SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Now during her time at Westminster, Ann Widdecombe developed a fearsome reputation. As a minister in the 1990s, she grappled with some of the toughest issues, including pensions, immigration and prisons. She was known for the strength of her Christian faith and for her other convictions against foxhunting, in favour of the death penalty, advocating zero tolerance of drugs. No-one could have predicted that when she retired from politics, she would become the darling of primetime television with her celebrated run on Strictly Come Dancing, revealing a side to her character she says showed she was just determined to have fun. Well now she’s written about all those experiences in her autobiography - Strictly Ann, it’s called - which also covers her childhood in Singapore and her heady days as a student at Oxford. And Ann Widdecombe is with me this morning. Good morning.

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
Good morning.
SOPHIE RAWORTH:
You say in your book, it was always a cherished dream to be a politician and a writer. You’d never have imagined the rest though, would you?

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
Oh no. I mean if anybody had said to me, even when I was retiring in 2010, well this is how it’s going to go Ann: you’re going to be dancing for three months on primetime television, then you’re going to be touring the country in a live dance show with Craig Revel Horwood …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
(laughs) Of all people.

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
… and you're going to be going into pantomime; oh and by the way you'll also be on at Covent Garden in the Royal Opera House, I would have said lie down and have an aspirin. But it’s all happened.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
You were driven though, really driven from a very early age, weren’t you? You knew exactly where you wanted to go.

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
Yes, that’s quite true. I formed political ambitions quite early. In those days of course there was a huge division between the parties - it was socialism, not New Labour - and I felt very driven to fight socialism. So, yes, it's quite true: from an early age, I wanted to do something about it.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
You had an extraordinary child. You moved around an awful lot. You were in Singapore for a time with your family, weren’t you? You were an on… well grew up as an only child virtually because your brother was so much older. What I didn’t get from the book is where you kind of really got your politics from.
ANN WIDDECOMBE:
I’m not sure either. Obviously politics were discussed at home, but my father was a civil servant so he could never take any public position on the matter. But I think, as I say, it came because at that time - and it’s easy to forget twenty years after the fall of the Berlin wall - but when I was coming to political maturity, the world was very sharply divided into two great conflicting political ideologies and there was a real battle for the future of the globe based on capitalism versus communism; and for decades it wasn’t clear who was going to win.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
It was a long, hard slog for you though to get to Westminster, wasn’t it, to get to Parliament? I mean you set yourself this deadline and you had to be there by the age of forty. You got there at, what, thirty-nine and a half despite …?

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
Thirty-nine and a half - yes, just, just.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
And you had an awful lot of knock backs.

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
Well you say “an awful lot of knock backs”. In those days there was no A list. You didn’t just glide into seats because you were a woman or whatever it was. You know you really had to go out there and you had to earn your spurs. And I fought a cotton and mining seat first of all, Burnley in Lancashire. And then I went and fought Dr David Owen at Devonport. He fought back very successfully. And then of course the wonderful Maidstone.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
You use some interesting words throughout the book. I mean you call yourself an “oddball”. Or you say “The Westminster oddball who was so unaccountably popular in the country.” You talk, you mention that word ‘odd’ quite a lot. Is that how you think people perceived you?
ANN WIDDECOMBE:
Oh I know that is how people perceive me, so I acknowledge it. And if people say to me, “Well are you odd?”, I say, “Good heavens, no. It’s just the rest of the world that’s gone mad.”

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
And did it annoy you? Did you feel that you were being held back by it?

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
Of course it didn’t annoy me, no. It’s just a fact of life - that you are how you are perceived in politics. There was always quite a considerable caricature in the public domain you know according to my image - I’ve never had the slightest doubt, I’m extremely hard and all the rest of it. Those things are not true, but that is the image that is portrayed and at Westminster I was seen as a bit odd.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
You were … you are …

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
A bit odd? Thank you. (laughter)

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
No, no, I wasn’t saying that. I was onto my next thought here. You are pretty let’s say rude about David Cameron in your book, aren’t you? “Big-headed and dismissive of everything that has gone before”.

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
I’m not quite as rude as those selected quotes suggest. What I do say is that he’s talented, that he’s able. That I find him big-headed …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
And more pig-headed now, you say.

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
But my worry today is much more the pig-headedness because he decides that he’s going to do something. Now supposing I decided I was going to introduce a foxhunting ban when leading the Conservative Party or Ken Clarke decided we were going to go even further into Europe while leading the Conservative Party. It would be a recipe for disaster and I don’t understand why David Cameron decided to adopt a line on gay marriage that was completely at odds with the party and the country and the majority of his MPs at a time when he’s in coalition and isn’t exactly in the strongest position just to do as he wants.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Watching from the sidelines now, do you think that the Conservatives can win the next election?

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
Yes I do. I do believe we can win the next election - if nothing else because I think …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
With David Cameron at the helm?

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
With David Cameron at the helm. Because if nothing else, I think that when people come to put their crosses on ballot papers, they will remember the outgoing note of the Labour Treasury Minister Liam Byrne …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Who is here, yes.

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
Who’s here. … who said “There is nothing left.” Now we’re going through a terrible time trying to put it right. The nation has a choice: we can go back to that; and we can go through another terrible time to try and get it right.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Does it rankle with you that you didn’t get your peerage? (Widdecome laughs) And
you say that you think basically David Cameron blocked that.

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
Well I mean as it’s entirely within his personal gift, it is his decision whether I get one or not. I covered it in the book because if I hadn’t done people would have said I was avoiding that which is uncomfortable.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
And does it rankle with you?

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
No it doesn’t rankle with me at all. It’s a fact of life. I mean I’ve gone through life accepting what is, which is why when I ceased to be an MP, before anybody else realised it, I knew I was no longer an MP and I could do things like Strictly because I was no longer obliged to behave as if I was an MP. I can always accept what is.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Do you think when you got into Strictly and you did that - and you were really embraced, weren’t you, by the British public - I mean was that the moment where you know after all those years and you say you were referred to as an oddball and slightly a bit of an outsider, that was the moment you were accepted?

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
It was certainly the moment I think that a lot of people who would not previously have done so warmed to me. But one of the greatest things about it was the impact it had on children. It’s small people now who come up to me, recognising me, not the people who watch the news obsessively.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
(watching Strictly footage/Widdecome laughs) I mean look at that! I mean how could anyone forget that?

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
Oh it was wonderful, it was just wonderful.
SOPHIE RAWORTH:
And now?

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
And he was too. (laughs)

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
What next for Ann Widdecombe? I mean you say that you’re going back to Latin, you’re going to be learning how to become a bit more fluent in Latin.

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
I would like to revive the Latin skills which I’ve undeniably just let lapse completely. But there are lots of things I’d like to do and well I’m retired, so I’ve got the time to do them.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
You certainly do. Ann Widdecombe, thank you very much. Lovely to see you.

ANN WIDDECOMBE:
Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS