POLITICS

THE BIG INTERVIEW

When Graeme met David

By Graeme Demianyk

David Cameron makes a persuasive case for taking a holiday in Cornwall, a place he knows well.

"I love the seaside, I love the landscape, I like the people," he says when the Western Morning News asks the Prime Minister what's the peninsula's enduring appeal.

"There are lots of places that mean a lot to me. I've been going to North Cornwall man and boy. I went as a child. I love surfing at Polzeath. I love walking the coastal path. I love the pubs. I like the beer."

The Prime Minister, his wife Samantha and their three children are almost certain to make their annual Cornwall "pilgrimage" later this summer.

I've been going to Cornwall man and boy DAVID CAMERON

The Camerons have visited Cornwall in each year of his premiership and often before (he used a copy of the Western Morning News to shield himself from cameramen when lounging on a Cornish beach as leader of the Opposition).

In 2010, Mrs Cameron gave birth to a girl, Florence, at Truro's Royal's Cornwall Hospital. Her middle name, Endellion, is a village in Cornwall close to where they stay. South Devon, too, has been a holiday favourite – Thurlestone is "really beautiful" while the area close to Bigbury can lay claim to "wonderful beaches", he says. "In Cornwall, I'm very active," he says. "I spend a lot of time on the beach with the children. The thing I want to catch up on is spending time with the little ones. They love it so much, and they're very happy there. There's time they don't see enough of their dad. It should be a week I see a lot of them."

We're talking in Downing Street on a sunny Thursday, hours before England's defeat to Uruguay, and wistfulness creeps in. That can happen to anyone wearing a suit in the capital when thinking about Cornwall.

He says: "I'm just never happier than when having a barbecue at Daymer Bay, at low tide, and looking across the estuary at Padstow. It's just one of the most beautiful places. When I think about it I can picture the scene."

But he makes it clear that his obvious love for the region has not blinded him to the struggles faced by one of the poorest parts of the country with a notoriously second-rate transport network.

In a wide-ranging interview, Mr Cameron says mobile and broadband connections are a "must-have" for a remote region attempting to re-tool its economy, and an issue the Government has "got to crack".

He concedes this year's winter storms have led to a re-think of priorities over flood defence spending amid concern rural areas get a raw deal.



Tourism, the Westcountry's mainstay industry, has been supported by the Government but Britain has to "advertise itself better" to compete with cheap overseas destinations boasting guaranteed sunshine.

The Prime Minister pledged the Government would "put its money where its mouth is" if "answers can be found" to improve the notorious A303 and the Dawlish line, and the region will get a "a good share" of future transport spending.

With Devon, Cornwall and Somerset a key election battleground, Mr Cameron says dealing with the UKIP insurgency means he has to "win people's trust back who have left voting Conservative" – an appreciable shift in tone from 2006 when he described followers as "fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists".

Some in the tourism industry have criticised the coalition Government for not "getting" the industry, an argument Mr Cameron dismisses. He points to a speech he gave dedicated to tourism, unlike his predecessors, in his first year as PM about how it should no longer be deemed a "second-class service".

"We have got to advertise what we have got better," he says. "The re-opening of the line at Dawlish was a great moment to shine a spotlight on the Westcountry, and encourage people to go. Also, tourism and holidays is a very competitive market.

"As a working dad with a working wife and three young children, holidays are so precious every moment has got to be precious.What I love about Cornwall is everyone has really stepped up to make it a great holiday. The pubs are good, the food is good, the guides you get for things to do. To make the most of what the Westcountry has got, everyone has to make it a really good offer. Which I think is what is happening."

Tourism is vital to the South West economy, but not the only game in town. Excitement is growing around emerging creative, technology and green energy sectors. Yet the largely rural region still struggles with poor mobile phone connections and broadband – somewhat of a stumbling block if the Westcountry is to be reborn as a Silicon Valley.

"This is a really big issue for people all over the country – the 'not-spots'," he says of mobile phone coverage. "It's not good enough to say here's the mobile coverage for the whole country. You have got to recognise a lot of people are making important calls while they are on the move. We do need to improve the coverage of the mobile phone signal."

The Government plans to provide mobile coverage to 60,000 properties in "black spots" before the end of 2015. Mr Cameron has also ordered ministers to get mobile coverage improved after getting frustrated by patchy network access in rural areas. Networks have been asked to increase coverage around A and B roads, with the Government also anxious to ensure coverage is "roaming" – where users are automatically switched to an alternative network.

Meanwhile, some £1 billion-plus is also earmarked for broadband.

"For rural communities not being connected to super-fast broadband is a bit like not being connected to the road network. It's that bad. So much work is being done online and that it really is a 'must-have'. We've got to crack this."

The Prime Minister has witnessed problems here first-hand, and at times of high political drama. Last August, Mr Cameron cut short his holiday in Cornwall to deal with the mounting Syria crisis. In 2011, the same thing happened as the Gaddafi regime crumbled in Libya.

He says poor technology "affects Prime Ministers making important calls wherever they are, but it affects everybody". But has his phone dropped out in Cornwall when on a call to President Obama?

Mr Cameron says: "As I go down a hill into Polzeath, I know exactly which bit of the road I lose my signal. So it is a problem. I know where to go to get a signal, but it can be very frustrating."

Many in the region travel on an unreliable transport network and then cast envious looks east to see billions committed to high-speed HS2 rail. There is a sense of the Westcountry missing out. It is a point the Prime Minister is anxious to address.

"Three times more is being spent on road and rail schemes other than HS2 in the next parliament. And the South West will get a good share of that. We haven't solved every problem but I totally recognise for the South West connectivity of all sorts is vital."

At the heart of concerns following the region's flooding is that "town" is considered worth protecting more than "country".

Mr Cameron, who said "money is no object" in paying for the clear-up, argues that the Government has stepped up. The Somerset Levels are being dredged after years of local clamour. The South West has received £25 million to repair flood defences and almost £40 million for road repairs and other grants.

But while "partnership" funding is attracting more non-state money to pay for new flood protection, he admits the so-called cost-benefit-ratio that favours urban areas is under review.

"We are going to look at that to make sure the schemes that are necessary go ahead."

Recent Conservative Party publicity has signalled a "brighter future". So are we entering the "sunlit uplands" that Mr Cameron promised as along ago as 2006 under a Tory government (albeit now a coalition)? He chuckles at the reference.

"I want people to know the point of this plan is not just to fix the wiring under the bonnet, it's actually to take this country to a better place," he said.

The South West will be a key battleground if the Conservatives are to win a majority in next year's general election. A bloody one too. A quarter of the Tory targets are Lib Dem MPs in the region. So why would a Lib Dem voter switch now?

"The heart of this plan is a Conservative Prime Minister and a Conservative Chancellor taking long-term difficult decisions which are paying off for the country and the Westcountry. And the best thing we can do is stick with the plan and stick with the people who have delivered it."

UKIP's vote share in the Westcountry is blamed for denying the Conservatives a handful of important seats in the South West in 2010. Nigel Farage's party are likely to be more of a threat in 2015. How does he deal with that?

"We've got to address the concerns people have. They want to see an immigration system that's under control. They want to see a proper choice for our future in Europe. They want to see a welfare system that rewards work. I think we need to explain if we get these things right then UKIP's message, which I think is quite a pessimistic one about Britain's future, isn't right."



Graeme Demianyk inside No 10 with Prime Minister David Cameron

THE PM'S MUSIC PLAYLIST



"I'm a big London Grammar fan. I think they're great."
(British trio, pictured, feted for their beat-driven electronic pop)

"I'm a bit of a fan of Poliça. That's very good on the iPad at the moment."
(US alternative rock band)



"Tom Odell I think is very good."
(Doom-laden singer-songwriter, pictured, in the early Radiohead mould)

"I'm still a big Mumford fan – I've probably over-played that."
(English folk given a pop makeover and taken global by Mumford & Sons)

MEDIA

PM welcomes new Sunday paper

The Prime Minister has welcomed the launch of the Western Morning News on Sunday because the regional media is a "vibrant part of our democracy".

David Cameron, a regular reader of the daily newspaper when on holiday in the region, said the industry played a vital role to "challenge and question the people who have been elected to run us".

He told this newspaper: "Congratulations. In a world where newspapers have faced the challenges of the internet, well done on launching a new paper. I really welcome what the regional press does.

"They help build regional pride, they help champion great causes and voluntary bodies, they celebrate the success of our regions, localities and communities, they help bind people together, and they're a vibrant part of our democracy, and challenge and question the people elected to run us. That can sometimes be a painful process, it's a very necessary one. So welcome to the world."

