

# Interview of Lord Wakeham of Maldon

With Dr Kate Utting and Dr Michael Kandiah

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**D**r Utting: Lord Wakeham can you tell us about your early memories of the lead up to the Gulf War?

**Lord Wakeham:** I went to a conference of British suppliers for the energy industry to try and get some business after the end of the Iraq/Iran war, to my big surprise ... well, to everybody's big surprise, an *Observer* journalist was arrested: he was an Iranian<sup>1</sup>. One had to say to the *Observer*, "I just wonder whether it was the brightest thing you could ever think of to send one, an Iranian, as a correspondent to Baghdad at the time". Anyway, he was arrested. And my role was to make sure that he got proper legal representation. That was what ... the only thing we could say or do at that stage which meant that I did see quite a few of the big shots like Tariq Aziz, the Foreign Secretary, and various other people when I was there.

Saddam Hussein was in Egypt at the time so I didn't see him but I saw his number two. But anyway, that was that. So that's the first time I went there. If you were to ask me about the build-up to war I was put on the War Cabinet. I was asked by Mrs Thatcher to be in the War Cabinet because I was the Secretary of State for Energy. But at no time was there a serious energy problem as far as I could see. We had plenty of supplies. Kuwait had, I think, six massive great tankers that carried the crude around. Every one of them was filled up within hours of the invasion. So the energy side of it was never really a big problem and therefore getting much involved in that because as a politician, I also realised that Mrs Thatcher was very likely to want a War Cabinet who she thought instinctively would be supportive of her because she had this in the Falklands War, Francis Pym in the War Cabinet, Francis Pym and John Nott who were perhaps quite as reliable, you know, from her point of view. And I have a feeling that ... this was never said, I have a feeling that was a factor in it. But when I did get on she asked me if I would look after the media handling side of things and I took to mean that my job was to keep public opinion as best as I could behind the objectives of war.

**Dr Utting:** What were your priorities and concerns?

**Lord Wakeham:** Well, my first priority was to make sure that the Ministry of Defence understood that they had a very crucial role in public opinion. It wasn't just a question of them making announcements when it suited them. They had to be very conscious of what was happening. Now the first thing was I said to them, "Right, there's a Media Centre going to be set up Riyadh.

You have to have a bunch of British people to make the announcements out there because it would be absolutely unacceptable for an announcement of British casualties to be produced by someone with an American accent”.

The second thing I had to say was, “If you get along with these people out there, some will be good and some won’t be good. But the last thing you want to have to do is to sack anybody”. So you want to have had more people out there than you really need so you could pick and choose which ones are good to use on really important days and use the others on quiet days. And it was very, very hard to get the Ministry of Defence to really take that on board in the way that I did. For example, if you go back to the coverage, there was no doubt that the very admirable Chief of the Defence Staff, Lord Craig, has got lots of very fine qualities but he wasn’t a natural on television, you know. That’s just life. You’ve got to try and work around those things. I mean no criticism here; but they didn’t really quite understand that. And then, if you go back to the time, they had a Group Captain<sup>2</sup>, who was absolutely splendid.

**Dr Utting:** He was in the theatre, was he?

**Lord Wakeham:** Yes, he was out there. He was absolutely terrific. Anyway, then Tom King came to me and he said, “Oh, we’re standing him down”. I said, “Why? He’s absolutely marvellous”. “Oh, well, it’s a land war and we need a new land spokesman to bring in here”, Stevens<sup>3</sup>, I think his name was. He’s going to take over his scene. Well, I said, “I’m sure he’s going to be absolutely excellent, but you’re crazy. Here’s the man who the British public accept as being frank, honest, decent, clear, and you want to stand him down”. “Oh, well”, he said, “the Ministry of Defence don’t see it that way”. Anyway, life would work its works, its wonders. Tom King was in Washington. He went to see President Bush Sr. He was kept waiting and when the President came out and he said, “I’m very sorry to keep you waiting, but I’ve been watching that excellent man you have in the Middle East giving a report on war. I said he’s absolutely first class. And I wonder whether you can arrange perhaps for him and his wife to come out to Washington when this is over, because I’d love to have them to tea at the White House”. And that’s how this chap kept his job. It’s crazy, absolutely crazy. But that’s part of why I’ve fussed about this, a symbolic problem that the Ministry of Defence had in saying, you know, they have a role in presenting results.

The next thing that happened, this is from the general media handling, I got a signal from somebody that the top commentators on people out there could choose which theatre they wanted to cover. So, there’s a friend called Michael Nicholson who was ITN, he got some wonderful reports of ships and torpedoes and beautiful sunshine, beautiful views, lovely television, everything turned incredibly well.

Kate Adie had decided that the land war was going to be the difficulty albeit it would be the interesting area. So she decided to go to the land war. She hadn’t realised, and there’s no reason why she should, that that was going to be long delayed. So, she was stuck there in the land,

watching her rival on the ITN getting wonderful pictures while she was getting nothing. My anticipation was that she would start sending reports that morale was getting low, the troops were getting fed up, because she was getting fed up, you know. And I said, "Well, we can't have that". So, I said to Tom King, "What I think we must do, we'd find a way of keeping her happy". And I said, "What I suggest that we do is that each of the Senior Generals gives her an interview, just one a week, just to keep her in the picture". Tom came back to me and said, "Oh, the Ministry of Defence don't think it's appropriate because these people have got nothing to say". I said, "But that's even better. That's even better". What I want is for them to give an interview, and if they've got nothing to say, that's even better. I just want to keep this woman happy. I didn't want her flying off at a tangent.

I hope they've learned their lessons, but part of the reason I wanted to talk to you is that that is the real lesson. Wars today are much about keeping public opinion. For instance, the timescale of when the battles were going on was this really. First of all, it would have been perfectly technically possible for television cameras to show live on television missiles being fired from outside. It would be perfectly possible for those same missiles to be landing in Baghdad and killing women and children live on television. That presents an awful dilemma for those who are trying to maintain favourable public opinion. Retired generals hired by television companies would comment on the effectiveness of what it's likely to be, Scud missiles, questions like do they have gas, and so on and so forth. So you got all these great experts all over the world pontificating and the Ministry of Defence perfectly reasonably couldn't say anything until they were absolutely sure they were right. So they were restricted in what they could say and this was perfectly understandable, whereas all these great retired generals who, in many cases, were better known than the spokesman for the Ministry of Defence, they weren't able to say anything.

So, once the fighting started the spokesman of the Ministry of Defence started reporting on the bombing.

**Dr Utting:** Yes, precision-guided munitions.

**Lord Wakeham:** Precision-guided, absolutely precision-guided. So the reporter said, "Very interesting. It's been going on for a week now. Can we see some photographs of this precision bombing? Because we are most interested in seeing it and, you know, the public wanted it. And if you know it is precision bombing, you have surely got some photographs". So then, the message came back that cloud cover meant that we couldn't get photographs. So I said, "Well, that will last a few days. But you have got to find a solution". Eventually, we got the solution; we got the pictures. But they were American pictures and the Americans wanted to use them for their morning television which was five or six hours after British morning television which meant we couldn't use them. So I rang Brent Scowcroft<sup>4</sup> and he said the only person that could allow these to be used was the President and he was in bed. And the question is did I want to wake him up? I said, "No" as I didn't think that was a very good idea. So, we sort of lost that one.

There's a whole range of activities which generals had never really thought about before. They've thought about public relations of telling people what they want to tell them, but what they don't seem to realise is that there are a lot of people finding out this information and putting their own spin on it and they've got to be able to counter that. The next thing that I thought was important was that we needed to think about the problems that would arise if we had a lot of casualties.

**Dr Utting:** They were anticipating that the casualties would be enormous.

**Lord Wakeham:** Yes, absolutely. We just didn't know what there would be. We had to plan for that. So the first question was where were the bodies likely to come in, and bluntly, what was the politics or what was the attitude of the local coroner to the war? Because if the coroner opposed the war, difficult questions might have arisen. So I had to get that sort of sorted out to deal with, which I don't think anybody in the Cabinet has ever had to think about before. The second thing related to casualties was that I wanted papers to be drawn up between the Ministry of Defence and Department of Environment about the housing arrangements for the widows and children of any service personnel. And virtually every department had a different view of what the rules were compared with the Ministry of Defence. And I said, "You've got to straighten these out. We cannot have a row". The same applied to housing pensions, education, all sorts of different things. And I got them working together behind the scenes so that if we did have these problems, at least we'd thought about them before.

**Dr Utting:** So would you say then that your prime focus in terms of media management was the domestic audience at home? Or were you also conscious of strategic communications with our Arab allies in maintaining coalition unity?

**Lord Wakeham:** No. I think that if I could get the presentation of the war right for the British press, then the Foreign Office would know the people would have a basis of which to deal with overseas. One of the things I did do, which again I don't think anybody ever thought of doing before, was I would ring up nearly all the editors of the main newspapers that I knew, and I knew most of them, for example, the head of the ITN; Max Hastings; different people

**Dr Utting:** And you did this directly yourself?

**Lord Wakeham:** I did. I knew them you see. And I don't say I did it absolutely every day or all day, but I did it two or three times a week. I would say, "I'm off to the War Cabinet. How do you think things are going? How does it look from where you are"? And of course, this had two effects. One is that sometimes we learned something. But secondly, flattery gets you everywhere. They were so pleased that they were on the inside track that they weren't going to say nasty things about the government or the war. It was the very subtle way of making sure that they were on your side. And I got useful information. For example, from the ITN man, Stewart Purvis. He said, "We think the big focus this coming week is going to be refugees

coming out of Iraq into Jordan, and we're sending a television team out there because we think that's where it's going to be". And I said, "Very interesting". So I rang Douglas Hurd up and I said, "On my view, what we need to do is to send Lynda Chalker out to Jordan".

**Dr Utting:** She was the International Development Secretary...

**Lord Wakeham:** Yes: in the Foreign Office.

I was in the Cabinet position in those days. And she was told to go out to Jordan. And there were pictures of her visiting the front. Half of the people thought she was the Queen! It was tremendously good PR that we were doing it. And it was only because I was tipped off by a journalist. The only problem we had was that Douglas [Hurd]<sup>5</sup> was making a speech in the House that morning and we couldn't find Lynda. So he had to announce that she was going before she knew. But you see the way I was trying to work?

**Dr Utting:** Yes to anticipate what the story might be.

**Lord Wakeham:** What it might be and from all sources. You know, someone like Max Hastings, I mean, he thought he could run the war better than the rest anyway. So to be consulted was very good.

**Dr Utting:** As you've mentioned with Hurd in the House of Commons, could you tell us something a bit about managing the relationship with the Opposition and managing the politics at home?

**Lord Wakeham:** Yes. I went to see the Labour spokesman. His name was McNamara<sup>6</sup>, I think. He's in the Lords. And he's a very nice man and he said, "Look, the Opposition can be 100% behind you all the while there are no casualties. But it will be a different matter if there were casualties, you know". If I remember rightly, Kinnock<sup>7</sup> refused to have private briefings at the time. That's a big issue that comes up on these occasions, as to whether the Leader of the Opposition wants confidential briefing. I know that Michael Foot didn't have any during the Falklands War because he felt that he wanted to be free to say what he liked and not inhibited by anything he'd be given on confidential terms. And I think that Neil Kinnock was the same.

**Dr Utting:** So when Mrs Thatcher resigned, quite apart from the impact that had on the Conservative party and John Major becoming the Prime Minister, how did that affect how you conducted the war? Did it make a big difference?

**Lord Wakeham:** No, I don't think so. John Major took over as the Chairman of the War Cabinet, and I didn't really notice any serious differences. He had a slightly different temperament. The road all went much the same. He was very good. I was there, of course, at the War Cabinet

meeting. The argument that Mrs Thatcher was dogmatic and wouldn't change her mind was simply untrue. She would change her mind. She would sum up as to what was the right solution having heard everything, and John Major would sum up the right solution. I couldn't really say there was much difference, if anything, John Major was maybe slightly better than she was, but there was really nothing much in it. They were both extremely good. But she would end up with a phrase, and it came out in different ways, but she would say, "Alright, Secretary of State, we'll do it your way, this, this, and the other thing, but you better be right". In other words, she reserved a rather more radical solution to herself, she said, "Right, we're going to do it your way but instinctively, my way is different". Now, John Major, you see, used to sum up and he put himself in the middle position of the Cabinet. Mrs Thatcher instinctively covered by taking it to everybody, saying, "Well, you know, you better be right", which is "I'm not 100% convinced but I'm going to make it so ..." which was, you know, one of her great skills. But, I mean, it was an instinctive skill rather than a thought-out skill.

**Dr Utting:** I know it's very difficult to look at something from a counterfactual point of view, but one of Major's great achievements at the end of the war was to institute the safe havens.

**Lord Wakeham:** Yes.

**Dr Utting:** And to try and protect the Kurds in the north and the south. Do you think that Mrs Thatcher would've had the same view of this because it really was quite remarkable how he managed to get the United States onside.

**Lord Wakeham:** Yes, I certainly would not say that she wouldn't have done it, because I would suspect in both cases, they would've had some good advisors. So this is an option that had some advantages and both of them were capable of taking a carefully presented view and saying, "Right, that's what we'd go for". And it wasn't something that she had a blind spot about. She did have a blind spot but not that sort of a blind spot.

**Dr Kandiah:** Just to go back to John Major, one of the things which was clear John Major appeared on TV. Did you advise him in any way about that?

**Lord Wakeham:** No, no.

**Dr Kandiah:** Or was it completely him?

**Lord Wakeham:** Completely him.

**Dr Utting:** Because he made the famous comment. He said "God bless" almost instinctively when the ground war came to an end, didn't he?

**Lord Wakeham:** Yes, yes, yes. It was ....

**Dr Utting:** Very natural touch.

**Lord Wakeham:** Yes, that's right. It was ... if my recollection of that was that it was the military that were pressing us to end the Gulf War rather than the politicians. They were the ones who didn't want to go on fighting. "We don't want to fight the Republican Guard with their backs to us", and all those sorts of thing. And whether they were right or not ... but we weren't planning to occupy Baghdad.

**Dr Utting:** It was the pictures of the Highway of Death, I think, that was very disturbing for the military.

**Lord Wakeham:** Yes that's right.

**Dr Utting:** In our Witness Seminar there was talk about the possible responses had Saddam Hussein chosen to use weapons of mass destruction. And certainly, during the conflict itself, he said that if Baghdad was bombed that he would consider using nuclear weapons. Was that part of your considerations?

**Lord Wakeham:** I can't recall it, it may have come up in the discussions. My role was distinctly a role about keeping public opinion behind what was actually happening rather than speculating what might happen.

**Dr Utting:** Yes. A lot of interesting measures on worst-case scenarios. Was having to deal with say chemical weapon casualties part of your area?

**Lord Wakeham:** I don't remember doing much on it. I really don't. I've got no records of that at all.

**Dr Kandiah:** Could you just say a bit more about sort of managing the House of Commons?

**Lord Wakeham:** Yes. Well, in the big issues, there were considerable advantages if you could brief the front bench. And you can see from an Opposition point of view, it was quite a big decision for them to take, as to whether they would feel inhibited. By knowing much more about it, they couldn't speculate. And I fully understand that. But from the Government's point of view, it was better to have an Opposition that understood the issues and knowing where they can press and where they can't press and so on and so forth. As far as backbench opinion was concerned, that was very much the role of the Ministers concerned, you know. Secondly, the other thing was that it was sometimes quite useful to put well-informed people on television, well-informed but who didn't know anything that was at all confidential. Now, I could give you an example. Someone like Michael Mates<sup>8</sup> was extremely good because he had been in the Army and he knew a bit about it. He was quite articulate. But he was never a minister in these areas. So, you didn't have to worry that he knew some intelligence matter or

security matter. So he was a great man to put on because he sounded knowledgeable. He knew how to sound knowledgeable. He knew how to speculate intelligently about what may or may not happen. And people thought he knew a lot more than he did. But he did it brilliantly. So, that is part of the process.

**Dr Utting:** Perhaps just looking more generally at the whole government, the administration, and media management, I seem to remember last time we talked a bit about the role of Bernard Ingham.<sup>9</sup> So did you work very closely with him? Because I can remember that after the Falklands War, he felt that the Ministry of Defence had not given him enough information during the Falklands War so he could do his job. Was it different this time then?

**Lord Wakeham:** Well, let's remember. Bernard was there when Margaret was there. And then, Christopher Meyer was there when John Major became Prime Minister. Bernard was superb. I got on extremely well with Bernard, but I was mostly the Chief Whip during that time. And the role of the Chief Whip has changed enormously. When I was a Chief Whip, you are half a minister in the government and you were also half ... at least part of you ... on the Staff of Number 10. The first thing I used to do in the morning when I got in, and I was in early. I would go and talk to Bernard "How's it going? What does it look like"? I would go and see the private secretaries who are all working fantastic hours.

Christopher Meyer was very good, but I got the impression that Christopher Meyer knew his own career. His own career was to be in a job where he was in a government. Bernard had know-how and Bernard had decided that he was going to devote the rest of his working life to Mrs Thatcher. And when she went, he went. And you could see the slight difference. Christopher might have been more valuable because he was a bit more impartial. But you didn't get that passionate concern that was there. And of course, Christopher Meyer was my successor at the Press Complaints Commission.

**Dr Utting:** When you were called before the Leveson Inquiry.<sup>10</sup>

**Lord Wakeham:** I did give evidence to him, yes. I think that my view is that if the speculation is right that he is going to say, "I would fight for a free press but it needs to have a statutory underpinning". I think the right thing for us to do is to give this revised self-regulatory system a chance.

**Dr Utting:** So what you've told us today about managing the media, the relationship with Bernard Ingham and Christopher Meyer, but your government didn't have a reputation with the spin doctoring in the same way it became an issue for the Labour government so why do you think that is the case?

**Lord Wakeham:** Well, I think ... Alastair Campbell was different from Bernard. Bernard was so self-evidently honest and honourable. People would disagree with him but at least they knew



where they stood with him. I mean, you know, there was no subterfuge about Bernard. He'd say what was what. And sometimes, he got himself into a little bit of hot water. But I think I contrast with it now.

**Dr Kandiah:** Just going back to managing domestic public opinion, do you think if the war had gone on for long and if there had been more casualties, would that have been a problem?

**Lord Wakeham:** Well, I think that we were preparing for the worst, and I can't guarantee how it would have happened if the worst had come, but we were going to be in a better position than we would have been in handling the adverse publicity.

**Dr Kandiah:** Thank you so much.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Farzad Bazoft. Convicted of espionage and executed in March 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Gp Capt Niall Irving.

<sup>3</sup> Col Barry Stevens.

<sup>4</sup> The President's National Security Advisor, 1989-1993.

<sup>5</sup> Foreign Secretary, 1989-1995.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin McNamara.

<sup>7</sup> Leader of the Opposition, Neil Kinnock.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Mates, MP for Petersfield and Chairman of the Defence Select Committee.

<sup>9</sup> Mrs Thatcher's Press Secretary, 1979-1990.

<sup>10</sup> The Leveson Inquiry into the press following the News International phone hacking controversy, 2011-12.

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