

the press conference with ZAC GOLDSMITH

The newspapers and glossy magazines have dined out lavishly on the peccadilloes of the Goldsmith family for decades. The late tycoon Sir James Goldsmith was rarely out of the headlines — and *Private Eye*, which he sued relentlessly — as he swashbuckled his way to his fortune. He launched the Referendum Party before dying of pancreatic cancer in 1997, aged 64.

Next, Jemima became the darling of the press with her ill-fated marriage to cricketing icon Imran Kahn, and these days the paparazzi do a sunshine business out of her “holi-daying” romance with Hugh Grant.

On a more serious profile trajectory is Zac, particularly since Tory leader David Cameron appointed him as No.2 on the Quality of Life task force to research environmental issues in preparation to adopt them into the party’s manifesto.

Zac is aboard after years of green campaigning, not least through *The Ecologist* magazine, which he edits, owns and financially props up. Eton-educated Zac inherited a fortune estimated by the papers at anything from £10 to 300 million. But he is no playboy. Now 31, he is a married father of three with a home in Chelsea and an organic farm in Devon.

We meet at *The Ecologist*’s tatty and cramped offices in an old warehouse office block by the river in Chelsea. Foam spews out of the meeting-room chairs. Zac, in a white shirt fraying slightly at the cuffs, is pinched-eyed after a sleepless night caring for an unwell child. He is diffident, faultlessly polite and speaks in a gentle, cut-glass voice that moves at a nervously accelerated pace. He drags intermittently on roll ups — Golden Virginia deftly rolled in Rizla Blues into immaculate mini cones that would make any Rasta proud.

The newspapers have always had a fascination with your family. When were you first aware of it and what was your father’s view?

I don’t remember a time of not being aware of media attention. At prep school I heard things that my father was doing from teachers and not really knowing what was going on, just that he was a person people talked about. There was not a lot of interest in me until I got involved in certain issues. It was always limited to the very marginal gossip columns and I could have kept it that way, but I took the decision to be moderately more public.

My father took a view later in his life not to bother with the newspapers. He had a very tricky relationship with the media, which, at the moment at least, I do not have. His was on the back of the



Private Eye court case, which was probably a mistake, although I can see both sides. It certainly let it be known he was not someone to muck around and probably put journalists on their guard.

Do you take a similar tough stance when it comes to the press?

I have actually never reacted because you lose a lot of time and energy. If something appears you don’t like, you bring it to the attention of more people by going to court. Unless my integrity was really seriously questioned, or something particularly horrific was published, only then would I go to court. I am always expecting to fight through the courts for *The Ecologist*, but on a personal level I would make that the neutron button, which I would really hope not to ever push.

I don’t think the coverage I get is that negative. If there is something that is not true, the likelihood is that it will be forgotten tomorrow, so I just don’t lose sleep over it. Very occasionally, I will write a letter, but not out of arrogance, just to put the record straight. I find it more annoying if I do an interview and what I have said is deliberately used out of context. That annoys me, but you can’t spend time

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Portrait
Phil Adams

obsessing on these things. Stories are printed about me because someone feels people want to read them. The positive flip-side is that if I want to raise the profile of a particular issue, or promote *The Ecologist*, it is the same dynamic that allows me to do that. I have access to the media, so I see it as a two-way street and part of the bargain you make. If I do an interview with the *Daily Mail*, then it is not surprising if something later appears in a gossip column that is not true, but you can’t complain about it.

But what do you think when a story is totally untrue? I read recently that your family are worried about your poker playing. Is that so?

No, not at all. I remember that one and I am glad you mention it. There was a detailed description of how I lost £100,000 in one hand of poker. It was re-printed in three or four papers and was just total fabrication. Actually, that story was not very helpful. I didn’t respond, but probably should have because you do not want to appear cavalier with money. I would prefer for that not to have been printed. There was not a single piece of truth in it, other than the fact that I like gambling. I always have, since I was a child — I even had a casino in my room at school.



by Rob McGibbon

ZAC'S NEWS SCHEDULE

**Newspapers:**

I don't buy a newspaper each day because I don't have the time to get through one. If I have a taxi journey, I will get an *Evening Standard* or any paper that takes my attention. *The Independent* is delivered to the house, but it is for other people. If I have time, I will read it. I have people in the office cutting articles that are relevant to what I am doing, so I keep up on all the necessary things. Certain papers are good on certain subjects, so I keep a broad eye on all of them.

Magazines:

Ironically, I like *Private Eye*. I don't remember my father's stuff with them — I was a toddler — and although I have featured, there has been nothing negative. I don't subscribe, but I buy it regularly. I think it keeps journalists on their toes. Sometimes you read an article in *Private Eye* and it drives you mad that you haven't read it anywhere else. It gets to issues that other newspapers just don't get to — whether that is down to cowardice or hypocrisy. I don't know. I also get *The Week*. I think that is a very good magazine and beautifully put together.

Television and Radio:

I don't watch a lot of television. I prefer radio and

I think John Humphrys is wonderful. I like Jon Snow on *Channel 4 News* and Jeremy Paxman on *Newsnight*. I like to watch *Question Time* — but not appearing on it! I have been on two or three times, but it is a nightmare to do. You go on hoping that your issues are going to come up, but the last time I was asked about stuff that is not part of my agenda. I am no more qualified to talk about crime or education than anyone else, so as a result it becomes a survival exercise. I got home before the programme had finished broadcasting — I had forgotten it wasn't live — and my wife was watching it. I recoiled at the sight of me and couldn't bear to watch.

Web:

I use the BBC website a lot. At all times at the bottom of my computer screen, I have the fluctuating prices of commodities. I like watching the ebb and flow of things like gold, oil, natural gas and sugar. It tells me a little bit

about what is happening in the world in a very different way to, say, news events. Commodity prices are strong indicators as to the psychology of the world. If the price of gold is moving up fast, it tells you that a large number of people are feeling insecure. And what is happening to the price of sugar has many implications. I also like looking at currency values.

entirely untrue. There was no such conversation.

I get on very well with him — we all do. He's a decent guy.

Are you worried about getting extra attention now that you have entered the political arena? And you were quoted having a go at William Hague recently. Was that accurate?

It's a very dangerous thing to say, but I can't think of anything that I have done which would be humiliating if it were across the pages of a newspaper. There is no financial incentive to misbehave, so that's ruled out. At the moment, the deal I have with the media is going pretty well, but you cannot predict these things. Clearly, when you get involved in politics you inherit enemies you didn't have before.

I have no idea where the William Hague quote came from and I would bet that nothing like that came out of my mouth. It was dug up from an interview many years ago, but I don't remember ever saying that. It was pretty hardcore and I have definitely never had those feelings about him. It's just not possible I would feel so strongly. I've met him a few times and I like him. He's a character, very intelligent, and he has got integrity — and you can't say that about a lot of politicians.

Have you been put on-message by Cameron and do you hold any fears for aligning yourself with the Tories? Your father famously launched a party against them.

There are no taboo areas and I have not been asked — even politely — to adapt any of my views. My job is to make sure we are picking the right people to answer the right questions about all these environmental issues. The policy group has already created momentum and people who would never have considered working with the Conservative Party are now clambering to do so. No-one I have spoken to yet has said no. David Cameron would not have got involved in the environment agenda if there was not a demand for it. I am taking advantage of a political party in disarray, desperately trying to find a new identity and my goal is help that identity form around some of the ideas that are essential to *The Ecologist*. I think there is a gap in politics and it makes sense to help the Conservatives move in that direction. At the very least, it is stimulating an arms race mentality among the parties as they are all desperately trying to appear the greenest — and that has got to be good news. I don't care who gets these issues on the map, I just want them to be dealt with.

What do you think of the newspaper coverage of green issues these days?

Things have changed a great deal in just a few years. The environment was virtually ignored by the

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mainstream papers, but today they all have their issues, and collectively the coverage is pretty good. If it is on-side with an issue, there is no paper more powerful than the *Daily Mail*. When it was focusing on GM foods it moved that agenda dramatically. *The Telegraph* does a fantastic job on food and farming. On the macro issues such as climate change, *The Guardian* is good and *The Independent* is well ahead of the game. It has broken all the rules with its uncompromising covers.

The Ecologist was founded by your uncle Teddy in 1970. How was your entrée into journalism?

I started doing little bits and pieces in late 1997, like the letters and reviews pages, but then the organisation running the magazine collapsed and the team fell apart. I was the only one left standing, so I went from reviews editor to editor in about two months. I had no journalistic background, I was totally unqualified, so it was deep-end stuff. But back then the magazine was not all that serious and only had about 2,000 readers. If it had been a bigger operation I would probably not have done it because I would have thought, I can't write, I can't edit, I can't design, I'm going to fuck this up!

I published a big story on the American GM foods company Monsanto in 1998 and it triggered a massive reaction. It caused a big storm and really got the magazine noticed. It was basically just me and an assistant at the time, and it nearly killed me. I was under so much pressure and survived on two hours sleep a night for about three months. I thought I was going mad. After that I started building the team to take the magazine forward.

How well is the magazine doing now? It is in that privileged position where it doesn't need to make a profit. What is the reality of it as a business and the contribution you have to make financially?

Obviously, I don't take a salary and I pay a small amount into the magazine every year. *The Ecologist* doesn't make money, but it could do potentially because it is growing. The amount I put in varies and I haven't totted it up. Last year it would have been about £50,000. We are a relatively tight outfit and have 14-15 people working full time. There are three full-time writers and the rest are freelance.

The magazine is selling around 30,000 at the moment, and there are now editions in French, Spanish, Portugese and Italian. There is also an Arabic edition and an English edition in India. There is nothing in America yet, but we have done some tests and the reaction is the best we've had anywhere. However, to launch in America requires such commitment — and we are not ready yet.

The whole point of the magazine is to not back down from an issue. We don't have shareholders nagging away at us to behave in a certain way, so we can take risks that other newspapers and magazines can't take. That is our job. The idea of backing down in order to protect the magazine just doesn't figure. If the magazine is bankrupted through a backfired risk, then that's what happens and it's something we would have to live with.

Obviously we are not going to change the world at *The Ecologist*, but if stuff that we print gets reprinted in the mainstream media, it has a better chance of having an impact. The magazine is useful. If it did not have a use I would not do it. I believe in the magazine. I like it and I think it has a role that is changing and growing. But at its heart it is the same as it always has been.

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In that story, I was meant to have gone to the Clermont Club, but at that time, I had never ever stepped foot in there. After that I was interested — and now I am a member. I absolutely love playing poker. I play with friends, but it is more of a social thing than gambling. I never have played cash poker, which is when things become dangerous because you can lose anything.

If you were to forensically go through most of the articles printed about me or someone I know, you will find that most are based on information that is entirely false. I would love to know what process the journalists go through who write this stuff. Is it false information from someone making a buck, or is it total fabrication on the part of a lazy journalist?

But how about your wider family — Jemima, for example, and Imran Kahn and her relationship with Hugh Grant. They get a tough time.

There are times when I would have thought her life is made more difficult by the press. It's just the way it is in this country. I think the British press has got a lot to answer for generally. I take everything I read with a pinch of salt and just assume most of what I read isn't true. As for Hugh, to talk about him is a minefield because it can so easily become a headline. A while ago, there was a story forensically reporting a conversation I had with him saying, "You treat my sister well or all hell will be let loose." There was all this stuff that I was very disapproving and that Jemima hugely respects Zac and that my negative attitude is having an effect on the relationship. It is

Zac Goldsmith's FANTASY FLYERS

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

"Walmart Collapses As The Last Of Its Customers Returns To The High Street"

What would be the Fantasy Headline involving yourself?

"Goldsmith Closes Shop As Green Manifesto Sweeps Conservatives To Power". As this is the point of what I am doing at the moment, it would be good to see our proposals adopted.

What would be the headline you most dread?

"World Goes To War Over Dwindling Reserves" or "Labour Wins Fourth Term"

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

John Prescott: "You're a complete waste of space: Discuss." How is it possible to be so wrong on so many issues and still



be Deputy Prime Minister? Someone please tell me — How!! His ideas just don't add up. He is living in a fantasy world.

What question would you never answer?

"When does it land?" It's always unlucky to assume a plane will arrive at all...

What would you like the headline to be on your obituary?

"Zac Goldsmith — Gave up smoking decades ago!" I am always trying to give up smoking, but I am always failing. I would also like to be responsible for even marginally boosting our chances of survival.