

Press Club Ball – Thursday 11th October

Well, well, well. What an honour! If only my old Dad could see me now.... a real-life laureate.

I'm absolutely delighted to accept this award on behalf of all the brilliant journalists at the Mail – some of whom are far more deserving of being commemorated for their eloquence than I.

Eloquence, of course, is one of the Oxford Dictionary's adjectives to define the word laureate. Another definition is *quotes* "distinguished for excellence as a poet" *quotes*. I'm not sure Alistair Campbell ever saw me as a poet. Or Ed Miliband. Or Jeremy Corbyn. Or Hugh Grant. Or Max Mosley.

I can only hope that all these saintly individuals will now see me in a new light and give me the respect and affection I deserve.

You know, when Doug Wills made contact to tell me about this evening, he mentioned that I'd be getting a Bentley.

Well, I thought, this journalism lark isn't half bad, is it? You become a laureate AND get a Bentley!

What Doug didn't tell me was that the Bentley was mine just for the evening. Anyway, it's a lovely gesture for which I am grateful and, I must say, I could get quite used to it.

And thank you for the magnificent pen you have given me. It's a running joke, of course, that I am utterly useless with computers so I plan to use it to write my autobiography. Its working title, by the way, is "A Dish Best Eaten Cold".

As for the £5,000 that comes with the Award, I have absolutely no hesitation in giving it to the Journalists' Charity. As my friend Guy Black – a man who labours mightily to defend our industry – says, it's a glorious body that does so much good for our trade. Indeed, one of my prouder achievements at the Mail was to introduce a system whereby each one of our journalists will be guided to make a contribution from their salary to the charity every month.

Earlier, I mentioned my father, Peter, who spent most of his life on the Sunday Express. Well, not many people today know that he was Chairman of the Press Club between 1975 and 1976. I was in Washington at that time working for the Express. In those days computers were an exotic technology and no-one had ever heard of the internet. It seems almost laughable, but back then, journalistic tools included carbon paper, scissors and glue while in the print rooms of newspaper offices, molten lead glistened in buckets of linotype machines. Today, Mail Online – a total digital operation – is the world's biggest newspaper website.

So yes, much water has flown down the River Fleet since those days and print journalism has had to cross many perilous bridges in the process. But this is STILL a great industry that STILL punches way above its weight and STILL sets the news agenda for a BBC that STILL plunders our stories while missing no opportunity to denigrate the press and, by implication, our millions of readers.

Well, tonight I salute our industry. Yes Fleet Street is going through a challenging time at the moment. But I promise you, mankind's need for information, both entertaining and serious, is as old as time itself and proper, as opposed to fake, journalism – that obeys the law, is self-regulated and is produced by brilliant creative minds – *will* survive and flourish again.

But also as old as time itself is the compulsion of the rich, the powerful and privileged to control the free press as we have seen so worryingly in Britain over the past few years with politicians, particularly in the Second Chamber, trying to impose statutory regulation on newspapers. And we should also remember – as we learn of the Saudi journalist reportedly tortured and murdered, that our colleagues in other countries die for our trade. As Northcliffe said: "*The power of the press is great... The power to suppress is even greater.*"

For my part, Ladies and Gentlemen, Guy, Doug, Ray and Robert, I have had a fabulously privileged life in journalism. Thank you again for this magnificent London Press Club award. I can't tell you how proud I am to receive it.