

CAMPBELL



In October 2007, Menzies Campbell resigned as Leader of the Liberal Democrats after just nineteen months in the post. On page 45 we carry a review of his autobiography. In July of this year *Journal* Editor **Duncan Brack** interviewed him with a view to supplementing the story told in the book.

AS LEADER

Q: Your autobiography has relatively little to say about why you became and remain a Liberal, apart from being attracted by Jo Grimond and the Liberal position on Suez. Can you say more about why you joined the party?

MC: My parents were both Labour – neither of them were activists, I think their memberships had probably lapsed by the time I was a teenager, but they did talk a lot about politics. And the first thing I was conscious of was Suez in 1956; I remember thinking, because there were National Servicemen at Suez and I was fifteen, that three years later and it could have been me. That was a seminal moment for British politics: this was the lion pretending to roar but having no claws and sounding rather hoarse; and of course it brought the end of Anthony Eden. For Britain it was the end of the immediate post-war era, something of a watershed. And lo and behold, bestriding all this was Jo Grimond who, it seemed to me, was the person who spoke out most effectively and charismatically. There was the Torrington by-election, too; I remember schoolboys shouting ‘remember Torrington!’ It did seem that under Jo, Liberalism was going to have a renaissance. Then I went to university, and politics was the fashionable activity for students at the time. I used to say that my first serious act of rebellion was to join the Liberal Party, because my parents were

both socialists. So I suppose it was a series of factors: being more politically aware, being attracted by Jo Grimond, seeing what some thought might be a Liberal renaissance, reading John Stuart Mill, and not wanting to do what might be expected of me – none of these was of itself the compelling factor, but taken together I joined the Liberals.

Political debating was the thing at university. There was a kind of progression: first-year students had to make their mark, then you had to try and become Treasurer of the political club, and then Secretary, and then you would lead it in your fourth year. And so I got on to that treadmill – although I was the only politically active student who was on the running track as much as I was in the debating chamber, and from time to time the two were not entirely in sync. So, that’s why ... and I just felt naturally sympathetic and at home; I sometimes refer to it as gut Liberalism.

Q: How would you describe that if someone asked you to sum it up in a sentence? What are the values of gut Liberalism?

MC: Individual freedom; personal liberty; opportunity. This is the way I put it in the book: ‘I count myself to have had a privileged life in which opportunity has always played a significant part. I see my life as one of experience and not of achievement.’ Those two sentences have to be read together. My father left

school when he was fourteen; his first job was as an office boy in a tea import company. That was thought by his parents not to be a very stable existence, so he went and he served his apprenticeship as a joiner, and he worked on one of the ships that was built on Clydeside as part of the effort to deal with the worst of the recession. His brother was a great ladies’ man and used to go to the dance halls, but my father went to night school; and eventually he had his own business. As for my mother, her friends and contemporaries say she could have played hockey for Scotland: she was a very good sportswoman. So when I was growing up, there was a feeling that they were doing their best for me; there was a sense of duty about making the most of it. So that’s what I think a Liberal society should provide: it should offer opportunity for those who are lucky enough to have the talent, and it should offer support for those who need it. And the overall arching cement that binds it all together should be freedom, individual liberty and human rights – and internationalism.

Q: Although they’re not as wide as journalists pretend, there are some differences between the so-called ‘economic liberals’ and ‘social liberals’ in the Lib Dems. Where would you put yourself in the party now?

MC: I tried to argue during my leadership that this was an artificial distinction. I mean, there’s no intrinsic merit in

Left: Menzies Campbell during his leader’s speech at the Liberal Democrat conference autumn 2006

taxation, any more than there's intrinsic merit in nuclear weapons; it's what the consequences are that is important. Taxation is only justified to the extent that it's necessary to provide the quality of public services, particularly health and education, that a civilised society should embrace. Now I don't know if that's left- or right-wing; but it's certainly always been my view that there is no point taxing for taxing's sake. On individual freedom, on the British spectrum I suppose I would be regarded as being strongly on the left – though within our own party the spectrum may not be exactly the same. I was also robust on defence. I supported David Steel in all his trials and tribulations over nuclear weapons. And actually, going back to Jo, the policy in Jo's time was for a nuclear deterrent, but a NATO nuclear deterrent to which the UK would subscribe; and of course that's in effect what has happened, because British nuclear weapons are effectively assigned to NATO. So, I was always a Grimondite, I always accepted the utility of nuclear weapons. But that is not inconsistent with disarmament. I'm signed up to the 'Toward a Nuclear-Free World' initiative put forward by Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn, which Margaret Beckett also supported, trying to put some bite into the whole notion of multilateral disarmament. So, there you are: strong on defence, strong on civil liberties, no taxation for taxation's sake.

I suppose I was always regarded as being on the right because my jacket and my trousers always matched ... what's very interesting is the difference in the party now. I remember the first party assembly I went to – 1961 in Edinburgh – and there were lots of suits about; but then the party changed quite dramatically thereafter and there weren't quite so many suits! Now there's a proper mixture. But I suppose I was always regarded as being

part of the suits. And I was a supporter of David Steel's, of course, who would have been regarded as being on the right of the party in some respects. But remember, he was Chairman of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, President of Shelter, and author of the Abortion Act of 1967. So, I'm answering your question by saying that I do not think it is easy to characterise people within our party as necessarily left and right.

Q: You don't say much about your period as Chair of the Scottish Liberal Party, from 1975 to 1977, apart from stabilising its finances. What do you think you achieved in this period?

MC: It happened because there was a palace revolution. In 1974, we'd fought almost everything – 68, I think, out of the 71 seats in Scotland, as part of the Thorpe strategy in the second election of '74 – and we didn't have the resources to do it. There were people in tears because they never got what they were promised from headquarters. So there was a Young – or Middle-Aged – Turks' revolution, of which I was part. You ask me what I did then. It's a good question. I kept the ship afloat. It does seem to me that I have often been the coxswain in the lifeboat! We had practically no money; we were bust until we developed an early form of the lottery. What I was doing was holding the damn thing together – with a very good man as Treasurer called John Lawrie, who was an actuary, terribly precise. So – survival. It was also the beginning of a serious debate about home rule, devolution; Labour was frightened to death by the success of the SNP in October 1974. Since we had very few MPs, as Chairman I did a lot of television and radio. We tried to put some meat on the bones of the federalist case.

Ashdown resigns

Q: Looking back, do you still think it was the right decision not to have

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stood for the leadership in 1999? After all, although Charles Kennedy looked unbeatable at the start of the campaign, Simon Hughes's campaign almost caught him, and might have overtaken him if it had started earlier.

MC: I'd been very closely associated with the so-called 'Project'; I was one of the small group of people to whom Paddy would talk before he went to meet Blair and to whom he would come back and report. And it seemed to me that although the party may not have known just how far these discussions had gone on, nonetheless by 1999 they knew more or less what had been happening and they were ready for something else. And it didn't seem to me that someone who had been so close as I had could provide that something else.

Also, the clear impression was that Charles was way out in front. I always assumed that his campaign was ready to run. He'd become President, he'd been round the country, he was well known, and very good on the box. It seemed to me that he was unassailable. Don Foster and Nick Harvey and I met several times under the chairmanship of Archy Kirkwood to determine whether one of us should stand, but in the end all three of us, for different reasons, decided that we wouldn't and we then all gave our support to Charles.

Also, because David and then Paddy had become such close friends of mine, I knew what the frustrations of leadership were. I know it cost both of them in terms of family life and personal life; although there was one thing which they didn't have to contend with to the same extent as we all do now, and that is the 24-hour-a-day constant news agenda. I talked to Elspeth, and we wrote down the pros, we wrote down the cons. The cons included not being able to keep on doing any legal work, which was quite important to my financial responsibilities. The cons outnumbered the pros very considerably.

Q: Do you still think that was the right decision?

MC: Yes. People do say, as you pointed out in your question, look at how close Simon Hughes got – but remember, he was coming from a different wing of the party from me. And then (the things we wish we'd never said!) I was asked about it and I said, 'Well, for ten minutes a day I think I made a mistake, and then common sense kicks in.' Of course everyone quotes the first half of the sentence and not the second. I never regretted the decision not to stand. I knew in my heart that for sound, sensible reasons it wasn't for me; standing was a romantic kind of speculation which soon vanished in the cold light of reality.

Q: Do you think Paddy was right not to groom a successor? Because it meant that his whole agenda – the 'Project' – disappeared after he stepped down.

MC: David Steel didn't groom a successor, and neither did Jo Grimond. And it was the British people that made Paddy's agenda disappear when they gave Blair a majority of 160. Although, right up until November 1998, when Paddy decided to step down, Blair was still talking in terms of replacing Gavin Strang and David Clark [ministers in Blair's first Cabinet] with Liberal Democrats – I heard some of this from David Clark, who's a friend of mine. They got wind of it and there was a real mobilisation against it in the Labour Party, to the extent that Blair would have found it impossible to do. This was against the backdrop of the Joint Cabinet Committee. Robin Cook and I became firm friends, we got on like a house on fire – stemming from the Scott Inquiry into arms to Iraq in 1996, when Robin and I had combined our forces because we were covering it for our respective parties. It was in foreign affairs that we made the JCC work perhaps better than anywhere else.

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The Kennedy leadership

Q: If you had been elected leader in 1999 instead of Charles Kennedy, what would you have done differently?

MC: I think I would have tried to keep open a dialogue with Labour – though I'm not sure that it would necessarily have taken the form of the JCC, nor that it would have lasted very long. My analysis of Blair is that he went on a journey almost from the moment he became Prime Minister; he turned into this quite extraordinary authoritarian figure. We would not have been able to live with him on tuition fees, or Europe. We would have been disappointed at the failure to give full-blown freedom of information. I was particularly disappointed by his insistence on a referendum on home rule. In fact I threatened to vote against the bill, because we had campaigned for devolution, it was in our manifesto; there was absolutely no reason why the legislation shouldn't be introduced without a referendum. The heavies were put on me; Roy [Jenkins] was detailed to ring me up and say, 'You may not like this, but sometimes in politics you've got to do things you don't like, and the relationship between us and the Labour Party is very important to the ultimate achievement of the home rule legislation, and you would be being extremely unhelpful if you were to vote against.' Roy could always move me in the direction he thought I should go.

So, whoever had been leader, I think there would inevitably have been a parting of the ways. And of course Iraq was the determining issue, the straw that would have broken the camel's back. So, if it had been my responsibility then I would have attempted to have kept the non-doctrinaire, centre-left alliance together – but I believe that Blair's political movement across the spectrum would have made that increasingly difficult, and

Iraq would most certainly have been the end of it.

Q: You opposed Charles speaking at the big anti-war demonstration in February 2003 (though backed him when he decided to speak). Why?

MC: If you remember, on that platform there were a lot of not-very-liberal people, and there was a lot of visceral anti-Americanism. Now, as you know, I spent a year in California; one of my best friends is Jeff Bingaman, who is US Senator for New Mexico – he voted against Iraq. There were lots of Americans who were on the same side of the argument as us, and my feeling was that to be associated with such fundamentalist anti-Americanism was really not a good thing at all.

But what happened was that Charles went to lunch at *The Guardian*, and they gave him a very hard time. (I went to one of their lunches in the autumn of 2005; there were about eight or ten people around the table, and I never got to eat my sandwich! It was unlimited inbound fire for an hour and a half or so, really hard pounding.) When he came back, not surprisingly he took some account of that and then decided he would go on the march. When he rang me up to say, 'Look, I'm going to do this', then I said, 'Well, I wouldn't have done it, but if that's your decision then it's got to be the right decision.' I wasn't the only person to feel concerned about the anti-American nature of thing; I believe Shirley [Williams] was concerned as well.

Q: You generally express your view of Charles's leadership in terms of sympathy for his drink problem. But were you not frustrated by his inertia and variable performance?

MC: Well, I say that in the book. I think I say that he irritated me, and I have no doubt that I irritated him. It was a great contrast to Paddy. But if he were here, he would say, 'But look at the results' – the progress made in 2001 and then again in 2005. The figures speak for themselves.

Q: Do you think he might have resigned or been forced out if it hadn't been for the Iraq war? It is possible to argue that the war saved his leadership, because it gave him an agenda to follow without him having to come up with one himself.

MC: The Iraq war did give Charles a platform, and it gave the party definition and distinctiveness. Could we have expected to continue to make the sort of progress we did in 2005 if there hadn't been an Iraq war? Probably not – but we can't be sure. Also, the thing to remember is that the affection with which the public regarded Charles was more than mirrored in the party.

Q: Do you think Charles should have gone ahead with his abortive press conference in 2003 and stood down in order to seek treatment for alcoholism?

MC: It must have been very, very difficult for him. He had clearly crossed a psychological barrier, but then drew back. It's easy to be critical after the event, but he was wrestling with demons. As I understood it, what he was going to say was: 'Look, I've got this problem; six months off to sort it out; Ming Campbell, he'll be in charge; but after six months I'll be back, sharp as a tack.' It could have worked.

Q: You say you were quoted by The Guardian after the Southport conference in spring 2004 as 'ruling nothing in and nothing out'. Is that what you said? If so, what did you mean by it?

MC: This was after the lobby lunch. We'd had the Budget and PMQs [which Charles had missed], and I was being hounded; I felt I had to say something. If it was serious and Charles was going to go, then where was the leadership going to be? It's a kind of a stock phrase which people use on all sorts of occasions, and I thought it would do enough to make it clear that if there was a problem we could deal with it, but not so strong as to suggest that I was gunning for

the job. But that was not how *The Guardian* interpreted it.

Q: In the book, you quote Sue Lawley, when you were on Desert Island Discs later in 2004, as claiming that you had suggested that you should be installed as leader without a contest if Charles should resign.

MC: She asked me whether it was true, as the newspapers had said, that I'd been asked to act as a caretaker leader after Charles's stomach problem during the Budget statement – well, that wasn't true. There was a huge amount of gossip at the time, but I never thought that if Charles stepped down at any stage there wouldn't be a contest, because it was clear to me, whatever the circumstances, that Simon Hughes would be running – he felt he had come close the previous time.

Q: What do you think caused the problems at the manifesto launch in April 2005, when Kennedy struggled to explain the details of the party's policy on local income tax?

MC: It was on the Monday of that week when Sarah [Charles's wife] went into labour. I can't remember where Charles was, but I was put on standby, and I was immediately told: you're 'Charles' for tomorrow – that was Tuesday – and also for Wednesday. And I went to Bristol, to help Stephen [Williams, the successful candidate for Bristol West], and then up to help Tim Farron [successful candidate for Westmorland & Lonsdale]. The decision was taken that the manifesto launch, which had been arranged for the Wednesday, clearly had to be cancelled. Now the question was: did you do it on the Thursday or the Friday? If you did it on Friday, then you got the Saturday papers, which were not as good for press coverage. If you waited until the following Monday, then nearly a week had elapsed and we would be well behind the other two parties. And so, the decision was taken to do it on the Thursday. In the end that was really the only day; and there was an

understandable determination to give the impression that Charles was right on top of things.

Q: You describe the 2005 election as a missed opportunity. Do you think it was the manifesto launch that poisoned everything?

MC: That's a strong statement, but there's no doubt it had an effect.

Q: In the book you mention Labour and the Lib Dems coordinating attacks on the Conservatives in the 2005 election. It was fairly common knowledge that that happened in 1997 and 2001, but more surprising, I think, that it was still going on in 2005. Can you say any more about this?

MC: It wasn't as close as it had been in 2001, and certainly not as close as it had been in 1997. It was more of a non-aggression pact rather than an alliance; that was my understanding.

Q: So that brings us to Charles's resignation in January 2006. You say that you watched his statement on 5th January (when he stood down, but stated that he intended to be a candidate for the leadership, to clear the air) with 'quiet admiration'. Did you not think, however, that calling a leadership election when he knew that his main rivals – you and Simon Hughes – had already said they would not stand against him was dishonest?

MC: I just thought to myself, this is not going to work. We are going to be back in the same difficulty.

Q: Charles said in the same statement that he had resolved his drink problem. Did you really think he had at the time?

MC: I heard what he said.

Leadership

Q: Why did you decide to stand for the leadership, having not stood seven years earlier?

MC: A lot of these young people, the new MPs, had been biting my ear ever since November 2005. I was concerned about them because they were full of hope and expectation and determination. They had fought like

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hell to win their seats, and I felt a kind of obligation towards them. I was criticised, I know, for my response [after Charles resigned] in saying 'I'm going to be a candidate', but it seemed to me that someone had to – there had to be some continuum. I was nervous at the idea that a vacancy had arisen and no one was going to say that they were going to be running to fill that vacancy on a permanent basis. There are those who say I should have waited, but you have to make these judgments based on what you feel; I thought it was the right thing to do.

Q: What did you think you could offer?

MC: Stability, and continuity.

Q: What were the main themes of your leadership campaign? What did you try to put over?

MC: The environment was enormously important – so I gave up my Jaguar! Taxation. Opportunity – using myself as an illustration; you know, the fact that I'd had three lives and been lucky to do so. Liberalism internationally as much as domestically.

Q: In the book, you describe the tasks you set yourself after the local elections in 2006: 'First, I had to put the party back on an even keel after the traumas of Charles's resignation and the leadership election; second, I had to make the party more professional in its outlook; and, third, to ensure we would be ready for a general election whenever it might come.' These are all essentially organisational – did you have any aims as regards the policy or ideology of the party?

MC: I had inherited a policy agenda under way, of course – remember, Charles had established the Tax Commission. I inherited the issue of the post offices [part-privatisation of Royal Mail], which we dealt with in Harrogate [the spring Lib Dem conference in March 2006], two days after I was elected. The 'Meeting the Challenge' exercise was under

way. Lib Dem policy-making is like an oil tanker: it takes you a while to stop it and get it to turn. I did run with the environmental stuff as hard as I possibly could, but I had largely inherited a policy agenda. And it had within it a series of major changes. I went straight into the post offices issue; then we had dropping the 50p top tax rate in September 2006, and then we had Trident at the following spring conference, and then we followed that up with the big tax stuff last September. My job, in the beginning, was to see through the policy initiatives which had begun under Charles's leadership. Once that was done I would have created an agenda of my own.

Q: Dropping the commitment to the 50 pence top tax rate was a major change. Why do you think it was right to do that?

MC: It was against aspiration, it discouraged ambition – and it didn't produce huge sums of money. I was at a lunch the other day with some businessmen, and one of them was asking me about tax and claimed we were a high tax party. I said, 'Under my leadership we dropped the 50p rate.' And there was a kind of ripple around the table. I thought 50p had served its purpose, and from my point of view, it was a break with the past.

What was fascinating was the way the party took to it. I was worried about the conference debate, because the 50p commitment was iconic to some. I thought that people would feel determined to hold on to it whatever the circumstances. But, to my surprise, we won the debate very convincingly. During the debate Paddy came up to me and said, 'I've sat here on many, many occasions, quaking at the outcome of some debate or other, and I can tell you now, you're going to win this.'

Q: Moving on to March 2007, in the book you mention Elspeth saying to Tony Blair that you were going through hell. You hadn't really

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written about that up until that point. Can you explain?

MC: There was a constant refrain about age; you will remember the cartoons. I'd begun to get the measure of Prime Minister's Questions, though I had had some sticky moments at the beginning. But there was this constant refrain, and it was not helped by careless talk among Liberal Democrat colleagues in both the Lords and the Commons. And that's as far as I'm going to go on that, for the moment.

Q: Do you think there was a consistent attempt to undermine you from within the party?

MC: My position was not helped by ill-judged comments from colleagues in both the Commons and the Lords.

Q: Do you think the criticisms of you over your age were really cover for criticisms of other aspects of your leadership?

MC: Stories have a natural life; if the story doesn't move on, then it dies – but if someone is foolish enough to open their mouth, then they simply give the story legs and it does not die. The relationship between the party and the leader is now much, much more in the public's eye than it ever was before.

Q: Your resignation seemed to come very suddenly, but in the book you say you'd been thinking about it for some time. When did you start thinking about it?

MC: As soon as Brown said: 'No election'. When we heard the news, Elspeth said immediately: can you take it for another two years? That was the point at which I said to myself, 'Well, if she's begun to ask that question, then other people are going to ask that question.'

Q: Your resignation statement mentioned the need for radical revision of the party's internal structures. What did you mean by that?

MC: I was really trying to lay a trail for whoever came after me. I spent a lot of time at the Policy Committee. Archy [Kirkwood] used to say to me

it was time well invested, but I began to feel that the Lib Dem leader is like the opposite of the harlot, with responsibility but without power. You carry the can for everything, but you don't have the authority to deal with everything. Now, I know these might be thought to be illiberal reactions, but the process does not need to be obsessively liberal in order to achieve liberal objectives. People used liberalism as a shield for indiscipline; you would go to these meetings and people would say, 'I didn't join this party to ...', and your heart would sink. And yet, I have to be fair about this, on the issues I wanted to make my own – like the 50p rate, environmental taxation, Trident – I got my own way, but it did take an awful lot of effort. I used to say, 'People in this party would rather beat the platform at the conference than beat the Tories at the ballot box.'

Q: What were your main achievements in your career as leader?

MC: Well, I think I did the things I was expected to do. I steadied the ship after Charles's resignation. And if you remember, the leadership campaign itself was rather more colourful than one might have expected, and we had to get through that. I did start the process, I think, of asking the party to smarten itself up: meetings started on time, we reached conclusions; at the Shadow Cabinet I would let everyone speak, but we'd reach a conclusion at the end of it. And we were ready for the general election. That was the one thing that we had to get sorted, and we did. We were ready for it, and if it had been called, my own programme was already 80 per cent written. The manifesto was agreed – I did eight hours in the chair that day! – and we came out with a manifesto upon which we could have legitimately fought the election. So, I would regard that as an achievement.

And then, personally – part of my seat had been represented

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by Asquith, so there was a kind of a symmetry about leading the party from the constituency from which Asquith led the party. I just wish that one or two people were still around. My parents would have been proud of that. I would have valued Roy Jenkins's advice, and I think he would have been instrumental in dealing with some of the more loquacious elements in the party.

Q: What did you try to achieve but failed to? And what do you wish you had done but didn't?

MC: We are in a period of enormous change, which I don't think people understand. We have a group of highly talented, highly motivated new Members of Parliament who've never really known anything but success since 1997. But some of the rest of us were around in the days when the party was down to six MPs – I remember 1970, when David Steel nearly lost his seat – and in 1992, we got only twenty. The tide comes in and the tide goes out, and the trick is to be able to survive both – not to be swept away by the tide coming in, and certainly not to be dragged under by the tide going out. It's two years away, the next election; things could change completely before then.

I got Prime Minister's Questions right in the end, because we did a huge amount of work at it. It was hard to do that from the beginning; we were pitchforked straight in. What people forget – and I noticed someone making the point on behalf of Nick [Clegg] the other day – is that first of all you get only two questions, so recovery, if you get one not quite right, is much more difficult than if you get six [like the Leader of the Opposition]. Second, there's nowhere to put anything, and if you notice, if you look straight at Cameron, he reads; he reads an enormous amount [resting his notes on the despatch box]. Also the camera angle doesn't help – it's a small thing, but in this age

of obsessions about appearance and style and all the rest of it, the camera angle for the Lib Dem leader is really rotten; it makes you look as if you are squint.

Q: Michael White wrote in his review of your book in The Guardian that you lacked the 'killer instinct that makes the difference at the very top'. Do you think that's a fair assessment?

MC: No, I don't. I've said this before but it's true, all the things I've ever done in my life involve winning or losing: you win your race or you lose it, you win your case or you lose it, you win your seat or you lose it. I have a competitive edge, and, well, let me put it this way, if by killer instinct he means lack of scruple, then that's not something to which I would aspire.

Q: In the author's note in your autobiography, you say that you count your life 'as one of experience not achievement'. That seems an odd statement given what you have achieved – can you say what you meant by it?

MC: I've been enormously lucky. There's a little bit at the end of the book, after I resigned which sums it up:

My principal emotions were frustration and irritation. The three tasks I had set myself when I became leader had all been achieved but the postponement of the election had robbed me of the chance to show just how far I had taken the party. I also felt a sense of perspective: I had run in an Olympic final, pleased a case as a QC in the House of Lords, become an MP after an eleven-year campaign, overcome cancer, been knighted for services to parliament, and led the party of Asquith and Lloyd George. It was indeed a long way from 19 Park Road, Glasgow.

So that's really what I feel – I just feel I've been enormously lucky; I can think of all sorts of people more talented than me who've never had the opportunity.