

the press conference with LORD ARCHER (AND ALISON & PAULA)



by Rob McGibbon

So, here I am, on a sumptuous sofa in Lord Archer's glorious watchtower penthouse above the Thames. Fine art and beautiful objects are all around, as is the stunning backdrop of London. In a cosy armchair next to me is former prisoner FF8282. Our only other meeting was 20 years before. Me, a cub reporter on the *Wimbledon News* doing my first celebrity interview and he, the bristle-tailed new deputy chairman of the Tory Party. Early 1986. And to think what was to come...

He told me something off-the-record back then and, no matter how un-newsworthy it was, I faithfully kept it secret. When I pitched for an interview months ago, along with the rest of the world's media, I reminded Archer of this simple fact. It was a short letter, a little hook to the big fish, and it worked. Archer has had interview requests by the multiple-score, but has kept "open" sit-downs to just a few as he promotes *False Impression*, his first novel since serving two years for perjury.

So what is it like interviewing Archer? Where do I begin? He is all the things you expect and dread; gushing with dubious charm, dominating, patronising, and shamelessly bombastic, with a tone and volume of voice that irritates like a finger relentlessly jabbing your forehead. Then, in bursts, he is kind, oddly interested in your life and, when the guard slips, fleetingly vulnerable and melancholy. Interviewing Archer — now 65 — is like entering one of his breathless novels. The plot zig-zags while you hang on in pursuit of the real story. But, of course, you won't ever find it. When you try to guide the "Master Storyteller" through the chapters of his own scandalously rich plot, you are left giddy with bewilderment.

[The scene: I exit the lift on the 13th floor and am greeted by the housekeeper — Paula. Mid-30s, she is in a black suit and seems a touch fraught, busy. Along a short hall of gilt-framed works, gallery lit, I recognise certain brushstrokes. A Monet of a sunset behind the Houses of Parliament. I had a similar picture on a calendar once. Around the corner to the main stage, and there he is, dwarfed by the floor to ceiling glass and the view of the city he might have ruled. He is in a blue YSL zipper top, grey slacks and black velvet slippers with embroidered crests.]

Ah! Rob! How are you? Twenty years... Ahh, Lord Archer, it's been too long. How have you been? Much been happening? [Chit-chat, banter, cricket talk, then we do pictures. I tell him I have read the new novel.] Thank you. Thank you very much indeed.



"If you take any national newspaper, you will find nine out of 10 pages are criticising somebody. They have discovered what sells papers"

I bought it, so I've chipped in with the royalties... What?! Why didn't the publishers send you one?

Oh, I needed it quickly, but not to worry, expenses and all that... [Not looking at anyone]. ALISON! Supply another book here for some girlfriend or some whatever. He bought one, which is all wrong... [From off stage: "Yes, OK."] ALISON is his PA, who is ever-present, but remains hidden behind an upper-office mezzanine. He subtly quizzes me on the plot of the book and I just about pass with a C+. Phew! Then we begin. But Jeffrey seems genuinely, almost endearingly, fascinated with my life and seems to want to delay our start. And then he is off on a detailed diatribe about the life of Edmund Mallory and the screenplay he has written which he cannot get financed. He needs £50 million. And then we talk about music... I will tell you how out of date I am — I have just discovered Lionel Richie! I was playing him all the way up from Cambridge to London yesterday. I dare not tell anyone, but it is wonderful...

Any favourites? Yes. The one on the end. It's, um... do we have the title, ALISON? [Off stage: "Sorry?"] The title on the end of the Lionel Richie album... [Remained annoyed] "Ern, no, I'm afraid we haven't..."

Portraits Phil Adams

And obviously, the big one... what's the one I like especially? Oh, come on, get with it Jeffrey. (Alison: "Hello?") Yes, of course, that's it — "Hello". But there was one yesterday, I went berserk about it. The one he ends the shows...

Jeffrey, I'm sorry, but we must move on. How does it feel to be back in the spotlight, dealing with the media again? The press have been wonderful — and you can't have heard me say that often. Very civilised and very decent — with the one exception... The one exception being? NO!

Sorry? NO? As in, I am NOT going to tell you. Everyone else has played it absolutely straight and has been very fair. They have been very kind about the book, too. As you probably know, it is selling very fast. Third reprint in four days. 120,000 hardbacks in England in four days. Never had that before. And that is after 87,000 hardbacks in Australia... [It went in at No.2 in the Sunday Times's bestsellers last week, behind Stephen King's "Cell", which had a few extra days' sales.]

You have had countless requests for interviews but you've done very few actual sit-downs. I'm fascinated — why Press Gazette? Well, I think I got cautious. I read your work and I liked it. I liked the Branson piece and I was very interested in the Andy McNab one. And of course I've worked with you before. [Er, hardly!] I had a very nice man from The Sunday Times to do "Me And My Car". He said, "There is a new vogue in journalism to be as unpleasant and snide as you can. I want you to know that I love your books. I don't write like that and I can't imagine why people bother." I gave him a very good interview. It was on my Mini. I give a much better interview to people who are straight. If they come in being snide or clever, you show them the door. What's the point? I don't need it any longer. I live a very comfortable life, thank you. [A slight, loud and clear, Jeffrey.]

So, what has it been like being back in the public arena? Wonderful, in the sense that the public could not have been kinder or more generous. Of course, the press have now come round to realising that. That's why you get articles like you did in The Guardian saying that he is a national treasure and we mustn't lose him. The press is guided by the public. Nothing

TIMELINE

The Archer case file
1986a: News of the World runs scoop that an Archer aide paid prostitute Monica Coghlan £2,000. The Daily Star follows it up and says Archer had sex with her. He sues for libel.

1987: In court Archer relies on a forged appointments diary to win £500,000 in damages from the Star. Editor Lloyd Turner loses his job.

1999: As Archer runs for Mayor of London, his friend Ted Francis reveals in the *Nat* how he provided Archer with a false alibi in the '87 trial.

2001: Archer found guilty of perjury. Sentenced to four years in prison.

2003: Archer freed after serving just two years and two days.

was more clear than when Diana died. In the first few hours they were all having a go at Diana and then they suddenly got in line and said she was the greatest thing ever. When I came out of prison, I certainly wondered if I would be shunned in the streets and treated badly. And I got the message very quickly because people were ringing up saying, 'Are you going to do your charity work? Do you want to do auctions?' Then Lawrence Dallaglio and Michael Vaughan were getting in touch. Then you realised how the crowd treated you. I was very nervous about that, but they were kind and that was cheering. People are basically decent and forgiving.

I watched the Richard and Judy interview and it seemed a bit awkward. Is there a sense of people wanting you to basically come out and say "Sorry"? Well, maybe. But if you said it 20 times they would still grind on. But they are not now — God bless them — suggesting that I want to return to public life. I got rid of that one — probably thanks to Andrew Marr. Andrew put it very straight and I said, "No".

Is it a conscious decision you have made not to actually say "Sorry"? DON'T go down that road!

How do you mean? I have answered that question a hundred times. You have seen the answers...

But I would rather not rely on what may or may not have been said in the cuttings... Right! The answer to your question is I have made a lot of mistakes in my life. I'm sure you have as well. Most of us have. Umm, I am sorry about those mistakes, but I am now a writer and getting on with it.

OK, fine. Is writing enough for you? No, no, it is not. I love the auctions. They keep me occupied at a different type of level and I am getting a lot of invitations to speak around the country, which I am not accepting. If something very exciting came up, outside of writing, I might consider it. But it would have to be very exciting because I am living such a wonderful life. I am putting more into the writing now than I have ever done. Maybe prison taught me that, because I wrote more while I was... [pause] PAULA! (Off-stage: "Sir?") Can you get me Prison Diaries — combined — and one of the latest books. I want to show you something... and I want to give you the latest book, I feel guilty about you buying one... [Paula chip-clops across the hard floor and places two books upright on a large coffee table that has long since been lost beneath a pallet-sized consignment of art books, eight deep in places.] What I want you to look at carefully, Rob, is the three diaries together, that is one year's work in prison. Half a million words. And that [the new novel] is two years' work outside. It is just because of time.

How do you feel about the diaries? Very proud. And look at those reviews. You would kill for those reviews, but now they have gone back to saying I can't write. They've got to make their minds up. One minute I am Dostoyevsky or Shaw, the next I am...

I realise it is all in the diaries, but can you put the prison experience into a nutshell for me? Pretty bloody, pretty unpleasant and, at certain levels, a complete waste of time. I wrote three diaries, a screenplay and nine short stories, so I used my time. I can't bear not using my time, but for most intelligent people I met, you were simply locking them up... there must be better ways of using intelligent people's time. Either working in charity, community service or doing something worthwhile, instead of just sitting in a cell all day and night... [continues at length about prison reform, the levels of drugs abuse inside etc. Refer to cuts...]

Even in some dark way, are you pleased to have had the prison experience and come through it? No. I am not. You take what you get in life and you get on with it. It was an amazing experience. It has changed my attitude to people and it may have



changed my writing in some ways. You take it. There is no use trying to pretend it never happened. It did happen and I don't hide from it. I will tell you a story. Forgive me, I will cut it as short as I can. I was at Oxford with a guy called Geoffrey Williams — a remarkable character, who won the single-handed trans-Atlantic yacht race in 1968 when he was 23. 24. I took him out to lunch afterwards and he told me that he fell off the boat and saw it going away. Oh, God! Can you imagine, in the middle of the Atlantic! It stopped, so he swam and grabbed the rope. He's alive today to tell the story... I thought, I will never in my lifetime experience something as dreadful and as frightening as that and I told him I envied him because I would like to know what it does to a middle-class boy in that situation. He tried to describe it, but he couldn't. And I say to people who haven't been to prison, you can't begin to understand, you never will. If you read the books, you will touch the surface. Being on a wing with 21 murderers, I now know it is every bit as frightening as falling off the back of a boat in the middle of the Atlantic. Well, I would be able to face him now and say, I had my falling off a boat, and I didn't like it.

What would you say is your worst experience of the press? No comment!

Can you tell me what was it like being the target of a News of the World sting with such serious ramifications? No comment!

Sorry? No comment at all! Are you getting deaf in your old age!!

What do you think of the News of the World and its place in the media? Well, they have a place in so far as selling more copies than anyone else because of the stories they produce. Clever old them.

Do you think it is fair to go after people if they have been up to wrong? Wouldn't you agree that is the value of a free press? No comment!

But do you think it serves some positive purpose, even just a little bit? No comment! [Oh dear, they were only the warm-up questions! I pause. Silence. Oh look, there's the London Eye, side-on. And that bronze figure of a girl on a wing is exquisite. I make a tactical retreat and discreetly squiggle a line through about 10 other questions, the key ones we all want answered. Oh, I don't know, what really is the point? Everything I want to ask is everything he will never answer. Besides, I feel as if I am intruding on someone's deeply buried grief. He's done his time, his mourning.]

Ok, on a lighter note, which journalist would you like to see do a spell in Belmarsh? Ha ha ha! One or two would learn a tremendous amount from the experience, but we wouldn't wish to name anyone in particular. One of the biggest mistakes every paper makes is... [Cue long explanation of how using the word "escape" from an open prison is wrong; it should be "abscond".]

Jeffrey, how would you sum up your media image? I wouldn't. I get asked that question all the time.

the press conference with LORD ARCHER

Say, if we went back 20 years to when you were flying high and had just made deputy chairman.

What would you do differently?

I am not sure I would go into public life. I got a real shock recently when I spoke to a group of women under the age of 40 who are already right up there in the City. One woman was having a particular go at me about the way Parliament is run. "Instead of shouting at me," I said, "why don't you become a Member of Parliament?" She said, "You must be joking, Jeffrey. I've got just as much to hide as you!" I thought, Oh God, we are losing a whole generation of people because it is not attractive to go into public life. If you have made any mistakes in life, they are multiplied by 10.

A guy from *The Herald* [Glasgow] interviewed me. Alan — a man of 60. A very experienced journalist. Sitting there, like you. A bloody good interview, too. A very good interview. It was so professional. [OK, OK. Got it, Jeffrey.] He said, "You know, Jeffrey, if you hadn't gone into public life, you would be just like Mick Jagger or Paul McCartney and any of the rest of them who have been arrested in half the countries on Earth. But because you went into public life..." I sat down and, well, I had never thought about that. So, in answer to your question: I think I would get on with other things.

You told me off the record all those years ago that Normal Tebbit was really hurt by his Spitting Image puppet. We kept it secret — but he wrote in the *Daily Mail* a few weeks ago that he loved it. These politicians, eh?

Well, he has grown older, too! Norman, a lovely man, a great man, very loyal, he comes to all my parties. Of all the politicians I have dealt with in 40 years, he is the best at summing up what the people really think in two sentences... [Cue long, unconnected anecdote.]

I don't really understand why you have bothered to go back into the Tory Party.

I simply paid £5 to join my local constituency. That's all. In Cambridge and here, in Lambeth. I didn't want any involvement, but I want to support the party, of course. One of the great myths, which became a standing joke inside our homes, with my wife and children, is if you read *The Times*, you would have thought I had wanted to be Prime Minister! [Cue pretreated tangent about Tory voting levels in Scotland and the North, and the chances of power for Cameron...]

What do you make of the book reviewers and the treatment they give your books?

Well, I don't expect them to be nice, although they have been generally kind about this book and the word of mouth is good. I only wish the critics would compare like with like. But you can't complain if you are well known. You have got to take it as part of the deal and look at the sales figures at the end of the week. But you have got to wonder sometimes and ask: Why did 100 million people buy that book? Are all of them stupid, but the one reviewer is a genius?

I wish they would acknowledge just how hard it is to write these books. None of those critics admit that they have tried and failed, that they wrote a book and it only sold 2,000, or they never got it published at all. My books take 1,000 hours of hard slog, but they dismiss it as if you have trotted them out in a few weekends. I don't find the writing either easy or enjoyable. I find it bloody hard work, but I do enjoy having done it. There is a great thrill when it is done. You feel, Wow!

Going back to the press...

Ugh! People only go back when they don't think that they have got what they want... [Then, chuckling slightly, he mutters to no-one in particular...] He's wasting his time... but he's a good boy.

Everything that has happened to you, do you blame it all on the press?

No. I don't blame it on them at all. I blame it on myself.

But what do you think of their treatment of you?

No comment! NO COMMENT! Ha, ha, ha! [Sips pink juice drink. Ice clinks.]

ARCHER'S ABRIDGED NEWS SCHEDULE (... HE WENT ON A BIT)



Newspapers:

I get *The Times* and *The Telegraph* EVERY day. They are delivered here and in Cambridge. It is clearly a success, but I don't like the three pictures on the front of *The Times*. I am a huge Matthew Paris fan and I would buy it for him alone. I love my sport — Simon Barnes and Martin Samuel are terrific. And Christopher Martin-Jenkins for cricket. In Peter Brook's, I think they have the best cartoonist in England.

Magazines:

If I am travelling, I will get *The Spectator* to read on a train. I am very interested to see how Matthew d'Ancona gets on. I also get *Art and Auction*, the *Art Newspaper*, the *Sophy's* and *Christie's* catalogues. Geordie Greig very kindly sends me *The Tatler* regularly. It's very Geordie. He's a very clever editor and has put sales on in hard times.



Television:

I have become a *Sky News* watcher over the past three years because you can get it all in 15 minutes. It means I don't have to wait for the Ten O'Clock News. You can get up at 6am, turn it on and you are ahead of the papers on the top three stories by the time they come through the door. My favourite programme is *The West Wing*. I spend a lot of time watching cricket, football and rugby.

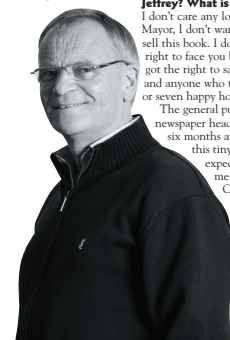
Radio:

Radio 5 Live for sport while I'm in the car. And if I am coming down from Cambridge on Saturdays or Sundays, I enjoy the political programmes in the morning on Radio 4. And thank God they are still doing live test cricket on the radio, so I tune into that.

Web:

The web is amazing, but I don't use it and still prefer to look things up in books. I can't click or do emails. I can't even type. I hand write everything. I did a podcast interview for Vancouver recently, so I know what an iPod is, but that's about it.

"It's past. Gone. I don't care any longer. You can all go off and do what you like. I'm no longer in the game"



are criticising somebody. That's fine, they have obviously discovered that is what sells newspapers. For example, I have raised, I don't know, £30 million for charities at auctions. Have you ever seen that in an article? No, of course you haven't. It doesn't sell newspapers.

And look what Tessa Jowell is going through. Double-page spreads in every paper for weeks and she may be completely innocent, yet she is being pilloried. Relentlessly. I don't know the truth. If she did know and was compliant, then that's fair enough because a cabinet minister cannot do that sort of thing, but what if she is innocent?

So, what is the bottom line for you now, Jeffrey? What is ahead?

I don't care any longer, Rob. I don't want to be Mayor, I don't want to be anything. I would like to sell this book. I do believe in it and I have got the right to face you because you have read it. I have got the right to say I think that it is a good read and anyone who takes it on holiday will have six or seven happy hours.

The general public are very different to the newspaper headlines. Very different indeed. About six months after I got out of prison, I went to this tiny place, this school hall, and I was expecting 32 people to come and hear me. There were 600 in the audience.

Can you believe it? To bring you more up to date, I did a signing session at Selfridges the other day. Non-stop queues, on and on and on. People in the end, cheer one up. People keep one going.

In 20 years time, I will be 85 and you will be 60, and then we could talk again and neither of us will give a damn. Then...

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Jeffrey Archer's

FANTASY FLYERS

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

I need to think about this and make sure I get it right. "There Is Only One God But There Are Several Religions". When I was a kid, you could sit in a room, with a Roman Catholic, a Jew, a Muslim and have a discussion. Now some people don't want to listen to the discussion. I find that dreadful. It is a case of: You are wrong and if you don't like that I will kill you. I think it is awful and I am very worried.

Do you pray much?

No.

What, never?

Ah! No comment. Now, that is NOT one of your usual Fantasy questions.

What would be the Fantasy Headline involving yourself?

"Archer Scores Second Century In The Opening Test Match Against Australia". At Lords, of course!

What would be the headline you most dread? You have had a few!

Thanks! "Archer Gets 0 and 0 In The First Test Match". Or "Archer Died Last Night Aged 147".

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

Nelson. He is such a hero of mine. There he is up on the wall [points to a large oil painting of Nelson addressing his officers]. I would not ask him one thing, but I would like to be present in the boardroom with those officers.

What question would you never answer?

Take any of the 20 I haven't answered today!

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

Umm... PAULA! (Off-stage: "Sir?") Could you give me the quote. He can have it if he wants. This is not what I would like written, but I want to read something to you. [A small laminated piece of paper duly arrives and Archer begins to read.] "It is not the critic who counts,

nor the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marked by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; because there is no effort without error and shortcomings; but who does actually strive to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

Theodore Roosevelt. Not bad, eh? [And with that, Archer removes his glasses and rubs his eyes that are visibly filled with emotion.]

Yes, interesting. But who are these timid souls, Jeffrey? The journalists?

Ugh! Certainly not! You're trying SO hard!