

A Labour of Love

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ALASTAIR CAMPBELL**

It really is a difficult job to know where to start describing Alastair Campbell.

You certainly can't pigeon hole him as there's just too many holes to choose from. How do you pick from journalist, broadcaster, political aide, media strategist, writer, long distance runner or television presenter?

Then what do you start talking about – his major influence in Labour's General Election victories, journalism, his tough fight against depression, his many novels, extensive charitable fundraising, life as a Burnley fan.. the list goes on. But for the purposes of today's *green&white*, we'll concentrate on the last on the list as he is a Claret.

The relationship between Alastair Campbell and Burnley FC began, as with nearly all football fans, at an early age. "I was about four when I first saw them play," he recalls. "I can't remember who they were playing but my late father thought it was either West Ham or Chelsea.

"At the time, we lived in the Yorkshire town of Keighley and the drive over to Burnley, about 20 miles, was through some beautiful countryside. My father was a vet and often worked at weekends so I would go with friends instead."

It could have been so different

though. "Initially, we went to Leeds, Huddersfield and Bradford as well, but I think I liked the colours and the atmosphere so we continued going to Turf Moor."

When Alastair was ten, a freak accident involving an aggressive pig seriously injured his father and Mr Campbell senior spent a long time in hospital. The young Alastair wrote countless diaries about his life for his hospitalised parent, an early suggestion for a future career perhaps?

The family then moved to Leicester but the lure of Burnley Football Club wouldn't fade.

"It's strange but the further I've moved from Burnley, the pull has grown stronger. I've spent hours and hours on trains going to and from matches; I find the logistics of travelling to games awful sometimes."

As Yeovilians, that's something we can identify with for sure and the joys of getting around in the West Country was soon on Alastair's agenda as a move to Devon arose. "I trained as a reporter for Mirror Group Newspapers down on the Sunday Independent in the early eighties. The Penlee lifeboat disaster in Cornwall was my first major contribution to a really big news story. I liked Cornwall, spent a year there and met my partner Fiona Millar while working on the paper."

After then moving to London to continue his Mirror Group media career, events at Burnley weren't going so well. Having watched



his beloved Clarets in the First Division, and witnessed his side thrash Spurs 4-1 (two Graham Roberts own goals), a steady decline had seen the Lancashire club slump to the bottom tier of the Football League.

"On the final day of the season, we had to beat Leyton Orient to stay up and we just about did, winning 2-1 with goals from Grewcock and Britton. If we'd lost,



it would have been Non-League for us.”

The nineties were a much better time for Campbell and the Clarets. When Tony Blair took over from the late John Smith as Labour leader, he appointed Alastair as his spokesman. The role then developed into one coordinating the campaign to re-elect Labour at the 1997 General Election. This

was ultimately a successful one with Campbell playing a major part by persuading the press to

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publicly back his party rather than the traditional Conservative media support.

Meanwhile at Turf Moor, there was excitement and promotion in equal measure. In just eight seasons, Burnley won three promotions and were relegated once, leaving them in the second tier of English football after more than two decades of exile. It also provided Alastair with some

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of his best memories. "Obviously the promotions were special. Beating Stockport with goals from David Ayres and Gary Parkinson in the 93-94 play-off final was a highlight."

Once Tony Blair was installed at 10 Downing Street, he moved to appoint Campbell as his Chief Press Secretary, a role he held for three years before becoming Director of Communications, a massively influential role in the Government of the time. Then in 2003, having resigned from the Government to spend more time with his family. He continued writing prolifically and has penned several fascinating diaries about his time in office.

When you think about what happened in this country during the nine years with Tony Blair (New Labour, Princess Diana, Northern Ireland, Kosovo, 9/11 etc), it makes him one of the most enthralling people to listen to or read about on any subject.

Yet still Burnley has never been far from his thoughts. Even now, despite having a schedule that exhausts a person just to read it, Alastair still gets to see around two-thirds of Burnley's matches each season, pretty impressive given that it means a 10pm return even from a home game. And he's even managed to see Yeovil twice in the past few months too!

"Yes, I went to the play-off final at Wembley to see you beat Brentford and I met your board at the game. I also saw you play up at Turf Moor this season. Your right back looked a quality player that day, he really impressed me."

Yes, Luke Ayling, he means you! And he has good words to say about the Glovers. "I really hope you stay up. It would be such a fantastic thing as you have the smallest squad and wage bill.



STAR STRUCK: Alastair meets Argentine legend Diego Maradona

Really, Burnley are only a small club too, surrounded by some of the biggest sides in world football and we only have a little catchment area."

So what now for the man who could stake a claim to be the country's busiest man? His latest novel '*My Name Is*', a tale of a teenager's descent into alcoholism, was out last week in paperback and follows on from other books dealing with subjects close to home. Having already written about his previous battles with depression as well as his captivating diaries

of his time working with Tony Blair, his well of creativity shows no sign of drying up. And neither does his energy as having lost his best friend, and his friend's daughter, to leukaemia, he continues to work tirelessly for Leukaemia and Lymphoma Research, having personally raised a sum into seven figures for the charity.

His love of Burnley also carries on, now into its fifth decade. The likes of Sir Alex Ferguson, Sir Bobby Charlton, John Motson and Brendan Foster have all spoken at dinners organised by him to raise money for the club. And despite having mixed with some of the most powerful men the world has seen on the biggest stages, Alastair Campbell still retains that unbreakable love for the club whose colours and noise attracted him as a four-year-old. ■

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