

# 'I've a huge admiration for politicians who I think are in a much darker world than the one I had to occupy'

Ahead of former Labour MP Alan Johnson's visit to Belfast this week, he speaks with **Aine Toner** about the possibility of a Keir Starmer-led majority and his joy at writing thrillers

**F**ORMER MP Alan Johnson and his wife almost bought a house on the Bangor coast when they were visiting for a book festival.

Now he'll be back in Northern Ireland this weekend to discuss his working life with Stephen Walker as part of the Imagine! Festival. It is a life that moved from trade unions to politics and now to writing memoirs, fiction and a biography.

Alan was general secretary of the Communication Workers Union before entering Parliament as Labour MP for Hull West and Hessle in 1997.

It seemed like a natural step he says, given his similar role as a trade union leader.

"I had a constituency surgery every week, and that was very much like people come into the sorting office floor when I was a postman, and a local rep.

"Then combined with, you go to conference; in the trade union, there are rules around debates, and you make policy decisions.

They're quite similar to what you do in Parliament.

"Basically, for a trade union leader, you have to learn how to negotiate, you have to learn how to speak publicly and you have to learn how to put a sentence together, because a lot of it is writing either to employers or to tell your members what you've done.

"Those three skills are what you need in politics as well."

He served as Home Secretary from June 2009 to May 2010, as well as holding a variety of roles

in the Blair and Brown governments such as Health Secretary and Education Secretary.

The former shadow Chancellor retired from politics in 2017 and doesn't miss it "one little bit" thanks to a love of writing.

His childhood memoirs have won awards, while his first novel, introducing readers to DCS Louise Mangan, was published in 2021.

"My wife reckons I only write books to go to book festivals," he laughs, "and there's a certain element of truth in that, because in what other profession could you go around the country? So many towns and even villages have a book festival now.

"It's the kind of little ones in a village hall on a wet Wednesday evening and yet 50, 60 people turn up who've read your books, or are interested in reading your books. They're so different from political meetings in the sense that there's nothing hostile.

"You might get the odd difficult question related to my past political life, although that gets less and less now, they want to talk about the books.

"So no, I don't miss politics at all. I've got a huge admiration for politicians who I think are in a much darker world than the one I had to occupy."

He discusses the advancement of social media and the internet.

"I remember getting our first email in my office. We almost made it a cause of celebration.

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**Rubbing  
shoulders:**  
*Former Home  
Secretary  
Alan Johnson  
(centre) with  
ex-Sinn Fein  
MLA Caitríona  
Ruane and  
former UUP  
leader Sir Reg  
Empey in 2007*

# ‘Keir has the capacity to deal with being PM’

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“There was no social media and I was never on social media, never had anything to do with it.

“Now it’s almost compulsory, you have to be on X or Twitter or Facebook, you have to be contactable every minute of day and night by anyone whether they want to praise you, which is quite rare, or attack you which is which is what they usually do on those kinds of forums. I think it’s a more difficult job now.”

Even if he wasn’t still a member of the Labour Party and a “big Labour supporter”, Alan says that wherever he stood politically, he’d be looking forward to a change in government.

“We had 13 years in power and the Tories are just about coming up to 14. But if people said to me, ‘Well, what did you achieve?’ There’s a whole long list which includes the national minimum wage, getting waiting times down to a maximum of 18 weeks and an average of nine in the NHS. And of course, the Good Friday Agreement. Just those three alone are significant.

“I can’t think of what even the most avid Conservative supporter would say they’d achieved in the last 13 years.

“I’m looking forward to the election.

“It looks very likely that Keir Starmer will be Prime Minister

and his efforts to rescue our party after the disaster of [former Labour leader] Jeremy Corbyn and that terrible result in 2019.

“One thing I’ve always campaigned on, and I hope Keir serves his attention to it at some time, is Labour membership in Northern Ireland.

“You weren’t allowed to be a member of the Labour Party in Northern Ireland.

“When I was leader of my union, all our delegates would come who paid their political levy as part of their fee, but weren’t entitled to come to Labour Party conferences as Labour Party members, even though one of the main issues that was being debated, and this was in the 80s and late 70s, was Northern Ireland.

“I’ve been part of that campaign. And although things have moved on a bit, it’s still the kind of double standard that you can’t really be a member; I think you can be a member, but it’s not kind of full membership rights.”

The possibility that Starmer will become the next Prime Minister is a real one.

“Well, the first thing to say is that he done something,” Alan responds when asked whether the Labour leader is respected.

“He was director of public prosecutions when I was home secretary.

“So that’s a job that is a bigger job than most Cabinet positions

and he’s done it and done it well. There’ll never be another Tony Blair. Tony Blair is the reason I went into parliament, he asked me to go into parliament.

“I was a fully-fledged paid-up member of the Blairite fraternity.

“But it’s no good waiting for another Blair.

“Blair was Blair, and Gordon Brown, with his own very moral approach to politics, was a different politician.

“So Keir is not going to replicate Tony Blair and I doubt whether it’ll be the same kind of landslide as 1997. But the polls are pointing towards that.

“First of all, he’s got that experience. He’s done something in life, including lots in Northern Ireland where a lot of his decisions were very important.

“And he’s got that basic decency, and that drive and that capacity to deal with all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, which is what Prime Ministers have to deal with.

“For me, while soaring oratory will never be Keir’s game, what you need now is stability and decency and a good brain applied to the country’s problems rather than the tribal warfare we’ve seen over at least the last decade.”

He talks of “the disaster of Brexit” and says that Northern Ireland is in the position where he’d like the rest of the UK to be

with the EU.

“While I don’t think that’s high on the agenda, because no one wants to re-open the Brexit arguments, it must be more likely with Keir Starmer as Prime Minister than it was with any of the various Conservatives who have held that office.”

We moot the possibility of younger people taking more interest in politics — does he agree?

“You tend to get a higher turnout in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK elections when you’re allowed to have them,” he says.

“I hope that’s true. I’m not seeing much of an indication in the statistics, and indeed some of the changes to voting procedures, which I don’t think are different to Northern Ireland, you have to take proof of identity now.

“That’s problematic, I worry about that.

“I think there are more barriers to young people in that sense, but I hope that the turmoil that we’ve been through, the austerity that we’ve been through, and the fact there seems to be a clear discrimination in this government’s policies, towards pensioners, against young people, I hope that means they turn up and vote.

“That’s always been the problem in the past — a much bigger, a much higher rate of apathy, if you like, among the 18 to 34 year olds than in another generation.”

Both his and contemporary Lord Hain’s writing have taken similar paths, first non-fiction and now fiction, via a career in politics.

“Let’s have a crack at what to me was kind of Mount Everest: can you actually invent a world that other people are willing to inhabit for as long as it takes to read 80,000 words?” he says on writing fiction.

“Now I’m on the third book, I’m on my third mountain. And it’s just as much fun as it’s always been, and I don’t think politics is as much fun as it was when I was

in Parliament.”

Luck, he says, plays a large part in enjoying a writing life.

“I’ve spoken to lots of very good writers who struggle to get published. If I hadn’t been a postman, I wouldn’t have been a trade union official.

“If I hadn’t been a trade union official, I’d never been asked to go for a seat in parliament.

“And if I had not been an MP or a Government minister, no one would probably have been interested in reading my stuff.

“Once I’d written the memoirs, [I thought] maybe I could do fiction, so it kind of followed naturally with an awful lot of luck given the struggle some people have.

“To get selected as a member of parliament, I was asked to go into parliament. I didn’t have to go through that, and to get a book published.”

One of his reviews credited Alan’s work as having “more layers than Filo pastry”, all the more relevant given that novel’s Cretan setting.

“I have got her whole world in my head,” he says of character Louise’s life, soon to be seen again in his latest novel, *Death on the Thames*.

“This is the third book in the Mangan trilogy. I know the names of her daughters, the ages of her daughters, the break-up of her marriage.

“I can’t mention it in book one and not refer to it in book three accurately, so I have to kind of almost write this stuff down and check out that I’ve got the timing right.”

“I’ve yet to meet the thriller writer who has plotted it all out in advance. Most of them either start off with a vague idea,” he continues, explaining he has discussed writing with genre heavyweights such as Ian Rankin and Val McDermid.

“I don’t think anyone does it as kind of meticulously as perhaps Agatha Christie did.

“She never spoke too much about the way she plotted, but

you do have to keep that world in your head.

“My focus is always on the reader. I want to surprise and hopefully delight the reader, but the surprise in a mystery comes first. I want at least one moment where their jaw slightly drops because I have surprised them, and if I can make their jaw drop two or three times, then I’ve succeeded.”

He narrated his memoirs as audiobooks and says while it wasn’t difficult to do given his closeness to the text, it wouldn’t work for reading fiction aloud.

In a case of history coming full circle, however, the choice of actor on his second and third novels links to Alan’s previous career.

“I had really good actor on the first one. On the second one is the same actor we’re using on the third one.

“His name is Richard Attlee. He is the grandson of Clement Attlee, the great Labour Prime Minister and deputy Prime Minister to Churchill during the war, during the coalition.”

Alan explain that Richard always plays Kenton Archer on BBC radio drama *The Archers*, something he has “avidly” listened to all his life.

While another Mangan novel is on the cards, Alan’s currently working on a concise biography of Harold Wilson, totalling 30,000 words.

“It’s a publisher called Swift, who have had this wonderful idea,” he explains.

“If you want to read a biography of a politician, you’re picking up 1,600 pages normally, and you have to dedicate a lot of time to it.

“They feel that actually these biographies should be more accessible, so 30,000 words as opposed to, 90,000 for my novel, should be easy.

“But the difficult bit is what you leave out; I’m still at that stage I think it’s a brilliant idea and I’m really pleased to be involved, particularly doing Harold Wilson

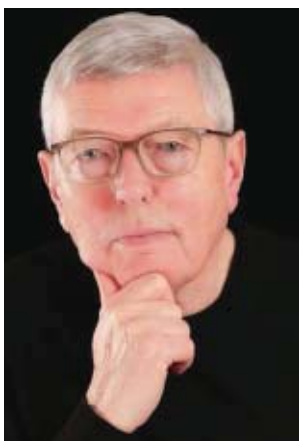
“Harold Wilson, as I was growing up, he was Prime Minister when I when I left school, Prime Minister when I got married first time around, when I first voted, he was Prime Minister.

“He was a particularly relevant figure in the 1960s.”

Alan Johnson in conversation with Stephen Walker: The long and winding road takes place as part of Belfast’s Imagine! Festival on Saturday in the Cube Theatre. For information, see [imaginebelfast.com](http://imaginebelfast.com). **Death on the Thames** by Alan Johnson is available at the event and on sale nationwide from March 28



***‘I’ve yet to meet the thriller writer who has plotted it all out in advance’***



**Past life:** Alan Johnson (also left) with Ed Balls and (below) with former Labour leader Gordon Brown