

## [Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 124. Politicians vs. civil servants, evacuating Sudan, and Diane Abbott

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Welcome to The Restless Politics with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

Great to see you, Alistair, and you're looking very smart, I see. You're wearing your Burnley tie. I am wearing a Burnley tie. We're probably going to win the championship by the end of the day.

I've been saying that for the last three weeks. I'm actually in a place where I'm about to do something that I think Al Gore used to call white collar crime, which is when you've been at a senior position in government and politics, and then you go on the speaking circuit every now and then, Rory. As you know, we do that a bit, don't we?

Yeah, that's it. Well, I think there are worse ways for ex-politicians to make money, probably, with maybe less conflicts of interest than other stuff.

So, in terms of what we were going to do today, we discussed, I think, returning to the question of Dominic Raab, civil servants, ministers, bullying, management, and government, looking at Diane Abbott and the fact that she's just been thrown out of the Labour Party for her comments on anti-Semitism, racism.

Well, she's had the whip taken away. She's still a member of the Labour Party, I think.

Still a member of the Labour Party, okay. Not a member of the Parliamentary Labour Party, I guess. Not sitting as a Labour MP at the moment. And then, we're going to find ourselves talking about Sudan. So, this is 25th April. So, obviously, we're staying on top of a fast-moving situation, both what's happening in Sudan and how the British government is responding with its evacuations. And then, you wanted to touch on a very difficult issue, didn't you?

Yeah, I wanted to talk about suicide. And I think we should say that right at the top, because it can be a very difficult subject for people. You regularly talk about the charity that you're involved in, give directly. And I want to talk about something called the Baton of Hope, which is a new campaign which is launched recently by two fathers who lost their sons to suicide. And I just think it's a very, very important topic, but also one that does have politics involved in it. And we'll come on to that towards the end of the episode.

But I think kicking off with Dominic Raab, we did an emergency podcast the other day when he resigned as Deputy Prime Minister and we covered some of the issues at the heart of this. But I've been trying to get a handle on it post that. I didn't feel terribly satisfied with our discussion because I didn't think we really got to the heart of it. And also, I think it happened so quickly that we didn't really know. And I've been calling around quite a few people in the Senior Civil Service and actually some lower down the ranks and trying to get closer to these events. And I have to say, I'm sensing real anger at the way this has been handled, a lot of anger at the lack of support for victims, anger at the way that Raab was given the report in advance and therefore allowed to frame a new narrative, the victims of his intimidation, bullying, etc. One of them apparently finding out the contents via Raab's article in the Daily Telegraph. And also, I think now amongst people, nothing to do with this, necessarily with this argument, anger that the civil service is becoming a new flank in the so-called culture wars. And I mentioned on the, when we discussed this the other day on the day he resigned, I mentioned that I thought there was something very bad about him being given this report in advance and being given this time to

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frame his own response. And I think that then this sort of publicity blitz where he, which was clearly supported by number 10, interviewed the BBC, article in the Telegraph, article in the Mail on Sunday, third parties out saying that this is all about snowflake culture, etc, etc, etc.

And the welfare of the complainants. And I didn't realize there were so many that we're talking quite a lot of people here who were interviewed, who brought forward complaints. And that says, you know, when you think of the power structures in government, the gap in power between a Secretary

of State and a relatively junior officials, and we're talking about, I thought we were talking about so-humphries in these, these complaints. And in some cases we are, aren't we, because we're talking about the ambassador. In some cases, we're talking about an ambassador, yeah. But we are talking actually about relatively junior, young civil servants. It's quite a big thing for them to put their name to a formal complaint against the Secretary of State who might survive that complaint. And what happened, I think that what this is a common theme for this government, I think,

that what really matters to them is who controls the narrative. It's about the media, it's about the narrative. Can I just come in on that a little bit and be a bit cheeky there? All governments care deeply about who controls the narrative. You care deeply about controlling the narrative. So that's not something that this government is unique in feeling that it needs to control the narrative. No, but all governments have to control the narrative. Yeah, but I'm talking, listen, we were controlling the narrative in relation to, we had a big program of modernization and we were trying to change the country. I'm talking about the controlling of the narrative here in what is essentially an employment issue. This is, I think, very, very different to the big picture. Yours, as we've discussed in the podcast, were very careful to control the narrative if there were scandals that affected your ministers, resignations, anything around that.

You've told us about how that happened with the Welsh secretary. We've talked about how that happened with the Formula One donor, Bernie Ecclestone. We've talked about Peter Mandelson. I mean, in every case, your job as the communications director was to get to the bottom of it and put out the narrative as quickly as possible to stop the opposition defining the narrative in the way they wanted to. And you'd expect a comms director to do that. Yeah, but do you think of some of the other things that we were involved in? Like, for example, you mentioned there, Peter Mandelson, for example, with one of the inquiries into him.

I can remember there being an absolute sort of process by which anybody who was connected to those inquiries, possibly was going to have to respond to those inquiries, had to be entitled to be across the content before it was out into the public domain. This did not happen in this case. I think what happened is that soon I knew he read the report. I think he probably knew Rob's going to have to go. He didn't want to sack him. He wanted to help him, though, to allow to frame his own response. But that does mean that the people who had complained were completely left in the dark. They were unable to respond. They didn't know what this thing was going to say. And I think

that is just straightforwardly wrong. And I actually will push back on you. I do not believe we would have done that. And I also think that now what's happened is that this new narrative has developed. And let's be honest, if Rob was, say, you mentioned some of those ministers, whatever anybody ever said about Peter Mandelson, nobody ever said he wasn't a competent

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minister.

Nobody ever said that David Blunkett didn't get stuff done. Nobody ever said that. But you're talking here about a guy, I can't think of a single good thing that he's done in any of his jobs. Brexit, he was a disaster. Justice, the criminal justice system is a mess. Foreign office, we're going to be talking about Sudan and the evacuation there. He has got an absolute massive blot from his time there for his utter dereliction of duty in relation to the withdrawal from Afghanistan. But he had nonetheless, despite being seen as pretty incompetent, has been allowed to frame this narrative that if only ministers weren't being held back by these snowflake activists, I've never met a politically activist civil servant in my life. I think this is a new narrative. And I think it's a dangerous narrative. Yeah. So I think where we got to in our emergency pod was a good place, which is to say that it's absolutely right that ministers should hold civil servants to high standards. Yeah, agree. It's absolutely true that ministers can experience obstruction in their departments, but that that doesn't require behaving in this way.

I came across a lovely letter which Winston Churchill's wife sent him.

I saw you put that on social media and I read it, Rory, and I thought, why is he put on social media rather than revealed it for the first time on the podcast? But anyway, well, let me let me just read a little bit of it because I think it's it's a lovely sense of her, I think, making better than you or I can the point that just because you are in a serious position, you don't need to behave like this. And in fact, the sense that all of us can find ourselves getting dragged into dynamics, which are completely unnecessary and very harmful to people around us. So she says she's writing to Winston Churchill during the war. It's his wife Clemi. Darling, I hope you will forgive me if I tell you something I feel you ought to know. One of the men in your entourage, a devoted friend, has been to me and told me there is a danger of you being generally disliked by your colleagues and subordinates because of your rough, sarcastic and overbearing manner. If an idea is suggested, say at a conference, you're supposed to be so contemptuous that presently no ideas good or bad will be forthcoming. I was astonished and upset because in all these years, I've been accustomed to all those who've worked with and under you loving you. I said this and was told no doubt it is the strain. My darling Winston, I must confess that I've noticed deterioration in your manner. And you're not as kind as you used to be. It's for you to give the orders. But with this terrific power, you must combine abannity, kindness and if possible, Olympian calm. I cannot bear that those who serve the country and yourself should not love you as well as admire and respect you. Besides, you won't get the best results by harassability and rudeness. Please forgive your loving, devoted and watchful Clemi. Well, that says to me that that is a proper marriage where she feels able to say that and she feels justified in saying that. And I suspect he may have listened. I'll tell you a story about another prime minister, Mr. Tony Blair. I can remember on a trip to Washington, we were flying to Washington where Tony Blair was going to be seeing George Bush and making a quite important speech in the buildup to Iraq. And the only person on that flight, apart from me and Jonathan Powell and David Manning, who had seen every draft of the speech that he was about to make was my PA, Alison Blackshaw, because she was the one who, as it were, she typed up all the changes that we made in our mad scribbles on various drafts. And I was at the back of the plane briefing the media about this visit and what we're going to do and what he's going to say and etc. And it was a very, very, very critical moment. And Tony was sort of complaining that, you know, where's the speech?

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And Alison said, well, Alistair hasn't checked that I put the changes tonight. He said, never mind that, give me the speech. And he read the speech with Alison standing there. And she was shaking when she told me this story after, she said to him, look, I know I'm only Alistair's secretary and stuff, but I think this speech is slightly lost the plot. He said, what do you mean? He said, well, I don't understand anymore what you're trying to say. And I've read every draft. And I think the one, I think the original draft that you wrote at checkers a few weeks ago was clearer. So Tony said, well, have you still got it? And of course, she kept every draft. And she came back with his handwritten 15 page sort of, you know, top of head thoughts that he'd started off with. And he read it and he said, yeah, you're absolutely right. Put that back in at the top and take out the first 10 pages. And my point to that is that she never ever did that before. And she never did it since she did that one time where she, but she felt empowered to say that even though she was, as she put it, just a secretary. And that is because she knew, I think this is the culture that we did have. And this is certainly not a culture that I'm hearing from anything about Dominic Raab. We had a culture where people felt they were able to express themselves. And they didn't abuse it, they didn't overdo it. And if they were deemed to be wrong, it wouldn't be held against them. And that's the culture I think you've got to get. And what I hear about Raab, I mean, one of the phrases I kept hearing talking to people in the last few days was coercive control. Somebody I spoke to said, I'd made the point on our discussion that every time he looked like he wanted to headbutt somebody as he got out of a car. Somebody said, he was like that all the time in meetings. You felt scared to speak because he felt this physicality coming towards you. Yeah. So I think the physicality point is a really interesting one. And it is something that I've observed. So your point I think about Blair is central, which is that if you are overdominating, as Clemlin said in that letter to Winston Churchill, presently no ideas good or bad will be forthcoming. You just intimidate everybody that they just don't feel they can speak anymore. And oddly, it's true that one of the things that we're dealing with here is that actually in the end, the investigation didn't find that he'd said very much. I mean, unlike Gordon Brown, he hadn't stroamed things of people or any of that kind stuff. But what he seems to have done is emanated in all these meetings, a very, very intimidating persona where people found it very uncomfortable being in his presence, very uncomfortable raising these. Just one thing that I think maybe we haven't talked about enough is to talk about it from my perspective as a minister. I think we underestimate how insecure all ministers are. Remember that most ministers are professional politicians. They've spent most of their training not managing things. They've spent their training sticking leaflets through doors, working their way up inside the party system. And they're taking over these departments, which they know close to zero about. So if you take over the NHS, you're suddenly taking over a department which has got 1,250 hospitals, 564 million patient contacts a year, one and a half million patient contacts a day. That's why a central skill has to be to understand who your key people are and motivate them properly. 100%. But what I notice is that 90% of ministers do not respond well to this. It's very, very few ministers who actually are good at their jobs. I think Dave Millerman was good at his job when I saw him as Foreign Secretary. I thought Michael Gove was actually very, very effective. People might disagree with him, but he was very effective about driving change through his

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department, whether you liked what he was doing or not. But they're absolutely in the minority. Most ministers respond either by basically doing nothing. They just preside in a relatively polite way over their department, but don't actually bring any change. And often civil servants quite like that. I often find when I was in parliament that the ministers that civil servants were praising to me, oh, isn't he lovely? Were ministers who I really thought, yeah, he's lovely in the sense he's just reading the speeches you've written for him and he's doing absolutely nothing. He's a sort of dignified figurehead who's presiding. And then the other extreme is either they do nothing or they become very insecure. And actually, I feel they can often become most insecure in departments which they know something about. I felt I was most insecure when I was a minister in the foreign office in Difford because I knew something. I'd been a civil servant in those departments. I knew about them. And I was more confident oddly, sort of paradoxically,

completely contradictory, dealing with prisons, which I knew much less about.

Part of the issue with Dominic Raab is he was a lawyer in the foreign office. And in both these jobs, he'd been a British diplomat, served in the foreign office and was running the foreign office. He'd been a lawyer, worked with the Ministry of Justice as a government lawyer, and was now running the Ministry of Justice. And there the real insecurities and tensions come out because he will have felt that he knew things. He will have been very, very paranoid about people pulling the wool over his eyes. He will have had very clear senses of what he remembered 20 years ago about being bad that he wanted to change. And then I think the real skill is having the calm the manner, the objectivity, the politeness to work out how your insecurities, your lack of knowledge, the inevitable tensions with your civil servants don't spill over in a bad way.

You see, I do think though, let's just accept the premise of your question,

the premise of your observation that there's a sort of basic insecurity. I mean, there's some sort of insecurity in every human being on earth. But I think to go into politics, to think that you can be a cabinet minister. And once you're a cabinet minister, I don't care who you are, you have a part of your brain that thinks, you know what, I think I could be Prime Minister as well, or I could be Chancellor. And the truth is that most couldn't, but they all think that maybe they could. So there's a combination of not arrogance, but a self confidence that you need to be able to put yourself in the public arena. And as you say, insecurity. And it's very interesting that you use the word there paranoia. One of the interviews you did last week in Belfast, which I thoroughly enjoyed, which we're putting out in a few weeks with Leo Varadkar, the Irish Taoiseach. And you asked him at the end about, you know, what qualities you would, you think qualities of a bad leader, which I thought was a very, normally we ask people what they think, you know, it's a good leader, you said what makes a bad leader. And I don't even remember what he said, he said bitterness, jealousy and paranoia. And I thought that was a brilliant answer, because bitterness is where you feel that you're not getting recognized, your colleagues are being preferred over you, your staff don't appreciate you. These things may be true, but they're all fixable, provided you're good at empathy and good at dealing with other human beings. And what you

hear from about Raab again and again and again, is that there was zero empathy for anybody other than people, if you like, who were above him, which once you get to be Deputy Prime Minister, there's only one person. And then I think the thing about about jealousy, I'm afraid jealousy

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is absolutely rife in politics. And it's a bad, bad, bad thing. Leo Radaker is absolutely right about that. And paranoia is, is dangerous. I mean, I've had, on one occasion in my life, I've had clinical paranoia, I don't know how really, really bad that is, where, where I literally thought that everybody around me was trying to destroy me. That's very, very different to sort of political paranoia. I got, I got hospitalized for that, for that one, Rory. But I actually, if I tell you this, I could laugh about it now, but I was absolutely convinced that Desmond Lynam, who was doing the teleprinter of the Saturday football scores, I was convinced that he was trying to, to give me a code of anagrams through all the scores. And I was sitting there with a classic sort of beautiful buy stuff. I was doing all these anagrams of Stenhouse Muir 3, Albion Rovers 2. Anyway, that's off the, off the base. That's probably. And you were sort of writing down a bit of paper and trying to work out what the message was. Well, the message was, and if I cracked the message, I'd be allowed out of the hospital. Yeah. But I'm not suggesting that's what Dominic Raab had. But, but I do think he probably did feel that these civil servants were out to get him. My sense is that they wouldn't have, they weren't out to get him, but they didn't know how to deal with them. And somebody put a thing on, here you are, I'm going to say something moderately positive about a conservative minister of the past, Brian Mawini, who actually was a pretty tough opponent to us and did some pretty harsh things when he was Tory party chairman. But somebody put a thing on social media in response to what we were talking about the other day. And he said, when Brian Mawini was, was a minister, he said, a lot of his civil servants were literally scared to speak because of the situation outside. You know, they didn't necessarily want to be identified as having an opinion. And he actually, he actually created, literally created a safe space where he said, this is a place where whatever we say to each other, we say it to each other, and that's it. And that's an act of leadership. And I think that's the sort of thing that Raab clearly wasn't capable of. Yeah, one of the things I have been reflecting on is, obviously, you're touching on the issue of trust. And it's vital. Many of the issues that I had, and I was, I think, a minister in six different portfolios is the question of when civil servants are happy coming forward and just being straightforward. And so many of the issues I dealt with, I would get stuck in a complete fight about something. You know, we talked, I think, in the emergency podcast about my fighting civil servants about Skyping Yemen or fighting ambassadors about money for police. If they had come to me the next day and said, minister, I'm really sorry, we screwed up. That junior official was a bit intimidated. And I would have been absolutely fine. And the whole thing could have been put to bed. But clearly, at some level, there are reasons why they don't always feel comfortable coming forward and saying, I'm sorry, I screwed up, or I'm sorry, the ambassador's case, I'm sorry, I promised the UN that we'd give them the money before we put the submission to you. Would you let me off this time? But it's trying to encourage that sort of human normal relations. And the most confident civil servants were brilliant at it. I remember deputy director at DFID coming to me and saying, minister, I know that you think this whole project in Zimbabwe is rubbish. And maybe we didn't write it very well. But I promise you, I've been working this field for 20 years. It's one of the best projects I've seen. Would you mind just signing it off? And I immediately relaxed. And I was like, yeah, of course, no problem. Go for it. But people having the confidence to do that is also part of the secret.

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No, that is absolutely right. And again, to another of our Belfast interviews along with Hillary Clinton, which was which is on leading at the moment, her description of how Obama, when they were doing the raid on bin Laden, asking people to say what they thought, but not say what they thought he wanted to hear. And that again, is about leadership. And that's something else that I would say for Tony Blair's credit, Tony Blair always wanted people to say what he thought. We knew that he would make the decisions in the end. But he wanted us to fire counter opinions at him all the time. And we would do that sometimes in an angry way. And sometimes we might go over the top with him. He didn't mind because it was just part of a process of him then going to a decision where what the sense I get with Rob is that people literally were scared to say what they thought or to tell him facts that he might not like the facts. And then if you add on to this, and again, this comes back to you mentioned Churchill, I've talked about Tony, you know, I've not read the Fiona was telling me about these extracts of the Anthony Seldon book on Boris Johnson, which sounds like things were even more dysfunctional than even you and I thought. Now, if that's happening at the top, where people are constantly using the C word against each other, constantly blaming where there are rows going on between his main advisor Cummings and his wife, Carrie Simmons, and he's sort of telling everybody else. Oh, God, I can't cope with these people. Then don't be surprised if people actually feel, you know what, just keep your head down. Don't do difficult things. Don't give difficult advice. Don't actually do your job. That's when it becomes completely dysfunctional.

Very good. Well, I mean, I think that's that's been good. And we've done quite a lot of time. But I think it's worth because we do care about politics and government. I think this goes to the heart something very important. Now, just to touch quickly before the break on Diane Abbott, so to remind people of what happened there. So very quickly, Diane Abbott, very senior Labour MP who was shadow Home Secretary under Jeremy Corbyn, has been suspended as Labour MP. And this is because she wrote a letter about racism to the Observer newspaper. So she said, many types of people with points of difference, but they're not subject to racism all their lives. So she wrote, Irish Jewish traveler people undoubtedly experience prejudice, which she said is similar to racism. But they're not all their lives subject to racism. And I think the thing that really got her in trouble is when she said that redheads, for example, can experience this prejudice. And I think that's been something that's really provoked many, many groups who feel that their experience of prejudice and discrimination is completely trivialized by comparing them to redheads. And so Kirstal has removed the whip. And she's apologized for errors and what she said was an initial draft. And there's been some very, very interesting writing about this. I think one thing to notice is that the language she used in that email up to the red habit was very, very technical. It sounds like a researcher who's done a sociology degree using phrases like, you know, it's similar to often uses interchangeable, but not the same thing. And I guess what she was trying to say is that she sees racism in terms of the oppression of one race by another. And she would think in terms of wealth gap, employment, housing, incarceration, drug and immigration arrests, infant mortality, a whole sense that a whole institutional power is getting behind that. And that that was her experience as a black woman. And it brings us, of course, to the response that we got from David Bedeal on the basis of his book, Jews Don't Count, which I thoroughly enjoyed as

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an interview. A lot of people did. And I think it was he talked about the hierarchy of racism. And I think that's what we're seeing here. He made the point about Jeremy Corbyn. He didn't believe that Jeremy Corbyn was anti-Semitic. He didn't believe that Jeremy Corbyn, sort of, you know, wanted to damage Jewish people. But he felt that because of his political ideology, and because there are these tropes about Jews relating to wealth relating to power, that it's not seen in the same way as racism against black people, against Pakistanis, against Indians. And I think that phrase, the hierarchy of racism, is perhaps what led to Diane Abbott writing this letter. I mean, I can't pretend to be close to Diane Abbott. I've obviously known her for a very long time. She's on a very different sort of political agenda inside the Labour Party to mine. I don't know. I see there was a theory doing the rounds, as you've alluded to this, that it was a sort of, you know, a member of staff drafting it. But if you'll send me a letter to a newspaper, you assume that you would check that before it went. And I do think as well, despite, obviously, it was a terrible, terrible thing to say. I think Keir Starmer was right to act very, very quickly and very, very decisively. But at the same time, I've been tracking some of the stuff now that is being said about Diane Abbott online. And, you know, I've got a very, very thick skin. I get a lot of abuse on social media. It really doesn't bother me. But Diane Abbott gets it on a scale that no other person in public life does. This has been sort of proven by data analytics that Diane Abbott is the most abused member of Parliament. And I've actually noticed that even within kind of WhatsApp groups and so forth in recent days, every time Diane Abbott is in the news, there's a sort of stack of stuff gets sent out by people who want to know better. So I just wonder whether that does have an effect on your mind that does actually make you kind of lose your judgment a bit. And she's certainly been, you know, she was the first black woman elected to Parliament. She's the longest standing black member of Parliament. She has experienced very, very significant racism in her life. It matters deeply to her. I thought probably the soundest judgment on this was Daniel Finkelstein, and we'll put the little video up in our newsletter. But he said, in thinking about racism and the oppression of vulnerable minorities, we should be generous and appreciate that many, many people have experienced horrifying things. And he mentioned that his mother had been in Belsen, his father had been in Siberia, and people would say, which was worth. And she would say, it's not a competition. And I think what he was trying to say there is that the experience of racism is horrifying, the experience of antisemitism is horrifying, and vulnerable minorities should not be getting into a competition about which is worse. It doesn't help anybody. I mean, I sort of think that Diane Abbott, she's obviously in a very different sort of political position to mine within the Labour Party, sort of suggests to me that there was perhaps a lack of judgment here as much as anything else. But I wonder, as an election looms, another election looms, whether, you know, whether she might think actually, you know what I've done all I've can do, given all the abuse that I get, I think I might well go and try and have a bit of a quieter life. Oddly, I'd be sorry to see her go. I think she is a symbol of something really important. And I think she's played a very important role, well, both as a politician and as a Labour Party activist, but also somebody standing up for very difficult issues in the British Parliament. And I think she'd be a real loss. Anyway, I think maybe time for our break. A quick break, yeah.

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Welcome back to the Restless Policy with me, Alistair Campbell.

And me, Rory Stewart. And just as a heads up, folks, we're going to be talking about suicide at the end of this half. So if that's something that you're really don't want to hear, it's the final section that will come after our discussion of Sudan. So if you don't want to hear us talking about suicide, and I would completely understand if you didn't, I hope you do, but I would understand

if you didn't, then that is that is when to switch us off.

And one point, you will have heard us if you're an avid listener podcast, Alistair and me talking a lot about leading. Leading is our interview podcast feed, where we sit down and speak to leaders from both inside and outside politics every Monday. And Alistair's particularly irritated this week, because it seems as though our amazing interview with Hillary Clinton was second to our episode on Dominic Raab. No, it's now overtaken. It's overtaken. It's now overtaken. It's gone. It's got there. It's fine. It's fine. Hillary has knocked Raab off his perch.

But the key thing is for Hillary and others and some amazing interviews that we're doing with other people, including David Miliband, Bernie Sanders, and many, many more, you have to go to a separate

stream. So go to your podcast app and search Leading, L-E-A-D-I-N-G. Right then, Alistair.

Let's talk about Sudan. Do you know one thing I find... I know that it's really important that the Brits on the ground are helped, supported, et cetera. But I really don't like the way that when these big international dramas happen, that becomes virtually the sole focus there.

And we almost forget about what the thing is actually about. And of course, if you're there now and you're a Brit on the ground and you're surrounded by all this fighting, you're probably thinking, where the hell is the government? Why did they only get the diplomats out in the way that they did? But there's a part of it that's thinking, yeah, but what about the people who have got no chance of leaving whatsoever, the people of Sudan, who have had a horrific recent modern history? You know, I wonder if we shouldn't talk a little bit about what came before all this,

because I think this guy, in fact, I know he was, he was in power the whole time through New Labour, Omar al-Bashir. Yeah, came in military coup in 1989. So he's really was in before John Major. So he's like, exactly. So there's three decades, a pretty brutal dictator. As you say, rose to power in a military coup. There have been plenty of those. There have been very, very, very few years of stability and democracy since Sudan became independent. You've had the civil war that led to the the secession of South Sudan as a separate country. You had Darfur, for which Omar al-Bashir, I think, became the first serving president to be indicted for war crimes.

Which was fascinating quickly on that one, just before you keep going on on that.

One of the fascinating things there is that the indictment was opposed by the Arab League, by the African Union, by the non-aligned League, and also, interestingly, by the United States. Presumably because they're worried that their in-presidents are going to get indicted.

Or, you know, I think you're right to point out that we saw the same recently with Vladimir Putin, that these judgments are not as it were globally accepted. But the point is that this guy had a very, very, very bad track record. And of course, the two guys that we're talking about now, they came to power in part through the toppling of him, through the coup that was against him. And everything that preceded that, you're exactly right. So, Hamed Ti, who's the leader of the rapid force, was in a sense seen as sort of almost the chosen son

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that Omar al-Bashir never had. He was a great, great favorite of the previous president. Came from nothing, came from the very, very far west of the country, from a tribal group that was semi-nomadic and migrated across the Chad-Sudanese borders. Left school with no education, was a market trader, rose up through the ranks the Janjuid militia, which was this group of often mounds hid on horses or camels, predominantly Arab tribes that were used by Omar al-Bashir in this counterinsurgency campaign in Darfur, in which maybe 400,000 people were killed, many, many millions displaced. And he essentially is a political entrepreneur who uses all these opportunities to make money and gain power. So, he turned against Omar al-Bashir at one point and then was brought off with money and gold mines and made a general. I mean, he's not a general in any normal sense. It's just kind of honorary title that he's given. No. Talking of money Roy, Omar al-Bashir was reckoned to have, and I don't know, listen, who knows how these things work, but he was reckoned to have \$9 billion in banks in London. That's pretty, pretty a lot of money, isn't it? In one of the poorest countries of the world. Yeah, and a state with a lot of oil revenue. The other person, I don't know whether you came across him that I knew a little bit, was a man called Hassan al-Turabi, who was the power behind the throne with Omar al-Bashir, who I remember seeing, I guess, sort of 2010, 2012, when he'd would turn up to international conferences, beautifully dressed in white with a white turban, having made a transition from being one of the sort of leading Islamists who'd supported killing people for apostasy towards strangely becoming almost a sort of liberal voice in his later age. And one of the things that was going on in Sudan, and one of the reasons why people like Osama bin Laden were attracted to the state is this weird combination of authoritarian military rule and Islamist government produced a very, very strange breeding ground for horror of different kinds. I read an analysis by Kolod Kaya, K-H-A-I-R, who runs something in the Confluence Advisory Think Tank, and she was making the point that actually the international community has a lot of responsibility in what's happening, that he felt there was a, we've talked a lot about how you want to think the best of people that you're trying to maneuver into positions that you think will improve the situation. She thinks that the post-Albashir political process is what has, to some extent, created this because we overestimated the genuine commitment of these military figures to want to bring about civilian rule. And what we're seeing now, you're basically seeing two warlords just, you know, at it. And it's heartbreaking because there was a moment of real optimism, moment of a civilian uprising, Omar al-Bashir went, but a lot of responsibility needs to rest with the US and the UK. We're actually formally part of this quad mechanism, US, UK, UAE, Saudi, that were meant to be leading the peace process in Sudan. And the United Kingdom has largely withdrawn from its responsibilities in Africa, very, very sadly. I mean, to put a number on it, when I was the Africa Minister, I had a budget, it's not very long ago, 2016, had a budget of over four billion a year just in bilateral assistance to Africa. That would now be reduced the bilateral level to about a billion because we're spending three and a half billion just on looking after Ukrainian refugees in Britain at the moment, of that money. And there is a real sense that Britain has lost the confidence to get involved, but there's also a sense that the US was very, very slow. They didn't lift sanctions. They didn't really get behind the civilian government and give it a chance.

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They land too easily into feeling that these military forces, and this is often a problem we make up, sort of forces of stability that these strong men are going to bring stability. And although the US should be given credit for stepping in now and helping to negotiate this ceasefire, which is allowing British citizens to be evacuated, it's still true, I think, that one would have expected 20 years ago, the UK and the US to have played a much more major role into trying to prevent conflict and bring peace.

We talked in the leading interview with Hillary Clinton, for me, one of the most compelling parts is when she talked about the raid on bin Laden, where the decision gets made and then you can watch it in real time. And I wonder whether there was something similar within the British system in relation to the evacuation of diplomats. Now, our government is getting a lot of criticism for focusing on the diplomats, rather than on the so-called ordinary people, normal members of the public who are there. Andrew Mitchell, the Minister, has explained that they were at particular risk, partly because they were targets, but also because of physically, geographically, where they were. And that side of the operation, you know, I think you and I, even though you think I'm a little bit too fond of the military, I think you and I both recognize that our special forces are genuinely amongst the best in the world. They do seem to have pulled off a pretty extraordinary thing. And yet, since then, we're seeing other countries that have been able, I was following the German news yesterday and there were, you know, 100, there were just in between lots and lots of people who were being evacuated by the German military. I mean, I've been involved in this a lot. I was a young diplomat in Indonesia in 98 when we had to evacuate British citizens out of Indonesia because the Suharto government was collapsing. And we were under huge criticism. And as you can imagine, all the British tabloid newspapers were at the airports interviewing enraged British citizens saying these useless diplomats are doing nothing. They're not getting us out. You mentioned the Afghan evacuations. It's also true that Hillary Clinton's career as Secretary of State was basically derailed by what happened in Benghazi, which was the successful attack and killing of the US ambassador and the wiping out of the US embassy in Benghazi. And these decisions, it takes me right back to my time in Iraq because I had to decide I was in my compound. In Southern Iraq, we were being attacked by men with rocket propelled grenades and mortars. We were under fire for two days. Internet had been taken out. Buildings were being destroyed. And I had to decide whether to try to hunker down and stay in this building and defend it. And all I really had were few Italian soldiers and my bodyguard team on the roof with heavy machine guns or whether to evacuate the civilians that were in the building. And I made the decision to evacuate. So I put them in armored vehicles, some very brave Italian soldiers took those vehicles. And in a lull in the fighting, we opened the gates and drove them out racing towards the airfield. And I remember standing with my bodyguard team on the roof watching these people go and suddenly all hell breaking loose because the insurgents attacked these vehicles. So there are bullets and rocket propelled grenades firing off the sides of these vehicles. They disappeared around the corner. And for an hour, I was absolutely convinced that I had made the worst possible decision, that it would have been much better to have kept them in the building and hope that we could stop ourselves being overrun and just keep fighting. And just to jump in the room, you say was your decision. Did you refer upwards on it? No, I had no, I'm fully my decision. I had no internet

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connection. I had no way of referring upwards. So I made the decision entirely myself. So who was the most senior person there who was actually a security expert? Probably the head of my bodyguard team. Wow. And would he have been special forces? Some of them were special forces. One of them was a wonderful man called Mark Mitchell, a New Zealand police officer who went on to be a New Zealand member of parliament. He was very, very brave, very, very calm. But in the end, I was in command. I mean, it's one of the few situations where I had to make the decision fully. And what happened afterwards is that in the end, I managed to, with a satellite phone, persuade US thing called an AC-130 Spectre gunship to come in on the third night and kill the insurgents around the building. So we were not overrun. We thought at the time they'd come over the fence and kill us in the place. How many were there? In the end, once we'd evacuated, I suppose there were, we evacuated probably 30 civilians and we maybe 12 or 15 of us left. How many insurgents were around the building? Maybe a couple of hundred. So, and I thought thinking back on it that I probably made the wrong call that I was reflecting on it recently and thinking that I was one of the problems in a crisis is you think in cliches. And I had become obsessed with this idea of getting, as it were, getting the women and children out. That I was sort of evacuating a ship and I was the captain staying on the ship. And I was so keen to do this, I underestimated the fact that it might have been safer to actually leave these people in the building. As it was, they made it safely to the abyss, but I was lucky that they did. Very, very lucky that the rocker pro grenades didn't penetrate their vehicles, take out the tires, in which case they would have all been killed or kidnapped. That's what's so hard about the decision, though, isn't it? Because whichever way it went, had one of those missiles being chucked their way, killed some of them, that the outcome is seen in a totally different light, you've made the wrong decision. Now, actually, you haven't necessarily made, there is no right or wrong decision, there's just a decision you have to make. Yeah, you have to make a decision. And I think, sorry, I think, and I'm sorry, that was a long story, but I imagine that the foreign office and the military were having some of the same discussions about these evacuations. Is it safer to leave the civilians in place or do you try to drive them through the middle of a civil war? So there are checkpoints all the way through Khartoum. There are heavy artillery flying around. There's chaos at the airport. It's a very small airport. It's very difficult getting the planes in and out. So they may have made the call that actually people are safer for the time being staying in the houses. And they may be vindicated because what they've done is they've waited until a ceasefire and now they're beginning to move them out. What did you think about that? You made the analogy with the captain of the ship and famously the captain of the ship stays to the end. And this doesn't just seem to have been a British thing. There does seem to have been a kind of, you know, ambassadors and senior diplomats and families first in this instance. And that of course has led to the several thousand Brits and tens of thousands of other non-sudenities nationals inside Khartoum and the surrounding region, has made them think that essentially they have been left behind because the top brasses it were had been taken out. Yeah, it's very difficult because the, I was lucky because I had no communications and there was nobody to tell me what to do. I could make the call of staying. I suspect that if there had been people trying to manage me from London, they would have been putting huge

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pressure

on me to get out. And this is partly because of that Hillary Clinton incident and the killing of the ambassador in Benghazi, that the foreign office is obsessed with what it calls duty of care towards its diplomats and civil servants. It can't bear the idea of taking risk with them.

And I think one of the problems is that even if the individual British diplomats wants to stay, they will be under huge pressure from the center not to do it. But equally, I understand the public's point of view because, you know, I would take the view that our diplomats have to take risk, should take risk, and that it's reasonable to expect people to say to be fair to Laurie Bristow, who was our ambassador in Kabul, he absolutely was clear to be the last person to go. The US ambassador famously in Saigon, when the helicopters were lifting off the roof, I think was the last person out of the helicopter. And I think that's what should happen. But I think we're in a culture where these departments, it's true, even if the intelligence services and special forces now are run with a loss of anxiety about lawyers and liability.

It was when James Cleverly, the foreign secretary, of course, he was out in the Pacific, wasn't he? He was in Samoa or something like that. And he came back. That was obviously when they realized things were getting very, very, very, very serious. And I suppose the point you're making about communications, one of the things that makes it harder now, although it's easier that they've got better communications, in a sense for the center, it makes it harder in a way in that you're expected then to be able to make those decisions as though you were there.

And of course, that is not an easy thing to do. And one of the things I slightly worry about with all the diplomats and others leaving is that there is now going to be a real difficulty in assessing genuine local knowledge as to what is actually happening. And that makes the decision making from London, Berlin, Paris, wherever it might be, even harder.

I think it's tough. And I think it's worth recognizing. We were going to go on, sorry to go from one depressing subject to another, but we were going to go on to talk about suicide and some of the work that you've been doing with the new charity.

And can you maybe begin, Alastair, with giving us a sense of your personal connection to the subject, how you began to focus on the subject of suicide, how it touched you as an individual, your family, and then maybe onto the charity? There is historically suicide in my family going back. And then around about the turn of the millennium, a cousin of mine, Lachlan Campbell, from Tyree, in the Hebrides, he took his own life, he hung himself. And it was just one of those moments that you kind of, I think anybody who's touched by suicide does this, they think, you know, why didn't we see it coming? What could we have done? What more could we have done to help?

Et cetera, et cetera. And I think that's a very, very common thing. And I think one of the most important things that's being, the tensions being drawn to in relation to the suicide issue, three out of four people who take their own life have had no previous contact with mental health services or psychological support services, three out of four. Now, if you think of, if you think of other major killers like cancer, nobody thinks that if you've had cancer, you're unlikely ever to have seen a doctor. And what I think that says is the reason why I focus on suicide as a, and I hate to use the word a campaign issue, but I think it is a campaign issue because I still think, I think it's the last great taboo. I don't think we talk about it. And one of the reasons we don't talk about it is because we don't want to talk about it, we don't

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want to confront it. But the fact is that most people who kill themselves, and there are 700,000 people a year in the world, that's one every 40 seconds, an average of about 115 per week in the UK, three quarters of those are men. And although the rates are not rising in a way that, frankly, some of us fear they might do through COVID, they're actually pretty stable. But the one area, it's interesting again to talk about Northern Ireland, the one area where there's a real kind of, there has been a rise is Northern Ireland. And is that, I wonder, does that go back to the trauma of the troubles? Or I don't know, Mary Macalise, who was one of our interviewees

for leading, she said that there'd be more people have lost their life through suicide than actually lost their life since the troubles. So suicide since the troubles has been a bigger killer. So if that were any other issue, if that was asthma, if that was diabetes, if that was, I don't know, falling over drunk, we'd kind of do something. And this campaign that I've been supporting from the word go, it's called Baton of Hope. And it was founded by two bereaved dads, a TV reporter, a presenter called Mike McCarthy, who lost his son Ross to suicide in 2021. And in his letter, he left a letter, and in his letter, he said, please devote the rest of your lives to fighting for better services for mental health, because they're not there. And then the second guy was a guy called Steve Phillip, whose son, Jordan, had also took his life. And the Baton of Hope, the Baton is literally a baton. It's a beautiful baton that has been made by Thomas Light, but it's traveling around the country. And it's a place where bereaved families and friends can go and there'll be public meetings and there'll be hopefully loads of media coverage around the country, as these two dads and others who've been touched by suicide tell their stories and explain why in their view, every suicide is preventable. Now, that may sound ridiculous, but the fact is, when you think of that, three quarters of people have never spoken to somebody about their mental health issues before they kill themselves. That's incredible. So most of those people, were they able to access proper psychological support, they wouldn't end up killing themselves.

And interestingly, the military, the military is really interesting this Roy, you'll be interested in this because of your background, military suicide, there are lots of problems related to homelessness and veteran psychological issues after the event and PTSD and so forth. But actually, suicide within the military has not risen in the same way as it has in the rest of the population. And I think that might be because actually the military has started in recent years to be much, much more open about people's mental health.

What one of the biggest areas most shocking is within prisons.

So the prison rate is something like one in a thousand people compared to the general population, UK would be like 7.4 per 100,000. So it's completely shocking. I mean, in a prison context, it's 15 times more likely to happen.

I said the answer as well. I think there is an important political or governmental angle to this. Theresa May, when she was Prime Minister, she appointed a Minister for Suicide Prevention. And I thought that was a good thing to do. Now, not much happened. Theresa May was obviously very,

very busy dealing with other stuff, but mental health was one of the so-called burning injustices that she mentioned when she became Prime Minister. And I think was she called Jackie Doyle Price? Jackie Doyle Price, yeah. Yeah.

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She was made Minister for Suicide Prevention. And I looked the other day at the government website and the first thing that came up on Google was her appointment. In other words, nothing has happened as it were since then. And when I look now, I think it's Maria Caulfield, who also deals with women and deals with mental health right across the board. And when I looked to her area of responsibilities, suicide prevention was a sort of very small, a low down blob point on about the 15th point about her job. So we've got to get it back up the political agenda. And I really hope that these guys in going around the country as they are can help to do that. Yeah. A little shout out also for a group that I worked with a little bit in Cumbria. Cruz Bereefment, who certainly when I was in Cumbria, were doing some very thoughtful work around families who'd lost the loved one in that way.

One of the things that really angers me is when people say, oh, what on earth were they doing? Don't they realize the effect it has on other people? I mean, I've had suicidal ideation quite badly at times. And I don't think I'll ever kill myself.

Flemacy in the Albert Hall, where we did our performance.

I did. I did. I got very, very close there. Yeah, I was right at the top and thinking of throwing myself off. And the thing you do when you're in that state, you actually do think you're going to make life better for the people that you love. That's the you think. I've not been like that for a while. But whenever I've been like that before, I always think, oh, God, if you only would have such a much nicer life if I wasn't here, the kids would be a lot happy if I wasn't around. You persuade yourself of that. And I think that that is what we need to understand. So when people say, God, don't they realize the damage that they've done and the hurt they're going to cause? Of course they do. But they think of it, they're so ill. It's an illness. I mean, suicide to me is the ultimate mental illness. It's right out there on the scale.

We can, we can, you know, I've had mental health problems, lots and lots and lots of people do, but suicide is when you make that decision that death is preferable to life. And that to me is the ultimate in mental ill health. Well, thank you, Alastair. Producers want to encourage me to say that you thought about doing this in the Albert Hall, not during our trip performance, but when you were earlier. It was Eric Clapton concert. Yeah. And I was very happy that day. I enjoyed that day, Rory. I was, I was not in, I was lost in a bad way.

Anyway, it's all been a bit, what, what were we done? We've done bullying in the civil service, Diane Abbott, Sudan racism and now suicide. Should we try and end with something a bit Joe Biden standing again? How about that, Rory? That'll cheer you up.

Well, I'm pretty depressed about it. I'm not sure I'm gonna put all my money in the Joe Biden basket. As Hillary Clinton said, Biden will run and Biden will win. I hope to God she's right. Let's hope so. Well, thank you very much, Alastair. And let's talk soon. All the best.