

Chris Mason

Political Correspondent and Presenter

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Job title: BBC Political Correspondent and Presenter, Any Questions, BBC Radio 4 at BBC News

Organisation: BBC

Location: London, UK

How did you get to where you are now?

I always wanted to be a reporter. Call me narrow minded, call me single minded...I never wanted to do anything else. There are no other journalists in the family, but I loved my little white battery powered radio I got when I was six. I loved watching Trevor McDonald's News at Ten in the 1990s and I loved newspapers.

But I also grew up in an environment where I was surrounded by the beauty of the Yorkshire Dales and also had two parents who were primary school teachers – and both of them were geography coordinators! So whenever we were out and about in the Yorkshire Dales, no Sunday afternoon ramble would be complete without explanations from the age of four onwards about how this was a glacial valley or that was a meander in a river or that was a sedimentary rock or that was a linear village. In other words, the geographical education started remarkably young!

Was there anything particularly useful that helped you get into this role?

The key thing for getting into journalism is demonstrating ongoing interest: work experience, blogging, having a go at podcasting, student newspapers, hospital radio etc. Do whatever you possibly can. And the other key thing is to read, watch and listen as widely as possible. This has never been easier – have a listen to an American news talk radio station, read an Australian newspaper, see how people tell stories, and what stories they tell. Why are they written the way they are? Why is the video edited the way it is? Constantly consume news and you'll get better at telling it.

What do you do as part of your role?

I work on a rota as a Political Correspondent, three days a week. These can be any three days, other than Wednesday – when I'm at home with my son – and Fridays, when I present Any Questions on Radio 4. Being a journalist often involves shift work. It certainly has throughout my career. I'm on an early shift tomorrow: that means the alarm will go off at 4.00am, so I can be at Westminster by 5.00am and on BBC One, Radio 4 and 5 live from 6.00am. Later in the week I'm on a late shift – I'll start at lunchtime and finish in the early hours. This kind of working life isn't for everyone, and soon flushes out who really wants to do the job, and those who merely like the sound of it, rather than the reality. On Fridays, I present Any Questions – a 50 minute live discussion programme on Radio 4. Normally, we are on the road, in a different place every week. Not so at the moment... I've been incarcerated in a studio in Broadcasting House in London since March...with the exception of two editions, when I had to present from home while self isolating. Chairing a discussion with four contributors – when none of us can see any of the others – is an interesting experience! In addition to this work, I present BBC Breakfast occasionally too. Now that is a proper early start. 4.00am feels very early. 3.00am feels like the middle of the night.

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What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?

Persistence, a love of news, a love of broadcasting and a desire to get better. And a whole lot more persistence.

How does geography feature in your work/ what difference does it make?

Geography, the big, hulking, amorphous discipline that it is — saw me through my three years at university. If I am brutally honest, I studied it because it was the last subject standing when I left school — everything else had fallen by the wayside, either because I wasn't interested in it or I was hopeless at it. Geography survived. I found it frustrating at university, because of its scale and lack of definition: I remember in the department there was a bloke who was fascinated in medieval villages whose office was immediately next to a guy who spent his life looking into volcanoes. And yet they were both geographers. There is a logic to this, I get it, but still struggled with it. Once I could specialise, and ditch the physical geography which my maths wasn't up to understanding, I got slowly better, and absolutely loved the contemporary history elements of my final years — studying the post Soviet states, the restructuring of Britain since the 1970s, the HIV/AIDS pandemic. And some of the books I read back then — this is 1998-2001 — did become bigger talking points later. Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*, for instance which I read in the late 90s...and then 9/11 happened.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

I love broadcasting. I love telling stories. I love asking questions.

Do you get to travel for your role?

I travel every week for Any Questions — or at least I did until the pandemic. I love travelling around the UK. One week it's a cathedral in north Wales. The next a theatre in Aberdeen. The journey, the place, the venue, the live audience. I live in London now but my heart is always in Yorkshire. The rolling — and sometimes not very rolling — hills of the Yorkshire Dales afford you the perspective of both the natural and the human world that perhaps in flatter environments you don't get quite the same sense of. When you stand on top of a valley and look down into two dales sometimes you can see RAF planes on their practice bombing raids *below* you in the valley as well as other geographical, physical or human entities, such as the meandering River Wharfe or the village of Starbotten or whatever it might be! My goodness, I can't wait to get back to Yorkshire — I have never gone longer without visiting the Promised Land! Courtesy of this

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horrendous pandemic. I can't wait — merely describing those beautiful dales to you now, the theatre of the mind is wandering!

What are the options for career progression? Where might you be in five years' time?

Surviving, hopefully! I am hoping in five years time I'll be better at presenting Any Questions than I am now. Broadcasting is all about airmiles — the more time you spend on the air, the better you get. It still feels like I'm feeling my way into presenting AQ, even though I've been doing it for nearly a year. I hope I might be in a more senior role as a correspondent and/or continuing to do more presenting of programmes on radio and television. Alongside presenting AQ, one of the biggest pinch myself privileges of my career has been presenting BBC Breakfast; I'd love to carry on doing shifts on the red sofa.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to go in to this career?

People in politics talk about the value of having 'a hinterland' in other words not just obsessing about politics. As a reporter I've always thought this: you have to be a three-dimensional, fully paid up member of the human race — as broadcasting can sometimes flatten you. You should sound normal, rounded and human. Reporters traditionally were very stiff and appeared on screen as if they still had a coat hanger in the back of their jacket. They'd often talking in a stilted, almost inevitably received pronunciation. I'd have never succeeded in broadcasting a generation ago! I think it is a very different era now and part of that is being human and showing your foibles and interests are beyond whatever you're broadcasting about on any given day. Use the language the viewer/ listener/reader would use — not the language of politicians or Westminster.

Being the outsider is very important. You must remember you are an advocate for the listener, viewer, and reader. You have a job of interpretation because of the nature of language, history, and traditions of Westminster. The conflict, particularly in a specialist journalism like politics, is that in order to be a useful conduit of news to that listener you have to know what you're talking about and you need to know the motivations, beliefs and instincts of the people at the heart of government. But, in doing so, you are in constant danger of becoming more detached from the people you are communicating to, by assuming knowledge, not explaining language or explaining how you got from A to B. You should aspire to and revere being an outsider! It's about always remembering you are an outsider working on behalf of your audience.

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How do you maintain your knowledge and interest in geography outside of work?

I subscribe to the wonderful *Dalesman* magazine! I've just read Tim Marshall's wonderful *Prisoners of Geography* – a wonderful argument about the pivotal nature of geography in shaping international relations. And I love wandering in the Dales.

Why did you choose geography? Why should others choose geography?

You should choose the subject that you most enjoy and you can do best in. Hopefully your subject ticks both of those boxes. Failing that, one will do! The wonder of geography, and its frustration, to me at least, was its breadth. Make the most of that breadth, and after that follow your interests. Ruthlessly ditch those bits that leave you cold or you struggle with, and throw yourself with enthusiasm towards those bits that fascinate you. And remember, the golden rule of life applies to geography just as it does in the workplace: the harder you work, the better you will do.