

The DEFINITE ARTICLE

We ask a celebrity a set of devilishly probing questions – and only accept **THE** definitive answer. This week it's former Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls

The prized possession you value above all others... My 1966 upright Yamaha piano. I got it in 2011 when I started learning and I'm on Grade 5 now. I find it relaxing because it's so immersive. It takes my mind off work.

The biggest regret you wish you could amend... That my uncle Tom never lived to celebrate a civil partnership with his partner Glenn. Tom died aged 59 from cancer in 2005, the year the first civil partnerships were allowed.

The temptation you wish you could resist... Crisps and peanuts. They're bad for me, but utterly compelling.

The book that holds an everlasting resonance...

Swallows And Amazons by Arthur Ransome. My dad Michael gave it to me when I was seven and I was swept away with the vividness of the adventure.

The pet hate that makes your hackles rise... People leaving damp towels on the bedroom floor, assuming someone else will pick them up. It's gone on in our house for 20 years. The culprits know who they are – it's *all* of them!

The person who has influenced you most... My wife, Yvette Cooper. She's always been supportive, but she doesn't put up with any nonsense. She's made sure I only do things that are true to my values.

The film you can watch time and time again... The Sound Of Music. My mum Carolyn played the music when I was a child, and Yvette and I took our kids [Ellie, 17, Joe, 15, and Maddy, 12] on a Sound Of Music tour of Salzburg in 2014. Great fun.

The figure from history for whom you'd most like to buy a pie and a pint... I'd talk to Denis Healey in 1976 when he was tackling many tough issues as Chancellor of the Exchequer, such as the Labour Party rebellions. I'd ask how he coped.

The misapprehension about yourself you wish you could erase... When I was asked in an interview if my surname caused embarrassment at school, I said as a joke, 'It was worse for my sister Ophelia.' For years I've had people ask me if it's true. Her real name's Joanna.



'Campanology – bell ringing – is fascinating. I did it for years in my teens. It's difficult but it has a mathematical beauty'



The unending quest that drives you on...

To play the piano effortlessly and be able to improvise. I want to be at Grade 8 in five years.

The unlikely interest that engages your curiosity... Campanology – bell ringing. I did it at a local church in Nottingham for four years from the age of 14. It's technically difficult but it has a mathematical beauty.

The piece of wisdom you would pass on to a child... When your formal education finishes, take your time before rushing into a career.

The treasured item you lost and wish you could have again... The ability to eat what I want without putting on weight left me in my 20s. I lost a stone doing Strictly though, I'm 16st now.

The poem that touches your soul... I love the words to The Magnificat canticle, which has been sung in churches for hundreds of years. Its timeless beauty always touches me.

The philosophy that underpins your life... See the glass as half full.

The event that altered the course of your life and character... In 2009 I was supporting some children talking about their stammer on a DVD. One of the fathers called me a coward for keeping mine a secret, so I chose to speak out.

The crime you would commit knowing you could get away with it... I'd camp overnight at the top of the Empire State Building, so I could watch the sun rise over New York's fabulous skyline.

The song that means most to you... Can't Help Falling In Love by Elvis. I remember singing it with Yvette soon after we met in 1994. Four years later the guests sang it at our wedding.

The way you would spend your fantasy 24 hours, with no travel restrictions...

I'd have mango juice and a banana pancake for breakfast on the beach on the island of Lombok, Indonesia. Then all the family would go windsurfing on a Greek island and have lunch at a beachside restaurant. I'd have calamari and chips. We'd go white-water rafting on the Zambezi river in Zambia, then look

at Impressionist paintings in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, before heading to New York to watch the musical Hamilton. We'd end the day at El Capitan Canyon nature reserve in California. I'd barbecue steaks on an open fire, then we'd sleep under the stars.

The happiest moment you will cherish forever... When Yvette was elected MP for Pontefract and Castleford in 1997. I felt so happy that we were going to be in government together [Ed was working as an adviser to the Chancellor Gordon Brown at the time].

The saddest time that shook your world... The 9/11 attack. I was in Downing Street with Gordon Brown and there was a real sense of foreboding. He said, 'The world will now be a darker and more dangerous place.'

The unfulfilled ambition that continues to haunt you... That I never became Chancellor. But it doesn't haunt me – I've moved on to do other things.

The order of service at your funeral... I want music by Handel and Herbert Howells, and then for the congregation to dance to Gangnam Style.

The way you want to be remembered... He showed that being a politician is a noble calling. I'll probably also be remembered for Strictly!

The Plug... The stage show An Evening With Ed Balls: Strictly Speaking Out is coming to Greenwich and Cheltenham. Ed's memoir Speaking Out is published by Arrow at £9.99. ■

As told to Rob McGibbon



Right: Julie Andrews in The Sound Of Music. Above right: banana pancakes and mango juice. Far right: the Empire State Building at sunrise

PS...

Jude Law stars in *King Arthur: Legend Of The Sword* – in cinemas Friday. Sheryl Crow plays *Shepherd's Bush Empire* the same day. And *Star Wars's* John Boyega opens in *Woyzeck* at London's Old Vic on Monday



NEXT WEEK

- Part one of Matthew Jukes' Summer Wine Collection – the 100 best-value reds and rosés
- Fearne Cotton's healthy no-bake, no-cook Banoffee Pie
- PLUS Britain's best TV guide