

GORDON AND THE EDS

21/ In 2008, there was an excellent young broadcast specialist recruited to work for Gordon, named Nicola Burdett. After her first meeting with him, she said: 'God, he's lovely! People are so wrong about him.' A couple of months later, she went to a meeting where he exploded about some NHS issue, and she came out shuddering. Veteran that I was by then, I told her: 'Don't worry, when he can have a good rant in front of you, that means you've made it with him'.

including/ But seeing Gordon lose his temper, and indeed seeing him really let his hair down, was only one of the initiation rites of getting to know him on a personal level. Talking to him about family was another — ~~both~~ the influence of his mother, father and brothers, and the relationship he had with Sarah and his boys.

But, family aside, if you wanted to see what Gordon was really like with the people who knew him best, you had to watch him spend time with the two Eds.

People will often describe the Eds as 'Sons of Brown', which — even without the insufficient age gap — is a lazy misunderstanding of their relationship. I always saw him much more as a college professor ~~simultaneously~~ mentoring but also learning from his brilliant young PhD students; his default setting with the pair was asking them questions and taking notes.

And the quality of those debates could be downright intimidating. Because so many of the decisions they took together required an understanding of complex social and economic theory alongside an instinct for political realities and public opinion, all three possessed the rare ability to operate on both planes simultaneously.

Of all the people who worked with them over the years, I would say only Michael Ellam and Jon Cunliffe were capable of holding their own in both aspects of those discussions, while the rest of

us tended to specialize in either the 'economics' or the 'politics'.

It also meant both Gordon and the Eds were equally capable of dismissing some colleagues and opponents as being either 'off in the clouds' and 'not in the real world', or alternatively dismissing others as being 'lightweight' or 'superficial'. That wasn't always endearing if you were on the receiving end.

At the other end of the spectrum, when it came to Gordon genuinely relaxing and enjoying himself – on overseas trips or private dinners and parties in the Downing Street flat – the presence of the Eds was key, simply because he enjoyed their company and their humor so much.

The Christmas parties Gordon and Sarah threw for close colleagues each year were always hugely jolly affairs. We'd eat Sarah's traditional lasagne, and do the usual ritual of exchanging Secret Santa presents, plus receiving a book from Gordon and a tie or socks from Sue Nye. Ed Balls and young political adviser Jonathan Ashworth would lead the singing: 'The Red Flag', 'Bandiera Rossa' and 'The Fields of Athenry'; some Elvis; and at least three full-throated 'Jerusalem's.

But the highlight of those evenings was always Gordon's comedy routine. It was never so much the content of the jokes and anecdotes he told that was so entertaining, but his gradual inability to speak because he was laughing so much under the constant heckling from the Eds.

Anyone who remembers Brian Johnston's hysterics on *Test Match Special* in 1991 will know the kind of high-pitched squeal Gordon used when pleading: 'Come on, you guys, stop it!' Tears streaming down his face, he would finally make it to the punchline of a story about Donald Dewar or union leader Jimmy Reid, and would always, always botch it, the cue for everyone to fall about laughing.

The converse of Gordon revelling in the Eds' company on happy days was that they were always invaluable in turning round his mood and getting him to re-focus on those occasions when he was in the dumps, or when necessary quelling his temper if something had set him off.

There was an interesting difference between them though. If

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Ed Balls was walking down the corridor and heard raised voices or swearing coming from Gordon's office, he made it his business to find out what the problem was and, having determined that Gordon was over-reacting to whatever it was, would march in to him and say incredulously: 'What's all this racket? What on earth is wrong?'

That almost always succeeded in getting Gordon to calm down and talk the problem through rationally or – more often than not – just drop it entirely. Ed Milliband was different. If he heard some explosion going off as he walked in to raise an issue with Gordon, he'd usually just roll his eyes, ask the office: 'Can you call me when he's finished?', and walk back the way he'd come. Never one to have tantrums himself, he simply couldn't be bothered putting up with what he would see as irrational behaviour.

If the two Eds were sitting with Gordon when some bad news came through and he hit the roof, you'd see the same split reaction: Balls would sit there with a faint smile and say sarcastically: 'Erm, is this going to help?', and if Gordon reacted angrily to that, he'd say: 'No, fine – you go ahead – just wanted to understand your thinking.' Meanwhile, Ed Miliband would roll his eyes, sigh and eventually shout with exasperation: 'For goodness' sake, can we get on with things please?'

If they were 'Sons of Brown', I wish I'd been able to control my own dad's moods the same way. But if there genuinely was any paternal aspect to their relationship, it was most visible when the Eds decided to strike out and seek their own front-line political careers before the 2005 election.

On the night Ed Balls was selected for Normanton, Gordon asked me excitedly how his post-selection interview had gone with Newsnight. He looked upset and defensive when I said it hadn't been great and, given I didn't know about Ed's stammer then, it must have made it worse to hear me say blithely: 'He might have been a bit nervous, or maybe it was a bit cold – he just seemed very jittery.'

You could see that same defensiveness when Ed was appointed to Gordon's ministerial team and faced his first sessions of

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≠/≠ Treasury questions in the House of Commons. The Tories weren't to know why Ed spoke so hesitantly, so they barracked him pitilessly – a constant barrage of Errrrrrs' every time he got up to speak, and every time he had a 'block'.

≠/ Gordon would sit there in a barely disguised rage, glowering at the Tory benches, and I'm convinced that the brutal battering that he used to give Gordon Osborne in those sessions – so bad that George stopped asking him questions for months on end – was fuelled by his anger at Ed's treatment.

≠/ Ed Miliband waited until much later – February 2001 – to stand as a candidate, and his selection was far less assured, going up against Michael Dugher, Geoff Hoon's former special adviser, in a Doncaster North seat where Michael had built strong ties. I rarely saw Gordon so agitated as on the March night when the selection meeting was taking place. We were late returning from Brussels and, while usually a stickler for protocol, especially when using the Royal Flight, Gordon had his phone switched on looking for a signal as soon as we started to descend.

Ed's call came through just as we were touching down and, hearing the news that he had won, Gordon let out a great scream of joy and vigorously punched his fist in the air. As a rule, you should never punch in any direction when travelling in a small plane, but upwards is probably the worst move. The collective noise of Gordon yelping and crashing his fist into the roof as the plane touched down brought the RAF steward scurrying back in alarm, and we had to reassure him all was ok.

Gordon being Gordon, the celebration lasted 5 seconds before he told Ed he should seek out Michael and tell him that Gordon would sort him out a job and an alternative seat. It may have taken a few years, but Gordon was true to his word, giving him a job in Downing street in 2008, and – not that he needed it – helping him to become an MP at the 2010 election.

I'm sure Doncaster North made the right choice, although – staunch football fan that he is – Dugher would never have made the rookie mistake that Miliband made in December that year, as he sat in the Doncaster Working Mens' Club watching Donny

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Rovers in the final seconds of what was set to be a famous victory in the League Cup over Arsenal.

I took the last step of a desperate Arsenal fan and sent Ed a text saying: 'Very well done, your boys have been magnificent, a fully deserved win.' Most fans in the world would have waited until the final whistle rather than ~~jinks~~ the outcome, but – in his excitement – Ed replied: 'Thanks, we were genuinely the better team.' Cue a last-second equaliser from Arsenal.. ~~h~~

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Both Eds assended to Secretary of State level in Gordon's first Cabinet in 2007, and, looking back, it's clear to me now that he envisaged one of them becoming his successor if he could win an election in his own right and step down shortly before the next.

At the crucial party conference that year, when we needed something to stop the void of activity being filled with endless election speculation, I sat in Gordon's hotel suite and he instructed me:

'Build up the young guys. Turn it into a beauty contest about who'll take over from me. Don't ~~for~~ God's sake ~~say~~ I won't serve a full term, but say "Brown doesn't want to go on forever. Brown will start putting the next generation into all the senior posts and one of them will become leader." Then Cameron can't use youth against me. We'll say: "They've got one young guy in charge, and that guy Osborne, but Labours got all the best young talent coming through."'

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I asked him who he wanted me to mention to the media as potential leaders. He thought about it, then reeled off surnames like a football manager naming his line-up: 'Purnell. Miliband. Kelly. Burnham. Cooper. Balls. Miliband.' I replied: 'You've already said Miliband.' 'Both of them,' he said. I was a bit incredulous: 'Really? You want me to say Ed Miliband?' He looked equally surprised: 'You need to watch Ed ~~Miliband~~, he's the one to watch.'

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I could understand Ed Balls being in the list, because the only thing he lacked was confidence in speaking from platforms, in the House of Commons, and doing TV interviews, which – while it was clearly a very big deal, was something he could improve as he gained more experience of what worked and what didn't.

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