government but also as Britain. I think that was important, and in a sense, talking to the Americans about that and involving them in that became important as well.

Q; What about domestically? How did you deal with that here?

A; By stepping up our contacts with them and our efforts to reach out to them. And, you know, you're talking often of newspapers that may have very small circulation but they have very high level reach within the communities that they're circulating in. So the prime minister did a number of articles and interviews with the Muslim media here. It was a

challenge because of course the Sikh community, I think, started to feel that we were in a sense neglecting them, and so there's a sort of spill-over. You then have to address that and it's really just a sense of what you're trying to do with something like the CIC – [to] have the sort of big general strategic messages that you're trying to put out as it were around the clock, around the world. But then within that you've got particular constituencies that you have to address. Within Britain, for example, it became an issue - why is the prime minister always abroad the whole time? You have to just constantly explain and try to put over the fact. Well, actually we came to a point where it was actually setting out how many hours he spent on domestic hours, how many hours he spent on international because you must never lose sight of the fact that that may be something that people genuinely feel. And therefore you have to address that.

Also by explaining why it is so important that the prime minister is doing the things that he's doing on the international stage and linking those to the domestic agenda. The whole business about drugs in Afghanistan ending up being the drugs that are killing young people on British streets, the potential impact upon the economy of September 11th. These are domestic messages that you are setting within the international context. But then you've got the whole business of opinion in the Middle East, what the Palestinians may think of the messages that we are putting out, what the Israelis may think. How you're getting your message over in somewhere as important as Pakistan in relation to what had happened to post-September 11th and then as you say, the huge plethora of ethnic media that there is now in Britain.

One thing that did surprise me was just how soon after September 11th in terms of, if you like, media aggressiveness on some of these issues.. because the Americans had far longer in a sense. It was several months almost, weeks and months after September 11th, before the media started to see the government as something that you kick around again. Here it happened a lot quicker and that's when I think we realised. You can't rely on that sentiment that you're alluding to. You know you've got to be out there pro-actively communicating what it is that you're trying to do, explaining it, putting it in a bigger context, but also boiling it down for particular constituencies as well.