

# the press conference with ANDREW NEIL

Meeting Andrew Neil is the journalism equivalent of sitting down with a legendary heavyweight boxer. If anyone has won some great newspaper bouts and slugged it out with the best, it's him. It all started at *The Economist* in 1973, culminating in the editorship. Then he fought his way through 11 bruising years as editor of *The Sunday Times* between 1983 and 1994 and turned that title into *THE Sunday papers*.

Neil was a vital player in Rupert Murdoch's daring switch to Wapping and, amazingly, from 1988 he doubled up as launch chairman of Sky TV. He flitted to Fox TV briefly, before finally falling out with Murdoch after his 1996 autobiography 'Full Disclosure'. Everyone thought that was the big K.O. for Neil, but to the chagrin of his enemies it seems impossible to keep him on the canvas.

The billionaire Barclay twins, David and Frederick, made him publisher of Press Holdings and *The European*, *The Scotsman Group* and *The Business* have followed — with differing fortunes. Now he has *The Spectator*, as well as the art magazine *Apollo* and *handbag.com*, not to mention two BBC political shows and various other ventures.

Despite all his efforts, Neil, now 56, has been consistently drenched in the bile of media commentators, and to *Private Eye*, well, he will always be Brillo Pad in a vest with an 'Asian Babe' on his arm.

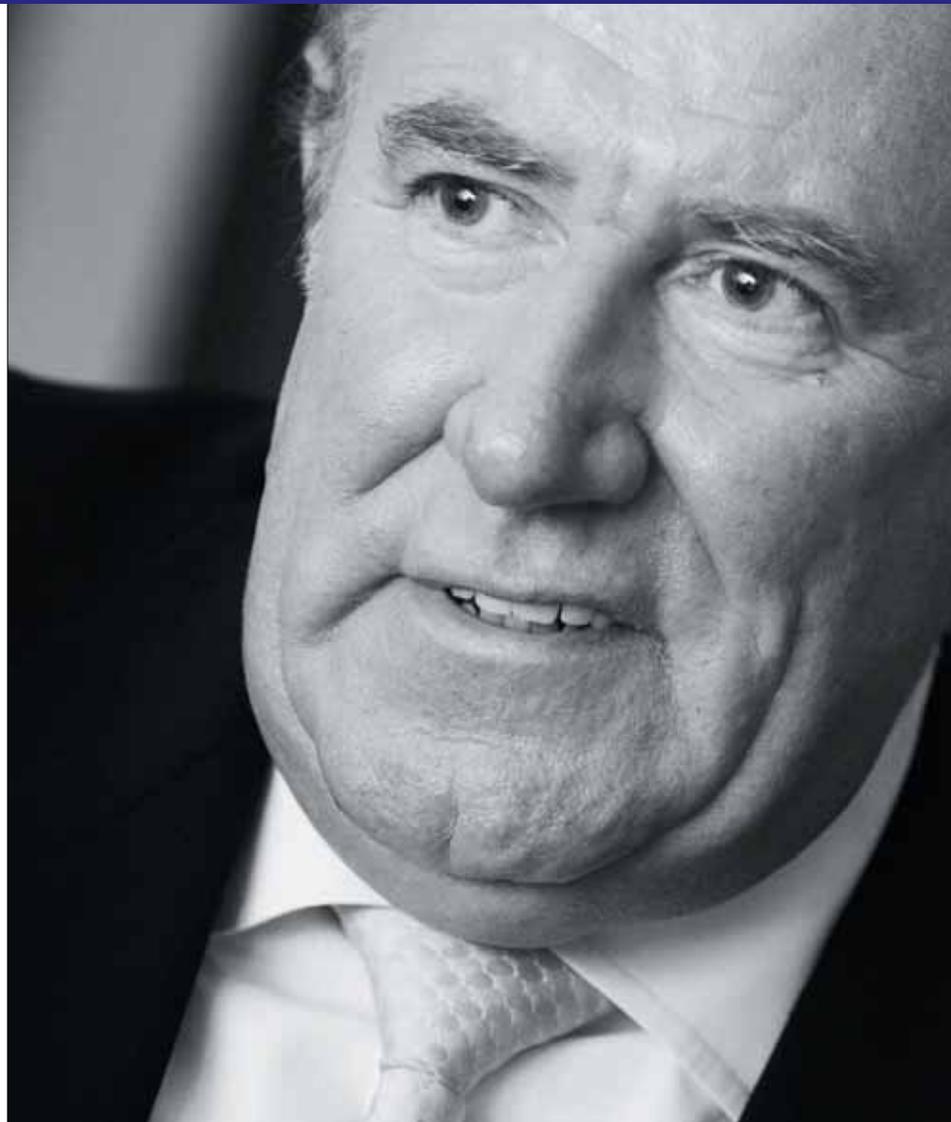
I talk to him at a super-sized boardroom table in discreet offices in St James's. Still tanned after Christmas in Cape Town, he is engagingly intense and laughs frequently with a flash of pearly white, TV-primed nashers.

And laugh he well might. If you owned a prial of prestigious properties (Kensington, New York, South of France) and were hot-synched into the mainframe of media, you'd be pretty chipper too.

## It's 20 years since the Great Battle of Wapping. How do you feel looking back now?

I can hardly believe it is 20 years. It is one of the watersheds in your life and you wonder how you got through it. But if it had to be done again, I would do it. It was just so important and I feel very proud.

Of course, all the trouble was entirely unnecessary. If we had been dealing with trade unions that had shown any sense, or any idea that technology changes were coming along, there need never have been a dispute. It could all have been managed in a transitional way, but these were people



who had always been victorious in every war and defeat for them was inconceivable, so why bother compromising? I remember in one negotiation meeting, a union man took out a box of matches and threw them at me across the table and said, "Why don't you go and set fire to that new plant. We are never going there and neither are you!" My inner reaction was, You bastard, we will go without you.

## What is the legacy of Wapping and its impact on newspapers generally?

The *Financial Times* wrote subsequently that the history of the newspaper industry is B.W. and A.W. — Before Wapping and After Wapping. We saved the British newspaper industry, no question. We got new technology in on a realistic cost base and were finally allowed to produce papers that we wanted to produce, as opposed to what the unions would allow us. If Wapping had not happened, there would definitely be far fewer newspapers today. For a start, the unions would have destroyed *The Independent*. And there would be no multi-section Saturday or Sunday papers, and very little colour. Newspapers struggle in the best of times, but without Wapping it would be impossible. We got severely criticised for what we did, but all of our critics were able to adopt every one of the breakthroughs that we made.

I speak to younger journalists today and sometimes, when you tell them what it was like before Wapping, there is a look of amazement, like you are making it up. It is so incredible to think the industry was run like it was. You even begin to doubt yourself because it is so unbelievable and so stupid. But so true.

## Personally, what are the abiding memories?

It was a harrowing time, but I got through it because I really believed in it. For 13 months, I had to have two bodyguards with me everywhere. They were either ex-SAS or Marines. Every time I went home I had to wait in the car in a side street while they checked the house. For the first 48 hours you felt quite important, but after that it was miserable. You could do nothing and basically I would get into Wapping at 9am and leave at 10pm. I got death threats regularly and a couple of times I was in fear of my life. We got caught up in a riot one night when the driver panicked and took a wrong turn. Another night the house was attacked.

You gave the appearance that you were coping, but privately it was distressing. At Wapping we used to joke that Murdoch would have to put a helicopter on the roof and it would be like the US Embassy in Saigon if the printers won. We knew if we lost we would never work in this town again.

Portraits  
Phil Adams



by Rob McGibbon

The lowest point was about halfway through when it looked like it would go on forever. There was talk that we were going to crack and do a deal and that depressed me. I went to Murdoch and said, "It's up to you, it's your business, but if those people now come in here, I am gone." He said, "Don't worry, I don't think it's going to happen."

## Well, here you are, all these years on and it seems to have panned out pretty well...

Yes. I have never been happier or more fulfilled by all the various jobs that I do. I still enjoy working hard and playing hard, and I am at peace with myself.

## That sounds as if that has not always been the case.

Well, while I was at *The Sunday Times* and at other stages, there was always turmoil, like, am I doing the right thing? What should I do next? But now I love the portfolio of different things that I do. I love working for the Barclays, my broadcasting for the BBC and I love my independent interests. I love being able to flit between London, South of France and New York. I am very fortunate. I have a great career that still has a few places to go yet — so I am sorry to disappoint those who are waiting for me to collapse.

## Yes, you've had a few negative cuttings, how difficult have you found all the sniping?

They're nearly all negative! If you were a film star you certainly wouldn't want my cuts. To say that it didn't bother you at all, would be a lie. It used to really upset me in the early days of *The Sunday Times*, but now it probably upsets me just a wee bit.

We are in a pretty petty industry. We are obsessed with ourselves and I think there is a certain amount of jealousy and envy in some of the coverage, written by middle-aged married journalists saying, "Oh, there he goes, off with some bird again, at his houses."

## And *Private Eye*, that's had a good run with you. I haven't bothered reading *The Eye* regularly for years. It used to be religious reading, but now I only see it if I'm at an airport or the dentist.

Looking back, it's not so bad. They make things up, get things wrong, but I do think "The Eye Test" is, in a way, more powerful than the PCC. If what you were doing appeared in *The Eye* — reported accurately, I might add — could you hold your head up or not? That is not a bad test and, for all its faults, *The Eye* provides an important function. Most of what they have written about me has been pretty mythical and I have not done anything that has been reported accurately that I have been embarrassed about.

## What! Not even that vest picture they always use? What's the real story behind that? It might help the rest of us be less disturbed by it.

I am amazed they still run it, but I guess that means

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you still matter. I was a bit embarrassed to begin with, only in the sense that it was presented as how I would turn up at a nightclub, like some ageing rocker.

The picture was taken by Terry O'Neil on Nick Lloyd's camera at the Sandy Lane Hotel in Barbados during Christmas in 1994. I wasn't staying there, but we were on the beach, hence the vest and the baseball cap. Nick and Terry hadn't met the new girlfriend and Terry said, "Ah, I've gotta take a

picture." I have never actually known why it got into the public domain.

The woman worked at Fox Television and she was the No.1 make-up artist in New York. I have always kept her name private and she has no idea she is the most famous woman in *Private Eye*. I have lost contact with her now. The picture gives the impression that I was this old man with this young girl, but there was only a 10-year age gap. And she's not Asian, she is Afro-American, but *The Eye* is obsessed with Asian Babes.

The picture doesn't bother me. Compared to other stuff it is water off the duck's back. I'm like the Catherine Tate character — "Am I loved?" No, I'm not. And as for the nickname Brillo Pad, it has been with me so long now it is part of the furniture.

## What has been the toughest time for you on the receiving end of the press?

No question — it was the whole onslaught of the Tory press when I serialised Andrew Morton's book about Diana in 1992. It was relentless, personal and unpleasant. Really quite brutal. I'd got a taste of it when I did the "Queen dismayed by uncaring Thatcher" story in 1986. I managed to upset the two people they revered most on that Tory side. It actually won me the award I am most proud of — "Editor Least Likely To Ever Get A Knighthood" — which was from *Press Gazette*!

With the book, the right-wing Establishment came on a full-frontal attack. What I did was highly controversial and you expect to get monstered, so I have no complaints. It is a free society, so people can say what they want. At one stage, I thought I would have to resign. Murdoch had warned me about it. He said, "Now you are going to become the target and they will try to destroy you." He was right, but they failed. I have a much better relationship with them now and I seem to have out-lived the greatest critics. But what a nightmare for them — I am chief executive of *The Spectator*! [Cue laughter and a flash of those pearly whites]

## Yes, *The Spectator*, what stage are you at with finding an editor and what can be expected in terms of changes?

I am just finalising a shortlist. We have had 12 people apply, plus a few other big names who are too proud to apply, but we know they want the job, so I will call them. We will get it down to about three and then there will be further interviews with myself and Aidan Barclay [son of David and the immediate boss]. The two of us will decide. I hope to announce the name at the end of January, or the beginning of February.

*The Spectator* is a bit like the mouse that roared. In terms of a business, it is minimal within this company's operation, but its ability to cause trouble is huge because people take it so seriously. It is now part of a serious business and we are upping the

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## NEIL'S NEWS SCHEDULE



things. I read and like the *Herald Tribune*. I use to devour the *Wall Street Journal*, but since it went tabloid it has lost it a bit. I read *The Independent* if I see it during the day, and I always get the *Evening Standard*, which I like and think is looking good since the revamp.

## Magazines:

Of course *The Spectator* and now *Apollo*. I particularly like *Prospect*, which is a very intelligent centre-left magazine with a lot of original

writing that is way above party politics. It is very serious and steps back a bit, as a monthly should, but there's not a lot of chuckles in it. *The Economist* has always been a favourite.

## Television:

I Sky+ most things and it's wonderful. You need never watch a commercial again. When I get in at night there's a menu of stuff to watch. I like *Channel 4 News* and *Newsnight*.

## Radio:

I generally listen to the 7am news on Radio 4, but I don't have *Today* on while I am reading the papers. In the car I listen to Classic FM, unless it is news time, in which case I will have on *World At One*, or *PM*.



## Web:

The web is amazing. I was in New York during Charles Kennedy's demise and I didn't miss a thing. I listened to his resignation statement live on my laptop on Radio 5 in Manhattan. Remarkable. And if I want to hear something from the *Today* programme later in the day, I go to its website.