

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

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Welcome to The Rest is Politics with me, Alistair Campbell.

And with me, Rory Stewart.

Sadly, yet again, we're going to have to talk about Swela Braverman and National Conservatism and the net migration figures coming out. We're going to talk a little bit about Scotland and also about something that Rory and I both picked up last week on our travels in the UK about the way that labour are seen at the moment, which I think is worth discussing.

And then we're going to go into the G7, Zelensky's masterclass, but also Rory happens to be in Japan where the G7 was hosted. So we'll talk a little bit about Japan, a little bit about G7 and G8 summits, and frankly, whether there's much point. But Rory, let's kick off with Sue Ella, as I like to call her.

Yeah, well, let me start by paying tribute to the fact that your book is now the number one bestseller in the United Kingdom. Are you completely exhausted? You've been charging up and on the country talking to every school in the country.

No, I've enjoyed talking to the schools, actually. And I'm not really exhausted. No, the only thing that I found utterly exhausting was I left Glasgow on Sunday at seven. I left my hotel at 7 30 a.m. And I finally walked through the door just as the second half was starting in the four o'clock kickoff on Sky. So that was a pretty troubled train journey home, pretty troubled train journey and added to the irritation, which you were presumably missing part of a football game that you wanted to see. I wasn't that bothered about the game to be absolutely frank, but it was just one of those journeys where everything seemed to go wrong. And at the very same time, as people pointed out on Twitter, I was on the bullet train heading between Tokyo and Nagoya. So why do the Japanese do trains so well?

Well, we're going to speak to that in the second half. And part of that is enormous amounts of public spending. But to tell us about Suella Braverman, your least favorite person, I guess, or one of your least favorite people. No, no, she's not. Well, I think she's part of my least favorite government for a long time. She's got into trouble again. This time, a story involving her time as Attorney General. For overseas listeners to remind everybody, Suella Braverman is the Home Secretary. She represents the right wing faction of the Conservative Party. She was a leading Brexiteer. She competed to be Prime Minister. She was a big backer of Boris Johnson.

And she is occupying one of these three great offices of state. So she's a real, in a sense, a big, big factor in Rishi Sunak's cabinet. And now, sorry.

And also, the reason that she's there is because during the leadership election that led to Sunak being crowned, as it were, she dropped her backing, her vocal backing for Boris Johnson. She didn't get involved in the Let's Bring Back Johnson campaign and clearly some sort of deal done.

She was forced to resign when she was in the Liz Truss cabinet over a breach of the ministerial code. That was to do with leaking documents to an MP who should not have been seeing them. And then within minutes of Sunak becoming Prime Minister just literally a few days later, she's back in the cabinet. And now she's charged again with breaking the ministerial code this time over allegations that when she was done for speeding, she asked first the civil servant and then a special advisor whether it would be possible for her to do it, rather than get points on her

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

license to do a speed awareness course, but one-on-one. So she didn't have to go and sit with the Hoya Palloy. So as an alternative against three points of license, you can sit in a speed awareness course typically with maybe 20 people in a room, private sector provider explains things like driving five miles an hour more doesn't get you there any quicker than you expecting. Have you done a speed awareness course? I've done two. And I vividly remember something from the first one, which I remember, which did not happen in the second one. Okay. And this was one of those acronyms, coast. And I do actually remember this and I do think of it sometimes when I suddenly realise I'm driving too fast. And coast is concentration, observation, anticipation, space and time. And I remember that from and actually every time I drive, it's up by old street, near the angel. And every time I drive past the building where I had that speed awareness course, I remember it and I always slowed out. It's funny how these things sort of get into your head. Just on the coast thing, I mean, obviously, I spend a lot of time saying to my eight-year-old and six-year-old, just concentrate, but I don't find it's very useful. I'm coming to the conclusion that telling people who aren't concentrating to concentrate doesn't really help them to concentrate. No, I think, I don't agree with that. I think that if I tell myself I am losing concentration, I can get it back. But the point about Sola Bravaman is that where I think she might come unstuck. Yesterday, she was quizzed by the media, she was quizzed in Parliament because she was doing Home Office questions or something else. And she just had this line, I was last summer, I was court-speeding, I didn't dispute the offence, I didn't dispute the sanction, but she just kept repeating the same thing again and again and again and again. Where I think she might come unstuck is the fact that her advisors, and this would be her special advisor, told the media that actually there had been no case at all at some point in this story. Then the other thing they said, which I think just underlines what happens when you sort of your story is unraveling. She was the Attorney General at the time. I don't know about when you were in government, Rory, but I know that when I was working for the government, if my memory serves me correctly, the Attorney General did not have protection. The Home Secretary does have protection. One of the lines being used about why maybe she considered that it would have been appropriate and reasonable for her not to have to go to a speed awareness course with lots of other people, is that her protection team would have to go as well. But she didn't have a protection team. When she was Attorney General. But I suppose she was Home Secretary by the time she was making the request, is that right? That's a good point, that is a good point. But what do you think the real reason is why she didn't want to go on it? She thought she'd be embarrassed that the media would show pictures of her sitting with 19 other people and it would somehow be a humiliation? What's the deal? I would be very surprised if this is earlier in her career. I'm not 100, I mean, I think she's a very well-known political figure now because of Rwanda and Stop the Boats and all that stuff. I think Suella Braverman could go to quite a lot of speed awareness courses around the country. Nobody would have a bloody clue who she was. I get a sense of her being a bit of a narcissist. I don't know about you, but my sense of her is she just loves all this attention. And I think she loves the fact that part of the narrative around her is that Sunak's scared to get rid of her. And I think she's either trying to provoke Sunak to sack her. She probably thinks, if you're right, that most Tories think

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

that they're going to lose the next election. She is clearly lining herself up to be the main representative of the right, the hard right of the Conservative Party. And of course, if she gets sacked, that is better for her in those circumstances than having to resign over something that is self-evidently scandalous. Yeah, so maybe actually Rishi Sunak can't really afford to sack her over her not wanting to do a speed awareness course because that will be used by Suella Braverman's supporters to say, this was a trivial thing. This was ridiculous and turn her into a martyr. I mean, you've been saying for weeks that you think Rishi Sunak is desperate to sack her. And I don't know if you've had any further conversations with people in the Conservative Party about that, but I don't know. I get the feeling that he quite likes having her there because she can do a lot of the nasty stuff and he doesn't really have to get his hands too dirty with it. Well, let's move on to the National Conservatism Conference that we spoke about a bit last week, which was this bizarre moment where last weekend, just at the moment where Rishi Sunak was trying to make some important announcements and meeting Zelensky on Ukraine and preparing for the G7 summit, Suella Braverman led this extraordinary conference called the National Conservatism Conference. And I've been digging into it a bit more and I hadn't realized this. The National Conservatism Conference isn't only a British thing at all. It's a global phenomenon and it's had some big conferences in the US, conferences in Italy. So Rhonda Santis is there on the website talking about how Florida is a great space for freedom. Dan Prager is up there saying the left is trying to destroy Western civilization. So this is extraordinary round about how in the Guggenheim, there's a golden toilet into which people can defecate and this shows that the left is trying to destroy art as well as everything else. And it's an extraordinary revelation of something disturbing because you see Giorgio Maloney being profiled in Italy. And Victor Orban is right up there on the website. So Victor Orban, I mean, just remind people, this is a guy who the right look to or that part of the far populist right look to because he's closed the university. He's put academic bodies under government control. He's put most of the press in Hungary under direct party control or indirect party control. So what I really want to say to people like Michael Gove and Swallow Braverman and Danny Kruger who are attending this conference is there are some very odd edges to this which are deeply disturbing for the Conservative Party in which they should be distancing themselves. They had a US Senator, as I said, JD Vance, who backs Trump in saying the election was stolen in 2020. And then I suppose the second thing that struck me looking at the conference is how very odd that side of conservatism is. They combine a whole series of very contradictory things. On the one hand, they seem to be standing up for tradition, my sort of conservatism. They talk about Edmund Burke. But actually, if you listen to Michael Gove, he's not really a Tory in that sense at all. He calls himself a wig. He's often in terms of kind of radical modernization he's not very comfortable with land ownership in Britain. He wants to take away VAT from private schools. Then you have other people who are standing up and saying they want bigger families. But the same people who say they want bigger families are supporting radical free market economics, which is one of the contexts which are forcing both partners to have to work. Edmund Burke's name was on the backdrop, by the way, because it was the think one of the thing to answer that carries his name that was that was part sponsoring this event. And you mentioned Danny Kruger. I was on that TV program with him on the day that this

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

conference

was happening. He and Miriam Cates are the two sole, they're the only directors of the company that has been set up to promote this thing. And I think that Miriam Cates is an interesting example of what you're talking about as well, because she is part of this, what I would describe as very right wing Christian evangelical movement, that a lot of which is about essentially about saying the big problem in the world is birth, we haven't got enough children being born, therefore women need to go back to a much more traditional role. They have pretty, the sort of very, the Christian evangelical movement in the States with very, very strong views on abortion and such like. So these are, I think you're right that this is far more insidious, that your point about it being an international network, is this related to the whole Steve Bannon thing or is it separate from that? It seems to be separate from Steve Bannon, but it is interesting. I mean, so Miriam Cates is an MP. She comes from a Christian family. Danny Kruger was actually part of the conservative movement quite a long time. He's an Ethonian who, I guess, must be now in his late 40s. He's the son of Prulith, the famous cookery writer. He was David Cameron's speech writer. He ran against Tony Blair in Sedgefield, got himself in trouble in those days for calling for the creative destruction of the NHS, which was a reference to Hegel, he said afterwards, but people didn't interpret it as a reference to Hegel. Well, he shows how he was ahead of his time though, because they're basically doing it now, aren't they? And then he became one of Boris Johnson's private secretaries in number 10 before he was elected as an MP. And he, again, a very Christian and set up a Christian charity, and very much sees a former conservatism and tradition of Edmund Burke. But what's so odd about it is that conservatism that sometimes sounds in Britain as though it's about Britain and British tradition is also curiously allied to some of the organisers and speakers who are active in Israeli politics, who are themselves Israeli settlers or are connected with people who are connected to Trump or the Republican right in the US. And again, Douglas Murray, who spoke with somebody who's also been very outspoken against Islam. He was the one who said we shouldn't stop being nationalists just because the Germans mucked it up twice in the last century. Exactly. And he's also somebody who I used to argue with a great deal because he was a great neo-conservative and defender of the Iraq war. So there's something about this style of conservatism that still confuses me. There's no logical connection between half a dozen different ideological things that I've mentioned here, but somehow they sit together. On the Christianity point and Christian evangelicals, I mean, I am not a person of Christian faith, unlike you. Were I to be so? Is this me just reflecting my own politics? But I always imagine that Christ was far more of a socialist than a conservative. I think he had a view of the world which was about helping the poor and building people up. And yet, the evangelical right in the States appears almost monolithically to be Trumpian. So defending a liar, an adulterer, somebody who abuses power, things I would have thought Christ would have been against. It's completely bewildering, isn't it? It's totally bewildering. And I think even the Christian right in the US struggled to explain it, but you get these extraordinary bumper stickers which are sort of portraying Donald Trump as the Messiah and as a guy champion of

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

the church. It's true also in the paradoxes of a lot of these people in the UK supporting Boris Johnson, whose personal life is a kind of flagrant attack on almost all the values that they seem to wish to uphold. And I think it's to do with an anxiety, a much older anxiety, about the left representing materialist atheism. I think this goes right the way back to the 1930s or even the late 19th century. And the situation in Germany too that the Christian parties tended to rely themselves on the right because the left was seen as anti-Christian. But don't you think on the on Braverman that Sunak, who is coming over as quite a weak character and quite a weak leader at the moment, I think, don't you think he would be emboldened and strengthened if he just stood up and said, look, it's perfectly clear that Soela Braverman, she's failing on the main policy agenda, in particular the immigration. We've got the net migration figures coming this week, which are going to show yet another failure on that front. And added to which it's been scandal upon scandal upon scandal. He promised that he would lead a government of professionalism, accountability, integrity. And I'm very, very sorry Soela, but you've got to go. Would that not strengthen him? Well, except you just contradicted yourself because you pointed out that in a sense she would like to be fired for something like this, like not attending a speed awareness course, because that would make her into a martyr and strengthen her position. Yeah, baby. I well, no, but I meant that I'm thinking there from her perspective that puts her in poor position as the representative of the right. I'm saying from his perspective, vis-a-vis the country, that it would strengthen him at a time when he is coming over as very, very weak. Well, I think he and Keir Starmer both come across as weak. And that's very clear in almost all the polling. So I'm not going to I'm not going to question that. If you look at, you know, a lot of the polling, weak as a word that comes up for Keir Starmer, weak as a word that comes up for Rishi Sinek. Just thinking on Labour, you and I did two events together last week, one in Harrogate and one in Leeds. I did six other events, three in Scotland and three schools. And I asked the same questions of all the audiences as you and I asked of the audiences in Harrogate and Leeds and got almost identical answers. Remind people what the questions were. So the first question was, who do you think will be Prime Minister in two years' time? And between 80 and 100% basically said Keir Starmer. We gave them the choice of Starmer, Sunak or somebody else and about eight between lowest was probably about 75. The highest was 100% saying Keir Starmer. We then asked them either to name any of the five missions that Labour has at the heart of its strategy or to give the summary of Labour's economic strategy in a sentence. And apart from a Harrogate, where one guy put his hand up and said he could do it, he gave a good fist of it and I as a joke said, are you a candidate, a Labour candidate? And it turned out that he was. But for the rest of it... And he could only manage four out of five. He got three and a half, he didn't get the whole way. So I think there is a real problem in that which Labour have to fix, I think is a matter of urgency. Because I think that it is definitely possible to get over the line in terms of winning an election on the narrative that the Tories of the worst government we've ever had and they've got to go. But you won't be able to do the difficult things that are going to have to be done as a government unless you have buy-in for the change that you're offering. Keir yesterday made quite a big speech about the National Health Service and it got a fair amount of coverage. But even today I've been getting quite a few messages from

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

friends who are in the NHS saying it went down okay, some saying it went down badly because of specific policy ideas. But I think the point that George Osborne made in our interview with him on the leading channel, that you need at this stage to be able to say what your economic strategy is, what your health strategy is, what your education strategy is, what your foreign policy overall is. In a nutshell, you've got to be able to communicate it in a way that people say, yes, that's different and that's what I want. It's very, very unfortunate. JLP polling does these polls and they did one 26th, 27th April where they do word clouds. In a word, please describe your view of Keir Starmer, 2086 UK adults. And the central word cloud at the moment is weak, boring, useless. Now, I didn't like those kind of words. I'm not very comfortable applying them to Keir Starmer. I'm not very comfortable applying them to Rishi Sunak either. I mean, I think as I keep saying on this show that I think Rishi is actually doing a much better job than his predecessors. He's much more of a grown up. He's running a good cabinet. But where I do agree with you with both of them, neither of them I think are quite managing to really communicate a clear vision to the public. And Rishi Sunak actually, I suppose maybe because they've got more control of the media, you do people I suppose can get to the fact that he wants to get inflation down, get growth and stop the boats. Whatever we think about that, we sort of know that. With Keir Starmer, I mean, I'd love to hear your views on this. I went through an evolution as a politician, which is that I was tempted initially when people said, what is your vision to say? Well, I just want to run things well. I don't believe in big flashy visions. But I realized when actually, I was able to answer that question. So when I was running for the leadership, and I was clear that what I wanted to do is stop a no deal Brexit and stop Boris Johnson, that things became much, much easier for me. And again, when I was running as London mayor, once I could see what I really wanted to do and communicate it again and again and again, things became much easier for me as a politician. I think Keir Starmer has got to get beyond what he'll feel, which is, well, I'll be more competent, which worked fine against Boris Johnson, but isn't going to work as well against Rishi Sunak because the two of them seem too similar in that respect. They both seem like sort of technocratic managers. And I think Keir is developing as a politician in a way that hopefully will, I think we'll see him become prime minister and actually be quite a good prime minister. I think he does, I think a lot of the qualities that he shows in terms of his overall commitment to public service, whether it was the DPP, the way that he could sort of clearly address his problems in a serious way, I think that will stand him in good stead in government. However, I think that to get into government, you have to counter this sense that, because I think the Tories deliberately want to create this sense that they're all the same. They're all as bad as each other. Yeah, we've been terrible. Yeah, nothing much has changed, but do you really think that guy's any better? And I think he's got to flip this sort of boring thing. I don't think he's boring and I don't think he's particularly weak. I think actually, if you think about, you know, how many, I'm not even sure that Tony would have expelled a former leader from the party in the way that he had. So that's the sort of sign of strength. I think some of the policy decisions that he's taken, even this thing about, you know, he gets a lot of criticism for dumping on the pledges that he made to become leader. But it was interesting at the event I did in Glasgow on the book, at Glasgow City Halls, and there was, you know, it's quite a big crowd and there's this guy stood up and he said,

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

am I missing something? He said, I actually quite like the look at his Keir Star, but he seems quite ruthless to me. And I thought that was an interesting observation that this guy, his name was James, he actually thought there's a steal in there that is about getting into power. And I think what I like about the way Keir has conducted himself is that we've said this before, stage one decontaminate the Labour Party, brand stage two, take on the Tories, stage three, set out the alternative agenda. Now, what I don't like that I think the missions approach is quite good as an overall thing. But if I've just got them in front of me, secure the highest sustained growth in the G7. Well, that's a great thing if you can do it. Let's just get to sort of somebody who thinks a lot about phrases. I mean, it doesn't exactly trip off the tongue, does it? To secure the highest sustained growth in the G7. And it slightly sounds like what they wanted to do was say, be the fastest growing economy in the world. And then someone said, well, I'm not quite sure that we can say that. So then they said, how about fastest growing the G7? Not sure about that. Can we stick in the word sustained because that might be able to?

Yeah. And what it's saying, what actually that says is that we want to get the economy growing again. I think that's a simpler way to say it. And at the same time, and I think Rishi Sunak's word for that is gross, isn't it? He just uses the word growth. And that's another problem. It's not really a differentiator. His first one isn't actually different from the government. So the next one, and this is where I think they have had a little bit of traction, make Britain a clean energy superpower. And also that is the environment linking to the economy. Next one, build an NHS fit for the future. That's okay. Make Britain's streets safe. Pretty standard. And then the last one, break down the barriers to opportunity at every stage, which again, I think is worthy and noble, but it needs greater harsh, greater sharpness than that. As you say, it's a lot of words at every stage. Break down the barriers to opportunity at every stage. The other thing that's missing there is the cost of living crisis. Rishi Sunak has put half inflation right there at the center of his things. And I'm surprised Keir hasn't put that bang there because I would have thought inflation cost of living is the number one issue in British politics. I think these missions, I think the downside of our surveys, unless if we go through the audiences that we spoke to and the ones that I did, we're talking a cohort of about 4,000 people now. One of whom could name three and a half of the missions. So that's the downside they've not cut through. The upside of that is that between now and the election, I think these should become the basis for five very, very clear, specific pledges that maybe are less global, less grand, less grandiose, that actually bring them down maybe to a level closer to people. To remind people, Rishi's Sunak's five promises are, we will halve inflation, grow the economy, reduce debt, cut waiting lists and stop the boats. You can see where the electorate is for that. You can see where the stop the boat electorate is. The whole country is in support of cut waiting lists.

I guess the conservatives are on the reduced debt side and the whole country is on halve inflation. We all agree there are huge problems with where the conservative government is and it seems unlikely that they get reelected. But presumably, if you were in Rishi Sunak's position and you were communicating for him, that's probably as bad as good as you can do if it turns to defining something to take you into the next election. But if you were in the number 10 comms machine, would you think that that was a pretty good stab at coming up with five things if you're on Rishi

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

Sunak's side to take him into the next election? Possibly. I don't think they're very ambitious and also I don't think they necessarily hang together. I think the stop the boats thing is such an obviously polarizing populist move at a time when I thought Sunak was going to possibly reverse the populism bandwagon on which the Tories have been riding.

But it is hugely popular. It does seem to be very, very popular.

I'm not convinced about that. I don't think it's, I think you can get very, very different views on this. I think for a lot of people, it's something that just underlines why they don't like the Tories, that they're focusing on something that they, so here we are today with this week with the net migration figures. And actually, we're going to see that those people coming over on boats are a very, very small part of a much bigger problem, which actually business, for example, once fixed. Well, so I don't know, most of the polls, we can share some of this and stuff are pretty consistent in putting illegal migration right up there as one of the top four issues among voters and top two amongst those who've backed Tories in the last election.

Yeah, but I think you've got to be very careful about these polls. They tend to reflect what the, is kind of in the media at that time. Yeah, I don't deny there are lots of people who think that the issue is people who are coming here who shouldn't be coming here. However, I think there is a broader debate on migration, which particularly in the business community, we saw in those people that we were speaking to in Leeds last week, where they, they would, they would recognize that there are massive shortages in labor market, there are skills shortages, which they feel can't be fixed. And therefore, Rishi Sunak, I think rightly, this goes back to your point about being more grown up than Johnson and Truss and Braverman, is saying we have to be a bit careful about how we handle this, this debate. So they're trying to create all the focus on the boats, essentially as a distraction for the more serious challenge they're facing or which they're failing by their own standards. Well, and the big, big story there absolutely as we, as we move towards the break is that the UK is going to take in over half a million people in net migration this year. That is over 300,000 more than we're taking in last year. And it's one of the highest numbers on record. And if you look at the composition of the people coming in, there's been an extraordinary shift away from hundreds of thousands of people coming from the European Union towards the largest numbers now coming from South Asia and from sub-Saharan Africa. And also the numbers inflated, I guess, by Hong Kong and Ukraine as well. Hong Kong, Ukraine and Afghanistan had an impact on this, big impact on it. But it is a big change in the composition of Britain. And it's an interesting one for conservative government to be doing because I guess most of the Brexit voters or many, many of people who voted Brexit were doing so to reduce immigration. Immigration was a big issue for them. And I don't think they meant by that. We want to reduce immigration from the European Union and take a lot of immigration from other places in the world, unless I'm missing something. You agree with that, right? I do agree with you. Final point before we go to break, just a quick observation about Scotland. The dial against independence, I think, has definitely moved. I think there was a sense around, lots of people that I met, a sense around the SNP that they really are in quite considerable political trouble, which is obviously a massive opportunity for Labour. And the second thing worth reflecting on again is the local elections in Northern Ireland, pretty stunning success for Sinn Féin. And that suggests, I think it's probably about them,

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

the people they're wanting to give a message to the other parties, get on with getting these damned institutions back up and running. But it also is the moving the dial, possibly in the direction of Sinn Féin's overall goal. Very good. Let's take a break.

Welcome back to the Restless Politics with me, Alistair Campbell. And me, Rory Stewart.

And Rory, we talked briefly about Sinn Féin there and politics in Ireland. Very good traction for the Leo Veradka interview on leading. If people haven't heard that, just search Leo Veradka leading podcast. Irish T-shirt, I thought very interesting on all sorts of things and artificial intelligence on the future of healthcare, which he knows more about than most prime ministers because he's been a doctor. And also, I was fascinated by what he said about how the reason why the relationship with America matters so much is because they feel that for the last decade, the UK government hasn't listened to Dublin, but they always listen to Washington. And basically, Ireland gets its messages now through Washington. That was a very interesting observation to me. And a lovely bit also, which I think we've talked about before,

and the psychology of politicians on how bitterness and paranoia plays into the mentality of it. And jealousy. And jealousy, exactly. Yeah. Now, shall we talk about the G7,

which became the Volodymyr Zelensky show? Yeah. Well, a little bit before we, we should bring you in on G7 because you've done a lot of G7 stuff, but very, very quick primer for people to remember. G7 emerged, predictably, from a sort of meeting of a group of five countries, then a group of six countries by the 1970s became the G7. And in those days, those countries were, let's hope we're going to be able to name them. Actually, Rory, Rory, I'm going to, I'm going to correct you. Okay. Well, 1973, it was a group of four, and it was a group of four finance ministers. And that was Secretary of Treasury in America, Schultz, Helmut Schmidt, the, from West Germany, Giscard Estan from France, and Anthony Barber from the UK. And they met in Washington,

in the White House, they became known as the Library Group of Four, because they met in the White House Library. Later that year, Schultz suggested that Japan be added, and Japan was added, and that became the group of five. 1974, all five members suddenly had changes in leadership of the country. George Pompidou died, and Giscard Estan became prime minister. Brant in Germany, Nixon in America, and Tanaka in Japan all had to quit because of various scandals. We had two elections in the year. And therefore, Gerald Ford, who was Nixon's successor, decided, let's move it up from finance ministers, let's have a meeting of the leaders. And how are those things logically connected? Why the political turmoil suddenly meant move from finance ministers to leaders? I don't, because Gerald Ford thought that the finance ministers could do so much, but there ought to be a forum where the leaders could meet in more relaxed setting than would normally be the

case. And then in 1975, Helmut Schmidt, he, with the French, proposed adding Italy. This was obviously to try to get more of a European input, so it became the group of six. And then in group in 1976, Harold Wilson, who had been the leader of the UK, he resigned, Jim Callahan became prime minister, and Gerald Ford decided that he felt they needed another more experienced English speaker.

Therefore, Pierre Trudeau of Canada was added, and it became the group of seven.

And just to remind people, it's Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the United States, as well as the EU. And at that date, when you're talking about,

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

these were the seven largest economies in the world, and not just the seven largest economies alone. They were about 70% of global GDP.

I know. And what is it now, about 30?

Yeah. And now we're down to about 30%. And now, of course, countries like China and India are in the top seven, but are not turning up at the G7. And this is one of the big question marks. So it's gone from being representing the seven largest economies in the world and 70% of the world economy, to now presenting itself as an excuse for not including China primarily, as representing a gathering of major powers with Western values.

And of course, for many years, Russia, for several years, Russia was added, it became a G8.

And that was something you guys did, right? That was something that you did on the ground?

It started. I think their very first one was, I think it joined the group for the first time in 97, which was in Denver. I don't remember Yeltsin. Yes, he was at that. And I think that they got kicked out a few years ago. 2014 Invasion, Crimea. Yeah. Exactly. But also, you mentioned India there.

So Modi was at this G7. And so was Lula from Brazil. And so was Albanese. And there were others who, so what's happening is that it's sort of evolving into something different.

And Gordon Brown was very much in favor, I know. He was very focused on the G20. He thought the G20

was a much more important body. So I think it will evolve. It's funny, last night, when I knew we were going to talk about this, I had a quick flick through my diaries to look at some of the G7s I went to. And sort of, interestingly, if I give you the highlights, most European summits, I can remember some pretty serious policy stuff. But if my highlight of the first one in Denver, the two highlights, the first was Northern Ireland was totally our preoccupation. And it was actually, I remember trying to persuade Bill Clinton to go out and do a doorstep. And it really pissed off his team that I got him to go out and do a doorstep with Mike Brunson of ITN.

But the other highlight was the fact that Chuck Berry was there. That was big news, right?

Then we had the, we were then, the UK was the chair of the next one, that was in Birmingham.

And what I remember about that one, the first was that Frank Sinatra died.

The second was a story that we've talked about before, the Japanese Prime Minister, Hashimoto, decided he wanted to send the good luck message to Kenny Del Gleesh,

because Newcastle United were the cup final. The next thing I remember was Boris Yeltsin

at a dinner being very much the worst for wear, shouting quite loudly, all sorts of very, very

strong opinions in Russian. But he had this very meek interpreter who spoke incredibly softly.

So Yeltsin would be shouting and bawling. And then the interpreter would be trying to translate the shouting and bawling, but nobody could hear what she was saying.

Because he was shouting so loudly over the top?

No, it's just that she wasn't, she was, she, she was inaudible if you, unless you were sort of, I'm sure Yeltsin could hear what she was saying, but nobody else could.

So the poor man, none of you had any idea what he was talking about. So he was waiting to get your reactions to his rant and he was getting nothing back. Well, people, people, I remember Bill Clinton, I remember Tony Blair at one point, just mouthing the word madhouse to Bill Clinton, who loved all that stuff. He just thought it was hysterical. And then the other really funny moment that, that one was Bill Clinton, the somebody in the, in the UK protocol team said

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

that one of the worst things about having to have the summit was that somebody's job, virtually full time was to go around taking, removing stamens from all the flowers that were on display.

So like the dinner table, all the flowers, the stamens, when you arriving at the sort of red carpet were lined with flowers and people had removed the stamens. And I said, why are they doing that? I said, Oh, because Clinton's allergic to the stamens of flowers. So I said to one of the sort of downtime bits. And I said to Bill Clinton, God, you must cause a lot of trouble around the world with this stamen's allergy. And he says, it's bullshit. It's not true. Every, everywhere I go in the world, it's in the protocol notes, Bill Clinton is allergic to the stamen of flowers.

So that was, that was Birmingham. Then there was Cologne. And what I remember from Cologne was that

Yeltsin was ill. And I also remember Shirak going into a complete rant about Nouvelle cuisine.

How he hated the fact that you got these big plates with silver platters on top of them.

And when the platters were removed, there was this tidy portion of food there.

And was that not a French invention?

It may well have been, but it was not one that was appreciated by the then French president.

The next one in Japan, I'm going to read you a line from my diary here, or you'll like this.

This was in Okinawa. I do remember swimming in the sea. So at one point, we left for the GA to to palace up the road from the hotel. Clinton was late because of the MEPP, Middle East Peace Process Talks. Shredder didn't bother. Shirak arrived last. And in the end, TB was in hysterics, that it was possibly the most pointless meeting he had ever attended, enlivened only by Shirak's extraordinary rudeness to Larry Summers, the American Secretary of the Treasury.

Then the next day, Saturday, July 22, TB over breakfast in eight presidential suites in eight five star hotels. There are currently eight leaders asking eight Sherpas and eight press secretaries. What the hell are we all doing here? And I have I have no memory of anything that we actually was actually discussed at that one. Then there was Genoa, which became Berlusconi was in charge of that one. And that was where the anti globalization protest started since when they've all had to move to safer places. I mean, so now and then we come to the one that is that I come from Creef in Scotland, as you know, and it was Gleneagles 2005. So it was a big event for Creef. Yeah, it's the biggest thing that ever happened in our neighborhood.

And actually, it was the moment where GCOM has been quite useful. That's when it pushed ahead with its debt relief, which was a huge move and led to almost 100% debt relief for many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Unfortunately, we'll probably have to get there again pretty soon, because a lot of countries are now heavily indebted. I remember George Bush as well, using the G7 as part of his push on AIDS and antivirals. That's right, HIV. It's an amazing American program, PEPFA, and then everyone getting in behind that one. George Haley Bush is really extraordinary bipartisan achievement on AIDS. And then I guess it comes from once again, sort of 2018 Canada, where Trump starts throwing his weight around demanding that Russia is put back in again. And you get this real standoff with the with them. Well, it's essentially with Angela Merkel saying the man's being ridiculous. And again, he disrupted it the following year too. There's a very famous picture. I think it was a G7. Was it when Trump sort of sitting behind a desk looking like a sort of spoiled child and Merkel and Macron and others sort of they've almost got pleading looks on their faces. He refused to sign the economic communique for the first time in 2018. I mean, it's very it's a very odd thing. I mean, I went

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

only to the development ministers part of it when I was in the cabinet, which was that year it was in France. So we were all went off to Paris and I was served something that looked suspiciously like Nouvelle Cuisine sitting around the table with a lot of G7 development ministers. And we were trying to focus on Ebola, but I completely failed to get the other ministers to commit the money to Ebola in the way that I wanted and ended up only really getting the commitment by taking the head of the American delegation head of USAID Mark Green for a walk along the sand. It is it is interesting how these I mean, they attract so much global media attention and there's a lot of work goes into them. The point about Sherpas, these are the people that that are kind of constantly in dialogue with each other, usually civil servants, but sometimes politicians. And they're essentially planning, they're planning the outcome. So the next G7 will already be being planning. And Kishida, the Japanese Prime Minister, he's, you know, he's been spending much of the last year preparing for this summit chose Hiroshima, because his main ambition for the meeting was to push for global nuclear disarmament. That was the whole point of this G7. And of course, Zelensky, I mean, really was the only show in town and and therefore nuclear disarmament as I mean, were you even aware that that was the main theme of the conference?

I think I mean, certainly from here in Japan, there's a lot of focus on the fact that it happened in a place where an untold number of people died, whether it was 140,000 or 300,000, we still don't really know how many people were killed by that atomic bomb. But yeah, the symbolism of that is very, very clear to people. And it's very, very important to Japanese political culture. But you're right, it became and felt like very much two things. Firstly, very focused on Zelensky. And secondly, from where I'm speaking in Japan, it was particularly being perceived by the Chinese as a very hostile act. And I mean, this is where the G20 is so different, because the G20 includes China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, it's got a very, very different tone to the G7 in terms of the G7 increasingly sort of standing for the sort of minority Western tradition in a world where the BRICS, Brazil, Russia, India, China now have a larger economy combined than the G7. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I wonder whether it will evolve. There's talk about South Korea, Australia, you know, becoming added to it. But because I think part of the thinking is that they're liberal democracies as well as market economies, that's sort of part of the thinking. But it could look quite outdated pretty quickly, I think.

Very good. Well, finally, Japan.

Yeah. Tell us, tell us what you do, what are you doing in Japan?

Here I am in Japan. I spent, I spent the day at Ise Jingu, which is an extraordinary shrine reaching back 1600 years, and where the main buildings are reconstructed from scratch every 20 years. And one of the arguments for doing it is it keeps the living craft traditional life that people are relatively confident that the buildings you're looking at are the same buildings you were looking at in the seventh century paradoxically, because they're only 20 years old. I don't think I fully understand that. So they are 20 year old buildings that are... Exact replica of their predecessor. And the great point about doing it every 20 years is you never lose touch with the craft tradition. You can be certain that you're remaking it on exactly the same techniques and technology that it was done in the last time round. And it's an extraordinary place because it is at the heart of the emperor and the heart of Shintoism, which is not quite clear whether it really is a religion. I mean, it's a profound sense of Japanese spirituality

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

and attachment to nature and rocks that preceded Buddhism, but also part of a Japanese religious psyche which doesn't really distinguish. I was, a Japanese friend of mine was joking today that many Japanese are born Shinto or sort of as it were, baptized Shinto, marry as Christians and die as Buddhists without really feeling a very strong need to identify. And when I asked whether there was a conversion to Shintoism, I realized it was a translation issue. And certainly the Japanese in the room said, we don't really recognize the notion of conversion, that religions doesn't feel like that to them in a way that in the West, we very much feel either you're a believer or you're not a believer. But in Japan, it seems to be that you can live in a sort of suspended ambiguity longer. They do good temples, don't they? They do great temples, extraordinary temples, extraordinary food. But Japanese politics, we've talked about a little bit. I mean, at the moment, our current leader is from the LDP, which is this party that dominated Japanese politics. And really in a sense is the products of the American occupation after the Second World War. So Japan was defeated, the Americans came in, they rewrote the constitution. And then there was a very strange moment in the 1940s, 1947, where the Americans panicking over the rise of communist China changed direction, particularly in Japan, and reversed their course on unions, on breaking up the conglomerates, on war criminals, and essentially, and they did pretty similar things, I think, with the German security service in West Germany, began allowing back in some pretty right-wing figures who had been associated with war crimes during the Second World War into key political positions. And this created a world in which Japanese politics has really been dominated largely since the Second World War by families who are often old samurai families, many of them coming from one very small part of Japan. These are all people who go to Tokyo University. The current leader in Japan is the son of a politician, the grandson of a politician, his cousin's minister, his uncle was Prime Minister, and his uncle's father and grandfather were so ministers. So getting onto the bus, leaving the temple, the young Japanese woman just said to me, we are completely fed up with these people. They are all the same. These are, it's a narrow political family. It doesn't represent us at all. They all feel like the same people. And it doesn't really matter which party's in power, but in particular, the LDP, which is back in again, has had a stranglehold on Japanese politics for 60, 70 years, surviving the most unbelievable corruption scandals. Yeah, they say about that when the woman says that they're all saved. The number of political parties in Japan is phenomenal. It's just that many of them have sort of 0.0% of the vote. But if you look up a full list of them, I think that my favorite is probably the party to realize a bright Japan with a female emperor, they got 0.02% at the last time. But this is really important. And the reason it's really important is that there's a real problem with the imperial succession. So in Japan, the way the Americans wrote the constitution, the Japanese royal family are only allowed to marry either other members of the royal family or members of the aristocracy, but the Americans also abolished the aristocracy. So there's nobody really that they can marry. So the Japanese royal family is shrunk to about 10 people. And if a woman in the Japanese royal family marries a commoner, they cease to be royal. So currently in a position where the emperor has a daughter, and it's impossible for the daughter to marry anyone, because there's nobody left in the royal family that she can marry and she can't marry anyone else and remain royal.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

Why did they only get 10,260 votes in the entire country then?

It's very unfortunate because the one route out of this is to allow women to take over as emperors, which currently doesn't seem to be possible. So there's a big crisis. And this is a royal family that goes back 130 generations. I've just looked up a full list. The ones that they got 0.0% were the wake up the Japanese party. They sound like fun. Party to take over US military base in Okinawa to Tokyo party. That's another big issue and has been for a long time US military basis. I know they're huge issues, but they all have these parties. And I guess that these parties are a response to the frustration that the woman on your bus is reflecting, that the parties at the top are just the same old crew doing the same old stuff. But even at the top, by the way, you've got a constitutional democratic party, you've got a communist party, you've got a social democratic party, you've got the NHK party, you've got the here's another one for you, the happiness realisation party.

That's good. Well, that's I'd vote for that. I'd vote for that.

But the children's party got 50,662 votes, the metaverse party got 19,000 votes, and the smile party got 5,409 votes.

Yeah, that's not very many. Anybody interested, we can send some links in our literature that we distribute, but maybe a figure to really look at to understand post-war Japanese politics very clearly. The great figure is a man called Tanako Kakuya, who completely dominated Japanese politics,

became prime minister in the 1970s, stepped down in the most colossal corruption scandals.

He lived in something called the Majuro Palace. He was a construction magnet, and he would hand out 100 million yen bundles to other politicians, and he ran his entire own faction in the LDP. And despite these various corruption scandals and judicial procedures, he continued to dominate right the way through to the 1980s. So I'll send a little link, because to understand how this man from a relatively hard scrabble background on the frozen north managed to break into this world of samurai elite politicians, and then,

despite the corruption scandals, continue to run this LDP faction from the inside is worth doing.

It's also a sign of the Conservative Party. The current leader comes from something called the Kuchikai faction, or the Pond faction, which is a faction, which is, I guess, more of the sort of one nation Tory tradition, we'd say, in the UK. And he's meant to be more progressive, more friendly towards welfare, more friendly towards the environment. So in a way, I suppose, if a party has dominance for too long, and maybe this is true of the Conservative Party in Britain, you begin representing the public by factions breaking apart within the party.

Well, they do have a pretty good, they have pretty speedy turnaround of their prime ministers, don't they? And I think that is partly a consequence of factionalism. But Japan, generally, they've been pretty stagnant for a long time. But actually, economically, the Japanese seem in a pretty good place at the moment.

It's interesting, isn't it? So there's been some positive recent stuff. But on the big scale, the big scale is Japan grew like a rocket from the Second World War to 1989, became the second largest economy in the world. And when we think about the current anxieties about China in the United States, in the 1980s, it was all about Japan. And there were all those novels produced about how the Japanese were going to take over the world, and everybody's very worried about Japanese nationalism. And then suddenly, 1989, 1990, everything ground to a halt. And the Japanese

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 133. Suella's speeding, Japan in focus, and what's the point of the G7?

economy basically has not grown since 1990. I mean, that was the period. In 1989, the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, the land of the Imperial Palace was worth more than Manhattan. And Tokyo was worth more than the entire land mass of the United States. It was this extraordinary moment. Since when property price, I think some areas of Tokyo are still 10% of what they were in 1989. So, but their stock market is just at a record high. And the Berkshire Hathaway, Mr. Buffett, largest foreign destination of investments outside of the US is now is currently Japan, making industries return into Japan. So, I think there are things they can point to. I thought it was the other interesting thing that came out of the G7 was the extent to which the Prime Minister, Kishida, clearly was wanting to push the other leaders into some pretty strongly, rhetorically at least, robust position on China. I noticed that Rishi Sunak, in his press conference, was very much sort of, he's obviously trying to avoid questions about Swallow Bravo, but he was very focused on that sort of very tough message on China. And that relationship between China and Japan, which as you say, is going to define the region in so many ways. But it was interesting to me that they were using the opportunity, not least with these other leaders there like Modi, like Lula, to say we have got a real problem and it's on our doorstep and you guys need to be more seized of it even than you are. And of course, that's something that Modi is going to respond to well, because I think there's opportunities for India in presenting itself as the great growing superpower, as a counterbalance to China. As Leo Varadka said, China's growth is in many ways defined our world in the last couple of decades and it might be India in the next couple of decades. Very good. Okay, well, maybe something on which to end, on those wise words, which can be listened to on the podcast Leading. Good to talk to you, speak to you soon. Speak soon. Bye-bye.