

## Where next for the (broadcast) political interview? David Dimbleby looks back and forward

It all went wrong with the introduction of the sofa. Once politicians had the option of a cozy chat with comfy pillows, then the gladiatorial combat of the traditional broadcast interview was dead.



The other David, Frost on the sofa with Mrs Thatcher

That is the core message from David Dimbleby's thoughtful [lecture](#) on the art of the political interview, given to celebrate the 90th birthday of the psephology legend Sir David Butler. The [BBC recorded it so you will be able to judge for yourself](#), but listening in St Peter's Chapel, Oxford along with a selection of broadcasting's great and not so good, I realised just how much the form has changed and wondered whether it is now effectively dead.

Newsnight editor Ian Katz has written an [intelligent and progressive analysis](#) of the crisis of the TV political interview. He suggests that to revive it politicians and journalists need to agree to a more relaxed, slightly less adversarial approach where the politicians are allowed to stray beyond the soundbites and indulge in thinking aloud without the journalist jumping on any phrase that does not fit precisely with the party line. Time, says Katz, is of the essence. Even a 5-7 minutes Newsnight (or Today programme) interview is not enough to get past the posturing.

Dimbleby agrees with Katz that size matters. But he worries that a more gentle approach will 'lack theatre'. His ideal is a long, but forensic and even aggressive interview. It was, of course, the kind of thing that Brian Walden (Weekend World), Robin Day (Panorama) and the other Dimbleby (On The Record)\* excelled at in the 70s and 80s. David himself pioneered it on *This Week, Next Week* but most of all as part of his frequent presenting from party conference and election programmes.

But a combination of sofas and spin doctors has, according to Dimbleby, made the set-piece interrogation sterile, precisely at the moment when politics – and politicians – really do need to be able to explain themselves and be held thoroughly to account.

There are other factors apart from the format that is killing the interview. Politics itself had become less ideological and more personality-driven. So the arguments feel more about process than principle, about the detail rather than the ideology. That makes for less interesting telly.

Dimbleby's answer is somewhat self-serving but I broadly agree. Yes, he says we do need a revived version of long-form political broadcast interview. But a lot is being done already by the

voters themselves. The public, as seen on the BBC's Question Time, hosted by Dimbleby, does a very good job of asking the tough, direct questions and reacting when fobbed off with clichés and platitudes. In his lecture Dimbleby showed clips of the BBCQT audience shredding MPs Pickles and Beckett over their complacent attitude to MPs' expenses. A more recent example was the way the audience exposed the cynical exploitation by Angela Eagle of Lord Freud's remarks about welfare benefits. [[Video here](#)] Dimbleby is right. This is the most 'democratic' and effective political interviewing on British TV at the moment. And it's popular.

Dimbleby thinks that it is time to replace what he called the 'industrial process' of routine broadcast political interviews. 'Politicians should take the risk of direct contact with the public via social media' and leave the journalists to do the long, set-piece exchanges. This makes sense to me, but I suspect that although this could be in the politicians long-term interest, they have become so risk-averse that they will miss the opportunity to re-connect.

[\*I was a producer at On The Record in the early 90s]



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