

# Entertainment & Leisure

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## Politics insider's packing a punch at books festival

By **MATTHEW WILSON**

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“THE sort of person you’d like to have as your MP” isn’t a bad one as descriptions go. Not many people really fit the bill, but the comedian Ayesha Hazarika is undoubtedly one of them.

The broadcaster, author and journalist, who writes columns for the *Evening Standard* and *Grazia* magazine, isn’t currently standing for election anywhere — or planning to — but with the state of British politics being what it is, that could well have changed by the time this paper hits the stands.

Next Sunday (October 7) at 1pm there is a chance to get the former political special adviser’s take on the state of play at the end of the party conference season when she appears on the Henley Literary Festival’s politics panel alongside *New Statesman* editor Jason Cowley and *Spectator* assistant editor Isabel Hardman.

As you’d expect from a literary festival, all three have new books out. Cowley’s essays and profiles are published in *Reaching for Utopia*, while Hardman — who also co-hosts Radio 4’s *Week in Westminster* — is the author of *Why We Get the Wrong Politicians*.

For her part, Hazarika is the co-author with Tom Hamilton of *Punch and Judy Politics: An Insider’s Guide to Prime Minister’s Questions*.

The pair spent every Wednesday morning for five years preparing Ed Miliband for combat ahead of PMQs, with varying degrees of success. Their book lifts the lid on the bear pit, reveals the tricks of the trade from leading politicians and the people who prepped them, and takes you behind the scenes of some of the biggest PMQs moments in British political history.

By venturing into stand-up, Hazarika could be said to have swapped one kind of bear pit for another — though the *Guardian*’s John Crace noted that she is “never cruel and manages to create a world I never thought possible” while praising her performance as “extremely funny... sharp and on the money”.

Currently embarked on a UK tour that will see her play five nights at London’s Soho Theatre at the end of October, Hazarika is appearing locally at Norden Farm Centre for the Arts in Maidenhead on Friday, October 12, and at the South Street Arts Centre in Reading on Friday, November 9.

“Girl on Girl — the Fight for Feminism” is the 42-year-old’s second stand-up tour of the UK, following on from her debut “State of the Nation” show last year.

It finds Hazarika asking what happened to feminism. Is it too posh? Too white? When did Germaine Greer become Richard Littlejohn? And what does any of this have to do with Piers Morgan?

As for the “girl on girl” part, it quickly becomes apparent that Hazarika sees today’s feminism as a house divided against itself.

“The context of it is that post-#MeToo we’re in a bit of a situation where I find I often get asked to go on television to have a fight with someone about feminism — and it tends to be another woman,” she says.

We’re living in a bit of a time when women are getting pitched against each other on feminism. And, you know, is that good? I mean, I don’t love fighting other women about feminism, but also there’s quite big questions about what is feminism? What’s the right kind of feminism?



Picture: Steve Ullathorne

**Centre ground:** Ayesha Hazarika appears at the Henley Literary Festival next Sunday, followed by stand-up gigs in Maidenhead and Reading

what my show explores. There’s quite a lot of politics in it, but there’s a lot of humour obviously, there’s a lot of jokes, but an interesting, quite challenging message in it as well.”

With Brexit continuing to dominate the political agenda more than two years on from 2016’s EU referendum, does Hazarika feel that the concerns of feminists and women’s rights campaigners have been pushed to the margins?

“Well, I think the #MeToo moment was really big — and a very powerful, important moment in sexual politics and gender politics — because for the first time a lot of women felt they could speak out about something quite difficult that had happened to them and I think lots of women had been carrying around big secrets about sexual abuse or harassment for their whole lives, many of them. So that was a very big moment because the veil of secrecy was lifted.

“It also highlighted that often sexual harassment and abuse is not just about sex. It’s about power — it’s about abuse of power. That was a very important moment. But my big concern is that it can’t just be a

big moment that we all got very excited about — we had a hashtag campaign on social media. That can’t be the end of it.

“People shout loudly about an issue and that’s very important but you also have to do the work to actually get change, and you do that by focusing on sometimes the less sexy, the less eye-catching stuff — the stuff that really matters and that affects women’s lives.

“So I think my message is, the #MeToo movement was great, very important, a very big moment, but don’t think that it’s all fine and it’s all sorted now — we still have a long way to go. We’ve got to keep fighting for gender equality.”

That’s a different sort of Punch and Judy politics, isn’t it? “I think there’s a place for Punch and Judy politics and I think probably something like Prime Minister’s Questions is it,” reflects Hazarika. “And I think sometimes where the mainstream media is at the moment, this desire to have manufactured conflict for four minutes, people are starting to get tired of it. And it is tired — you don’t learn much, it’s not pleasant to watch, it’s not educational, no

one gets to speak, you’re just wound up to shout at each other. I hope that type of television and broadcast is going to have had its day soon.”

With the post-referendum political landscape continuing to be marked by tumult, there has been much talk of a Blairite-style centrist party being formed ahead of the next general election. Having previously worked closely with the likes of Ed Miliband, Harriet Harman, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair himself, does that prospect appeal to Hazarika?

“Well, it’s interesting because this debate is raging at the moment — the idea of a new party or a third party. I was just talking about it this morning with some people.

“I think a lot of people are politically homeless — I definitely accept that. I feel very frustrated about the Conservatives and very frustrated with my own party, the Labour Party, as well. But I do think that a lot of people still like their political parties and they like what Jeremy Corbyn stands for.

“A lot of people really like the fact that the Labour Party is a more socialist party than it was, and a lot of Conservatives say to me — Conservative supporters, not necessarily MPs or whatever — they say to me, ‘You know what? We wish the Tories had a version of Jeremy Corbyn.’

“Like a Boris Johnson or a Jacob Rees-Mogg — somebody who’s ultra-conservative. In the same way that Jeremy Corbyn is ultra-left, they almost want someone who’s ultra-right. So they almost want clear primary colours in politics.

“I’m somebody more in the centre ground — I’m still pretty left-wing but I’m probably more to the centre in terms of how I would like politics to be. So I think sometimes us in the bubble in London, we assume that everybody thinks the same way that we do — that’s a really big mistake to make and it’s why we’ve got lots of things wrong in politics and why we miss things like Brexit.

“And I think for quite a lot of people they quite like having clear red water and clear blue water. So they like having quite defined politics again — because a lot of people felt that all the parties are the same, they felt that Labour and the Tories are the same. The Liberal Democrats were in coalition so they just thought the Liberal Democrats were the same as the Conservatives as well.

“I think we’ve had an era of people thinking actually all our politicians are the same, right? Now people are quite enjoying the fact that you know what Jeremy Corbyn stands for. And I don’t think people do know what Theresa May stands for, which I think is why they want a change — they want somebody who’s probably more right-wing than Theresa May.”

Not to suggest that Hazarika comes across like a politician, but would she ever consider standing as an MP herself in future?

“Well, never say never, but I did try many, many years ago. I tried to get selected in Scotland and wasn’t successful back in 2010. And I’m now quite enjoying my new life — I quite enjoy being a political commentator, writing about politics, broadcasting about politics. I almost feel I have a bit more of a say and an opinion than I would do if I was an MP — because I think MPs in both the big parties — and indeed the Liberal Democrats, actually — I think they feel quite frustrated at the moment.”

Tickets for the Henley Literary Festival’s politics panel on Sunday, October 7, are £9. To book, visit [www.henleyliteraryfestival.co.uk](http://www.henleyliteraryfestival.co.uk)

For Norden Farm tickets and times, visit [www.nordenfarm.org](http://www.nordenfarm.org) and for the South Street Arts Centre visit [www.readingarts.com](http://www.readingarts.com)

## Comic has doctor’s orders for the NHS

THE announcement that Phil Hammond intends to stand against Tory MP Jacob Rees-Mogg in the latter’s North East Somerset constituency at the next general election set pulses racing in political circles last month, writes *Peter Anderson*.

Admittedly, it would have been a slightly bigger story if the Philip Hammond in question had been the current chancellor of the exchequer rather than the popular TV doctor of the same name.

Namesakes aside, the story gained further legs when the BBC sacked Hammond from his Bristol radio show for declaring his candidacy under the banner of the National Health Action Party.

Hammond says: “It was either drop me or give Jacob a show, so they dropped me!”

A writer, broadcaster and investigative journalist who writes the *Medicine Balls* column in *Private Eye*, Hammond has a bit of a political track record.

As a junior doctor he contested the 1992 general election under the banner of the Struck Off and Die Doctor’s Alliance.

Running against William Waldegrave, the then secretary of state for health, in the Bristol West seat, he captured a mighty 87 votes.

More significantly, that same year he was one of the doctors who broke the Bristol heart scandal, later giving evidence at the public inquiry.

More than a quarter of a century on, Hammond is still a practising doctor and continues to tour the country with occasional comedy shows.

His latest — *Happy Birthday NHS?* — takes him to Norden Farm Centre for the Arts in Maidenhead on Thursday (October 4).

The show invites people to celebrate the history of the NHS while rebuilding it to their liking.

Hammond said: “Nye Bevan’s baby turned 70 this year, but will she make 100? A decade of austerity with a Brexit cherry on top has brought her to her knees.”



**Political animal:** Dr Phil Hammond with a portrait of NHS founder Nye Bevan

While not everyone will share the good doctor’s prescriptions for the health service, the show invites you to join him as he explains the history of the NHS and invites audience members to come up with suggestions for how to improve it.

Hammond will debate these, add his own ideas, and cast votes.

By the end of the show, the audience will have *The People’s Plan* — which Hammond guarantees will make more sense than anything that comes out of the government. It’s your NHS, apparently, so it’s time you sorted it out.

A GP for 20 years, Hammond later specialised in sexual health and now works with young people with severe fatigue.

As a comedian he first appeared on the Edinburgh Fringe in 1990 with fellow junior doctor Tony Gardner as the subversively titled double act “Struck Off and Die” (see above).

He says: “In the early days our humour was exceptionally dark — I think it was somewhat cathartic to what we were going through in training.

“Now my humour is a lot gentler as I have worked my way through the profession. Tony, on the other hand, has gone down the acting route and recently appeared in *Last Tango in Halifax*.”

Tickets for *Happy Birthday NHS?* are £16. The show starts at 8pm in the Courtyard Theatre of the Altwood Road venue. To book, call 01628 788997 or visit [www.nordenfarm.org](http://www.nordenfarm.org)

## Former head of art’s work is in the frame

A SELECTION of work by a Caversham artist is going on show at a picture framers in Church Road from tomorrow (Saturday).

The Caversham Picture Framers is exhibiting paintings by Michael Norcross — the former head of art and design at Queen Anne’s School and now a full-time painter.

A spokesman for the shop said: “Michael Norcross’s paintings and prints draw on a wide range of local subject matter and exhibit a high level of skill.

“At a glance the eye can be tricked into thinking they are photographs but on closer examination they reveal a precision which emerges from confident loose painterly qualities.

“Much of his work shows an interest in realism and colour through exploring such themes as luminosity, mood, atmosphere and shadows. Paintings include local landscapes and



**Creative:** Michael Norcross in his Caversham studio

imagery from the immediate vicinity of his Caversham studio — others are more complex with narrative elements.

“Some of his work concentrates on luminosity created by both natural and artificial light, while others are studies of found objects found either on their own or arranged in compositions.”

The exhibition runs until Friday, October 26.



**Panelists:** *New Statesman* editor Jason Cowley and *Spectator* assistant editor Isabel Hardman are also appearing at the Henley Literary Festival