



Tom Watson is regarded as a hero of the Leveson Inquiry

PARTY MAN

Labour deputy chairman Tom Watson speaks at the Rose this month. Robert Edwards meets him at Parliament for a sneak preview

It is not every day that you meet a political celebrity, and certainly not one from your hometown. Factor in the ability to rattle the cages of powerful institutions and numbers positively dwindle.

However, in my case the exception to this particular rule is Tom Watson, MP for West Bromwich and deputy chairman of the Labour Party, and with his appearance at *Kingston Connections* storytelling festival close at hand, what better time to interrogate this increasingly public figure?

However, pinning him down has been no easy task. After one abortive visit, and a thorough frisking at Portcullis House (apparently packs of spare batteries look remarkably like a clip from a semi-automatic weapon), I finally encounter the man himself at Westminster.

Watson rises from behind his desk and is apologetic that our meeting has been so difficult to arrange. However, the historic vote on the gay marriage bill is less than an hour away, so platitudes on our shared origins and idle chit chat must be kept to a minimum.

Author of a devastating tome on Rupert Murdoch's media empire, *Dial M For Murdoch*, the 46-year-old has come to be regarded as something of a hero of the Leveson Inquiry into press standards, serving on the Culture Media and Sport Select Committee at the height of the phone hacking scandal. It will be one of the hot topics he will focus on during his talk at *The Rose* this month.

"I've genuinely been on a journey in life as well as politics," he says. "The experience of the News International scandal has obviously seared me personally and politically. I'm much more questioning and much more sceptical."

Watson will share the platform at the *Rose* with Daily Mirror political columnist, Kevin Maguire. Besides promoting his book, Watson hopes to encourage debate on press regulation.

"Kevin is a formidable interviewer, so I don't think he's going to give me an easy time of it," he grins.

"People say my book's a good read and they get a lot out of it. It's had decent reviews – not in any *News International* papers mind you!"

Himself a victim of tabloid slurs, winning substantial libel damages from the Sun newspaper in 2009, what lessons has Watson drawn from his battles with the press barons?

"It certainly gave me an insight into how the worst parts of the tabloid media operate," he sighs deeply. "There were lots of warnings and veiled threats, which are documented in the book. It is a very scary place to be. And, as we know now, they hired people to follow me around."



With press owners in open revolt and anxieties over the integrity of our free press, is Tom confident Leveson's proposals will lead to meaningful reform?

"I don't know where we're going to go on regulation – the jury's out on it. And it seems the proprietors of the media groups are seeking to defy parliamentary unity on this. If it's not settled soon, it could for the first time be an issue in a general election."

"For me, these are lessons about vested interests and unaccountable institutions. Where trust and power

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deficits exist, you've got to go out and change the system, and be bold and courageous to do it."

It is rather appropriate then that Watson is now charged with the task of reshaping Labour's campaign strategy.

"We're a party with much less income than we've had historically. We have to accept that we are a volunteer-led party, and we have to put faith in our members to deliver that."

Arnie Graf, an American specialist in community organising, was hired by team Miliband to instruct on the party's ambitious grassroots renaissance. Tom ardently endorses his boss's new ethos.

"I feel a great debt of loyalty to Ed Miliband," he says frankly. "It really came about when he challenged David Cameron at Prime Ministers Questions and called for Rebekah Brooks to resign and for the BSkyB bid to be shelved."

"I don't think he quite gets the recognition he deserves for that. What he was really doing was severing a relationship with the most powerful media oligarch on the planet."

"Even though I'm a gnarled up veteran, I want to believe in my leaders and I want them to be brave and to speak their mind. So I'm with him all the way."

It's been a difficult time for the Tories just lately, and Watson, a lifelong Labour Party activist elected to Parliament in 2001, can scarcely conceal his smugness at seeing his opponents flounder.

"I find it difficult to analyse just what the Conservative Party's plan is at the moment," he chuckles. "It's so unprecedented with these recent events, the gay marriage bill and the rebellion on Europe. I think they've inflicted serious psychological damage on themselves."

Watson's political views were forged in his formative years.

"My parents come from Sheffield, which was obviously quite a hotbed of politics with the coal and steel industry. They were Labour Party members, so I've got that kind of lineage."

"There was always politics in the living room. We would discuss current affairs even when I was young."

Tom recalls meeting the former Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, on the star struck 17-year-old's first day at party HQ.

"It was like meeting your childhood hero," says Tom, wide-eyed. "I was so nervous I could hardly speak to him. Now later in life I've got to know him quite well. He was definitely a hero in my teens – a brilliant orator, a great speechwriter."

His admiration is not only reserved for fellow party members, however.

"I admire politicians from other parties, too. I really admire Harold MacMillan, who in my view was the greatest ever Tory prime minister, who did bold things in difficult times, like electrification and massive house building programmes that today I'm not sure we could achieve."

Today, of course, the political landscape can seem more marked by scandal than debate and reform, and this is particularly pertinent given another subject likely to get an airing at the Rose, namely the ongoing inquiry into alleged child sex abuse at the Elm Guesthouse, Barnes, in the 1980s.

At Prime Minister's Questions last October, Watson told a hushed Commons there was "clear intelligence of a widespread paedophile ring" with links to Parliament and Downing Street, adding credence to claims of an establishment cover-up.

"My office was inundated with allegations, evidence, claims, survivors coming through, and there was an allegation made about the Elm Guesthouse," he explains.

A criminal investigation, Operation Fernbridge, is now in progress.

It is no surprise then that Tom has gained a crusading reputation as a thorn in the side of powerful and ostensibly opaque institutions. Surely a cabinet position awaits him should Labour squeak to victory in 2015?

"I do have ambition, but not in the classic sense, wanting the next promotion in the Labour Party. I would be happy to get a place in a future cabinet, but I wouldn't be unhappy if I didn't."

"I've seen politicians crushed by political rejection. But it wouldn't be the end of the world if Ed wanted to build a different, younger team. But the one thing I know in this game is you never say never in politics."

■ Tom Watson, June 27, 8pm. Tel: 08444 821 556

LET'S CONNECT

Kingston Connections is a joint venture organised by *Kingston University*, the *Royal Borough of Kingston*, the *Rose Theatre*, *Creative Youth* and various community partners. It is a feast of storytelling using the spoken word, music, film and performance, and featuring actors, writers and academics. There is an eclectic choice on offer; here is just a handful of what's available.

Jack Straw, MP (below) – discourses on his life in politics, with anecdotes from his 13 years and 11 months in government, including spells as Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary, Lord High Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice. June 25, 8pm, Rose Theatre

Professor Lord Peter Hennessy – will be *Telling The Story As It Happens*, with a talk about how to make sense of history from the Cold



War, to Ground Zero, Suez and the Eurozone crisis. June 26, 7pm, Rose Theatre

What Do Fairy Tales Mean? The Interpretation of Popular Narrative Tradition – Kingston University's Dr Andrew Teverson explores the hidden meanings in popular narrative traditions, touching upon psychoanalytic, political and socio-historical explanations. June 22, 11.30am, Kingston University

Eddance: BEASTS – A scratch performance of dance by acclaimed Eddance, based on the role fairy tales and folk tales have in our society. June 30, 7pm, Rose Theatre

Oysterband – touring since 1978 Oysterband have brought modern, folk-based British music to more than 35 countries. They offer 'music for the head, the heart and the trousers.' June 26, 7.30pm, Rose Theatre

■ Kingston Connections, June 22-30, various venues. Tel: 08444 821 556. kingstonconnections.co.uk