

**T**he Today presenter Nick Robinson was on holiday last month when the story broke that Boris Johnson's Svengali, Dominic Cummings, had told colleagues he never listened to BBC Radio 4's flagship current affairs programme. Robinson also read that Lee Cain, No 10's director of communications, was said to have told special advisers not to send ministers on the show, as it was "a total waste of time".

"I thought, 'Oh shit,'" says Robinson, 55, who is hugely affable, bearded and tanned from his break, necking down black coffee near the BBC, seven hours after his 3.30am awakening. "But everything I've seen since has made me sure the story's not entirely reflective. I would never show you private texts from Lee Cain, but there is literally no evidence [for the story]."

As for Cummings, "I have no bloody idea if he listens to Today or the shipping forecast or Classic FM," Robinson says tersely, his voice still sandpapery after a 2015 operation for lung cancer damaged his vocal cords. "But the underlying point that therefore Today's irrelevant is nonsense and indeed all the people he works with then texted me to say so."

"It would matter if Downing Street, or indeed Jeremy Corbyn's office, said, 'You don't matter any more' but they don't. I know because I'm always getting messages from both at 6am with their reactions to what's going on and because we get lots of senior folk on the show. Would I like more? Yes, but recently we've had the foreign secretary the minute he was appointed and the chancellor twice."

Still, of Johnson there's been no sign. "We're assured we're going to get an interview at the party conference." But the conferences may not take place. "Now, there's a good follow-up," Robinson concedes.

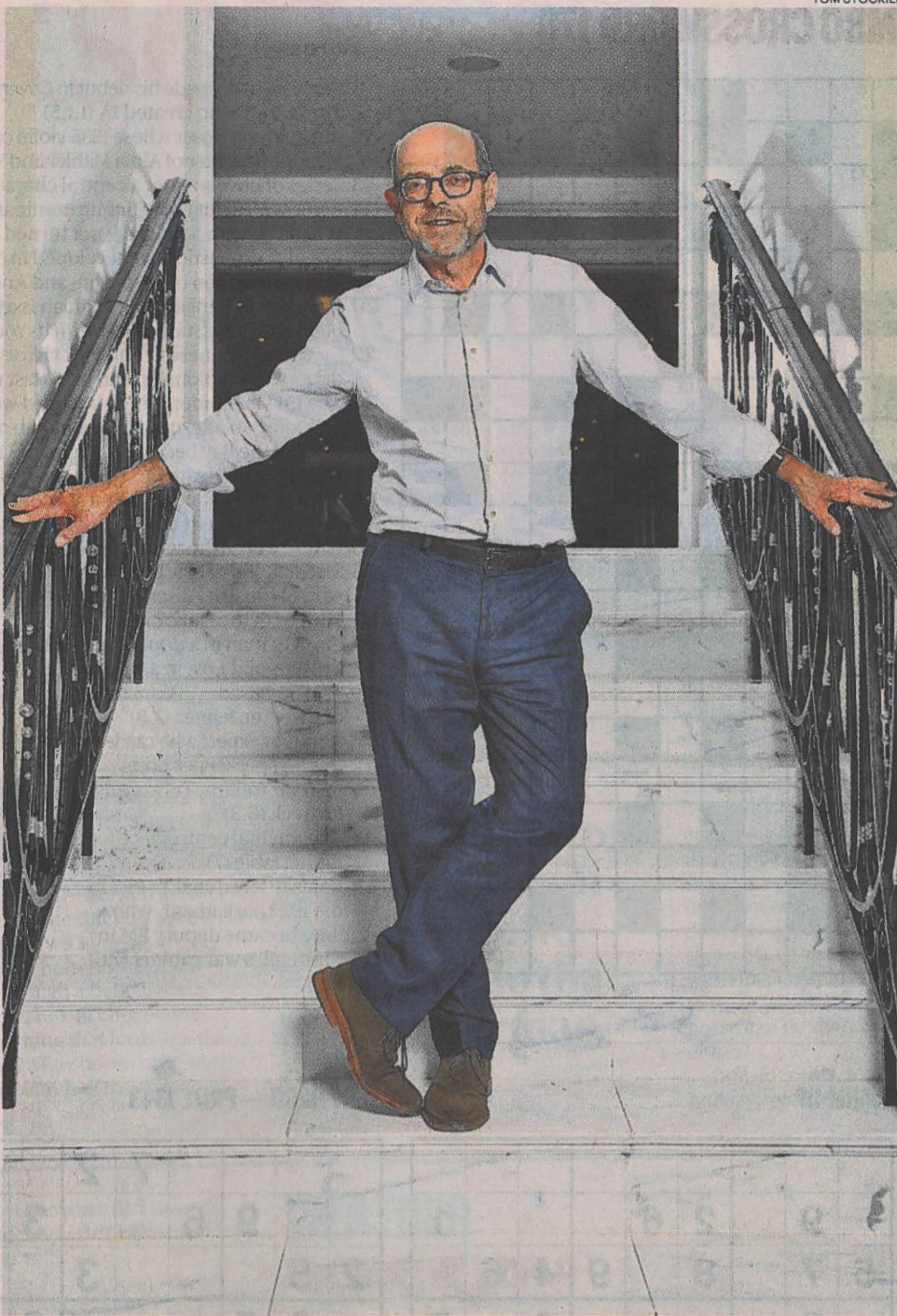
Cummings isn't the only one savaging Today; last month Channel 4's head of news, Dorothy Byrne, likened listening to the programme to "accidentally walking into a knitting shop in Bournemouth". At this, Robinson laughs merrily. "That's a caricature and I don't agree with it. But it's a healthy challenge for us. We need to be incredibly wary of not being a cosy club for people of similar backgrounds."

Byrne also accused both party leaders of cowardice for dodging Today, saying that Johnson was aping Vladimir Putin's strategy of putting points across via social media, instead of giving interviews. "The interesting phenomenon is both parties are led by people for whom the interview isn't the place they feel most comfortable," Robinson says. "What does Jeremy Corbyn love? Rallies. What does Boris Johnson love? Short visits, photo opportunities, upbeat messages that convey optimism."

We're meeting to discuss a new book, Today, which marks – somewhat confusingly, since it was first broadcast in 1957 – the programme's 60th anniversary. Robinson has contributed a brief foreword but his association with the programme goes much deeper.

Born in Macclesfield, Cheshire, the son of the director of a metals firm, Robinson's best friend from the age of eight was Will Redhead, son of Today's much-loved presenter Brian Redhead. "I was really close to the family – I went on holiday with them and I always thought what a cool job Brian did." After A-levels, Robinson, with Will and another friend, embarked on a road trip around France. Shortly after their Volkswagen Beetle left Calais, it crashed. "I was asleep on the back seat, all I remember is a scream, then the car went boom," he says. "It was a two-door car, I remember trying to smash the windows to escape but I couldn't. I'll never know how I got out, but the next thing I knew I was in hospital and my friends were dead."

Robinson was so badly burnt he had to defer his place at Oxford (where he was Johnson's contemporary, although they were "never friendly") for a year. He arrived still wearing a bodysuit under his clothes to prevent his scars going lumpy. It was several years before Redhead felt able to resume their relationship. "I remember coming home and my parents had deliberately not told me that Brian and his wife were there for dinner. It was never discussed, Brian just reached out, grabbed my hand and squeezed it and things went on where they had left off." There was no counselling? "God, no!"



# IRRELEVANT? THEN PLEASE STOP TEXTING ME, NO 10

Dominic Cummings has declared that he does not listen to the Today programme, but as Nick Robinson tells *Julia Llewellyn Smith*, ministers still want to be grilled



“**Dodging death twice has made me very fatalistic. No point worrying about anything**”

**Nick Robinson could be in line to take the top job on Today when John Humphrys retires**

Redhead died in 1994, having never learnt that Robinson had named his elder son after Will. He also never heard Robinson's Today debut in late 2015. "That was one of the hardest days ever. I felt like Brian was there, I felt like Will was there. And I'd just had cancer and truthfully, I shouldn't have broadcast, I had a cold and my voice wasn't good enough."

The cancer had been diagnosed nine months previously. Surgery cured him, but the political junkie was left only able to speak in whispers: devastating news for a man about to report an election.

Having convinced doctors that it was vital for his psychological health to jump straight back, he croaked his way through election-night News at 10, 90 minutes after a hospital appointment, leading to comments from concerned viewers.

"Well, back then elections only happened every five years – now they come along the whole bloody time," Robinson says, defending himself. "Had I realised what events were around the corner, I'd have listened to David Dimbleby, who said, 'Take the year off, dear boy.'"

The prospect of another election makes him feel, he chuckles, "slightly exhausted". Still, healthwise he's in the clear, though he still reads from a screen rather than paper "because my voice is better if I'm looking straight" and always sits on the left of the studio as turning his head to the right closes a gap between his vocal cords.

His workaholicism combined with the Redhead connection makes colleagues certain he's burning to inherit Today's top dog mantle from John Humphrys, who retires this month after 32 years. His skewering of chancellor Sajid Javid on Thursday, thanking him for his "party political broadcast" certainly sounded like an audition, but naturally he claims fealty to the current set-up where all four presenters (Mishal Husain, Justin Webb and Martha Kearney) are equal. "If anybody thought they could replace John, they would be quickly disabused," he says smoothly.

Like all broadcasters, Robinson receives non-stop flak for bias. Twitter loves reminding us that in 1987 he was briefly chairman of the National Young Conservatives. Less reported is the fact that Labour approached him (unsuccessfully) to become Ed Miliband's spin doctor. His friends and family also give him grief if they feel their views have not received sufficient airtime.

"Like everyone, they're feeling rage and anger; passions are higher than they've ever been. I get a lot of, 'Why didn't you ask this?'" For that reason, he's started actively trying to reveal the show's mechanisms to listeners, this week pointing out that the government was unable to field anyone to defend its withdrawing the whip from rebel Tory MPs. "If you're ranting about why the other point of view has been forgotten, I want to be able say, 'It will be on in an hour' or the reason you will not be hearing a minister defend this is because they chose not to put up a candidate. Today hasn't taken a collective decision on this, it's my personal policy."

Has dodging death twice changed him? "It's made me very fatalistic," he says. "I never assume all is going to be fine, because everything could end, just like that. That could sound gloomy, but on the other hand it's rather liberating because you just think there is no point worrying about anything." In the coming weeks, it seems as good a philosophy as any.

*Today: A History of Our World through 60 Years of Conversations and Controversies, is published by Octopus at £25*