

CHAPTER 1

THE PIG'S HEAD

IT WAS THE day that changed everything. I like to think I'm a pretty tough cookie. I've been through a lot in my life. I've taken on the odds and I've won. I've also had to learn to deal with defeat.

I'm very proud of who and what I am. My roots are working class. My family roots lie in the villages of the Punjab. I'm from the Sikh faith and very proud of that too. I'm not dead yet, but I think I can be quite chuffed with some of my achievements. I was the youngest MP of the 2001 intake, and did it in a seat where I had no previous links. I won there even though internal and external forces told me I was the wrong colour to be Labour's candidate for the nation's

bell-wether constituency. But I am also conscious that pride can be a dangerous thing, and that too much of it can be burst like a bloated balloon.

Maybe the pride is to blame for the unexpected impact the pig's head incident had on me and my sense of self-worth. Proud men can take the rough with the smooth. Surely proud men don't run away from a battle?

My own emotional response to this incident is not something I would have predicted. It got under my defences unlike anything that had preceded it. It highlighted my 'differentness' in a way that made me feel uncomfortable. It made me feel as if I'd never been truly accepted. Being different should be water off a duck's back to someone who's 6 ft 3 tall and wrapped in brown skin, while representing a community that is over 90 per cent white.

But this was different. It wasn't on my terms. I didn't have control of events. And, significantly, it was no longer just about me. I could deal with uncomfortable situations that impacted on me. Proud men can defend themselves. But what if you're not around – travelling, away for days on end – and you can't defend those closest to you? And what if you can't define or understand what you're defending them from? If people are willing to do odd, bizarre and frankly frightening things around a woman at home, largely alone, and your children, then what do you do? We were safer when I was part of the establishment. But I was no longer part of the public establishment or the Labour Party establishment. We were now on our own. Proud men, after all, can protect their wives and their children. But when your support networks break down, you're left vulnerable and alone.

Zac hadn't quite turned five and little Maxi was in nappies. In the

twenty-first century, I would never have thought I'd have to shield them from racism. And if I couldn't, what did that say about me?

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It wasn't a happy time. My full-time job for the trade union meant leaving Gloucester on a Monday morning and living in a flat in Kennington during the week, coming home on Thursday night. It was tough for Rupī and the boys. Max was only a year old and Zac just four when Labour lost the 2010 election, and they would have to adapt to my being away, without the recesses and flexibility I'd once had, to see more of those in the constituency.

I always knew it would happen some day, but I could already feel the arm of the Labour hierarchy, which had once been draped firmly around my shoulders, slowly slipping away. Texts to those who used to tell me how fabulous I was now went unanswered.

There's nothing more 'ex' than an ex-MP.

And it teaches you who your friends truly are. All those handwritten notes you receive when you've just lost (I've kept every one of them); all those offers of help – 'We must do everything we can to bring you back, we miss you...' – but where do those people all go when you really need them? A few of them are genuine and go the extra mile to call you, advise you and help you. But most promise the earth and will then turn their backs on you when it's crunch time. Politics is a brutal game where the wounded and the fallen are often left behind on the battlefield while the army marches on.

Perhaps being elected so young, and in the first seat I genuinely tried for, was a curse. Winning aged twenty-nine was great. But losing at

thirty-eight – with a young family and a mortgage – was a harder blow than I ever anticipated. I'd put so much of my 'self' into those nine years and I took the loss personally, even though I knew I shouldn't.

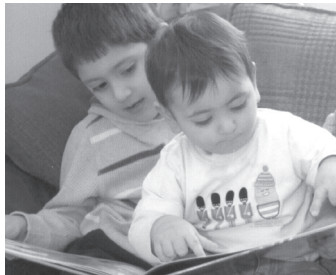
The journeying to London and back left too much time to dwell on election defeat and whether my career in politics had come to a permanent and premature end.

On the upside, things could only get better. Surely we'd hit rock bottom.

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8.15 a.m., Sunday 12 December 2010, Gloucester. In the Dhanda household, Sunday means a lie-in for Rupī, while I get turfed out of bed to make breakfast. Nothing extravagant: some warm croissants in the oven and a pan of Indian tea brought to simmering point on the gas hob.

The kids had settled down to eat in the dining room, which was open-plan with the kitchen. I finished off the tea while keeping half an eye on our young ruffians, making sure they were actually eating instead of flicking food or kicking each other under the table. Sons!



Zac and Max

Max had adopted the seat at the head of the table as his own, due to the fact the baby seat had fitted in nicely there. Although he'd outgrown it, he was attached to his place at the head of the group and had his booster cushion fixed there now. It was also the regular place for the plastic mat under his chair – to protect the carpet from his cast-offs – but the stains on the carpet showed it had been a rather unsuccessful project. As I looked over Maxi's head, I could see one of our two cars in the front drive and about a third of our front garden as it sloped gently towards a hedge – which separated our home from the brook that gave the house its name: Brookside. All this sounds rather more rural than it was – just a mile from Gloucester city centre, it lay on the corner of the busy Painswick Road and the sleepier cul-de-sac called The Wheatridge.

I could see that it was a rather grey and dull day outside. The house, although having a good-sized hedge to shield the ground floor from the main road, was not the best place for a very visible MP to live in his constituency (or ex-MP, as I had been for six months now). Everybody seemed to know where our home was. From constituents' comments like 'I saw you hanging up curtains, Mr MP!' to 'Drove past your house and didn't see your cars – were you away at the weekend?', I soon became aware that the house was not located in the most secure place and we should have thought more carefully about where we were going to make our family home, even though we had needed to find one in a hurry.

The flat in Kingsholm I had lived in, from the time I was adopted as Labour's candidate in 2000, had been perfect for me. A couple of years later, Rupi and I had got together and it suited us just fine too. Then we did something rather irresponsible. Bearing in mind this

was historically one of the most marginal seats in the land, planning a family was not on the agenda for us until after the 2005 general election was settled – at the earliest. But, within a week of the 2005 campaign ending, Rupi realised she was pregnant. It was great news, but I'm not sure I'd have been so cheery about it had I lost my job a few days earlier. I must advise any aspiring MPs reading this book that, unless you're financially secure, try not to get pregnant, or get your partner pregnant, during an election campaign. So, we sold the flat and bought our first family home – Brookside – just in time for Zac's arrival on New Year's Day 2006.

As I poured out the tea on that Sunday morning in 2010, I listened to Zac's chit-chat on the phone to my dad (his grandpa). On Sunday mornings, before, after and sometimes during breakfast, the kids would catch up with Mum and Dad on the phone.

When the doorbell rang, I knew something wasn't right. Who would be at the door at 8.15 a.m. on a Sunday? It was pretty unusual for people to turn up unannounced at our home and, when it did happen, it often spelled trouble. When I was away in Parliament a year earlier, a woman with mental health problems was banging on the door in the middle of the night, demanding a meeting with me. It was a case my office had been dealing with, but she should not have been banging on the door of our home in the early hours. Rupi dealt with it, but she was quite shaken at the time. She should never have answered the door. People in the state that woman had been in can be so unpredictable. Whenever I was in staying in London, I would dread the late-night calls from our Gloucester home. On more than one occasion, I had to scramble helpful friends out in their pyjamas in the middle of the night to check that Rupi and

the kids were OK when the bell or the alarm were sounding. People hanging around the place, break-ins, a smashed car windscreen and battered fences were all signs that things weren't right. It can happen to anyone but it's not wise for people in public life to make a fuss – you'll only get a reputation as a whiner. I was usually away when it happened, and it was happening a little too often for comfort.

I can recall an occasion when I was at home, and a group of angry residents (about seven of them) turned up on the doorstep. Zac was a babe in arms back then and was clinging to me when I opened the door. The mob weren't intimidating but they simply refused to wait for the weekend to end to come and see me in my constituency office. Apparently, some kids had set fire to a hedge and the residents weren't happy that the police hadn't put their best brains on the case. I was sympathetic, but hardly well placed to take up their case in my pyjamas, with a teething baby in my arms. But we talked (or rather, I listened for about a quarter of an hour). They rewarded my patience by putting a letter in the newspaper the following week basically telling the world they'd been to our house, giving its location, and stating that I wouldn't put out their fire.

So when I heard the doorbell that Sunday morning, my first instinct was to be ready to politely tell whoever was at the door that, if their hedge was on fire, they'd lost their pills or Billy hadn't been accepted by one of the grammar schools, then it was no longer my role in life to sort it out. I was no longer the MP after all, so surely the upside of defeat was that we could live in relative peace?

I left the kids to chitter-chatter and went to answer the front door. Straight away I knew this was something different. There

was no anger or malice about this lady. I don't know her name, or how old she was. I'd imagine she was in her fifties. I do remember that, despite her obvious distress, she had a kind face. It's one of those things you look out for as a politician. Who's nice and who's sympathetic? Are they the kind of person who'd smile back if you smiled at them?

She had a dog on a lead. It was pulling away from her, trying to drag her away from my doorstep. 'It's horrible,' she said. She was struggling to hold it all together, so I knew this was going to be bad news, whatever it was. 'They've left something horrible for you behind your car.' She trembled throughout. The rest of our meeting was something of a blur. I can't really recall what else she said, just her state of distress. She may have mentioned something about not wanting children to see it. I don't recall her departure either, but I know she wasn't around when I went outside. Other than saying it was horrible, I don't even recall her telling me what it was. She said the dog had found it.

I thanked her and said I'd deal with whatever it was, but my first thought was Zac and Max, who were having breakfast with their backs to the window in the dining room overlooking our front garden.

I called up to Rupi to come down and look after the kids so I could go outside, in my gown and trainers, to take a look. She'd heard the door bell and came straight down.

I went out not really knowing what to expect. As I walked around the back of the car I saw it. There's no mistaking a severed pig's head any which way you look at it. With my back to the road, facing our front door, I was face-to-face with it, looking up at me. My

own calmness and internal matter-of-factness surprised me to the extent that I crouched down to take a closer look. My first concern was the view from the dining room: I didn't want Rupī or the kids to see it. Thankfully, as I learned later from our own grainy CCTV footage, though it had been placed on top of our SUV (a Hyundai Tucson) to face us when we looked out of the house, as whoever did it ran away, it rolled off the roof and into a dip in the tarmac that largely prevented the street from seeing it.

You can't help but stare at something like that, however distasteful it is. I felt like it summed up my life at that time. Just when I thought we'd hit rock bottom, this happened. I didn't feel angry – I felt more than a bit sad. Have I changed nothing in my life? To my knowledge, there'd never been a UK minister of Indian parentage until Tony Blair promoted me. I'd worked so hard for this constituency and I felt my record of achievement was the best they'd ever had. It was almost comical that they thought the best way to offend me was by leaving a pig's head on my drive because they assumed I was a Muslim. The subtlety of these people to know the difference between a Sikh and a Muslim would have been a bit much to expect, I guess.

I could have gone back in time to my school days, when we were all pakis or wogs – what did it matter anyway? We were all the same and just as likely to get clouted in the playground by a complete stranger.

Nine years. I gave you my heart and soul for nine years. And you gave me this.

I needed to get on with what had to be done. Shield the kids; do whatever necessary with the police to get the head moved and

make sure the word didn't get out. I did not want the incident to cloud nine successful years in Parliament, serving this community, as well as three ministerial jobs, serving this country. Maybe one day, I thought, I'd be ready to talk about it. When I did, it would not be as a victim and it would not be on *their* terms.

I told Rupi, who took it as I knew she would: with a shrug and that look I'd seen many times before – the 'how much more?' look. It was also a 'we need to go, leave this place behind' look. Letting go of the place I loved so much would be more than a wrench for me. But, at the same time, I needed to feel a sense of control, a sense that I could protect my family from this rubbish. I didn't want my bright and inquisitive five-year-old to be asked about this kind of stuff at school. Racism is something my generation had to face up to every day at school thirty years ago. It isn't meant to be part of the modern-day script.

I'd like to put on record our thanks to the local constabulary, who were terrific that day and on the many occasions we needed them before and after my time as MP. Perhaps it was a slight overkill on the day, as two police cars, followed by an inspector and then a police photographer, arrived to do their work – small wonder the neighbours were ringing within half an hour and rallying round, putting things into some perspective. The deputy chief constable, a lovely guy by the name of Ivor Twydell, phoned me. We'd worked together during the 2007 Gloucester floods, as well as on the successful bid for resources for the new police HQ. I asked him to tone things down a bit because the local newspaper was difficult and we wanted to keep things quiet. So the police cars were moved off the drive, the pig's head

was taken away and the officers were called off from doing any door-to-door stuff.

We gave our statements. Things moved on. But something had changed forever. I had, after all, my pride.