

## the press conference with JOHN SUCHET by Rob McGibbon

Just glancing over the barest stats of John Suchet's journalistic career is enough to make any hack sigh with admiration, if not a little professional envy. Reuters graduate trainee in 1967; BBC Nine O'clock News writer in 1971; joins ITN in 1972 and begins an illustrious 32-year stint. This includes 10 years as a globe-trotting "fireman" covering some of the world's biggest stories. Television Journalist of the Year 1986. Suchet then tops all this with 17 years as the affable and unshakeable anchorman on all the signature ITN bulletins. Television Newscaster of the Year 1996.

As if all that is not enough, Suchet even managed to become a Beethoven scholar in his spare time. He took 10 years to complete a trilogy of books about the great man and now stages popular lectures tours. Suchet also has a Sunday presenting slot on Classic FM and will soon write a book about Mozart for the station.

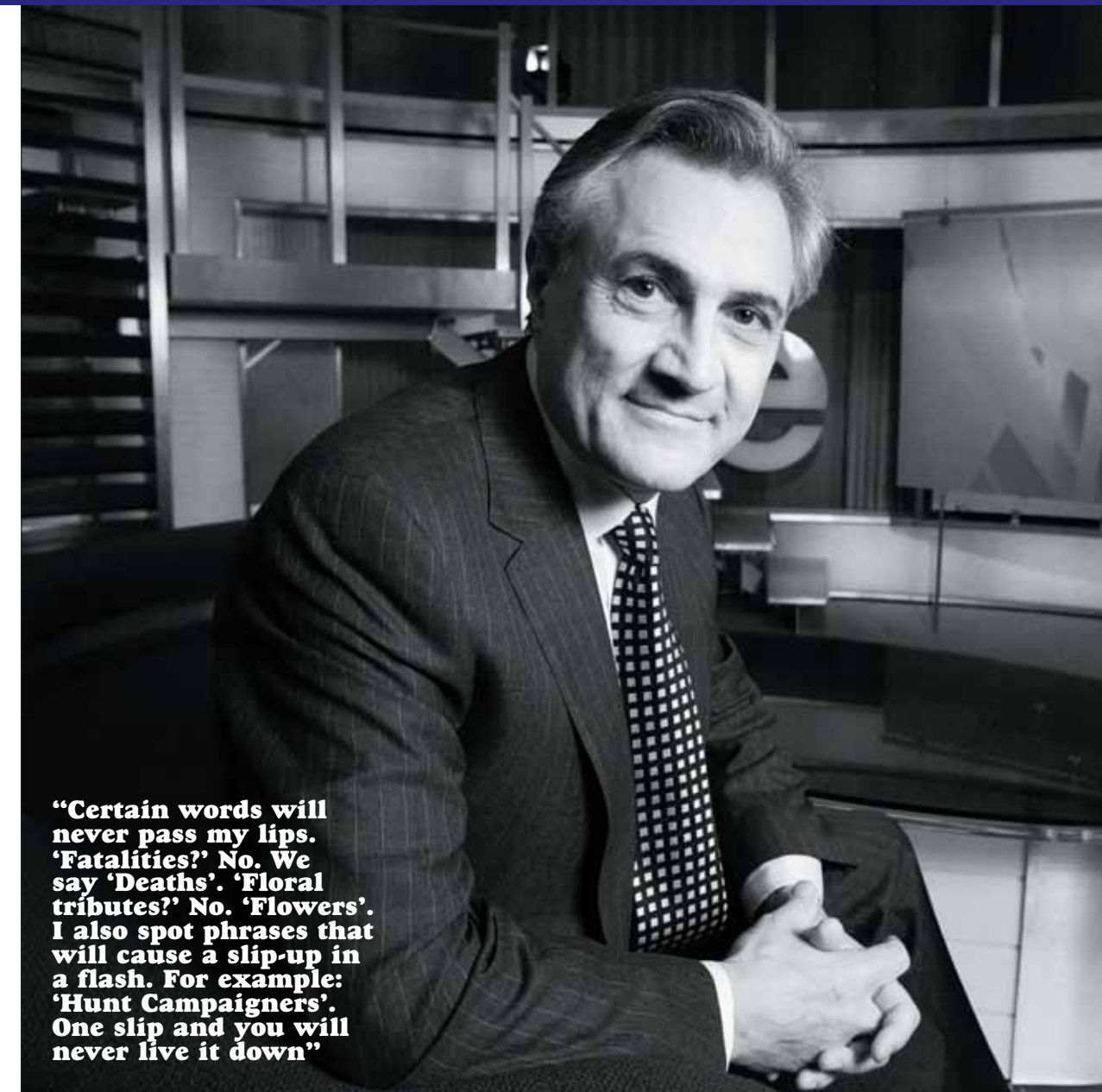
Now 61, Suchet quit ITN in March 2004, but is making a somewhat surprising TV comeback. From next week, he will present the Five News bulletins at 5.30pm and 7pm on Thursdays and Fridays, and will cover for Kirsty Young full-time when she goes on maternity leave.

I meet Suchet at Sky News centre in Isleworth, West of London, where Five News is produced. We talk in an upstairs conference room with a long glass wall overlooking Sky's super high-tech newsroom. Suchet is so charged with energy and enthusiasm that anyone would think he has just landed his first job and is not the veteran newsman with more experience than just about anyone beneath us.

**Firstly, John, congratulations on what must be one of the shortest retirements in newscasting history. What happened?**

I know, it is bizarre. My last bulletin was in the last week of March '04, which coincided with my very big birthday — one that doesn't begin with a four, or a five. I decided to call it quits and I said, "That's it, time to let the next generation come through". I made a positive decision to put television news behind me. While I was away from it all, there was a tiny part of me that thought, "Well, no one will know who I am now, I have done my bit, I'm forgotten history. When someone comes up to you and says, "Did you used to do the news?" You do think longingly, Oh, yes, I did. But nevertheless I was convinced I had moved on.

My wife Bonnie and all my family will tell you that until a couple of months ago I was saying with total conviction, "That was then, this is now, I will never go back, not even if anyone rings and asks me." Then someone rang and asked me and I said "Yes!" My family were a bit shocked, and even this morning



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my wife said, "I can't believe you are going back to it." But she is really thrilled for me, they all are.

**What was it like while you were not working and how were you tempted back?**

My wife and I are complete news freaks. We are always watching television news and I would sit there hurling abuse at the screen saying, "Why have they done this? Why aren't they doing that?" And she would say, "Will you please shut up and let me listen!" Television news is in your living room all the time. I really tried, but the truth is you never ever really let it go. And when the chance came to go back, well...

The way Five put it to me was, "Do you want to do six months?" I said, "Yes". "Do you want to do more?" "Almost certainly not." I see it as a nice guest appearance, rather than me back in television. That is not the intention, but who knows what will happen. I think the break has helped me. It gives you time to re-think, re-charge your batteries — and now I just can't wait to see if I can still do it.

Portrait  
Phil Adams

**Are you serious? Surely, this is simply a matter of doing what you have always done?**

I have not had an ear-piece in my ear for nearly two years. What is going to happen? I don't know, so I am extremely worried. People say, "Oh, you never forget, it's like riding a bike." But newscasting is difficult. I honestly don't know if I will still be able to do it.

**Five could probably have had their pick of ex-newscasters and bright young things. Why do you think they came to you?**

When Chris Shaw — the head of news here — first asked me, I said, "Don't you want a 20-something bloke with spiky gelled hair and an iPod in his pocket?" And he said, "John, I can get one of those any time I want." He said he wanted 30 years of experience. He kind of flattered me into it, which is doubly dangerous! Here I come, with this baggage of seen it all, done it all, and I have only got to fall over the first story of my first bulletin. Oh my God...

Five are taking a risk, but in a way it is a calculated one because the majority of viewers who watch a bulletin at that time of the afternoon are 50-plus.

The audience is a lot of retired people and kids, and the Five set is very comfortable. It is completely different to Sky or ITV News. On Five, it is like saying to the viewer, "Come into my home and let me tell you what happened today".

When I first came in to meet the Five team and have my photo taken, I went into make-up and this lovely lady said, "I can't believe I am making you up, I grew up with you". It was as if she already knew me, which was nice.

I like to think that my phone went because I am considered a friendly newscaster and that is one of the attributes viewers like. They want to feel you are not forbidding, or lecturing, especially if the world is going crazy.

**I suppose it is a common misconception that all you have to do is sit there and read an autocue?**

You always get taxi drivers who say, "Oh, it's alright for you. I bet you just turn up 10 minutes before and read the news, I wish I had your job." Of course, it is nothing like that. I am a journalist, not a presenter, so I am heavily involved on all fronts, although I do not write the scripts. It is quite possible that the team here are going to hate me after a month because I am very hands on. I want to know why they have written it a certain way and I have pet hates that they will soon learn about. Certain words will never pass my lips. "Fatalities?" No. We say "Deaths". "Floral tributes?" No. "Flowers". "Undergone surgery?" No. Someone has had "an operation". I am also on to certain phrases in stories that will cause a slip-up in a flash. For example: "Hunt Campaigners". Those two words together? Never. One slip and you will never live it down.

Presenting television news is difficult and I believe it is impossible to do it perfectly. Ask any newscaster worth their salt and they always remember the bad moments, never the successful ones. After doing the bulletin, a good newscaster should lie awake at night and think, "How could I have done that better, or, Why did that go wrong?" They should never think, "That was great — because it never really is. Something goes wrong in every single bulletin.

**Blimey! If it's that tricky, why on earth have you put yourself back in the hot seat?**

Quite simply, I love television news. Live television is sexy. It's an aphrodisiac and the most exciting thing you can do with your clothes on! I am so excited. And frightened...

**What has been your worst experience during TV news?**

I can remember when the Berlin wall came down, I had the Mayor of Berlin lined up for a live interview. I had already tested the link, but when I asked him the first question, he just stood there with his mouth closed. I asked him again. Nothing. Then I said, "Herr Whatever, can you hear me?" And without saying a word, he turned round and walked away. I can't remember what I said afterwards, but I distinctly remember laying awake that night thinking I could have handled it better than I did.

### JOHN'S NEWS SCHEDULE

#### Newspapers:

I always try to read the *Daily Mail*. It has some extreme views, which I do not agree with, but I am not someone who buys a newspaper for its politics. It has its finger on the pulse of what people talk about and is the perfect combination of news and gossip. I also like the *Evening Standard*, especially for its arts coverage. If I am in a newsroom I make sure I skim every paper. I'm a typical journo and can get through a paper in minutes.

#### Television:

Television news — I can't watch too much of it! I have Sky on most of the time. To be honest, I have gone off BBC and ITV. I just think that Sky is a lot better. I know the editor Nick

Pollard and I told him the other day that we have become Sky freaks.

#### Radio:

Classic FM is on all weekend, not least because I am on it! I don't care what purists say, it is lovely to have classical music waiting through the flat. I also like the *Today* programme.

#### Website:

For my age, I am a real nerd. The web is changing the way we all behave. Google is the obvious one, but I am always looking at the Sky and BBC news sites. I have an iPod and recently I realised that I am missing a crucial piece of Mozart. I downloaded it within minutes from iTunes. Sorry High Street, but...

**What would you say is one of the pivotal experiences for you while reading the news?**

I was just starting out at newscasting and I was doing a lunch-time news for Leonard Parkin who was in Beijing for the Queen's first visit to China in 1986. We did a live link with him standing in the street. These were the days when a live link to China was unbelievable, and it worked a treat. After that, I went to the next story and in my ear I heard, "Story 16, John". I looked down at the script and it said Story 17. I looked at the autocue, which also said 17 and then I froze. "John. Story 16!" came the yell in my ear. I continued to freeze. Then they were yelling, "For fuck's sake, read anything!", so I read Story 17.

After the bulletin I was almost in tears. David Nicholas called me into his office and I thought, Right, this is it, end of a career, what am I going to do now? He sat me down and in a nutshell he told me to always remember that you are the viewers' friend. Forget what is being shouted in your ear, talk to the viewer nicely, tell them you haven't got the first idea what to read next. And he said, "Believe me, not only will they love you, but it will tell the control room exactly what is going on." It taught me that the newscaster has to drive the bulletin.

I thought that freeze had lasted 30 seconds or a minute, but apparently it was only seven seconds long. It has never happened since — but it might happen again soon!

**I appreciate you get asked this all the time, but what advice would you give to someone wanting to emulate your career? It might assist some of our younger and less, er, jaded readers.**

A lot of people want to get into television because they want to walk down their high street and be recognised. That is totally the wrong reason. Only get into television news because you love television and news. If you want to be a journalist, the first decision you have to make is what medium really turns you on, then choose which specialist area excites you most. Once you have made those two decisions, then just go for it and don't take no for an answer.

To anyone wanting to emulate what I may have done, I would say the bottom line is this: you can't beat being at the sharp end. I was at the sharp end throughout my entire career, either reporting or newscasting. Not everyone is cut out for that, but get to where it is happening, because that is what used to do it for me. As someone once said, "Journalism is the first draft of history". I think it is the most important job in the world and it has always felt more like a privilege to me than work.

**On a lighter note, your brother David is famous as Hercule Poirot. I read somewhere that the character is about to be killed off. Why is that happening?**

What? Are you serious? I don't know anything about that... shall I ask him?

*(Ever the reporter, Suchet then jumps up, reaches for his mobile phone and calls his brother. David's wife answers and they chat for a few minutes.)*

Right, all cleared up. There is a story Agatha Christie wrote in which Poirot dies, but they are nowhere near filming that. I can tell you it is complete bollocks. Poirot is not about to be killed off. You have it on top authority!

**What do you think of 24-hour news and the view that all you need is a good-looking face up there to deliver it?**

I think Sky is the future of television news and I am not just saying that because I am now working in the same building as them. I am a huge fan. They make massive mistakes, but 24-hour news is not a perfect science. Sky is wonderful and is light years ahead of the opposition.

Certainly, you can't say any longer that you must be a reporter before you become a newscaster. But you can make young people newscasters and still get them out there doing some real reporting and not have them sitting around the studio looking pretty all the time — male and female. And when I say reporting, I don't mean standing on a red carpet at some awards ceremony. Get them out there, make them get their hands dirty so they know what it's like to cover a story. It will make them better newscasters.

Everything has changed because of 24-hour news. You need teams of newscasters because it chews them



up and spits them out. And they need to be young because they have the energy. But I think looks are less important, as long as there is nothing about them that distracts the viewer unnecessarily. What I do feel strongly about is that when a big story breaks, I do believe you need to turn to a newscaster with experience. The viewer senses authority, and that is important.

**And how about the emergence of the citizen journalists? What do you think about the use of their material within traditional media?**

Technology has always driven television news and you will never stop that. Anyone who flies in the face of new technology is in for a nasty shock. Email and mobile phones have made everyone a reporter and a cameraman, and I embrace it all completely.

**As you prepare to go back to what you call the sharp end, what are your main concerns?**

When I retired, I said to the family that I had reached the end of my career with my reputation intact. I was not bothered about being remembered for the good things, but I definitely didn't want to be remembered for a horrific mistake that haunted my career.

My dread was that when I am 95 and I am in the home for the elderly, *It'll Be Alright On The Night* comes on the television and a voice says, "Do you remember that immortal moment when John Suchet..." I reached the end of my career without that ever happening, but now I have laid myself wide open to it all again. I cannot believe it really...

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### John Suchet's FANTASY FLYERS

**What would be the Fantasy Headline of the story you would most like to read?**

"Ken Admits: I Got It Wrong And Brings Back Routemaster Buses". I know it is a bit local, but I love the Routemaster and not to be able to jump on and off one is not London.

**What would be the Fantasy Headline involving yourself?**

"Retired Newscaster Suchet Goes Back to Newscasting And Gets Away With It!". I admit I am worried sick, so I would be happy with this headline!

**What would be the headline you most dread?**

"Terrorists Attack London Again". I pray to God it never happens. It is the city I was born and brought up in and I still live right in the centre. I love it. When it is attacked, it makes you feel your world has been violated.

**Who would you most like to interview, and what question would you ask?**

Beethoven is too obvious and, besides, he is so important in my life that I would need to spend at least a year with him. I would choose Josef Stalin and ask: "What on Earth made you think that shutting off half of Europe would last forever? You stupid, stupid man!"

**What question would you never answer?**

"How are you going to vote at the next general election?" I am a journalist and I do not work for any organisation with a political view. I have interviewed politicians from all parties and if anyone can deduce from that which way I vote then I have slipped up badly.

**What would you like to be your obituary headline?**

"Television Newscaster And Beethoven Scholar Dies At 110"