

How I blew my 10 minutes with PM

How do you hold a conversation with a leader, especially one you're meeting for the first time?

If you're hoping for some useful advice, you'll be disappointed. I've met a few and they were all different and there are consequently no helpful guidelines, other than being polite and adopting some form of forelock tugging that stops short of craven obeisance.

I'm reminded of this quandary by a book just out called *Ma-am Darling: 99 glimpses of Princess Margaret*, a revealing, entertaining read by retired British actor Craig Brown. In an early chapter, he rehearses an anecdote from Gyles Brandreth, an English writer, broadcaster, actor and former Conservative Member of Parliament.

At some function, Brandreth unexpectedly found himself alone in a corner with the Queen, who has probably met more strangers than anyone alive. When he attempted conversation, he had to lead the process, Her Majesty's responses monosyllabic and non-committal.

Brown goes on to say her technique is to let others do the talking: "...the dizzying experience of talking to a stranger more instantly recognisable than your own mother, a stranger the back of whose miniaturised face you have licked countless times, is enough to start you spouting a stream of gibberish. While you do so, Her Majesty may occasionally say, 'Oh, really?' or 'That must be interesting,' but most of the time she says nothing at all."

Prime Ministers aren't exactly royalty, but they can have the same effect. Especially those whose charisma is writ large on TV, but whose live, one-to-one demeanour - never actually one-to-one, because there's always a stern security person glaring at you from the shadows - will be detached.

How can it be anything else, since the whole exchange will be recorded, analysed and regurgitated via that journalistic process innocently labelled "summarising"? One mis-step and they're the next big thing on social media.

All prime ministers are coached and learn by experience that being businesslike and cautious are the only reliable methods in front of someone with a camera, a voice recorder or a notepad. I was curious, then, to see what Jacinda Ardern would be like face-to-face, after her minders agreed to a brief interview during her recent visit to Taranaki.

This may seem inappropriate, and it's certainly appearance-ist (although cartoonists get away with it unmolested) and probably gender-biased...but you don't notice the teeth. TV is unkind in that respect, you think when you meet her.

It's the intelligent eyes that strike you, the instant recognition of the significance of each question asked of her, the speed of a brain that would put *The Chase's* Beast to shame, the coherence of her answers. Those things and the smile that leaves her face only fleetingly while she thinks.

She's adept at putting you at your ease, no small feat given she may have talked to dozens of other people before she got to your allotted 10 minutes. She's on-song, confident, informed, no-nonsense. All of which is probably why she's unlikely ever to grant me another interview.

I messed up. I used levity at the end, which I forgot is something you can never do during news interviews with leaders, who are required to take themselves, the issue and you seriously at all times. Ardern has learned that part of the equation already: it's "don't mess with me – there's a time and a place for playfulness, and this ain't it".

What did I ask? We were discussing the implications of her government's decision to call a halt to offshore oil and gas exploration, and up until the end, when the minders were signalling it was time to go, the exchange went according to plan for both of us.

Then I said: "And now, Prime Minister, the most important question of all – have you seen *Occupied?*" In the next milliseconds, too fast even for a camera on motor-drive to capture, her face

JT column July 13 2018 – talking to leaders

registered bemusement, blankness and irritation. Minister of Energy Megan Woods, who was sitting in, tried to save me with a cheery: “I have”.

The Netflix series about a Norwegian prime minister who shuts down his country’s offshore oil fields to encourage use of alternative energy, was something Woods obviously saw as relevant to her job. But her encouraging smile wasn’t enough. The PM was up and leaving. There was no proffered hand, although when I offered mine she took it politely.

Oh well. I’m old enough not to believe in fairy tales.