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Posted by [Andy Wasley](#) — 9 May 2011 09:00

[Interview: Talking politics with Iain Dale](#)



Iain Dale's office is something of a shrine to politics. From the tenth floor of an Albert Embankment office tower, it commands spectacular views of Parliament; a fitting prospect for a man who has looked at little other than politics for most of his adult life.

Dale, 48, has been on quite a political journey since his first job as a political researcher for a Conservative MP in the 1980s. The LBC radio presenter, founder of *Total Politics* magazine and owner of political publishers Biteback Media arrived at his current position via stints as a journalist, a bookseller, a parliamentary candidate and one of the UK's most prominent political bloggers.

[Iain Dale's Diary](#) consistently topped polls as one of the UK's most widely-read political blogs, but he has no qualms about his decision to give it up late last year to concentrate on his radio career, *Total Politics* and Biteback. Still, he allows that he misses it sometimes. 'There are times when I want to say something to react to what's happened in politics. But broadly, I really don't miss it, because it was becoming a burden. I was getting such abuse that I was wondering why I was doing it at all.'

That's not to say that Dale isn't accustomed to taking criticism for his political outlook. He lists Margaret Thatcher as his political hero; behind his desk, a large, somewhat malevolent painting of the Iron Lady gazes across the room at a gaudy Monroe-by-Warhol-style print of herself. When asked how, as a gay man, he can

list the harbinger of Section 28 as a hero, his reply is typically bullish: ‘I remember actually being in favour of Section 28. When it came up, I genuinely didn’t think it was right to promote homosexuality in school – just as I wouldn’t think it was right to promote a lot of things in school.

‘I think children are sexualised now at far too early an age. But it didn’t matter what the legislation itself said; it was how it was interpreted. People thought the Conservatives were bigoted and anti-gay.’

Happy Tories?

Surely that’s true? After all, the run-up to last year’s general election saw controversial comments by a number of Conservative candidates and MPs – including the then Shadow Home Secretary, Chris Grayling – that led to charges that David Cameron’s party had failed to get to grips with gay rights. Dale is quick to defend Grayling, who had suggested that gay people should respect the rights of Christian B&B owners to turn them away (‘I thought his comments were ill-judged, at worst, and I think he’s paid a big price for what he said’). He admits, however, that the party still has a problem with individual homophobes.

‘Yes, there are individuals who express homophobia – but that’s all they are, individuals. I can happily be a member of the same party as them, because all parties are coalitions. It doesn’t bother me; I don’t judge people by their views on just one issue. Look at [Conservative Party Co-Chairman] Sayeeda Warsi; she expressed some very trenchant views on this subject a few years ago, but she no longer holds those views. I think we should welcome it when people do change their views.’

Is it unfair for members of other political parties to paint the Conservatives as latently homophobic, then? Dale certainly thinks so. ‘What I really can’t stand about some politicians who use this issue – like Chris Bryant and Ben Bradshaw – is that they use every opportunity they can to beat Tories over the head about it. They don’t acknowledge that the party has taken big strides in dealing with sexuality; the Conservatives actually have more openly gay MPs than any other party.

‘What Bryant and Bradshaw should be doing is rejoicing in that. Surely it’s great that things have moved on, and that the Tories have finally woken up and realised that. Instead, they try to play party politics with it. They’re both intelligent guys and nice people, but they can’t resist sticking the knife in. I think that’s a real shame.’

Pledges and performance – the Coalition and gay rights



Iain Dale with his partner, John Simmons.

How, then, is the Coalition performing – particularly on gay rights? Before the election, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats made a number of pledges to gay people about, for example, considering marriage equality and deleting criminal records for homosexual ‘offences’. A question about marriage equality draws a quick response. ‘To me, a civil partnership is a marriage in all but name. If the Government wants to call it marriage, fine – but I can’t understand why people get so hung up about it.’

It seems obvious, however, that gay Christians might object to a law stating they cannot have a religious element in their civil partnership – which is the case with the law as it stands. Dale, who is in a civil partnership himself, is open to that objection despite his own agnosticism. ‘I don’t think the law should prohibit a religious element, but I also don’t think that churches should be forced to offer services for gay people if they don’t want to.’

When considering Dale's points of view about gay rights, it's easy to understand why he is, to some on the political left, a *bête noir*. The left-wing blogger Soho Politico, in a particularly colourful turn of phrase, [once said](#) that Dale 'wouldn't know LGBT equality if it slapped him in the face with a size 12, rhinestone-encrusted stiletto heel'. But while it's true that his one-time support for Section 28 and his nuanced point of view on gay marriage might seem awkward, Dale holds no torch for genuine homophobes. He describes himself as a social liberal, voices strong support for gay adoption, and has [roundly condemned](#) Conservative candidates who express stridently homophobic views.

Indeed, he doesn't pull his punches when it comes to how the Conservative party overall is dealing with gay rights. 'While there are still people who are living one life but would actually like to live another – or are actually living a double life – you can never say that we've got to where we need to be. For people of a certain age, there is still a bit of shame associated with being gay. I've no doubt that if I was 18 or 20 today it wouldn't matter a damn, but there are still places in the country, for example, where it's a real issue for people. We shouldn't kid ourselves that the job is done, because it isn't.'



Dale on Cameron: 'Eight out of ten'.

He is similarly frank about how David Cameron is performing as party leader. 'The Conservative Party has never loved David Cameron,' he says. 'He's never really shown any understanding of the Tory grassroots. It's very easy for parties in government to lose touch with their activists. There are some very unhappy people in the Tory party at the moment, and I don't know what Cameron can do now to address that. They are the people who will be delivering leaflets at the next election, and they need to feel loved. At the moment, they don't feel loved at all.'

On Cameron's performance as Prime Minister, however, Dale is more optimistic (giving him 'eight out of ten'). He also reserves some praise for Cameron's political bedfellow, the Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, who he describes as a great risk-taker. Although the Lib Dems faced a stinging setback in local elections on 5 May, Dale can see Clegg as a potential future foreign secretary – subject to William Hague's standing down at the next reshuffle. Clearly, the lure of political future-gazing is something he finds hard to resist; hardly surprising for someone who has been in the thick of the political fray, both as a commentator and as a candidate.

Behind the blue rosette

Dale stood for Parliament in North Norfolk in 2005, against the incumbent Lib Dem MP Norman Lamb. He says he had anticipated a loss by a couple of thousand votes. On election day, however, Lamb increased his majority to over 10,000. Dale describes himself as a very emotional person, and that becomes apparent when he talks about that 'devastating blow'.

'Probably the proudest moment of my life was getting up on the stage after the count and making a speech that was gracious,' he says. 'I still don't know how I got through it. I remember driving away from the count and completely losing it in the car. There's just nothing anyone can say to you at that point.'

'When you look at the result, I completely understand why people must think I was the world's worst candidate. But anyone who knows what I actually did in the campaign will tell you I put heart and soul into it. I could look myself in the mirror on election night and know I couldn't have done anything more. The people who count know that.'

That attitude – springing back from defeat with his characteristic self-confidence – has certainly served Dale well since he decided to give up on his race for Parliament. *Total Politics* magazine established itself quickly as the publication of choice for political obsessives after it launched in 2008, while Biteback Publishing, Dale's new company, expects to publish over 80 books this year. During our interview, Dale's phone beeps and buzzes several times; he breaks off to take a call from someone who wants him to take part in a panel discussion. Despite his calm demeanour, Dale is obviously frenetically busy – indeed, it is hard to imagine how he finds enough hours to run his business and host a radio show.



Iain Dale at LBC's studios: 'It's what I was put on this earth to do.'

'I'm not very good at standing still,' he laughs. 'It's a difficult balance for me at the moment, because the LBC programme takes five or six hours a day when I include preparation time. It's not easy to fit it all in; I'm trying to make it work, but sometimes it's busier than others.' The LBC show seems to be, for him, the jewel in the crown. 'I've always wanted my own radio show,' he says. 'When I first started in media in the 1990s, I loved radio and always have. It sounds terribly trite, but I feel that I've finally found what I was put on this earth to do, and I know that I can be really good at it.'

Why not writing, then? His blog did well, and his 'In Conversation With...' pieces for *Total Politics* have proved so popular he's just published a book full of them. 'I've never felt I'm a good writer,' he reveals. 'Even when I had a column in the *Telegraph* I used to agonise over when to hit the send button to file copy. Now, I write for *GQ*. When I did my first piece for them – a 3,500-word profile of the Miliband brothers – I could hardly say no, but I was absolutely dreading it. I just prefer talking!'

All that talking, of course, leaves Dale open to making mistakes from time to time. He chuckles as he recalls an incident with his friend, Ann Widdecombe, with whom he has been running a national theatre tour for several years. Widdecombe has been criticised for being less than comfortable with gay rights. Dale agrees, with reservations. 'I don't think she's anti-gay,' he says, 'but she's certainly seen as an anti-gay crusader. I remember having one really long discussion with her about gay adoption. She said she couldn't support it because she'd seen statistics suggesting that gay relationships only last two years on average. I said in my experience it's more like 20 minutes!'

'I was interviewed for Piers Morgan's *Life Stories* show, and found myself saying I thought Ann was actually a bit of a "fag hag". I rang her up afterwards to tell her as I thought it best she heard it from me – and she wasn't best pleased!'

Dale's recent success owes a lot to that sort of frankness; it cements his reputation as one of the most influential commentators in politics, and has helped him build an increasingly successful publishing business and radio career. Through it all, though, it is clear that Dale's interest in politics goes deeper than almost anything else. Principled to the last, he sticks to his views – however recalcitrant – and isn't about to apologise for saying what he thinks. Considering his success since leaving his Parliamentary ambitions behind, it's hard to see that as anything other than an advantage for him.

Iain Dale's new book, Talking Politics, is available to buy through totalpolitics.com. You can listen to his LBC show from 7.00-10.00pm every weekday, and you can follow him on Twitter @iaindale.



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[/caption] Bern Bowers has done it all. He is a best-selling author, a ...

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