

# The Greatest Media Politician Ever?

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No, not Tony. Though he could turn any hostile question to his own advantage.

No, not Margaret. Though she mastered the soundbite and dominated her (largely male) interrogators.

No, not even the emollient, budget-airline-travelling PR man David Cameron.

The best politician as interviewee is Ken Livingstone.



This is according to the Independent's Steve Richards, as revealed in his latest [Rock and Roll Politics Live performance](#). He gives some interesting reasons that I think provide lessons for anyone seeking to get their message across on modern broadcast media (and possibly online and print, too).

In his live show at Kings Place Steve recounts how Red Ken managed to outwit an outraged Paul Johnson back in the early 80s on the Meet The Press Programme. Johnson was ranting about Ken's meeting with Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams, who back then was still seen as a terrorist rather than the genial peacemaker and friend of [Ian Paisley](#) that he became. Ken reacted to Johnson's barrage of fury with a calm, polite, detailed response. He was relaxed and personable. It was the kind of affable, sensible performance that helped disarm the right-wing press stereotype of 'Red Ken'. Ken had

used TV to talk to the public direct.

The rest is history. Ken went on to a career as the most popular politician in London. Steve's point is that since the mid 70s TV has changed political discourse into an intimate dual of personalities. Politicians have been slow on the uptake.

As Steve pointed out, some others like Ken Clarke also understood that a small measure of honesty and a huge dose of relaxed chutzpah can overcome the toughest questions during an interview. Others like Gordon Brown were paralysed by trying to outguess the journalists and an obsession with detailed spin and 'messaging'. He was so busy trying to get his lines right that he forgot to communicate.

I suspect that one of the problems with the current trio of party leaders is that they are too isolated from 'normal' conversation. They are all professional, career, life-long political wonks. They talk politalese. They have been drafting manifestoes and scripting speeches all their working lives.

And they are under huge pressure from their staff never to slip up. Certainly, Ed Miliband's [Martin Luther King moment](#) in Hyde Park was wrong. Yes, Nick Clegg's [self-pitying weeping to music](#) was jarring. But they were both damaging because politicians and their staff are so paranoid about the 'gotcha' mentality of the Westminster press corps.

I think Steve is right that both the red and blue Kens were great examples of how politicians can avoid this trap if they speak human. As John Prescott has found on Twitter, we live in an age when politicians with real personality, passion and political integrity can now speak directly to the public. It's time for our leaders to find their human voice.



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