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Introduction

Ella's Story

I ran for London before I actually ran for London.

It was the summer of 2011, and I had invited a journalist from the *Evening Standard*, David Cohen, to visit my constituency office in Tooting Bec, South London. A few weeks previously, the police's shooting of Mark Duggan had triggered riots in Tottenham, which soon spread to other parts of London and then the country. David was writing a series of articles about the riots and was keen to get my perspective as a London MP.

As part of the interview, we had decided to travel up to Battersea, where some of the rioting had taken place. We found ourselves sprinting a fair distance for the bus. As we sat on the top deck panting, David and I complimented one another for making it as two middle-aged dads. I discovered that David was actually a regular marathon runner. It was one of the ways he helped the *Standard* raise money for its 'Dispossessed Fund', which supported vulnerable people from across the capital.

We kept in touch and in early 2014, David contacted me to tell me the paper had been trying to persuade the then-Labour MP and Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls to

run the London Marathon for the Dispossessed Fund. But Ed had already agreed to run for Action for Stammering Children and Whizz-Kidz. He had suggested my name as an alternative because I'd taken on a new job as shadow minister for London. As David reminisced about our run for the bus back in Tooting, I realised where the conversation was going.

'Have you got an alibi?' The question I'd asked dozens of times in my former life as a lawyer was now turned on me.

I tried a few excuses: 'I am not a runner.' 'I don't have the right kit.' 'Twenty-six-point-two miles is a really long way!' But David was unconvinced. Before I knew it, my wife, Saadiya – who was still a criminal defence lawyer and so took great pleasure in asking me the alibi question – was weighing in, trying to persuade me to run. She played to my competitive streak: if Ed Balls could run a marathon, surely I could?

Things escalated when my political advisor Jack Stenner and head of office Ali Picton got wind of the idea. They were also keen. Partly, I suspected, so they could have a few hours off from my text messages while I was training. But also because they were pushing for me to run in an even longer race – to become the Labour candidate for the upcoming London mayoral election. They knew that the editor of the *Standard*, Sarah Sands, was very close to the MP who was favourite to become the Labour candidate, my colleague and friend Tessa Jowell.

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Any opportunity to go the extra mile (the pun was excruciating even then) to build my relationship with the paper was invaluable. It didn't help that Ali had run the London Marathon several times and was evangelical about it. She took a leaf out of David's rhetorical playbook. If she could run a marathon, surely I could?

Eventually, I relented. After all, I thought, I was reasonably fit. I played football with a group of friends every Sunday. I only overindulged my weakness for a Snickers bar occasionally. How hard could it be? I tried not to take offence at the speed everyone's enthusiasm about me running the Marathon turned to concern about my health once I told them I might actually do it. My friend, local GP and marathon-runner extraordinaire Tom Coffey, was given strict instructions to provide me with a full medical, and keep a close eye on my training to ensure I didn't inadvertently die.

On a cold Sunday in February, 70 days before race day, I laced up my trainers and headed out on my first run in advance of the Marathon. Having started training late, I was on a strict regime. So it was worrying to discover that I wasn't quite as fit as I had imagined. After only a mile or two, I felt terrible and was convinced I was going to have to stop to throw up – not the best look for the local MP. After about half an hour, though, I started to get into the swing of things. Several laps of Tooting Common later I felt pretty smug about having run a decent seven miles. Much further than I had expected.

The smugness didn't last long. I can't describe the pain I was in the next day. Hobbling around Parliament, I tried to hide my stiffness and my limp from other MPs whom I hadn't yet told about my new project. My parliamentary office was usually a good five minutes' walk from the House of Commons Chamber, where I was required to vote several times a day. I was on high alert for the sound of the division bells which ring across Parliament for eight minutes before the doors to the voting lobbies are closed. I wasn't always sure I'd make it in time.

Ed Balls wasn't my only competition in the Palace of Westminster. In 2014 a record number of MPs were planning to run the London Marathon – eight of us – and half of those were around the Shadow Cabinet table: Ed, Shadow Health Secretary Andy Burnham, Shadow International Development Secretary Jim Murphy (who later dropped out due to injury) and me. It was Ed's third Marathon and I knew from experience that a few weeks before the race, he would become unbearable: you would hear of nothing else. For my part, I was deliberately keeping my decision low-profile in case I decided to pull out. It would have been embarrassing if people had known.

Much to my horror, only a week after I began my training, Ed told the audience at a packed Labour fundraiser dinner that not only was he running the Marathon (again) but that I would be joining him. People clearly

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thought it was a joke as it was the biggest laugh Ed got in his speech. This did not do much for my confidence.

While I didn't admit it to Ed (he would have been insufferable), I learned a lot from his advice – and within a few weeks, training was going well. I had the right kit, good trainers, and an upbeat playlist featuring masterpieces ranging from 'Eye of the Tiger' to the *Rocky* theme. After my training sessions I'd often text Jack, Ali and my policy advisor Dr Nick Bowes, fizzing with ideas that had come to me while running. So much for the Marathon giving them a break from my messages.

Before I knew it, it was the day of the race. As I stood on the start-line with David and my fellow *Evening Standard* runners in Greenwich Park, my nerves were worse than any election night I'd experienced. Our bags were packed in a truck to be taken to the finish line, and I handed my phone over to Ali, who at this point was the only person more terrified than I was.

And then we were off.

Despite the pain, I got a lot out of running the Marathon. By the time we reached the Thames and wove our way around the *Cutty Sark*, even if I wasn't quite enjoying myself, I was starting to see why you might. Any time you feel you can't carry on, the cheers of the crowd pull you through. I had a brief ego-trip when I noticed that people were shouting my name on every mile of the race – clearly my profile-building had gone better than

I'd thought – before I realised they do that for everyone by reading the name off your T-shirt.

My knees started hurting by around mile 15, but the adrenaline kept me going. I was determined not only to finish, but not to walk any of the way. By mile 23 I had run further than I had ever run before and was really struggling. Among the voices cheering me on, one with a distinct Northern twang calling out, 'Go on, Sadiq!' sounded familiar. I didn't have the energy to look around – but I felt a tap on the shoulder and a figure started running alongside me: my friend Ben Johnson, a Tooting councillor who had come with me to get my kit just days earlier. Ben had run several Marathons before and had been encouraging me in the week building up to the big day, when I had been incredibly anxious. He ran by my side for a mile or so, encouraging me every step of the way. I felt guilty slowing him down, but his support was exactly what I needed. At around mile 24, I spotted some friends on the sidelines, and got a second wind. I told Ben to run on, which after some persuading he did. At last, thanks to Ben's help, the end was in sight.

Crossing the finish line of the London Marathon is a special moment – deeply personal, but also a shared experience with the other 40,000 people who are taking part. There is a great photo of me biting the gold-coloured medal I was given on finishing, just as I had seen my heroes do on television during the Olympics (although I looked a bit more bedraggled after 26.2 miles

than they did). As it turned out, 2014 was the year the double Olympic gold medallist Mo Farah ran his first London Marathon too. To this day, I often tell people that I raced Mo Farah. I don't volunteer that I finished two hours behind him.

As I stood panting at the race's end, I couldn't help basking in how far I'd come in the last ten weeks. I had completed the Marathon in 4 hours 19 minutes, well under my five-hour target. I had raised more than £20,000 for the Dispossessed Fund. I had even beaten Ed Balls *and* Andy Burnham.

Over the next few weeks, I found myself reflecting that the Marathon embodies everything that makes London special. The route passes through five very different boroughs: from the high streets of Woolwich and Deptford, through Canary Wharf skyscrapers, and then on to the Houses of Parliament. More than anything, though, the experience taught me that I actually liked running. I was fitter than I had been in a long time, and lighter too. In the weeks and months that followed, I carried on pounding the pavements of London. Not immediately, of course: I was in too much pain. After a few months, though, I was back out there as much as my schedule allowed.

But the Marathon wasn't just the beginning of my journey as a runner. It was also, unexpectedly, the beginning of my journey as a climate activist.

As I got more and more into jogging, I started to

encounter a new problem. After a long run, I would find myself wheezing and struggling to breathe. At first, I put it down to a lack of fitness. But the wheezing turned into coughing, and was soon being noticed by my family, friends and my team, particularly in the months leading up to the 2015 general election. They pointed out that I kept clearing my throat, at times almost constantly – to the extent that it was undermining my performance during live radio interviews.

Any boundaries I might have had about discussing health issues with my staff had gone out the window when I sought their advice on how to solve my ‘runner’s nipple’ problem during Marathon training. So we talked over what to do. At first, life felt too frantic to get it checked out – shortly after the election in May 2015 I’d launched my official campaign to be Labour’s London mayoral candidate, and was working round the clock. I assumed my poor health was a result of being run-down and working long hours. But by September, my excuses had worn thin. I gave in and went to see my GP.

Saadiya insisted on coming with me as she was worried I would tell the GP I was fine and wouldn’t fully explain the symptoms. I walked in feeling relaxed, with no expectation of anything more than a clean bill of health and of putting Saadiya’s mind at ease.

After a few quick tests, I received the diagnosis of ‘adult-onset asthma’.

I was incredulous. Growing up, I had had a few friends

who'd used an asthma inhaler and hadn't really played sports with the rest of us as a result. But I was 43 years old. I'd never had any breathing or respiratory issues. I'd just run a marathon, for goodness' sake. My GP took the time to explain that it wasn't uncommon now for people to develop the condition in adulthood, largely due to environmental factors like poor air quality.

There had been no trace of this when I'd had a full medical before the Marathon. I had almost certainly developed it from the air I was breathing while training on London's roads.

As she talked me through the diagnosis, everything started to make sense. I felt a sense of relief: at least now I knew what the problem was. In the days that followed I felt a sense of relief physically too, as the asthma inhalers and medicine started to make a difference. I could finally get a decent night's sleep, and I found using the inhaler before or during a long run or a game of football really helped. But I wasn't happy about my newfound identity as an asthma patient. Perhaps, on one level, I didn't like to recognise that I was 'vulnerable'; my asthma felt like a sign of weakness. To this day, there are times when it gets so bad I struggle to breathe. A mayoral trip to Delhi in 2017 was made almost impossible due to the terrible-quality air.

But the biggest change resulting from my diagnosis was to my political outlook. I found it hard to believe that my asthma was a direct result of breathing in the

city I loved. Had I known that my Sunday-afternoon runs along Balham High Road were causing permanent and lasting damage to my health, would I have stuck to the gym instead?

More importantly, the diagnosis made me think about many issues I had never really considered. Had the air we breathed always been this bad? How many people were affected? Was air pollution linked to climate change? And, if so, would cleaning up London's air help tackle the climate crisis too?

Until then, I had never been particularly 'green'. When I was offered a salaried partnership in a law firm, I had negotiated a car parking space for my Saab convertible on the same street as the office in Central London. After my eldest daughter, Anisah, was born, I had upgraded to a more spacious Land Rover Discovery: a huge gas-guzzling vehicle that spent almost its entire life being driven around the capital. As a Member of Parliament, I had even voted for a new third runway at Heathrow Airport. Climate change had always seemed very far away – both geographically and temporally. It was a 'tomorrow' issue rather than a 'today' issue.

Asthma made me think again. After my trip to the doctor, I began to notice the cars idling outside schools and the exhaust fumes streaming out of vehicles in grid-locked traffic – as well as the wildfires on the news that had begun to rage across Europe as a result of increased temperatures. Environmental problems weren't just

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causing problems ‘out there’; they had just given me asthma, here in London. This wasn’t just a climate crisis, it was a health crisis.

I also learned that having an asthma attack is scary. And I’m an adult. I can rationalise what’s happening to me when my chest gets tight and I find it hard to breathe. I can reach for my asthma inhaler, or ask someone to get it for me.

I can’t imagine how frightening it must be for a child. And there is no better way to demonstrate exactly why our toxic air matters than the story of Ella Roberta Adoo-Kissi-Debrah.

Like me, Ella was born in South London. Her potential shone bright from a young age. She attended a performing arts school from the age of three and loved to dance and sing. *Mamma Mia!* was her favourite film. At school she was well liked and enjoyed sports and science. She dreamed of becoming a pilot.

Just before her seventh birthday, during the October half-term holiday, Ella began to develop a cough. Her mum, Rosamund, had taken her to the Monument in Central London, as part of her school project on the Great Fire of London. Ella became breathless climbing the stairs. Determined to make it to the top, she persevered, falling fast asleep with exhaustion on the train ride home. Worried, Rosamund took her to the doctor.

The initial diagnosis from her GP was a chest infection,

and Ella was prescribed antibiotics with the expectation of a full recovery. Recovery never came, and in the weeks that followed she had a range of tests, for everything from cystic fibrosis to epilepsy, before eventually being diagnosed by a series of specialist doctors with a unique and severe form of asthma. Her condition was complex, leading to a continuous build-up of mucus in her lungs that reduced air flow. The lack of oxygen would cause Ella to faint, have seizures, and ultimately resulted in her lungs collapsing completely. A few months later, she was admitted into intensive care, for what was to be the first of several visits.

In the 28-month period following her diagnosis, Ella was admitted to hospital 27 times. Her mum resuscitated her on over 20 occasions, and she was treated in five separate hospitals and by numerous specialists.

On Valentine's Day evening in 2013, Ella sat with her mum reading Beethoven's famous love letters. The next day was the last day before half-term, and together they picked out Ella's outfit for the school disco. It was to be their last night together. A few hours later, she stopped breathing. Ella had a seizure in the ambulance, and died in hospital in the early hours of 15 February. She was nine years old.

Ella's story is every parent's worst nightmare. I can't comprehend how scared she and her family must have been throughout. But for Rosamund, her death also raised a number of questions. What had really happened

to her daughter? Why had she developed asthma, and what had made it so difficult for her to breathe? Could her condition have been prevented? The pathologist who carried out her post-mortem said Ella had suffered from ‘one of the worst cases of asthma ever recorded in the UK’, and the coroner who investigated her death concluded she had died due to a severe asthma attack followed by a seizure, ‘possibly caused by a reaction to something in the air’.¹ But what?

It was not until many months later that a neighbour mentioned to Rosamund that their neighbourhood in Lewisham often had particularly poor air quality, due to its location near the busy South Circular Road. This was the first time that Rosamund had considered that pollution might have contributed to Ella’s death. Medical staff had never suggested this during her multiple hospital visits and admissions. She hadn’t imagined that Ella’s condition could be linked to the air she was breathing every day. Why would it?

So began the journey to find out the truth about what had really happened to Ella. In January 2014, less than a year after her death – and around the same time I started training for the London Marathon – the Ella Roberta Foundation was created.

Over the next few months, the foundation worked to improve the lives of children affected by asthma in South-East London by raising awareness, calling for better treatment for lung conditions, and campaigning