

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 132. Question Time: How to reform prisons, Macron vs. Clinton, and what is the Privy Council?

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So, welcome to The Restless Politics Question Time with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

Very good. And we're sitting here, sitting on the Harrogate Theatre, looking at Edward Fox and family and saints and sinners. I'm looking at Elaine Page. Elaine Page, one of the world's best-loved entertainers. Ralph Fiennes. Ralph Fiennes. And Chris Bonnington. They're obviously quite big on mountaineering. Dara O'Brien sold out. We're doing a mountaineering thing, right, tonight.

You've been talking about walking up mountains. I just want to get confused in these places. I always sort of think maybe if I'm here, I am, you know, whoever else has performed here.

Max Miller. Exactly, Max Miller.

Yeah, okay. Right. As we're focusing on your fantasies, Dean Beaton, what is the Privy Council?

On the back of Rory's Privy Council outfit for the coronation, which I see Graham Norton was channeling in the Eurovision Song Contest, can you explain what exactly the Privy Council is?

Is it a lifetime membership? Who joins? Does it have a purpose? Do you get paid extra?

Very good. Okay. So Privy Council is lifetime membership. Generally, you become a Privy Council when you enter the cabinet, but you can get it in the shadow cabinet and actually, Prime Minister's increasingly give it out. Judges. As rewards, people are judges, get it?

It was originally a sort of super cabinet for the king. So it was the private council of the king.

And still there is a convention in Parliament that if you want to read classified documents, you're supposed to be a Privy Councilor. So I'm not sure that necessarily holds out much.

You stick right honourable in front of your name for the rest of your life. And occasionally, you are invited to do various ceremonial things. So there's the acclamation of the monarch.

Which was televised for the first time. Which was televised for the first time. But

the number of people in the Privy Council is getting very, very large, like the number of people in the House of Lords. And so I think it's becoming a pretty unwieldy type of body.

And you don't get paid extra. You don't get paid extra being okay. But you do get a beautiful uniform. Macron versus Clinton. Graham Perkins. Thanks for the Hillary Clinton interview. It was an enjoyable and interesting podcast. But I thought she was arrogant when she criticised Macron.

Shouldn't those of us in Europe be able to think for ourselves instead of jumping into line when America snaps its fingers? I really enjoyed the interview with Hillary Clinton. But I did think she was very dismissive of Macron in a way that slightly surprised me. She was basically making the point. He'd been talking about European security, possibility of greater European capacity.

She was basically saying, I've heard this from presidents all my life. After his China trip.

After his trip to China. And I think the Americans were, as we've discussed before,

they were a little bit troubled by that visit and the extent to which he allowed himself to be portrayed by the Chinese as being somewhere between America and China. I don't think that was the purpose of the visit. And you know, I think he just got a bit carried away with himself in

one of the chats on the plane coming back. There is an American tradition of doing this, which is really interesting. So you remember Biden is always getting himself in trouble because he called Saudi a pariah state. He was very rude about Erdogan. He called him an autocrat.

Hillary Clinton is doing this about Macron. The other people who do this, of course,

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are people like Erdogan themselves who are perpetually throwing insults around to everybody else. And it's striking that British politics isn't really like that. You don't seem to get huge populist points in British politics. Macron friend or foe, let's trust.

Oh, yeah, but that's not, I mean, I agree. I mean, that that was awful, absolutely awful.

She said the jury's out. But compared to what Americans and Turkish politicians take as normal, which is throwing really offensive epithets against almost everybody. I mean, so Erdogan will say about the Egyptian president, that the man's a tyrant, and this kind of stuff goes on. And then he, he will compare the Israelis to goodness knows what, and then the Israelis will chuck stuff back. The Americans are more into that kind of politics. And Biden loves that stuff.

A lot of his campaign was, you know, attaching these extraordinary epithets to people. But we don't really do that, but we tend to be polite about foreign rulers. I don't feel that, but maybe that's because we live through the Brexit period. We've just heard that Johnson and talking about friends and our friends and colleagues in Europe to their face while abusing them through the media.

What about, did you see Macron's piece in the FT at the weekend?

Well, you know, we talk about a lot about how we want political leaders who kind of give big picture messages. It really was a big picture message. I think he was trying to sort of catch up with the American IRA, the Inflation Reduction Act, and signal that Europeans have got to be on that level of thinking. But it's definitely.

Well, we've got to keep watching Macron because the key challenge to him is, is he going to be able to bring together very, very soon a candidate who he can endorse?

He's got to think about succession.

Because if not, either the far right or the far left are going to take it.

Well, it won't be the far left. It won't be the far left. It'll be Le Pen.

Marine Le Pen.

Yeah. Now, BioSavage, why isn't the T-Sport business dealings getting more news? I listened to the Private Eye podcast and it looks like public funds are going astray on a monumental scale. Sarah Ashwin, T-Side Freeport Corruption and the Cover Up. It's a level of corruption worthier. Russia is going to take it in a very damaging direction if not exposed and challenged. We've said before that Private Eyes seem to be the only media organization that's really getting stuck into this, but the French times are now onto it. I can't pretend to understand the ins and outs of it, but I do get the sense of a very, very, very slow burning massive whiff around this. Huge shout out to Private Eye who consistently over, I don't know, how many decades have broken all these stories?

Well, this one, they've been going on about it for weeks. And we've said several times, why are the rest of the media not picking this up? The other people to give a shout out to, the Yorkshire Post have been doing quite a lot about this as well. And I'm not just saying that because we're in Yorkshire, it's because I've actually been, I've been seeing this stuff online. So I think maybe that's something we should come back to. And while we're up in the, you know, this part of the world, we are going to be doing, we're going to have our first double-headed leading interview in a few weeks time.

Yes, very good. Very exciting.

Two Andes.

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Very good. Two Andes, Andy Street and Andy Burnham. And the only reason I'm pleased that is that, generally speaking, I'm always told off that I never managed to remember when I meet people to raise it. I did remember the coronation to raise the question of the interview with Andy Burnham. Which is not quite the same as King's. King of Thailand was there and he would have been a real winner. And we could have.

Sorry, the King of Thailand from Munich was out of the way.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, you can have the coronation, I know, and I missed my chance. It's unbelievable. We could have done it in German.

Exactly. You could have done the whole thing.

Well, Rory, please, honestly, you've got to get better at this. You really are.

Question from Victoria Gray.

You were brought back by a forward thinking new government to take charge of prisons.

What are the first three things you would do? And then what?

Oh, wow.

Am I allowed to enter them?

Yeah.

I would release an awful lot of people who are there.

I would have a mental health assessment of every single person who is in the prison estate.

Very good.

And find out which of them could be better treated in hospital.

Um, I think at some stage we are going to have to rebuild our prisons.

So I probably have a rebuilding program as well.

That's bloody expensive, though.

Very expensive.

But what would you do?

My first three would be set minimum standards.

So I'd make it illegal to overcrowd prisons.

So I'd give people a human right that they cannot be crammed to a cell that the Victorians built for one and therefore force any government to decide whether they were either going to build more prisons or put fewer people in prison, but not be able to get away with overcrowding.

Wow.

Secondly, you might have to have a few of the migration barges brought in for the prison estate.

Secondly, I would abolish short sentences.

So any sentences under two years, except for violent crimes, I would abolish because I think there is very good evidence that sending someone to prison for a short time increases their chance of re-offending.

And thirdly, I would get rid not just of the current IPP legislation, but I make sure that any IPP prisoner currently in the system is released.

On IPP, which we talked about last week, Alistair Carmichael Lib Dem, I didn't see the debate, but he sent us both the message saying that there had been a very positive response from the minister to something that he had raised about IPP in Parliament.

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Oh, good.

Well, as you know, I'm a big fan of Alex Chalk, who's the new law chancellor.

Well, we didn't like his joint article with Suella Braverman, did we?

No, we don't write joint articles with Sarah Braverman.

And John Major made a very strong speech on prison reform, which I think we both read and both liked.

I thought it was brilliant.

And I can't quite understand the extent to which I've become such a proselytiser for the apologies of John Major.

Just by being the person who brought us the fact that he tucked his shirt into his underpants.

Don't do that. Fiona hates that being raised.

Okay.

At all times.

Here's one. Mickey Moran.

Jerry Adams.

I like them both to answer why they didn't push Adams harder on certain events.

I think he got off lightly.

Huh.

I don't know about that.

I thought we, I've had amazing feedback on that one.

Was there a moment in it where we could have gone in harder?

There's no point going harder and harder on, are you a member of the IRA?

Why do you never admit that you're a member?

Because he's answered it 50 million times.

I think some of the specific, there's the book, because it was called Say Nothing.

I think there's a lot in there that we maybe could have picked on.

But the trouble is that he's just so, it's a bit like Osborne on austerity.

I felt with Osborne when we joined austerity.

There just came a point where I thought, we're now going round in circles.

I'm going to say what I think.

He's going to say what he thinks and we're going to get nowhere to move on.

And I just feel that with Adams.

I find it was much more interesting when we talked about,

I was fascinated by some of the things he said about the various prime ministers and then the exchange with you about you being a soldier.

And, you know, there was tense.

I don't agree with Mickey Moran though.

I think we gave him a pretty hard time.

So, George, are George's from interviews out on leading this week?

So, people listening, this should just go to the podcast and look for leading George Osborne.

But I noticed somebody on Twitter saying that they thought that you'd been tougher on George Osborne than you were on Tony Blair.

Would you accept that?

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Well, I agree almost with everything that Tony Blair does.

So, it's Tony.

I'm going to give you a really tough time about how you delivered the peace process.

I really am.

No, yes, I probably was.

But the thing about austerity, we've talked about it so much, but it sort of goes to the heart.

And I don't really think that Osborne...

Do you think he really believes that austerity has delivered the goods that he secured the...

You can't believe it because it didn't secure the...

You know, we were talking in the last episode about all the different economic factors, and we talked about the fact that Syria since 1980 lurched up.

So, by 2007, gone from \$1800 to \$10,000 and then dropped down today to \$1,200.

The Thailand went from \$700 to \$4,000 in 2007 and is now at \$8,000.

But the British economy, and this is what I'm trying to get to, the British economy in the same period went from in 1980, \$10,000 per capita to \$47,000 per capita.

And today, since 2007, it's stayed exactly the same.

So, basically, we've had no GDP per capita growth since 2007.

Now, whether like you, you blame austerity or whether like George Osborne, you blame the financial crisis, there is absolutely no doubt.

You also blame Brexit.

Absolutely. Oh, and Brexit.

So, what you've just confirmed to me is, I said to George Osborne, the labor economic record was strong and the conservative...

He had a real good line to that, didn't he?

...weak.

He said the...

Badal Lincoln played.

Yeah, he said Lincoln played.

Yeah, he's such an old cliché. That wasn't given in that one.

Now, here's one for you.

Will Taylor, who are the best civil servants you've worked with and why?

Will it be good to hear about more junior ranks in particular?

What was it made them excellent?

I really, really liked some of the civil servants I worked with in the Mr. Justice, for example, a guy called Andy, who is my private secretary, who'd been a prison officer.

He's a kind of scrawny guy like me.

He'd come from spending five years in the landings.

He was brilliant about just bringing realism.

If a prisoner escape happened, he would say to me, Rory,

I have no idea why the officers didn't just grab him by the ankles.

And that would then give me the confidence to go in and say, why didn't someone grab him by the ankles?

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In Difford, I loved the people in the field officers.
So there's a woman called Bex Buckingham in South Sudan,
who'd been in the British Army.
She was fantastically funny, realistic.
She's now actually our acting ambassador in Venezuela.
And was a fantastic antidote to what happens when you become a director
or a director general or a permanent secretary,
when it's easy as a minister to feel they're largely trying to run ring strategy.
I could give dozens.
This is what funny, there were a couple of civil servants came to the event.
I did with Beth Rigby last night, who I think I told you,
that somebody in the Ministry of Justice had told me that,
however bad you think it was with Rob, it's worse.
Somebody last night from the Home Office said the same to me,
that it's just awful at the moment.
And that the Spads treat the civil service with absolute contempt.
Was that happening when you were there?
My Spads.
I don't mean yours, round government.
Did you hear that?
Yeah, well, that was Ken Clarke's complaint.
I mean, Ken Clarke had a couple of complaints.
One of them was that cabinet government had collapsed,
and he did put the blame at that partly on you guys.
He said that under Thatcher and Major,
cabinet meetings were much longer,
the conversation was much more serious.
And post Blair, cabinet meetings had become quite cursory, quite short,
and people were very interested in the views of cabinet ministers.
And we've got a leading interview on this coming up,
where Jonathan Powell said,
yeah, well, what do you expect?
Ministers don't really have much to contribute.
So why would we want to read this?
He did not say that.
He did not say that, Laura.
You can't pre-spin our interviews.
Emma's going to have a lovely opportunity to listen.
They'll also hear you lose your temper.
They will, they will, they will.
So that was one complaint by Ken Clarke,
but his other complaint was that David Cameron,
who'd himself been a special adviser,

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loved special advisers more than he liked politicians and cabinet ministers.

I was interested in that.

And that's partly because special advisers,

Ken suggested,

are young people who can be hired and fired and removed at will,

whereas someone like Ken Clarke can't be.

They're permanent bits of furniture.

They're members of parliament.

Well, to the Boris Johnson kicks them out.

For the House, exactly.

Yeah.

So I think we've got lots of questions to come.

So should we take a quick break here?

Welcome back to the rest of this questions.

I'm me, Ernest Campbell.

And me, Rory Stewart.

Maria V.

I am year 12 at the moment,

thinking, applying to study medicine.

Regarding doctors,

why is there so little conversation

about why there are so few places at medical school?

How it's so difficult to get in,

meaning that many capable students

with excellent grades are turned away each year.

The Labour Party did pledge

to increase medical school places to 15,000.

Do you think this will happen?

I don't know.

I didn't even know that was the case,

that there was a shortage of medical.

I thought we were trying to get more doctors.

I thought we'd desperately try to get more doctors.

And it must, presumably,

they do have to set some kinds of standards.

I would hope so.

I would hope that you can just go and buy medical degrees.

So listen, we have to come back.

I don't know.

We've got questions about sporins in Bancroft.

Oh, good. I like questions about sporins.

On last week's question time,

we're describing a Scottish sartorial garb.

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Alistair mentioned that although he had several sporins, only one of them was functional.

Please, can you put me out of my misery and explain what makes a sporin dysfunctional?

Yeah.

Well, my view on that, I assume what you meant.

I mean, as people listening will understand, a sporin is essentially a man purse.

And if you're running, you probably want to move it onto your side hip, otherwise it bangs around a lot.

And it can then get decorated.

So I've got one with goat hair on the front, horse hair on the front.

I found a badger in the road that had been run over.

You made it into a sporin?

That's a sporin.

Did you?

That's a sporin, yeah.

Did you make it?

Yeah, I worked with a friend to make it, yeah.

You made your own sporin.

How many sporins have you got?

I've got five.

Five, you told me, yeah.

I've got three, but only...

So the functional point for me is one is the belt broke.

The other one, the baubles fell off.

So there's only one bauble left, and it looks a bit ridiculous.

I've got one with two baubles, missing a third of the other one.

Yeah, it looks...

But as long as it's the two there, the normal one in the middle.

No, no, it's the central one on the one on the side.

That's a dysfunctional sporin.

No, good at all, yeah.

Yeah, yeah.

No, good at all.

Meanwhile, I'm having a ski undo made in Jordan.

Okay.

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Would you like to tell our listeners
what a ski undo is?

Very good, yes.

Obviously, in Gaelic, it's a black knife,
and it's what goes in your sock.

But there is an amazing man called Zaid,
who is a knife maker in Amman.

This is the second time you've mentioned
the making of bespoke offensive weapons, Rory.

And what was the other one?

You play like a movie.

You talk about making another knife another time.

I mean, Zaid, literally, he takes some huge sheets of steel
that are used in industrial processes,
saws that are used for cutting massive bits,
where it cuts them into knife shapes,
and then he carves your name on the knife
and then he does silver tops and bottoms.

So anyone going to Amman,
go beyond the Roman theater and look for Zaid
and get a knife made.

Did you watch the Eurovision Song Contest?

I did not.

Justin, was the Eurovision vote
rigged to get Sweden as host
to the 50th anniversary of ABBA winning?

I honestly think it would be unbelievable.

Sweden, next year, you know what happens is that
whoever wins it, they host the next one.

So it was only in Liverpool
because it was meant to be in Ukraine.

Yeah.

So Sweden have won it, 50 years on from ABBA,
and I just think the Abbatars should represent Sweden.

Help me understand about the Abbatars.

Is it that ABBA themselves are a bit old and crooked
and they can't perform anymore,
presumably if it was 50 years ago that they won?

Rory, you're talking about musical, cultural legends.

You can't say old and crooked.

They're older than they were.

Very good.

So what the Abbatars do, it's technology.

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So when you go and watch it,
it is like you're watching a live ABBA concert back in the day.
Right.
And it is truly mind-blowing when you see it.
Is Avatar a word you made up like pedultery?
No, I made up pedultery.
I've also made up Persevillians in the book,
which you haven't mentioned much of this today.
I'm very disappointed with you.
But what can I do?
Publishers.
Pedultery I made up, but no,
Avatar is a word made up by the ABBA Avatar phenomenon,
which is phenomenal.
And then now it's going to go to different parts of the world.
Could you imagine Elvistar and any number of things?
Yes.
And now it's started.
Yes, it's already started.
Listen, this artificial intelligence stuff.
Somebody sent me the other day, as you know, I like Elvis.
Elvis singing Freddie Mercury songs down the years,
most of which were written after Elvis died.
And it is incredible.
Elvis doing crazy little thing called love is unbelievable.
That's pretty weird.
And it's Elvis.
I mean, even though it's not Elvis, it's Elvis.
So yeah, I think this musical cultural stuff is going to be...
I'm sorry you didn't watch Eurovision.
I thoroughly enjoyed it.
I thoroughly enjoyed it,
but I thought the wrong country won.
I was rooting for it.
France came to 16th and they were brilliant.
I felt sorry for you, Maymuller, the Acklin-Burley girl,
who came to second last.
The Germans deserved to come last.
As you know, I love the Germans, but they deserved...
They were terrible.
Croatia was one of the funniest songs I've ever seen in my life.
But I think that Israel should have won.
But I think politically...

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What was the Israel performance?

Oh, I couldn't do it.

It was very kind of funky.

Is that okay?

Yeah, yeah.

Okay, Syria.

James Lachas, what's the latest on the Syrian Civil War?

Where can you go and get good news and analysis on it?

Why is this conflict received less and less coverage when it's still a major international issue?

So my recommendations to James are,

look at Middle East Eye,

look at blogs, LSE,

look at the Arab Monitor,

look at France 24,

and look at Human Rights Watch,

hrw.org, if you want reporting on Syria.

The other thing that's just vanished out of the news headlines is Sudan.

It's still going on.

It's extraordinary.

Well, it's like when I went to Turkey

and the aftermath is this earthquake,

which killed 40,000 people in two minutes,

which wiped 10% off the GDP of the country,

actually 4% off Turkish GDP,

but 10% off Syrian GDP.

And people are behaving as though it hasn't happened at all.

These things have forgotten so quickly.

I know, it's bad.

Right, my final question,

it will allow you to plug my book.

Murray Minns, what was your favourite book to write and why?

What was my favourite book to write and why?

Mine was my first novel, All in the Mind.

Not, but what can I do?

I enjoyed writing, but what can I do?

I'm enjoying promoting.

I'm enjoying the fact that you enjoy promoting so much,

but no, my favourite was All in the Mind, my first novel.

So I loved writing my first book, Places in Between.

I wrote half of it, took me six months

and then the second half took me six weeks

and I did it alone in Scotland.

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My parents had gone away on a long holiday
and I was all alone in the house
and I just, what I loved about it
was I didn't talk to anyone in six weeks.
I would wake up in the morning,
I'd dream about it at night,
wake up thinking about it,
I'd work on it in the morning,
I'd have a quick lunch, I'd go for a walk,
I'd come back, I'd correct in the afternoon,
I'd watch 24 on television, I'd go to bed,
I'd dream about it again and that just went on.
That's brilliant.

Well, very similar because I got the idea for it.
Out on my bike, I saw a funeral
and I just started fantasising about whose funeral it was
and it gave me the ending of a novel.
And then I went back home, I'd never written a novel before
and I started to write it
and I didn't tell anybody I was doing it
until I finished it, including Fiona.
She just thought I was doing upstairs working
like I do quite a lot and eventually I read it.
Turned out you were upstairs skypeing and writing a novel.
But it was exactly the same thing,
I was dreaming about it,
the characters were in my dreams
and I was waking up in the middle of the night and writing
and doing it on my blackberry as it was then
because I didn't want to wake Fiona up.
That's pretty cool.

Okay, last question then.

Dementia Among the Young, Ian Perkins.
Having read Steve Thompson's book, Unforgettable,
could Alistair talk about his involvement
with the 2005 British and Irish Lions Tour?
And I think this might be, for our final question,
opportunity for you to discuss Dementia Among the Young.
Well, Steve Thompson is a great rugby player,
part of the England World Cup winning team
and the book he's written is about his dementia
and it's becoming a big, big, big thing this now in NFL
and also now rugby is dementia

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and the constant sort of battering of the head.
He is an amazing character.
He was, that was one of the most bizarre experiences
of my life going on that Lions Tour.
It was probably, it was probably a bad idea,
me doing the media for the Lions
because the press were not going to make it, make it work.
But I got on very, very well with a lot of the players
and my favorite, I don't know if it's my favorite,
Steve Thompson story,
it's one of the most embarrassing moments of my life.
I came out of a briefing and you know this thing,
did you ever play rugby at school?
I did, yeah.
And do you know that thing about, I don't know what it is,
it's clearly a kind of posh public school thing
but they try and take your trousers off the whole time,
de-bagging.
So you have to tie the lace up really tight otherwise.
So I'm walking out of this press conference
wearing a tracksuit and Paul O'Connell,
Irish captain and Steve Thompson de-bagged me, right?
And as they did so, my blackberry,
which was in my right hand pocket, flew out.
With the novel on it?
No, the novel wasn't on the blackberry
but I'll tell you what was on the blackberry
was a long note that I'd written,
the title of which was TBGB Transition.
Oh, wow.
Plan.
And this is flying in the press conference.
It's flying onto the floor and Steve Thompson has got it.
And he doesn't know what's on my blackberry
but he thinks it'd be really funny,
not just to take my trousers there
but also to steal my blackberry.
I had to go and beg the head of security,
the lion security, who was a kind of, you know,
kind of rough tough ex-cop or ex-special forces or something.
And I had to go beg him to go put the frightness
on Steve Thompson to get my blackberry.
Because he wasn't giving it back.

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He did want to give it back though.

No, so look, that's the sort of funny story
about a very nice guy

but the truth is this dementia and sport thing,
he's really shining a light on it.

And his book is very, very well worth reading.

Okay, well, I think on that maybe we should stop.

Lovely to see you and good luck with the rest of the book tour.

Thank you, the book being called...

But what can I do?