

Christopher Snowden

Libertarian Writer, Commentator and Pundit

Media Masters – February 3rd 2022

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Welcome to Media Masters. A series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm joined down the line by Christopher Snowden, the libertarian writer, commentator and self-styled scourge of the NA status, the head of lifestyle economics at the Institute of economic affairs. His work focuses on social freedoms and what he sees as the dangers of prohibition. A contributor to spiked the critic and the deli Telegraph. He often appears on TV and radio discussing social and economic issues. He's authored numerous publications, including Killjoys, a critique of paternalism and Closing Time: Who's killing pub. Chris, thank you for joining me.

It's a pleasure, Paul. How are you doing?

I'm doing very well, thank you. I'm very grateful for you doing this. I mean as we just discussed, I'm incredibly interested in what you have to say, whether I agree with it or not and I admire the robustness with which you stand up for it. I was gonna actually bring that to my first question really. Which is how do you feel it's more generally in terms of you standing up for your views, do you sometimes sort of just get tired of having to deal with numpties?

Well, I assume you're talking about Twitter there, mainly. That's where all the numpties are. Well, yes, it's a bit wearying. I mean the last year or so, I've been sort of waging a steady war against what I call the smileys. The kind of anti lockdown, anti vaccine types, not that I'm fanatically pro lockdown, but it did strike me this time last year that we didn't have much of an option other than to severely restrict human to human interaction. This led me to fall out with quite a few people, but there is just an apparently endless supply of idiots on Twitter, who just are willfully uninformed about what's going on and get worse over time. So it didn't start off as an anti vaccine movement. There wasn't much of an anti vaccine thing when the COVID vaccines were first introduced. But the anti lockdown thing, which had some kind of weight

behind it in so far as you can legitimately discuss the costs versus the benefits of lockdowns. And I'm not even sure they necessarily were worth the cost to be difficult, I think ever to establish that. But wherever you stand on that, there is a legitimate question about did we go too far? I mean, that that's been something that's been discussed with the whole Boris Johnson wine cheese party thing. Everyone's been saying I couldn't do this and I couldn't go to my father's funeral, blah, blah, blah. And so there's an acceptance that maybe the lockdowns did go too far. And I would certainly agree with that, but that is the very different question to whether the virus spreads from human contact, right. Which is what the anti lockdown position very quickly became. It wasn't that the costs outweigh the benefits. It was lockdowns that didn't make any difference whatsoever. And the virus just comes down your chimney or something. And then that morphed into an anti-vax thing. They hate being called anti-vax people, but I'll do that for, for that reason alone, anti COVID vaccines. There's no logical reason that I can see why a movement against lockdown should become anti-vax, but that's just the way it goes when people go down the conspiracy theory rabbit hole. So I argue with these people quite a bit. I block most of them cause I can see them coming a mile off these days, but it's all a bit of sport really. Whether it does any good, I don't know, probably not for most people, but I have actually had emails over the course of last year sort of saying I was kind of down this rabbit hole and following your Twitter feed kind of got me outta it. So that's quite satisfying.

I can imagine so. I mean, what's disheartening for me is that, whether it be Brexit, how and why and to what extent we should lock down all of these kind of big issues, no one actually discusses the actual evidence and the technicalities, it immediately almost becomes like a tribal emotional thing rather than actually looking at what's proportionate. I mean, obviously I'd obey the law, but if there's a lockdown, if it's proportionate, then of course I'll obey it and you don't want it to be a degree disproportionate then it should be. But there seems to be an evangelical nature on both sides now that it's hard to even challenge whether we're doing it to the right degree.

Yeah, up to a point. I mean, the lockdowns are kinda over, I don't think we're gonna see another one. And whatever you think of the government's response to COVID, which I would broadly categorise very bad in 2020 and pretty good in 2021, they had a clear and logical roadmap and they followed it and Omicron was a major bump in the road, but we still got through it, thanks to the vaccines and the boosters. And the idea was that the pharmaceutical interventions were gonna take precedence over the non-pharmaceutical interventions, which is lockdowns and so on. And that's what's happened. And the smileys find that quite confusing cause they thought the whole thing was a plot to force us to wear a face mask in shops forever and keep going into lockdowns forever and all this kinda stuff. And it hasn't happened. And the extremist

on the other side would quite like us to be in some kind of lockdown forever. I think the majority of the population is somewhere in between and actually generally I think the government has tended to follow public opinion. Public opinion has been a little bit too authoritarian for me for large parts of it. But you know, it's pretty much the centre ground. We've just got extremists on both sides trying to pull us one way or the other. And I think now, in 2022, most sites have lost. And they're becoming increasingly irrelevant, which is kind of good. But the debates about the custom benefits, as I say, will probably go on forever. I've never seen a compelling economic analysis either way on this. And I don't think actually you could really produce one or rather you could produce one that goes either way. You know, I think it'd be quite easy to say the lockdowns weren't worth the effort and quite easy to say they were, and it would entirely depend on what value you give intangible cost and benefits. So how do you put a value on human life? Well, the communists actually do put a value on human life. They have various methodologies to do it. The government, indeed, I think the department of health places a value of one life year at 60,000 pounds. So if you then estimate how many lives are saved lockdown and you could work out what the benefits are there but it's still pretty arbitrary. And then you have to put a value on what is the benefit of being able to leave your house and see your friends? So what was the cost of lockdown in terms of that? What's the cost of social isolation, unhappiness, kids missing school? Very quickly you get into areas where yeah, you can put a figure on it, but it's a very, very contestable figure because then these are not genuine financial costs. And so if you make that figure for example, social isolation, higher or lower, you're gonna massively change the cost benefit analysis. So I don't think you have really compellingly shown one way or the other, whether the government's response was worth it on a cost benefit analysis. Even if you accept that you can put a price on human life, which a lot of people don't anyway, because they think it's rather gruesome business. So my position really is given that it's quite difficult to show either way, let's go with the option that doesn't lead to hundreds of hours of people dying.

I remember my law degree from 20 years ago when we were talking about personal injury and if you lost an arm, it was something like 700 pounds. And I put my hand up and ask the lecturer, why an arm worth 700 pounds? And he said, well, we don't know, someone behind a big desk decided that and it's always been that way. And I was just thinking that was odd. How did that figure even come about? Because as you said in some ways it's not even valuable. I think I sort of garbled my last question. I think what I was meaning to ask is, I worked in politics for well over a decade and almost everything can be explained through incompetence and cockup and people not been on the ball and miscommunications. Why did people leap now so immediately to faith and conspiracy, like they think the government's out to get them? The government isn't out to get anyone because they're just incompetent.

That's a good question. And probably people have gotten more conspiratorial over the years. And a lot of that is probably due to the internet. In the case of the COVID-19 situation, I think it's because once people convince themselves that COVID wasn't really a problem, but it was just a flu. They then needed to find an explanation for why the government was lying about this. So you start with your conclusion and work backwards in a way. So you assume that COVID isn't a problem against all the evidence. In that case, why are scientists around the world lying about it? Why are governments all around the world lying about it? And that is gonna lead you to some pretty crazy conclusions. Because it requires essentially a global conspiracy. And I don't think even a lot of the so-called sceptics are really quite sure where this is supposed to be leading. There's a lot of stuff you read about Bill Gates, about vaccines, about digital ID cards. That idea seems to be quite a popular one, that this is just a way to get people to put up with having ID cards. Of course they do have ID cards, not a lot of countries. So it doesn't really explain why these other countries are engaged in this conspiracy. There are all sorts of wacky theories, but it comes from a vacuum essentially that is well. The obvious kind of explanation for why the government is doing this is because it doesn't want hundreds, thousands of people to die from a rather nasty disease. But if you don't accept it as a nasty disease and people aren't dying a bit, then you have to come up with some other explanation. And that he's almost inevitably gonna end up being rather eccentric.

I mean, it's not that I do feel sorry for Boris Johnson at all, but if I were to be a reasonably good mayor, outspoken, a bit of a showman, those kinds of sensibilities work for being mayor. As prime minister though, this is kind of the worst thing he could deal with because the realities of dealing with this disease are managerial and scientific and technical. It's all about vaccine rollout and infrastructure and tedious things. And yet if you get it wrong, it results in the most horrendous thing, which is obviously people dying and becoming incredibly ill. It's like you can't win. And it seems to me unusual why the media and everyone else are fixated on this sort of 20 minutes he was in Downing street, for example, because that's not even worth considering. And yet there's lots of other legitimate criticisms of the government's handling of the pandemic. Do you think that's just the way the modern media works because they feel they've got him on something, some kind of hypocrisy that they sort of hang all of their frustrations on this bizarre event?

Yeah. I mean a lot of the criticisms of the government's handling will come out in the inevitable inquiries of course, but yeah, people hate nothing more in politics than the hypocrisy. And this is one example of hypocrisy, because obviously the guy basically created these rules and he is now accused of breaking them. So yeah, the public hate hypocrisy, political journalists revel in these kinds of stories, political journalists have been obsessed with Westminster tittle-tattle throughout really. The Dominic

Cummings thing was, as far as a lot of journalists are concerned, probably the biggest story than COVID-19 itself in the last two absolute fascination with him. It's obviously political, I don't particularly take sides on this issue to be perfectly honest with you. Although I think it's pretty contemptible that these people were more or less enjoying themselves, maybe not having the time of their life, but certainly enjoying themselves more than the rest of us are able to it's pretty sickening, but I'm one of those people who kind of is more angry about the rules at the time. And don't really think that the rules are any worse just because people in Downing Street were bending or breaking them. The rules were inhumane in some respects at the time. I thought that at the time and was angry at the time and now so much time has passed I sort of got over that to a larger extent. And being reminded that at one point, I think when one of these parties allegedly went on, it was illegal to meet more than one person outdoors. And even if you met one person outdoors, you had to stay two metres away from them. I've kind of forgotten just how crazy some of these rules were. But I think you can criticise the rules on their own terms without having to bring in any political hypocrisy. And that's just my view, but I can see how it rubs salt in the wound for all people.

Oh yeah. I have friends and colleagues that are genuinely angry because they couldn't see their dying relatives and they see pictures of the prime minister and enjoy a glass of wine in the garden with ten, 15 other people.

Sure, but why weren't political journalists angry about people not being able to go to their loved ones' funerals at the time? I didn't hear much from Robert Peston about that. All I heard from Robert Peston is why are you relaxing these rules? Why aren't we having a longer lockdown? So I think there's a bit of hypocrisy there from the journalist.

Yeah. And I actually wanted to ask you about that because that fascinates me. I mean, you've been very robust on the data and your commitment to evidence and obviously that's so to be applauded for, frankly it's to others' discredit that they would turn away from evidence and reasons. So good only for doing that, but like in terms of the politics of it, COVID has been a big challenge to libertarians. Given that the facts are beyond dispute as it were, do you take a moment to reflect thinking what is the proportional way as a libertarian to think about this? You wrote that "any benefits of lockdown were far exceeded by the restrictions to civil liberties." I'd be interested for you to talk about your journey as a libertarian reacting to this.

Well, for me, libertarianism in so far as I self-describe as libertarians kinda shorthand rather than signing up to every libertarian idea. But to me, libertarianism or classical

liberalism, it's really just applied economics. And so you take economics as your starting points and you work from there. And the lessons of economics, certainly microeconomics are basically fairly free market and libertarian. We believe in allowing people to maximise their own utility to fulfil their own happiness in any way they see fit in any kind of interference from external powers will tend to diminish that leaving aside negative externality, blah, blah, blah. So I look at this and most of my colleagues in the think tank world kind of look at it in the same way as an economic problem. And the COVID-19, rather like climate change, is just one massive negative externality issue with a big collective action problem in there as well. So you attempt, as I say, it's very difficult to actually do the cost benefits, but you attempt to balance out the cost and the benefits. And of course we put a value on human life. And that is very important to take into account. As somebody goes around spreading a potentially deadly disease, that is a major negative and it is cause for government action. We don't believe in no law at all. And if people are doing harm to others, it's a pretty basic concept in classical liberalism, it's John Stewart Mills' harm principle. So then you try and work around that and you accept that absent vaccines, something is gonna have to be done to restrict human interaction. Otherwise this thing is gonna get worse and worse and there will be enormous external costs. The question then is what do you do that's proportionate? And what there hasn't been enough of in politics during the pandemic is thinking on the margins. So people meeting outdoors is a good example of that. You know, it's pretty clear and it has been really more from day one that infection outdoors is very, very unusual and rare. And so it made no sense really during lockdown to stop people going fishing on their own, for example, right. Or even with somebody else. But there were a lot of rules that went too far. I think we could almost certainly have had more exemptions for funerals, for example. You've already mentioned, like you said, a lot of other people have been mentioning it recently that you might get some infections for the funeral, of course you might. But we're not trying to stamp this disease out completely because that is impossible. And are the social and psychological costs of stopping people going to their parents funeral's really worth it for the possible reduction in transmission? So I think as a libertarian you can support lockdown. I said this actually before the very first lockdown, I wrote a piece of the Telegraph explaining why this is the case, but that doesn't mean you have to support every element of it, doesn't mean you have to support being forced to wear a mask outdoors, or indeed being forced to have vaccines. These are different questions. So it's not an all or nothing thing. And I certainly don't just think we're going to do everything we can to stamp this out because it's the most important thing in the world. It's not and it certainly isn't the most important thing in the world now that we've given everybody who wants the opportunity to have a vaccine, a vaccine, and indeed a booster. And at this point, the risk reward ratio has massively changed. The infection totality rate is very similar now to flu and we quite rightly don't legislate to try and control flu.

I'm absolutely fascinated because you are the editor of the Nanny State Index. And I'd love to explore that with you because where the government does have a role in restricting the behaviour of citizens for their own safety. And even I jar at that when you say the government knows best, regulating alcohol and trying to increase the prices of products that have sugar and banning smoking in restaurants. I don't smoke and I like being in restaurants that are smoke free, but that's not a strong argument. Even I accept that. It's very difficult. And I love the way that you characterise my opinions like I'm being a killjoy because it is in a way it, everyone's selfish. So I'm just absolutely fascinated with where this role is. My very earliest political memory was watching Frank Bough interview a taxi driver for BBC Breakfast Time and they were doing Vox Pops because the government had just compelled people to wear seat belts and they were doing sort of live Vox Pops. And a reporter went up to a taxi driver and said "you're live on BBC breakfast, do you think the government should be forcing you to wear seat belts?" And this taxi driver said, "the government shouldn't be telling me what I can and can't do." And my earliest memory probably set me off on my leftwards journey thinking, well, we probably should because you just happened to be an idiot. He wasn't the best advocate for that particular argument. Anyway, I'm waffling, but where's the line because I suppose we want the government to do enough to protect us, but on the other not to cross that line when they get into, as you would say, The Nanny State.

That's a very good question. And I've written a whole book trying to answer it called Killjoys, which can be downloaded free online. But the bottom line is it goes really back to John Stewart Mill's harm principle. If you're not harming other people, you should be allowed to do what you like. And if you want to go to hell on a hang cart, then that's absolutely fine with me. I'll advise you against it. If I know you personally, I might even try and introduce some kind of mechanisms to prevent you from harming yourself, but it's not the government's business to stop people eating themselves to death or smoking themselves to death or drinking themselves to death. There are some negative externalities associated with these things. Alcohol in particular, things like drink driving, selling alcohol to children or cigarettes to children. And that's why drink driving is banned. And that's why we banned the sale to children. So we have laws in place to deal with the negative externalities. When it comes to pure paternalism. No, that's where we draw the line, you know? And just because you might like something, it doesn't mean that the government should make it mandatory. If you don't like it, then the government shouldn't ban it. There has to be a decent reason for any kind of government action. And it's interesting you bring up the seatbelt thing because that's always the gotcha you get these days from people. Oh, you're libertarian, I suppose you don't think people should have to wear seat belts. And I mean it's not the hill I'm gonna die on, seat belts and crash helmets, that does actually cross the line. And while I would never suggest people go around not

wearing seat belts, I think that is actually the moment about 40 years ago, when paternalistic regulation began to become accepted. And it's quite interesting if you read back in the house of commons debates about this at the time, none of the MPS were saying people should wear seatbelts. They were saying, this is the start of the slippery slope and that's the worry. And they were saying things like, well, what next we're gonna stop people smoking. And of course that's exactly what we did. And that's the other gotcha you sometimes get, oh I suppose you want people to smoke in pubs again? I say yeah. If the landlord wants to allow it, absolutely people should be allowed to smoke in pubs. So the slippery slope is very real. The slippery slope formally is a logical fallacy. And it is a fallacy to say that just because you introduce policy A you're inevitably gonna have policy B and C all the way up to Z, but what's not a fallacy is that it will tend to create an environment in which more and more paternalistic regulation is possible because you've opened up a Pandora's box really, because what you're saying with laws like the seatbelt laws, crash helmet laws, is that the government will create a criminal offence for your own good, to stop you harming yourself. And I guess some people would say, well, there's a lot of really stupid people out there and then they need protecting from themselves. I would say if you're an adult I think it really should be up to you. I don't see any great benefits from not wearing a seatbelt. At the time of the motorcycle crash helmet laws there was quite a lot of opposition from Hindus because they couldn't get the crash helmets over the turbans. And there was one guy who kept going to prison because he refused to wear his motorcycle helmet. And it all sounds kind of silly in retrospect. And we get so used to these kinds of laws, but in a way that's a problem. We do get used to them. As a result of passing these laws 40-odd years ago, we have got used to having the government tell us what we can do for our own good and indeed prosecuting, fineing, or even imprisoning us for pretty much the definition of victimless crimes.

There is paternalism, isn't there? It's a piousness, there's a humanlessness about it. I was in Weatherspoons the other day and I was about to tuck into my cooked breakfast. And it says right next to it as near 900 calories or whatever it is.

Oh, it's only 900 now? It was 1,200 last time I was in it, they must have taken a sausage out.

Probably! But I'm all for the transparency of it, but it just seems they're doing it to tick a box, but is it really gonna put anyone off? I'd quite like problem drinkers to drink less, but minimum alcohol pricing I'm against because it just doesn't work. It just seems to penalise poor people. It's like the whole regulation of drinking per se. I have a niece who's 16 years old. She's not legally allowed to go clubbing. So she has a fake ID. It's like all the

government's busying itself with this, but if the enforcement's not there or it doesn't actually affect change on the ground, then why are we doing it?

I think minimum pricing is immoral even if it does affect change. And again, it's a very explicitly paternalistic policy, minimum pricing. And I think it's particularly pernicious because it very obviously targets people on low incomes and explicitly in practice excludes politicians and doctors.

The kind of people who can afford it.

Because it's not gonna affect the price of champagne.

And there's also a little bit of searing at them, that it's the poor that don't know any better. They're the ones that do need, unfortunately, to have their bottle of white lightning another 60p extra.

Yes. But I mean that then that's true with the whole nanny state movement in general. I mean the modern public health movement, the modern paternalistic public health movement is really just the latest incarnation of the middle class reform movement that's been going on since the Victorian age. And if you look at the targets there's a lot of snobbery involved in it. So you can say things like smoking and obesity and alcohol related diseases are kind of classness diseases that affect anybody. But if you look at the way they're being tackled firstly, smoking policy has become much more draconian and authoritarian since it became a disproportionate working class habit. In the sixties, there was really no difference in smoking rates between the rich and the poor. Everybody smoked at more or less the same rate. Over time that's massively changed people in blue collar work come three or four times more likely to smoke than somebody in the professional classes. And as it's become more and more working class, more people with low incomes, people who don't have a political voice to oppose this kind of stuff. Anyway, often quite marginalised people. The policy has gone from being a bit of a nudge to a pretty blatant show. If you look at alcohol, as we just mentioned, alcohol taxes kind of affect everybody, although the kind of regressive like all indirect taxes, minimum pricing only affects people on low and average incomes, explicitly that leaves alone the rich. And if you look at obesity, there's a high rate of obesity amongst rich and poor that are a little bit higher amongst people on low incomes, but they're pretty high amongst people on high incomes too. But again, the policy is aimed at the kind of food that is supposedly consumed by people on housing estates. So it's fizzy drinks and it's McDonald's and this kind of stuff.

All the good stuff!

It's good stuff, but it doesn't really contain any more calories than the kind of meal you get in a high end restaurant. There's a lot of butter and salt in high end restaurants for a start. There's a lot of sugar in their desserts, but they kind of go under the radar, it's just the mass produced stuff that normal people or people with low incomes consume. So the whole thing is riddled with snobbery and class bias. Often in a way that doesn't really make any sense. That's particularly true of the food control obesity stuff. There is no legal definition of junk food, because it's just a pejorative campaigners term. It's nothing about how energy dense it is or even how much salt sugar is in there. It's just that term we use to describe a certain kind of food, which with a nod and a wink, we're talking about the kind of food that the elite wouldn't touch with a bargepole.

There seems to be a direction more generally in society though to this paternalism, this judgmentalism, this piousness, everyone seems to be more sort of moral and Victorian and than ever. Where do you think this sort of trend is coming from?

Oh, well, partly it's a slippery slope I'm talking about. We've created an environment in which if you don't like something, you can get it banned and that really took off, I think under Tony Blair, but he has absolutely continued under the Conservatives, who are just constantly itching for things to ban. And once you see that the government is gonna just ban anything from smoking in pubs to plastic straws, to this mad war on plastic, they got a moment, minimum pricing, sugar taxes. It seems that if you can make a good enough case, you can get politicians to ban anything. And therefore if you've got something you don't particularly like, form a single issue pressure group like Action On Sugar, and the government will probably capitulate sooner than later. So everybody's battling to get their own little pet peeves banned, but in the end there's no escape from it. You feed the crocodile hoping that you last, if you create an environment in which anything can get banned at any time, just because somebody thinks it's immoral or unhealthy or whatever, then they may well come after you sooner or later. And that's why it's very important I think to take a principle stand on this from day one, even if it means saying things that a lot of people find ludicrous, like it shouldn't be mandatory to up to where a seatbelt because if you don't have any clear set of principles, you're just gonna get dragged along by the momentum of hysteria and pressure group rhetoric. And as one of the people back in that debate for a seatbelt said at a time you end up living in a country in which nobody is really very happy because you can't do very much. So I would like to see classical liberal values return. Even if that does mean it from time to time, you're gonna get inconvenienced and from time to time people are gonna do things that you don't really approve of, but you just have to accept that's just none of your business and it shouldn't be any of the government's business either. It's the only way you can rub

along in a large society, if you accept that some people have different tastes and preferences to you.

I mean, this podcast is not just about your views, but also you and I'm fascinated when I see you on screen because sometimes I agree with you, sometimes I don't, but I always prick my ears up when you appear on the TV and the radio, because I'm interested and engaged. And I also want my own prejudices and views to be challenged. If my views can't stand up to challenge or scrutiny, then they're clearly wrong. So I was going to ask you, I'm trying to think of a polite way of saying why are you like this, that sounds very aggressive. But do these beliefs that you're arguing for come from a place of authenticity and genuineness and robustness. I mean the easy thing to do will be to not do this really. So what has been your journey?

I wouldn't say the easy thing to do is not do this. I would be very happy to live in a country where nobody needs to do it. I kind of enjoy it. I actually found quite a lot of it quite funny in a weird way. So much of the stuff that comes out of public health is just so tenuous and desperate, that you just have to laugh at it really a lot of the time. I don't know if you'd call it a journey. But I do remember very clearly that I did politics for a year at university. And I think the opening term began with a brief lecture about four or five key thinkers. You know, one of whom was Carl Marx. Another one probably was Russo. And then there was John Stewart Mill and somebody else, but it was John Stewart Mill, one of whom I didn't know very much that immediately captured me. And I remember thinking this isn't just one guy's opinion. This is obviously true. This is obviously the right way to view the world that you have to live and let live. And if somebody's not messing with you or affecting your personal property, then leave them alone. So I didn't even see it as being like here's one angle and next week we're gonna do another angle. It was like, no that's the one for me. That's obviously correct. And I recommend anybody who hasn't read it reads On Liberty by John Stewart Mill. I read it a number of times. So it's a fantastic book and I haven't read that much in the way libertarian literature since really. I probably read more books from the opposing side to kind of test my own beliefs a bit and also kind of review them for people sometimes as well, quite enjoy reviewing bad books. I dunno if that was damascus moments or anything, but I think inherently I've always kind of believed in liberal values, libertarian values. I grew up on a farm. I think people who grew up in the countryside tend to be a bit more self-sufficient anyway.

What did you want to be when you were at university then and these views were forming? Why did you go to university? Did you want to be a journalist or was there some other plan?

I didn't have any particular plan. When I was a bit younger I did wanna be a journalist. And it's funny that I have ended up being a sort of a journalist. I'm not really, I do a lot of writing for magazines and newspapers, which I guess counts, but I'm really a researcher from a think tank primarily. But yeah, funny enough when I was much younger, I used to write quite a few stories and things. I quite like the idea of being a journalist and I went off it actually. And I worked in industry, I worked on the internet for a few years and then in my late twenties, I got more into this nanny state area. I wrote a book about the history of the anti-smoking movement, which was quite stimulating, quite entertaining. And eventually I got taken on by the Adam Smith Institute, did a few bits of research and then the Institute of Economic Affairs and I've been there for the last ten years and we've sort of carved out a specific niche for this area, which we call lifestyle economics just because nobody else is really doing it. There's a lot of think tanks, obviously in Britain. And a lot of them can be guaranteed to give you a quote about the latest lunatic nanny state policy, but there weren't any think tanks that were really looking at in a rigorous kind of way, and really diving into the kinda the primary research, the evidence that was being put forward by the public health groups, critiquing that, coming back with a kinda sound economic rebuttal to it, or sometimes of course, agreeing with it. And trying to look at these issues through the lens of free market economics, rather than the lens of what you might call healthism. Single issue fanatics are never a good thing, looking at any issue through a single lens. And this includes COVID is never a good thing. You have to look at these things in the round, look at the unintended consequences, and look at the cost to people. And that doesn't mean you always reject intervention. You mentioned the calorie labelling thing before, I'm actually kind of in favour of calorie labelling really. I don't know if it makes a great little difference. I don't think it really does. But the government is gonna introduce it as law for chains like Wetherspoons. And I don't think it does any real harm to have calorie labels on products. It just gives people more information. So that will be his example of a nanny state policy that I broadly support.

Well I still ate breakfast in Weatherspoons. I just felt bad while I was eating it.

Well, that's an interesting point, isn't it? But maybe you should feel bad in a way because now you realise what the full cost of that is to you in terms of calories. I don't know it's a tricky one, but I don't think giving people basic information can be considered necessarily to be negative. There is an issue there with people with eating disorders. They're not very keen on all there's calorie stuff being put everywhere and I can kind of get that. So it's an interesting question, but in principle, having a fully informed bunch of consumers is a pretty good thing. And if some of them feel a bit worse about themselves, because they actually know what they're consuming, then I guess that's just a logical consequence of being better informed.

It's interesting, isn't it? Because the people that are often proponents of the sugar tax or banning smoking in pubs. They won't admit it. I'm one of the unusual people that does because it comes from a place of selfishness. I don't want people to smoke in pubs because I don't smoke. And my opposition to allowing smoking in pubs is no more sophisticated than that it's selfishness, but people don't admit that. Do they? It's reinforcing their own conveniences and prejudices dressed up as that. I stood for parliament in 2005 for the Labour party and I wasn't given a winnable seat. Luckily for me now in hindsight because of all women shortlists, the winnable ones were only women. And I objected to it, but at least I said I objected to it because it's as Bender in Futurama said, "it's the worst kind of discrimination, the kind against me," which I've always liked actually. But like a lot of people I would argue with, women would say, well that's not why I'm in favour. And that may well be true, but they wouldn't even admit that they personally did benefit from it. For me, it's the lack of thought.

Yeah. Well, I'm against all women shortlists on principle, not gonna affect me because I'm never gonna run for parliament. I guess it requires a certain amount of empathy, I'm not gonna run for parliament, but I do feel a bit sorry for somebody in your situation, assuming you were perhaps the best possible candidate for a winful seat, if you're not getting one based on something that is explicitly discriminatory, then I don't think that's a good thing.

I put it directly to Tony Blair at the time because obviously I was frustrated and knew him a bit and he came out with a line that there were more people called John in parliament and there were women at the time. And I get that. And I think that for me, drew to sharp focus, the problem with politics is that we all agreed that there should be more women in parliament and that parliament should look more like the society it represented, but the minute you agree on the ends, we disagree hugely on the means don't we because does that mean that we should lead automatically to all women shortlists? Or a sugar tax? Or having to present ID at Sainsburys if you want to buy a bottle of prosecco and you look under 60, my mum got ID'd the other day. I mean it's ridiculous.

Yeah, it's incredible. I guess it comes down to this thing of just because you don't like something doesn't mean you should use coercion, the labour party had to change the law in order to allow all women shortlist because they're obviously discriminatory, it's obviously discrimination on the basis of sex, which was illegal. And so they excluded themselves for it in the same way that politicians incidentally exclude themselves from advertising regulation. Everybody else has to produce advertising that's decent, honest and truthful. The only exception is political advertising. And so yeah, I guess it's a problem to some extent, if you have a very small number of women in

parliament, why is that? A friend of mine, Dolly Theis runs a 50-50 campaign for gender representation in parliament, she's very clear that she wants 50% of MPS to be women. I'm not sure if that's necessarily exactly what the right target should be. I mean, fewer than 50% of full-time employees are women to start with and maybe women are less likely to be interested in running as a candidate for whatever reason. I don't know. I don't really care that much, but my point is what she's doing to fix a problem is she's going around and she's encouraging women to stand, pretty straightforward thing. Rather than assuming that this is the result of systematic sexual discrimination amongst the electric, she's kind of saying this is because women, for whatever reason, don't feel they want to stand or they don't feel they can win or whatever. So she's gone about it in a more freedom loving way and probably a more productive way I would ultimately. By saying you're a smart woman, you're into politics, have you ever thought about becoming an MP, oh, not really. Well, why don't you do it?

I think my objection was the injustice of there were ways and means to get round it if you were in with 10 Downing Street. So one of the seats I was looking at in sort of the early 2000s was Doncaster and it was an all women shortlist and then suddenly Ed Miliband, who was a special advisor at No 10 at that point decide he wants to be an MP and lo and behold, they then impose Doncaster an exception to that. And they then allowed Ed Miliband to present himself to an open shortlist and it was stitched up for him. The famous Prescott joke isn't there, where a man walks in the fish and chip shop and the guy offers him some mushy peas, and he says, oh no, I don't want guacamole with it. Having sort of mangled a question of why are you like this as it were, I suppose I've got another weird question, which is what do you do? Could you talk out listeners through like a typical week? Because well, what do you do and how does it work?

Well, what I do is I have a list of research projects I want to do. And at any given time there's probably at least three or four of them. And if I have time, I will work on my research projects. So that would typically be a discussion paper of 5,000 words or so looking at something that I think is interesting and maybe been under explored, usually has something to do with policy ideas, tends not to do things that are totally irrelevant to politics. But obviously in my area, it would involve obesity or smoking or vaping or alcohol or gambling or what have you. In practice I then will get emails and phone calls from people saying, can you write an article about this? Can you come on the radio to talk about this? Can you come to London to do this event? Or what have you. And I will tend to prioritise media stuff, a media podcast, I tend to prioritise things that have a larger audience. So I'm gonna prioritise going on the Jeremy Vine show over.

This podcast!

Or going to a university to speak to half a dozen libertarians. Articles and media appearances will tend to take priority, podcasts probably a little bit below that, but still over a lot of things. And once I've done all that stuff, once I've dealt with the requests, which I'm very happy to have, I'm very happy if anybody wants my opinion on anything. Then I will try and do my research. I still see the basic primary research as being a core job, but as the years have gone on, I've been able to do less and less of it.

I mean, I was in politics for well over a decade and there was the opposition in your opponents, but many of them I admired, we could go for a drink afterwards in the pub, even though we'd knocked seven bells out of each other in the council chamber. Do you have opponents? I imagine if they're gonna get Chris Snowden on a show, there must be the same cohort of five or six people that you're always up against and you're just sort of rehearsing the arguments. Do you admire them as people? Can you sort of set aside your differences when you're out in the studio and just enjoy a pint? The golden rule of me talking with my political opponents when we were socialising is we didn't talk politics because we've done all that and it's boring. We just wanted to talk about family and friends and so on.

There are a few people like that. There's not many, I don't actually tend to get put up against exactly the same people every time. I talk about such a different range of issues and also my opponents, as you rightly call them, a lot of them are just professional lobbyists. A lot of them, their heart isn't really in it that much. So they just trot out their lines. They're not usually that intellectually kind of engaged with the issue or you're dealing with maybe a mouthy GP or something like that who tend to be the most statistically illiterate people going something enough. And they just get cross with you. So you can't really be particularly friendly with them. You're also not generally in the room actually, it's usually down the line. I do have fairly healthy content for most of my opponents. I do think a lot of them are acting in bad faith and it's not just that what they're proposing would make the country worse, but they are actually pretty nasty people in many cases, not all of them by any means. And some of them, I do respect. Some of them, I will speak to off the record and have chats with people. I'm not gonna name any names, but quite a few of them will say things, not far off what you've said really, which is I don't agree with you about everything, but I do think you've got a point on this. And my response to the COVID thing has been particularly perplexing to some of them. Because I guess they expected me just to say let it spread, let the bodies, I've kinda done the opposite. So yeah, it's a bit

different to being an MP I guess, or being in politics. Because I genuinely don't really like a lot of these people, the reason that they come out with the ideas they do is that they're not particularly nice to start with.

I recently watched Sylvester Stallons' re-edit of Rocky Four and you're conjuring up images of actually the reason why you are succeeding is because you are Rocky Balboa, you've got heart, you believe in it. And you're up against a basically paid agent of the state in this case, Ivan Drago managed by bureaucrats for political reasons. Is that why you prevail?

Well, I'm not prevailing, that's what you've got wrong. Paul, I'm not prevailing at all. I mean, nearly every issue I write about and discuss tends to go against me. There have been very few examples of liberalisation. Since Blair actually at least Blair liberalised the drinking laws in the gambling laws, there's been no sign of that since. Just one thing after another, even fights that seem quite winnable to me end up being lost eventually. But you know the IA is a pretty small organisation in the great scheme of things. I'm the only one person dealing with these issues. I'm one of the very few people in the country whose deal with these on a daily basis. And I'm massively outnumbered by a vast number of organisations in Britain and around the world who are determined to regulate people's lifestyles. So I'm outgunned and outnumbered and the best I can do is take potshots of people and try and get the point home to as many people as I can. But I'm not prevailing in any sense at all. I'm losing. I just have to be kind of cheerful about that and hope that one day the tide will turn. And if I can't turn the tide, at least I can make these people's lives as difficult as possible. Not give them a total free run.

It seems like it's quite a uniquely British outlook, standing out for what you believe in, but acknowledging and still being cheerful that the forces are against you.

There's a scene at the end of the film Election. I dunno if you've seen the Election.

Yeah, I absolutely love that.

It's one of my favourite films and right at the end of it, she, having been horrible at school, ends up being quite a powerful political figure. And he's been sacked as a teacher. He's now working in the museum and he sees her getting into a limousine with some important politician and all the memories come flooding back. And just as a limousine is driving off, he throws a milkshake at the back of the car. And that's kinda how I feel really, I'm the person chucking the milkshake at the back of a

limousine then running off because what else do you do? I'm actually pretty powerless over all of these things.

But you've gotta stand up for what's right.

Either you stand there and put up with it or you make a kind of fairly futile gesture, so I wouldn't say my work is a totally futile gesture, but I feel much more like the Matthew Broderick character in terms of status and power.

The best scene in that movie, which is hysterically funny, is when his wife throws him out and he ends up stopping in that sort of travel tavern. And he uses his last dollar in the vending machine to get the chocolate because he's so angry and it gets stuck on the glass and it just cuts to his reaction like are you joking, could this day get any worse? I absolutely love that.

His eyes' stung by a bee.

Yeah, that's right. Well, I was going to ask Chris, I mean obviously I admire that you're taking popshots of these people, but would you ever go down the sort of schmoozy lobbyist route where you think I've tried arguing with these people, they're immune to reason so if you can't beat them, join them and join the ranks of the lobbyists and start hobnobbing at Davos where you're trying to get in the ear of these people. And try it that way. Or is that something that would fill you with dread?

It would fill me with dread really. I wouldn't do it for the same reason I wouldn't be a politician. I'm not really a schmoozer. And I tend to say what I think. And I don't really suffer forward gladly. The idea that I've gotta kind of charm people that I might not particularly respect. And also, just the idea of being a lobbyist. I just don't kind of like it, cause people know why you're there. They don't know whether you actually believe what you're saying or not. I mean, maybe people think that people who work think tanks don't believe what they're saying either. But I mean, we do. And yeah, if it's your job to be a lobbyist, I kind of feel a bit sorry because it's like being a lawyer, you have to defend somebody you might not necessarily wanna defend somebody, you know is definitely guilty. I would not be very comfortable doing that either. So I'm happy to give recognition to any campaign or lobbyist or activist who wants to stand up for freedom. And hopefully I can do that by analysing the evidence in the way I do and putting forward arguments based on market economics, but no, I'd hate to be a politician and I'd hate to be a lobbyist.

Several of my friends are defence lawyers and I think that they genuinely believe that the integrity of the justice system means that even the guilty, anyone accused of a crime has to have someone standing up for them. But I agree with you that if it's like a civil matter and you're trying to sue a company that you know shouldn't be being sued then it's horrendous that some of the jobs that people have to do are just totally soul destroying.

Obviously I agree that people have a right to be defended in court, but if I was a defence lawyer and I knew the guy was guilty and I got him off on some kind of technicality.

That'd be horrendous.

By exploiting the naivety of the jury. I wouldn't be able to sleep particularly well at night.

Yeah. I trained as a barrister and I did a lot of criminal defence and a lot of people are guilty, but they're also just not very nice people. They've not learnt their lesson. They're aggressive even to their own lawyers and smelly. I mean I'm glad I never went down that route. I was gonna ask you, have you ever changed your mind on anything in the last few years? Has someone put an argument to you that's raised your eyebrow when you thought actually on reflection they might be either wholly or partially right?

Well, we've already mentioned the calorie labelling thing. The traffic light labelling thing on food I was against originally, and now I think it's actually at least benign and maybe a good thing. So this is where Coke will have a red for sugar, green for everything else, or it's got a lot of salt, have red for salt, I think actually at a glance that kind of thing's okay. I changed my mind about COVID really because for most of 2020, I was kind of applauding Sweden for saying we should do what Sweden's doing. They seem to be doing alright. But I changed my mind because winter came along and Sweden was not doing alright. And they clearly hadn't reached her immunity or any of this kind of stuff that people have been talking about. I dunno if I even changed my mind as such, cause I was in favour of the first lockdown for the same reason I was in favour of the last lockdown, which is that this has come to head and there's no other way of dealing with it. But for quite a large part of 2020 I was thinking I'm not a scientist. I don't understand how these things work, but it does seem like there's not a lot of COVID knocking around in Sweden and their rates went down and they haven't had a lockdown. But then we effectively tried the Swedish approach in Britain. You know, we didn't have so many rules and case numbers went up and then we brought in more and more rules and tears and all this kind of stuff and cases went up and up and up. And at that point it didn't seem to me that the

obvious answer was to get rid of the rules and to encourage more human interactions. So I did in a way, change my mind on COVID, that's probably the most recent thing. Maybe why some people in the libertarian community consider me a bit of a turn coat. But actually, as I said, before the very first lockdown, I wrote an article in the Telegraph saying libertarians can support lockdown. It wasn't my support of lockdown that changed as a kinda last resort. In between those lockdowns, I did get a little bit carried away with a kind of great Barington declaration type policy, which I know realised was totally stupid.

Isn't that to your credit, that however you label it changed your mind or whatever. I mean everyone praised Mrs Thatcher at the time for saying if you want to the ladies, not for turning, like surely if you have a policy and then the evidence starts to go the other way, you'd be a total idiot not to reflect and revise your policy or your opinion. Otherwise that's just psychotic to not change your opinion when the facts change surely.

Yeah. But people feel kind of the injured pride from changing their mind. It's completely mistaken because people really like it when you change your mind, especially if you change your mind to their opinion, but actually people never judge anyone for changing their mind. I think most people consider it to be quite a virtue to say I've got this wrong. But people individually don't tend to feel that they tend to feel that, oh my God, I look stupid now cause I was wrong before. I think you should aim to be changing your mind about a few things every few years really. Because you get new information and the facts do sometimes change and there's lots of things I don't know very much about which I have a basic opinion. But as I learn more about it, I change. There's more examples I could give you Paul, maybe I block out the fact that I was wrong about so many things in the past, but I can't think of any specific examples, but it definitely happens. And I'm quite happy to change my mind when it happens, it feels quite liberating.

What keeps you up at night?

Nothing really. I'm not a big worrier. I mean, if you ask it as a literal question, I'll just be thinking about what I've got on this week, what I'm gonna do tomorrow and stuff like that. I wouldn't say I worry about it. There's no real point worrying about it. There's lots of things that trouble me, but you can't do very much about most of them. So, I've got to the stage where you just gotta try and make yourself happy. Concentrate on your friends and family and make sure that you are kind of secure. And if the world's gonna go to hell then it's gonna happen whether or not you worry about it.

It's a sort of journey of self discovery that I hear about for my friends and me, that you're painfully aware in your sort of teen years and twenties about what other people think of you and you're disproportionately obsessed with it and you become more relaxed and self-accepting. If someone would've called me a twat online 20 years ago or 15, I would have been absolutely gutted. Whereas now I just think they're a numpty and just ignore them or block them or mute them.

Well it happens obviously all the time on Twitter in a way that makes you kind of immune to it. But I genuinely don't care what people think of me. I mean, genuinely, I dunno why some people say this and they do. I genuinely don't care what people think. I dunno whether that's a good characteristic or not, maybe it implies some kind of arrogance. I just don't care. I guess people I know personally, I would be unhappy if they suddenly start hating me or something, but in general, particularly if you're gonna be doing my job and you're gonna be saying things that invariably people are gonna take issue with you can't let that worry you. And it would be very weird if you, if you didn't make enemies and in a way you should be making enemies, because opinion is very polarised. And the only way to not make enemies is to be incredibly bland and not really say anything of any real interest. So I don't really care what people think. Generally, if they don't agree with me, I don't take that personally. People are always saying Chris, we don't see eye to eye. And you people say this on Twitter, when they're kind of retweeting an article I've written or something, they'll make a point that saying don't agree with Snowden about everything, but this is a good article. Why do you have to say that? Why can't you just say this is a good article? Why do you have to put this kind of health warning on it? This caveat that you don't agree with everything else. Because as far as I'm concerned, that's not a good reflection of you because you should agree with it about everything because I'm always right.

It's bizarre, isn't it? Because I think people do that for defensive reasons because they know inevitably that they're gonna say that article is about tobacco, but you know that he's absolutely horrendous on the sugar tax. My daughter's type one diabetic and it's Chris that has caused it type thing. You just can't be bothered.

Yeah, exactly. I don't see that about that about many other people. I don't see that many other people being kind of given this sort of two edged kind of praise, which yeah, this is good, but I just like to remind everybody that I do really disagree about a lot of things. OK, fine.

It's bizarre. Isn't it? I think my last question really is what's next? You've obviously been there for well over a decade, will you be there sort of 20, 30 years from now and will it be a new set of topics? I mean, because that's the other thing, obviously you're so knowledgeable and you're making the case on across these number of things, but would you tire of that say ten years from now or would you never tire of it? Would you say right, I'm gonna take on all of the idiots on the same topics or would you want to start to grow the topics that you were involved in the debate?

I think I'll carry on dealing with these nanny state issues for a good while longer yet. I mean, some of them can get a little bit tedious. You can just keep going around and around circles, but there tends to be new ideas come up all the time. I mean the ideas are awful and I oppose them, but that gets me going, that gives me something new to write about and discuss. And the only thing that would make me stop doing it would be if I just completely despair of at all, that if it seems that people can just get away with absolute murder in what they're claiming, which does happen more and more now, I noticed in a lot of these areas that people can just say anything they want in public health and be believed and the government will go along with it. So if you get to that position, there's really no point at all even challenging it. And it's just so disappointing, I've seen just in a relatively short time that I've been looking at these issues for about ten, 15 years, the standard of public health journal studies. It goes down and down. It wasn't particularly great to begin with but activist driven academia and just really has very little regard for the truth. And it's getting to the point where in a way it's not even wrong. In the past, you've been able to say, okay, well here's your data and this is why I think you misinterpreted it, but now it's not even, it's a total disregard for facts. So that would be the thing that would make me move onto something else. If it just becomes totally futile. And I do dabble in other areas, I've written stuff about lots of things. Just in the last year I've written about net zero, about the NHS and things that are all very important. But I'm quite happy with the niche I'm in at the moment. I understand it is a niche, but it's kind of good to be known as that guy who opposes a nanny state, rather than just another person who will generally talk about politics or economics. Having gained all this knowledge. And I do have a huge amount of stuff now that I kind of know a fair bit about. It would be a shame to abandon it completely.

So you are the canary in the coal mine for me. If I ever see that you have given up, I'm gonna retreat to the hills. because if you then think it's not worth it, then it's game over.

Yeah, it's getting a bit like that with vaping. Not in this country, but with the WHO and in places like Hong Kong and India where it's been banned. Vaping is such an obvious win from every perspective, right? If you generally care about helping people

quit smoking, which public health people supposedly do, then it's very, very obvious that vaping is a great way out of it. And the way that so many anti smoking, anti vaping organisations just lie constantly about vaping and try and make out these as dangerous as smoking or more dangerous smoking. There's more people now in England, this is England, this is not some like place where the government's anti vaping. The government in England is really encouraging people to vape. And yet still, even in England, there are more people who think that e-cigarettes are as dangerous or even more dangerous than smoking than there are who understand the truth. And it's much worse in other countries. In most countries, most doctors think that nicotine causes cancer when it doesn't, this ignorance hasn't come out of nowhere. This has been a concerted attempt to mislead people about a product, which I use. I used to smoke like a chimney and I didn't want to quit, but I just started vaping. And before I knew it, I'd stopped smoking. So there's a very good liberal argument for allowing people to vape, there's a liberal argument for allowing people to smoke, but there's also a really good public health argument for switching to vaping. And yet the public health establishment in large parts of the world, including the rural health organisation, are dead set against it. And if they can get away with lying about vaping to that extent, then they can pretty much get away with anything. So I think it's very important to battle on, on that particular. But yeah if you see more and more countries banning vaping and it just becomes the conventional wisdom that vaping is as bad as smoking, then that might be the moment by throwing the towel.

I mean, looking at it through my selfish lens, I used to hit being in clubs and bars when people smoked, but if they want to vape and it's their choice and their adults, they're literally not harming me anymore and all power to them. They're paying their taxes on it and they're entitled to healthcare and they're entitled to do whatever they like. They're not harming me. They're not even inconveniencing me at that point. So for me happy days, let them get on with it. Where's the piousness coming from vaping? Like you say, it just seems to be an ideal compromise, letting people get on with what they want and not inconvenience people like me that don't want to stink of fags.

It's sheer purism. I would say very obvious and naked puritanism. There used to be this kind of thought experiment that people would say about cigarettes, the anti-smoking people, are they genuinely concerned about health or are they just against people enjoying themselves or do they just not like the smell of it by you? Because those are clearly different things. And so the thought experiment was what if there was a vaccine for lung cancer tomorrow or a vaccine for every smoking related disease? Or what if cigarettes could be made harmless, would anti-smoking people still be against them? Would they still be in favour of smoking bans? That was just a theoretical thought but vaping essentially made that scenario real. And we've got the answer now that actually a lot of these people are just against people using nicotine,

they're against people enjoying themselves. Some of the opposition to it is because the tobacco industry has gotten into the vaping market and some of these anti-smoking people hate the tobacco industry more than they hate smoking. But yeah, you're right. It obviously doesn't make any sense even from a public health perspective. In fact, especially from a public health perspective, I think it reveals the inherent puritanism within the paternalistic nanny state movement that there really are a lot of people out there who just don't like people enjoying what they see as vices. And you see that across the board. It's no coincidence that all the targets of public health, the traditional targets are more or less going back to the Bible. You know, it's like obesity is really the kind of gluttony side of it. Alcohol's always been under attack. Gambling is now a public health issue. That's a bit of a giveaway. Gambling is not a health issue in any meaningful sense, but it's been taken on as its public health issue now. And why have they done that? Well, because they wanna treat it like smoking. They wanna treat it like other public health issues, which means you attack the industry, you ban the advertising, you restrict the availability, blah, blah, blah, blah. All these things are dealt with in the same way. But I think it's a real giveaway that gambling's been included there because of course gambling is a classic vice that moralists have been opposed to hundreds years

Well, Chris, I think I misled you at the beginning of this podcast. Because we said it'd be about 45 minutes and to your credit, this has been so interesting. I mean, obviously you've a fascinating person and this is incredibly interesting, but I think in the interest of everyone's time, I think we need to bring things to a close, but we could always reconvene in a couple of years from now. And you tell me whether it's still either more miserable or whether you're feeling a bit better, but I must say I've hugely enjoyed this conversation. I'm very, very grateful for your time and wishing you all the best. Thank you.

Thank you. Pleasure.