

Mischievous. Moving. Marvellously indiscreet

AMUSING, incisive, and rarely without a smile, the BBC's political editor Nick Robinson is one of the best-known faces on TV. So when on the eve of the General Election he was diagnosed with lung cancer, the messages of goodwill poured in – and never stopped. Here, in a remarkable new diary of his life behind the camera during the most dramatic contest of a generation, Nick describes with touching candour the terror and the tears of his battle, the disastrous loss of his voice, and his unbreakable determination to continue telling the truth about our elected leaders. Emotionally draining, supremely well-informed, yet typically witty from start to finish, it is an utterly compelling read...

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 6 CHEST CONSULTANT'S CLINIC

I'VE been coughing and wheezing on and off since the autumn party conference season. I've been an asthmatic all my life, I'm over 50, I work stupid hours, and three weeks of early mornings and very late nights trapped in the company of thousands of perspiring, plotting political activists would be enough to make the fittest person ill.

And yet and yet... what began as a routine review of my asthma treatment has turned into something rather different. My consultant, Mike Beckles, has done all the usual stuff and we are almost done when I drop in that I've lost weight. Actually, I've gone down a whole belt size. 'In fact, you know what?' I remark to the elegantly dressed guy behind the desk, 'I've just treated myself to a slim-fit Paul Smith suit for the Election.' No, I haven't dieted. No, I'm not exercising any more than usual. I've just lost weight. In the short pause that follows it feels as if a klaxon has gone off and red lights are flashing. 'I'm sending you for a CT scan. Now,' he says. Oh.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 9 HOME, THE STUDY

'HE started it.'

'Did not.'

'Did so.'

'Liar.'

'Pants on fire.'

This is not a verbatim summary of the texts that have bombarded my phone from the moment I woke but it isn't that far off.

The fact that more than 1,000 wealthy Brits hid their money in HSBC's Swiss accounts and were advised by the bank how to dodge tax was not, apparently, the fault of them or their bankers but all the fault of (delete as applicable) a) Ed Balls, who was the City Minister at the time of the offences, or b) David Cameron, for rewarding the bank's boss with a peerage and a ministerial red box.

Every story I report on has now become a contest between [Tory spin doctor] Craig Oliver and [Labour counterpart] Tom Baldwin – Team Cameron and Team Miliband – over whose narrative wins. Every broadcast and tweet is followed by a stream of complaints that I've ignored this or not emphasised that.

I've had enough. I tell Tom that if he really wants to decide what the BBC broadcasts he should apply for a job here, and Craig that if he wants to know what I'll be saying he can watch the News at Ten like everyone else.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 11 VICTORIA LINE TUBE

THE newsroom want me to cover [SNP leader] Nicola Sturgeon's speech but I've got a hunch that we haven't seen the end of the tax-avoidance row. I text someone in Ed Miliband's office: 'Help me out – where's this story going next?' In response I learn that The Guardian website is about to publish a list of seven Tory donors, including the former party treasurer Lord Fink, who had those secretive HSBC Swiss accounts. Miliband will challenge Cameron on this at PMQs.

CHINESE RESTAURANT NEAR THE OFFICE

LUNCH with Tom Baldwin. The Labour spin doctor is still buzzing after PMQs. This moment, he tells me, is like the moment when

Battling cancer. Asked to spin for Ed. And what they REALLY tell me when we turn the cameras off!

THE MUST-READ BOOK OF THE YEAR

By **Nick Robinson**

BBC POLITICAL EDITOR

the story broke about the hacking of the murdered teenager Milly Dowler's phone. He means they are both balance-tipping moments, the point where an issue that hasn't previously excited most people – in one case phone-hacking within the Murdoch empire, in the other tax avoidance – suddenly galvanizes the public. This is a moment when Ed can show he's standing up to the rich and powerful.

RADIO STUDIO 3

I'VE only just finished my report for BBC News at 6. Now radio want a piece, too.

My WDIAM – What Does It All Mean? – focuses on why Miliband is pursuing tax avoidance so aggressively.

Remembering my lunchtime conversation with Tom, I write that Ed's advisers see it

as a 'Milly Dowler moment', run into the studio, file the report and think no more about it.

MY OFFICE

A MOMENT to close my office door, to breathe, to pause. I've been playing phone tag all day with my chest consultant. Finally

Disbelief! A job with Miliband – and a role at



PARTY INVITATION:
With Labour leader
Ed Miliband

WEDNESDAY, JULY 9, 2014 MY OFFICE, MILLBANK

THE door is closed. I am looking round in disbelief. If only someone else had been there to hear what I just heard.

There was, though, no mistaking the purpose of the phone call I have taken from what, in the customary code, I must call 'a senior Labour figure'. This would be easier face to face, I was told, but the caller ploughed on regardless. The party knows it has a problem and is determined to fix it. The leader needs advice, and it

has to come from someone with sufficient stature to ensure he'll listen to it.

On a rather bad mobile line I was sure, at first, that I was being asked if I could recommend anyone to take charge of Ed Miliband's presentational difficulties. I began to rack my brains until it began to dawn on me that I had misheard. I was being asked whether I would consider taking on the job of spin doctor, with a role at No 10 to follow, naturally. That's right – me.

For the rest of the conversation I had to resist the urge to roar with laughter and inquire whether the caller had got the

– the brilliant memoirs of BBC's man at No 10



UNITED FRONT: Nick and his wife Pippa at home last week

we get to speak. Mike has the results of my scan. There is a shadow on my lung. I'm no medic but I know that's not good. Hold on, he tells me, it might be a bad infection. It could be inflammation.

Yes, he agrees, it could be cancer, but that's not at the top of his list.

The only way to be sure is to have another scan. Oh.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 13 HOME, THE KITCHEN

NOT since the days of Neil Kinnock – remember The Sun's Election day headline in 1992: If Kinnock Wins Today Will The Last Person To Leave Britain Please Turn Out The Lights? – have I seen coverage that is so personal and politically motivated.

The Mail's front page is dominated by the headline: Red Ed The Tax Avoider. Beside it is a photo of Milly Dowler and the words '... and now Labour drags Milly into election battle'.

The Telegraph front page includes the story of the Dowler Family's Dismay At Miliband. Papers that regularly attack the BBC are now using my name to try to give extra credibility to their attacks on Labour.

I text Ed Miliband and those I know best on his team to say that I don't much like being used in this way. As ever they are polite, but it's pretty clear they blame me for providing the bullets the Tory press have fired.

It's not just the Milly salvo. The tax-avoider headline comes from the answer to another question I asked Miliband, about how his father's will was designed to limit inheritance tax. The complaints are already rolling in. Many allege that I made up the reference to

Milly or raised her name first. I am going on a half-term holiday tomorrow and I have another scan this afternoon. I could really, really do without this.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 14 THE RUNWAY, TURIN AIRPORT

HALF-term. A week's skiing. The second the plane's wheels touch the tarmac I switch on my phone. There's a message from my consultant. Can I call him?

THE LUGGAGE HALL

'CAN you help Mum get the bags?' I ask the boys [my sons Will and Harry]. 'I've got to take a call.' They look at me as if to say: 'What? Work? On a Saturday morning? On holiday? Again?' Mike is calm, clear and reassuring. The scans show what looks like a tumour. It still may not be cancer. May not. The balance of probability has clearly changed. Only a

biopsy will tell. No, I don't need to fly home but I should have a test as soon as I do.

I wave at my wife Pippa to come over. She looks a tad irritated. She, too, thinks I've put work first. Again. I take her to one side and do what I do every day of my working life: summarise a stream of complex information on a subject I know very little about as simply as I can. But there's a crucial difference. This time it's about me. And us.

She looks numb. For now the priority is to keep going. Don't scare Will and Harry. Don't spoil the holiday. Don't assume the worst.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20 CERVINIA, CHAIRLIFT

LIFT the bar, lower skis, come to a stop. I can hear [Radio 4 presenter] Jim Naughtie filling in through my earpiece before he says: 'And joining us now is our political editor, Nick Robinson.'

It is the first time – and I suspect it will be the last – I've ever broadcast from a ski slope. I couldn't resist it. The Labour and tuition fees story I've been chasing is taking yet another twist. So here I am, 'live from the Alps', revealing that Labour has not yet agreed on where to find the £1.7 billion a year they need to pay for Ed's promised fee cut.

It might seem like a busman's holiday but it sure as hell beats phoning hospitals about appointments for next week.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25 CHEST CONSULTANT'S CLINIC

'I'VE got as long as you need,' says Mike. It is, of course, cancer. Cancer in the lungs but not, he insists, your everyday killer.

It is, apparently, a slower-growing, nicer sort of tumour which very few people get: a bronchial carcinoid tumour. And it is 'fixable'. Mike recommends swift surgery to cut out the tumour along with all my lung lymph glands. He says it'll be possible to get me back to work within three weeks – in other words, in time for the Election campaign.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26 A ROOM NEAR BROADCASTING HOUSE

I'VE asked Sue and Katy, my BBC bosses at Westminster, to meet me to discuss my flight plan now I've discovered, on the eve of a General Election, that I have a cancerous tumour.

I spell out my ludicrously simple agenda: I will have the tumour and any other nasties cut out and get back to work three weeks later. This can all be fixed, I tell them, quoting my consultant.

Then I pause and think and cry – hot, shoulder-shaking tears. If I don't believe what I'm saying, what on earth can they be thinking?

HOME, THE KITCHEN

Over dinner with the boys, Pippa and I work hard to make normal conversation; to laugh before we break the serious news. Will and Harry listen and seem to take it all in. They don't say a lot – they're teenage boys, after all.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27 BY THE RIVER, OXFORD

WE'RE in Oxford, about to buy lunch for our daughter Alice and tell her my news. But first Pippa is having coffee with an old school friend. I lie down on a bench by the river and stare into the sky. What will I do if Alice cries? What will I do if she asks questions I can't or don't want to answer? 'I

ST PETER'S COLLEGE

I TEXT Pippa: 'Black Dog has come.' She arrives to hold my hand and cheer me up before we meet Alice. And guess what? It goes just as well as last night. No tears. No unanswerable questions. Concern, sympathy, smiles and then the gossip about college life. Just what the doctor ordered.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28

RELIEF. Huge relief. Everyone knows who needs to know. A text arrives from The

Turn to Page 10 ➤

WITHOUT SPEECH, I AM NOTHING

No 10 to follow...

wrong number. Instead, I politely expressed my thanks for being considered and explained I remained committed to journalism (just as I did when the papers reported a long time ago that I'd been approached to work for 'the other side').

I hustle my bureau chief, Katy, into the office, swear her to secrecy and tell her the whole extraordinary tale. I have no idea whether this approach was made with Ed Miliband's knowledge or, as is more likely, by someone freelancing to try to be helpful, but as I walk down Whitehall, I phone my wife and say: 'You'll never guess what...'

After surgery, disaster:

► From Page 9

Sunday Times. The press release [about his illness] has not yet been issued and already they know every detail. It's a quiet news day, apparently, and this story is going to lead page 3. Bloody hell. I should be breaking the news. Instead I am breaking news.

The boys start to follow it all from home. Harry texts to tell me to check Twitter. I can't bring myself to do it. I am afraid it will be filled with the normal bile – 'Good for the tumour', 'Won't be missed', 'Now at least we'll get some straight reporting', and so on.

There is a bit of that after the

Prime Minister tweets his good wishes but then Ed Miliband follows suit and so does Nicola Sturgeon. Now that is a nice surprise. If you work for the BBC you get impartial sympathy.

HOME, THE SOFA

TEXTS continue to pour in. The messages I've had from Robert Peston [the BBC's economics editor], whose beloved wife Sian died of lung cancer, have been among the nicest and the most supportive.

Few people call. One who does is Ed Miliband.

He is kind, generous and thoughtful and sounds genuinely shocked.

SUNDAY, MARCH 1 HOME, THE KITCHEN

MESSAGES from Pesto and the Prime Minister are no match for a text that leaves the boys almost speechless.

'It's from Fergie!' they gasp.

Perhaps Sir Alex remembers that I described him as 'the greatest living Briton' when he retired from Old Trafford. I pretend to be cool about it but I'm not.

Given that we barely know each other, I am hugely touched that he made the effort. Will and Harry agree that only a message from the Queen could top this.

WEDNESDAY MARCH 4 ROYAL BROMPTON HOSPITAL, HIGH DEPENDENCY UNIT

THE operation was, I'm told, a great success. But, but, but... it also seems to have stopped my vocal cords working. I can barely speak above a whisper.

My surgeon, Eric Lim, warned me that he might not be able to get rid of every last bit of nasty cancerous stuff from the inaccessible bits of lung near my main airway and a critical artery. He was delighted to find that he could. Unfortunately, the nerve to that vocal cord took a bit of a battering in the process.

I am assured that this sort of complication is far from unheard of with this sort of surgery. It is, though, for me, a disaster. It's funny how you can take for granted something as fundamental as your ability to make yourself heard, thanks to what are, it seems, just a couple of vibrating folds of mucous membrane stretched across your larynx and the nerves that send them electrical signals.

One of my folds ain't twanging any more, which means that while I might well be able to get myself fit enough to go back to work in time for the Election, no one will be able to hear a word I say.

Everyone keeps telling me that my health is more important than the Election, than any story. Of course it is. But it was the prospect of fighting my way back for this Election that was keeping me going. Now I am confronting the possibility not just of missing it, but of never broadcasting again.

SATURDAY, MARCH 7 ROYAL BROMPTON HOSPITAL

EEE. Ooo. Rrr. I'm damn well trying but nothing more than a faint, husky whisper emerges from my flaccid vocal cords.

The idea of these exercises is to rouse them from their post-operative slumber. The vocal gymnastics have been set for me by Julia Selby, my speech therapist. We'd been acquainted for only a few minutes before Pippa confided something she knew I hadn't dared reveal to anyone else: I was more scared to be told I'd lost my voice than that I had cancer. My voice is no mere tool. It is who I am. Without spoken words, I am nothing.

FRIDAY, MARCH 13 THE REAL WORLD

HOLD the front page! Ed Miliband has two kitchens! That's right, two! And he chose to be filmed in the one that looks a bit grotty! This is what passes for news just a few weeks before the country decides whether to make Ed their leader for the next five years. It is a story of our times, one that should be used as an example in future media studies classes.



THE BEST CURE: Nick still works while having treatment in hospital

On the basis of a single fact and a single image, thousands and thousands of words have been written about the meaning of all this. It has almost none.

UNDER THE SCANNER AGAIN

I'M lying on another cold, hard slab. I am rolled slowly into another vast white tube and every minute or so I'm told to stop breathing. I have that feeling again. Pure dread.

At this point a cheery radiologist says: 'Funny thing is, you remind me of someone on the news.' I smile, and only just stop myself replying: 'Yes, it is a funny thing. That someone on the news used to be me.'

ONCOLOGIST'S CONSULTING ROOM

THE oncologist beams. Your scan, he says, is completely normal. The cancer has not spread.

It's possible, he continues, that you have been cured and that you will never have cancer again. We'll have to keep checking you for the next couple of years, but I'm not inclined to give you any further treatment. No chemo, then. No debilitating sickness, no loss of the little hair I have left. Pippa and I look at each other, waiting for the 'but'. We test his reassurances.

There can be no certainties, no guarantees, no way of knowing for sure whether cancer may return, in the lung or elsewhere, but this is the best possible outcome. Our joy is unalloyed and overwhelming.

● *Election Notebook: The Inside Story Of The Battle Over Britain's Future And My Personal Battle To Report It*, by Nick Robinson, is published by Bantam Press, priced £20. Offer price £16 until June 21. Order at www.mailbookshop.co.uk, p&p is free on orders over £12.

KEEP LOVING THE SIMPLE THINGS

SIMPLE GOODNESS* IN EVERY DROP

SEVEN SEAS
SINCE 1935

*DHA helps maintain normal vision and brain function while EPA & DHA contribute to normal heart function. The beneficial effects for vision and brain are obtained with a daily intake of 250mg of DHA; for the heart beneficial effects are obtained with a daily intake of 250mg EPA & DHA.

I may not work again

Dinner with the Milibands before the Election – and Ed is full of doubt

PIPPA and I join Ed and Justine for dinner before the Election. We talk about what polite, middle-class couples in smart restaurants tend to talk about – children, holidays, books and, of course, politics. What's striking, though, is that Ed makes no attempt to use this conversation, one of the longest we're likely to have before the Election, to make a pitch as to why he's ready to be PM.

I detect, though, something more than natural political caution. It's doubt and uncertainty. Ed, who is a clever, engaging and self-deprecating guy in private, jokes about the time Neil Kinnock was campaigning for him during the Labour leadership election. Neil called on the audience to back Ed for leader... 'although I wouldn't wish this job on my worst enemy'. Ed's demeanour suggests that he is thinking, 'If only I knew then what I know now...'

It's all in stark contrast with a dinner I had with the last leader of the Opposition. In 2009, David Cameron invited me to a restaurant and did everything he could to convince me that he had what it took to be Prime Minister, inviting me to cross-examine him. In truth, that evening was less enjoyable, even though privately David is also very good company. But it made more of an impact.

A lesson in diplomacy from the most powerful leader in the world

I've long known how frustrated Cameron was with Barack Obama's initial reluctance to act first in Libya and then in Syria. Recently the President schooled reporters on Air Force One to parrot the answer to a simple question. 'What is my foreign policy?' he asked the travelling pack. They chorused in reply: 'Don't do stupid s***'. His former Secretary of State and possible successor, Hillary Clinton, observed, 'Great nations need organising principles,' adding waspishly that DDSS (as it is now inevitably known) was 'not an organising principle'.

How Ed Balls went off to climb a mountain... in Sound Of Music costume

After we've talked about his 2014 conference speech and the state of politics, Ed Balls marches me

Ed Balls' family in lederhosen. What Obama calls 'DDSS'. And why Russell Brand is a ****ing sanctimonious t***

DECEMBER 1, 2014

Ed Balls is, as ever, good company. He's much more worried about his Grade 4 piano exam than answering the Autumn Statement. This despite the fact that his terrible performance the previous year finished off any talk of him as a future Labour leader.



through to his and wife Yvette Cooper's hotel room as there's something he wants to show off. In the middle of the room is an ironing board and on top of that a portable fold-out lectern. Stepping forward to show me how it's possible to practise his speech without ever leaving his room, he knocks it to the ground and breaks it. The other revelation of the night

is that Ed, Yvette and their kids went inter-railing during the summer, taking in a Sound Of Music bike tour in costumes made by the Balls-Coopers themselves from curtain material on the train to Salzburg – lederhosen for the boys, headscarves and neckerchiefs for the girls.

Now, if only the snappers had caught that...

'Secret' notes between Brown and Straw that everyone could read

Labour's Jack Straw is sitting alongside me in the studio. On arriving he asks to sit with his good ear next to the presenter, Huw Edwards. He is pretty much deaf in the other. I joke that it must have been interesting serving with Gordon Brown, who has only one functioning eye.

'It was worse than you think,' he says. The official Cabinet seating plan, based on status, required that Jack sat on Gordon's blind side, which meant Gordon was on Jack's deaf side. As a result they were never able to exchange a discreet word about what others were saying, being forced instead to swap notes written in the fat, bold, black felt-tip pen Brown always used to ensure he could read them. The only problem was that everyone else nearby could read them as well.

Coulson was straight and likeable (but I never asked him about hacking)

I didn't know Andy Coulson when he was at the News of the World. I got to know him when he became Cameron's spin doctor and I dealt with him virtually every day during the 2010 Election. I found him straight, professional and likeable. I took a decision not to ask him about hacking on the grounds that he was never going to tell me anything in private that he hadn't said in public. To do so would have been to admit to a crime. Coulson believes that if he'd never crossed the threshold

The 'Brand Show' leaves me cursing

AFTER a recording of Question Time, as Russell Brand poses for photos with his fans, I wait patiently to ask him for an interview. We've had a bid in with his agent for weeks, and again and again he's told us that 'Russell may not have time'. He has plenty of time now but no, he brushes past me to pose with yet more fans.

I return to the departing devotees and as they sing his praises I find myself angrily defending the politicians he so loves to attack. While Russell is being driven by his chauffeur, with his PR and his personal make-up artist, to his multi-million-pound apartment, I point out that the Labour guest on the panel, Mary Creagh, will take the train, collect her bike and cycle home before heading to her Wakefield constituency to hold a surgery the next day. Who, I ask, is more in touch?

I find myself cursing Brand as 'that f***ing sanctimonious t***'. I'm not sure this complies with BBC editorial standards but it feels better out than in.

My beef is straightforward. I do not resent the fact that a stand-up comic has energised, excited and enthused people about some of the great issues of our time where politicians and, yes, commentators like me, have utterly failed. It is just that I am not impartial when it comes to democracy.



IGNORED: Nick tries to speak to Brand after BBC's Question Time

of No 10 he might not now be facing prison. Without the Downing Street link, the hacking scandal might never have become front-page news, and the police would never have launched the massive investigation.

Boris stand for the top Tory job? Of course he will – he aches with ambition

I'm not sure why anyone bothers to ask Boris about standing for the Tory leadership. We all know the answer: of course he will stand. He aches with ambition. People warm to him because they think that, unlike other politicians, he's authentic. He is, but it's an authenticity that is carefully crafted. His one weakness is that he's no team player and good leaders of parties need to be that.



Son's shock as I'm caught in The Thick Of It

OVER breakfast my son Will tells me that he's just caught up with *The Thick Of It*, the brilliant BBC political satire. He has been devouring whole series in a single sitting. 'You're in it a lot, Dad,' he says.

Looking ever so slightly

FOUL TEMPER: Peter Capaldi as Malcolm Tucker

proud of his father, he quotes an inept Cabinet Minister in an early series: 'There's more to life than drinks parties at the Foreign Office and having Nick Robinson's number on your f***ing BlackBerry.'

Will hesitates before adding: 'And then there's that other bit...' A suppressed memory

begins to resurface. The memory of a parting shot to his team from Malcolm Tucker, the foul-mouthed, testosterone-fuelled Glaswegian spin doctor played by Peter Capaldi: 'I'm away to wipe my a*** on pictures of Nick Robinson. I'm getting good at giving him a quiff.' There is absolutely nothing I can say.

NEXT WEEK: IS THE CANCER REALLY GONE?