

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 134. Question Time: Solving sewage, building on the Green Belt, and the most intimidating person in politics

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

And me, Alistair Campbell.

Very good. So, Alistair, sewage dumping, this is a question you like, Clive Fenton.

I'm sure you'll be aware of all the news covering the dumping of sewage into our country's waterways.

And onto our beaches, I understand you voted to support this approach in a recent vote this year, did you?

In Parliament, is that correct?

I'd like to understand why, and I imagine this may be addressed to me, I'm only teasing you.

I'd like to understand why, and given the absolute mess, what actions you're going to take to reverse this unacceptable situation.

So, Clive, I'm not actually a sitting MP, so I haven't been a member of the British Parliament since 2019,

so I certainly did not vote to support this approach in a recent vote this year in Parliament.

However, it is a good subject and one that's worth talking about.

Basically, at the heart of it, I believe, is the incredible lamentable underinvestment in our sewage system,

which means that the whole British sewage system at the moment and has for a long time depended, if there's an overflow, in discharging raw sewage into water.

And fixing this, and I was the Environment Minister, so I spent a lot of time looking at this issue, is an issue of tens of billions of pounds.

The number that was thrown at me was something like 23, 25 billion pounds,

which, to put it in context, is, I don't know, the entire prison budget four times over would have to go into fixing this.

So, it's not a small amount of money, and it would be interesting to see a cross-party approach to put the funding in place to get it together.

And I think there's another thing that isn't communicated to the public, which is that I'm being a bit unfair to colleagues in the Treasury,

but the impression I got from the Treasury was that they thought that 23 billion pounds wasn't worth it for the health benefits

that you derive from not putting the sewage into the water.

Question here related to Lee Williams.

Your thoughts on water companies charging the customer 10 billion pounds over 10 years to repair antiquated network,

despite withdrawing over 50 billion pounds in dividends over the last 10 years.

I think this is what gets people really angry, Roy.

Of all the privatizations, I think this is the one that really gets people to go.

And I think that people just feel that these water companies have been absolutely in it for the money, haven't really invested for the long term, and at some point they stop caring about the quality of water.

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And of course, if you have something like Dary's coffee as the minister, it always seems to me like somebody who, it's almost like everything is happening around us, though it's got nothing to do with, oh, yeah, well, it's not very good, is it? But it's better than it was, or it's, you know, we've got... She actually went on television the other day, so we've got the cleanest bathing water we've ever had.

Well, you then look at these maps of where this SHIT is being pumped out in massive quantities. And as you know, I'm a cold water swimmer, and we're always looking for new places. And you can't even get the data now as to what is clean and what isn't.

I think the government's completely underestimating this issue as a real problem for them. I mean, it is a really interesting issue.

The one that I was completely obsessed with was air quality, because when I was the minister, it became clear that at least 26,000 people a year were dying prematurely from air pollution.

But I remember doing a debate with Diane Abbott in the House of Commons, and she was saying it's absolutely disgusting that air pollution is worse than it's ever been. And I had to say, actually, that isn't true.

The truth is, air quality is much, much better than it was 20 years ago, 30 years ago, 40 years ago. It was unbelievably bad, the nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide that was in our air.

And of course, you go back to the famous smogs and fogs of Victoria and Britain.

That was air pollution. That wasn't weather.

What Dickens thought was part of the traditional London weather was simply industrial pollution. So it is also true that actually our beaches and water have, on many indicators, improved over the last 20, 30 years.

But our expectations are also, understandably, expanding all the time.

So just as I don't think it's good enough to say, we don't need to do anything on air because it was worse in the past, well, 26,000 people are still dying prematurely.

And you can make the same argument around sewage.

Yes, it may well be that our bathing water is cleaner than it was in the past.

I mean, the Thames famously is much cleaner than it was in the early 80s.

And we've built a huge sewer under the Thames, being built £4 billion super sewer under the Thames to make it even cleaner.

But I think the public still wants things better than that, don't they?

Yeah. Now, Kirsty Savapalan.

I've just ordered Alice's book, thank you.

Somebody who's disabled and lives with the chronic illness, ME, which limits mobility and exertion.

What can I realistically do?

Do you know of any active disabled, chronically sick politician role models to inspire people like me?

Actually, when you read the book, Kirsty, you'll find that I have a section where I pay tribute to three of my favourite MPs.

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Jack Ashley, who was profoundly deaf.
David Blunkett, who was, as we all know, blind
and was one of our best ministers by a long way.
And Anne Begg, MP up in Aberdeen,
who I suspect was in there in Parliament with you, Rory.
Yes.
And of course, was in a wheelchair.
And I don't know if you may know, Rory,
I also know politicians who struggle with mental health problems.
I don't know of any who have ME.
We don't know whether you do, Rory,
but I don't think we should think that it's impossible
to be a member of Parliament with chronic illness.
No, I mean, one of the striking examples of my intake
is Paul Maynard, who has cerebral palsy.
He was strangled by an umbilical cord at birth,
developed epilepsy, and has been a very effective MP.
And he was a minister in justice,
minister in transport, very bright guy.
I mean, it's not easy.
And there have been times where he's felt
that he's suffered real abuse as a politician.
I'm afraid to say also actually abuse from the Labour benches
when he's been speaking.
But he's a real example of somebody
who's overcome extraordinary difficulties to be a powerful MP.
Now, here's a question for you.
Charlotte, what are Rory and Alice's views
on Keir Starmer's plans to allow more building on the Greenbelt?
I live on the Whirl.
There are applications to build houses on our Greenbelt land,
which are extremely unpopular with myself and local residents.
I've always voted Labour and was planning to at the next election,
but Starmer's comments made me think twice.
Where are you on building on the Greenbelt?
I think I'm moving towards it.
I don't see how we...
I, as you know, love the Great Landscapes.
I think a lot of it when we talk about the Greenbelt,
we're not necessarily talking about Great Landscapes.
We're talking about land that has been protected
from certain forms of building
into which there has already been a sense of encroachment.

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And I think as long as we do have proper environmental policies,
then at some point,
given the housing crisis in this country,
we are going to have to look at it.
I'm on the other side of this.
So, I think the Greenbelt has been an amazing thing around our cities.
I think it stopped urban sprawl.
It was a really smart move.
If I look at a city like Nagoya, where I was yesterday,
you can see what happens when there isn't adequate protection around.
And a lot of American cities,
you can really see how the sprawl continues and see.
I'd like us to be more imaginative though.
I agree, a lot of the Greenbelt Band is substandard land.
So, I'd like to see Kirstama put in his manifesto.
In fact, you and I should write a manifesto for Kirstama.
But in his manifesto,
a commitment to plant the Greenbelt around London
with the largest forest in England.
We could put in 500 million trees.
We could transform air quality.
We could have an impact on climate.
We could have an incredible impact on leisure
by putting the Greenbelt to proper use.
So, it's not just sitting there as sort of half abandoned land,
but get a beautiful, beautiful grand forest planted there.
Okay, listen, Harry Diamond,
what does a UK cabinet minister in 2023 have to do to get the sack?
As in, no resignation given or accepted, plain outright, you're fired.
What do you think a minister would actually have to do
to get the boot without any sense of...
Ron Davis, when he went for a walk on Clapham Common,
that ended up in him being sacked.
We had...
But when was the last sacking in this government?
I think Ron Davis is unfortunate
because I think Ron Davis is a legacy from a period
where the press were pushing for ministers who were gay
and he was stuck in a problem
about not being comfortable coming out.
I think that that wouldn't happen today.
And I think ministers are much less likely
to be forced to resign over affairs.

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Although, I guess, Matt Hancock had resigned,
but that was connected with breaking COVID regulations.
What would it take to drive people out?
Well, I mean, remember, the number of people have gone,
have resigned or been sacked.
Not until how he went about his tax affairs.
Yeah, but they always go after a long draw now,
try to defend them and keep going.
There's not a sort of...
You know, there's nothing seems to be cut and dried anymore.
And this whole thing about the...
Sunak appears to be sort of using the ethics advisor
in much the way as previous Tory prime ministers have done
to sort of say, let's see if we can sort of kick the process
into the long grass a bit.
Oh, I'm not sure that's fair.
I think this ethics advisor, Laurie Magnus,
is not only pretty good, but pretty quick.
I mean, I know people suspected that,
but actually what happened with Adam Zahabi
is I think he was back with him four days.
As soon as he produced his report on Adam Zahabi went.
No, I think that's working pretty efficiently.
It's not kicking it into long grass
like a royal commission or something.
Okay, James OB, who's the most intimidating person
you've both come across in politics?
Is that James O'Brien?
No, I don't think it is James O'Brien.
I think James O'Brien is called James OB on social media,
but I don't think this is James O'Brien.
The most intimidating person?
I'm going for Helmut Cole.
I found him incredibly intimidating.
More than Vladimir Putin?
Yeah, partly because of his physicality, I think.
He was very...
I don't mean intimidating, by the way,
in a Dominique Raab type way
of bullying and aggression.
Just incredibly intimidating because of his size.
And there was a power about him
that sort of emanated.

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I found him very intimidating, yeah.
Well, I'd put my money
on the leader of Zimbabwe.
I was the first minister
to meet President Manangagwa
after his inauguration.
And he killed his first man,
I think when he was 14 or 15,
and then led Mugabe's security service.
And at that period when he came in,
there was a real desire to believe
that now that Mugabe had stepped down,
that Manangagwa was going to lead
a new liberal opening,
that they were going to open up economically
and politically and run clean elections.
And he marched in to see me
with two men
in full military uniform on either side of him.
Sat down.
And he began talking about
Lorna Kabila
and his time in military training camps
in Angola
in the 1970s and early 80s.
And I sort of remembered
and I gently tried to suggest
in the weird way that British ministers are supposed to
that maybe we should allow
Zimbabweans outside the country to vote
and we should have independent electoral monitors in.
And he looked at me
and said,
what are you going to get Mugabe in?
And he looked at me
with a sort of extraordinary
sort of mingled, pity
experience
and sight sort of derision.
And I left the room thinking
that the idea that we were going to get
amazing reforms out of a man called
Emerson the Crocodile Manangagwa

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was not very likely.
Well, the one that I almost said
but I didn't want to was also Zimbabwean
and that was Mugabe.
It was not utterly repelled and revolted.
It's one of the most expensive suits I've ever seen.
You've got a good eye for expensive suits, haven't you?
You're always noting on Michael Heseltine
who else did you think had an expensive suit?
Philip Hammond. I saw Philip Hammond recently.
He had a very, very, very expensive suit.
And what's the sign of an expensive suit
as a man that doesn't notice these things?
What do you notice about expensive suits?
It's the cut you can tell.
It's just very, very, very well cut
and the cloth sort of...
I noticed with Philip Hammond for example
when we were sitting together
and we were sitting down maybe for about two hours
but I noticed that when he stood up
it still looked like he'd just put it on.
It was the weight of the cloth.
I mean, I don't know.
Maybe it was Mars and Spencer's but I don't think so.
So Mugabe was wearing this incredibly expensive suit
and it was at the Chogham, the Commonwealth
Heads of Government meeting in Edinburgh
and his first question was on the lines of
why did Tony Blair surround himself
with nothing but homosexuals?
Jonathan Powell and I were both sort of very confused
with this question but so
then he went to add that a brief about
Tony Blair's gay mafia
or very, very, very odd.
Gosh, good, it's gross to me.
Oliver Merriman, year abroad story for Alastair.
I am, like you were,
a student of modern languages at Keys College
in Cambridge. Is that Gonville and Keys?
That's the one.
Gonville and Keys College, Cambridge

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where you went, right?

September I'm going on my year abroad
and would therefore love to know the most memorable story
from the time you spent on your year abroad
and as a modern linguist at Cambridge University.

It was one of the best years of my life.

Totally random.

All the students were given the choice of having
year abroad in a school
teaching English for 12 hours a week
or going to university. I went for

the school. It's then

total potluck about where you get sent

and I got sent to a school in Nice.

So I had a year

living in Nice, down by the port

and it was absolutely wonderful.

The highlight moment in a bizarre sort of way
was probably

when I realised that I could make a very, very
good living as a busker

because I had my backpipes.

With your pipes? Yeah, I had my backpipes.

I went and found a very quiet place

out in the open but a sort of

random car park in the middle of nowhere

tuned them up, started playing them just from

my own entertainment and this crowd

came out and started throwing money into the

into the box and I thought, oh my god.

You were just practicing? I was just practicing.

This evening I went to the

Promenade des Anglais

and then Rue Masséna which is the sort of

pedestrian precinct and I stood there

playing my pipes.

I thought, god, I could make it absolutely

fortune. So then what I did, I persuaded

the head teacher of the school, can I pack

my 12 hours into one and a half days

and then the rest of the year I just spent

the time travelling around Europe

making a lot of money with my backpipes. And that's how you

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made your fortune? Well, fortune overstates it.
So, Rory, if you're asking me
specific questions aimed at me,
Carl Wiseman, could Rory please share a few
of his lessons from staying overnight with ordinary people
during his mayoral campaign? Yeah, so
that, thank you. So this was
something called Come Kept With Me
and I put out a tweet saying I'd love
to be invited
to stay in people's houses and about
6,000 people wrote back
almost immediately and there were lovely emails
coming in from people saying, they were
often very long emails trying to explain
why I should be staying with them and what I'd learn
when I was staying with them. But it was
really eye-opening. I stayed
with a co-operative
for older women up in North London.
I stayed on the sofa
of a guy's family flat
in Wandsworth where he was living
with his parents and his sister and a younger
brother in a two bedroom council house.
Did you have anybody
check them out before you went? Yes,
someone from our team would call them.
When you're an MP, obviously, you're often leafletting.
So you knock on a door
and you put a leaflet through and you ask a couple of questions
and you move on. If you stay in someone's house
you have the whole night
and the morning and you talk late into the night
and you wake up and you often you can
walk to work with them in the morning
or walk to the underground
station in the morning and I learned
so much.
I learned so much from just getting a sense
there was a stable woman who was volunteering
in a homeless shelter
out towards Stratford and

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a lot of the times I was sleeping on people's sofas
but it just gave me an amazing
insight in a way that
is so important for London because London isn't
really one place. It's
sort of 32 cities connected
to each other and you've really got to spend
time on all of them. And did you
literally stay on your own or did any of your people
your team stay with you? I'd stay
on my own except one
case I think my friend Will came and stayed
once but generally I'd stay on my own
and we'd have
sometimes have supper. I'd bring some milk tray
with me.

Milk tray? Yeah, Cadbury's
milk tray. Always milk tray?
Always Cadbury's milk tray, yeah. Why?
Well because someone had made a joke about my
being the man with the milk tray
so it was this kind of crap joke.

Ah, I see, okay.

Matt Hancock was the milk tray man as well, wasn't he?

That wasn't because
he went in through people's windows for the present
I think it was more because he wore a dodgy
black polar neck.

Right, well let's just take a quick break
and Rory Stewart the milk tray man.

Welcome back

to the Restless Politics Question Time.

Jonas, you both seem like very busy people
constantly on the move, travelling to different
countries, working on multiple different projects.
I wonder what are your tips for work-life balance?

I manage communications
for a UK diplomatic mission
while also having three kids under the age 5
I feel burnt out most days for the struggle of wanting
to give my all for the job
and also my family.

I'm the last person to answer that very, very well

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because I don't think I do it very well at all
the work-life thing.
I feel completely burnt out most of the time
as you know I'm running this charity gift directly
which means that I have to be in Africa
quite a lot and fundraising the states
quite a lot
and I feel very, very
guilty. I've got an 8 year old
and a 6 year old and
I won't see them now for
almost three weeks.
Oh Lord!
So I think it's tough
and I think it's tougher
maybe this isn't true but I sometimes
feel it's tougher for my friends
or women. I think it's particularly tough for Shashana
who's running a big charity in Afghanistan and Myanmar
and it's also having to
do an enormous amount of other stuff
in the house. I think
it's pretty tough being a young parent though
I guess any gender
because the expectations are generally
pretty impossible aren't they?
I listen, I'm a lot better than I was
in that I rest more than I
used to
but I still feel I have to exercise
every day. I've been out swimming this morning
and I'm doing boxing later on. I've got to
exercise
I've got to sort of look after myself
and you know our kids are growing up
but we still see a lot of them
and still worry about them
and still want to be kind of connected to them
I guess you do have a job
to have quite a lot of freedom
Yeah, I think that's true
I mean I'm the boss which helps
and a lot of what I'm doing is fundraising

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so a lot of the time I'm travelling around
trying to raise money and it's true
actually as a member of parliament too
that you are your own boss as an MP
and you can pretty much, MPs do work hard
I mean whatever we think about them
maybe evil, maybe incompetent but they do work hard
No, I think very few are evil
some are incompetent but I agree with you
that most work very very hard
Listen, we've got a few critical questions this week
which I think we'll come back to you later
We've got a lot of people asking
suggesting that we were very dismissive of doctors
and the question of why we've got such a
problem with training doctors
which I said we'd come back to
but given the level
of the number of people who got in touch
to say that they felt we were dismissive
I think we should come back at it when we've really looked into the issue
and here's another one we've got
a bit of criticism, Fritfly
The most popular country in Africa held their election this year
the results of which remain controversial
I haven't yet heard you guys mention it once
Can you give some thoughts and analysis on Nigeria
before the swearing in of Tanubu
at the end of the month? In fact, Fritfly
you must have missed the episode
where we talked at good length about the election
We've done a couple of Nigerian episodes
Yeah
and we talked quite a lot
about Tanubu
I mean it is very difficult
to know who
could have brought Nigeria out of its current
malaise
but it's difficult I'm afraid to believe that Tanubu
can because he is absolutely
a veteran machine politician
and the guy that was meant to be

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breath of fresh air came
third in the end. Who was Peter Obi
and Tanubu famously had his assets frozen
by the US government
for heroin dealing in 93
it's pretty worrying
Simon C

I'm genuinely interested in your answer to this
and I think I know

the answer is going to be but I don't really

I'm an art teacher, Simon

I wonder how you both feel about art

are you artists yourself

do you make time to be creative

do you have exhibitions

or galleries that are favourites

to paint?

I do paint a little bit

I paint and I draw

my first book placed in between has got

my drawings in it. Oh, they're yours?

They're my drawings yet? They're not bad

They're not okay, yeah

a bit of watercolour

yeah and art galleries

I mean I huge shout out if anyone's

interested in London at the moment

amazing free exhibition

on St. Francis in the National Gallery

if you want to pop down and have a look at it

which has the robe that St. Francis

himself wore in the 12th century

has incredible

manuscripts but also

paintings and artwork going right the way through to the current day

including film clips on St. Francis

so there's my

art gallery recommendation

I don't

I'm the worst probably not the worst

but I can't paint and I can't draw

and I really wish that I could

I really admire you

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but you're much much better at music than I am
so there we are
yeah but I just wish I could
and I have had a go
we've got an artist
Sarah Pickstone who lives just up the road from us
and she did help me
I did a painting for a charity
it was actually to raise funds for
a swing pool down in
the West Country
and actually
it wasn't bad it wasn't bad
with her at my side telling me what to do
but I would need to have
that if I was to
I do like wondering
I do like wondering around art galleries from time to time
my complete
fantasy if I was going to do something
if I managed to retire is I'd love to
make pots I love ceramics
I love the feeling of clay
I'm just an ore of
Chinese ceramics, Islamic ceramics
Japanese ceramics I'd love
to be a potter
okay there you go Simon C
when Rory Stewart becomes a potter
he can come along and teach your students
how to pot
well I've got a good one for you here
could you both give an example the fun side of politics
is if there's a story involved even better
any fun stories from politics
I understand
I can remember one in Japan
Gorman?
we had a gathering recently for Tony Blair's
70th birthday and there's lots of people who were
basically people who worked for him the whole time
and
people were remembering some very very

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very good fun times
and
I think I've told you the story about Tony once
sort of impersonating
an Ulster Unionist in the Bath
in Hillsborough Castle but the one that
popped into my head because we've been talking about Japan
was when
I got a message
that he wanted to see me and this was
he was in his bedroom at the British Embassy
in Tokyo
and I walked through and he
he discovered
he discovered the crash helmet
under the bed
in case of an earthquake
and there was something surreal
about walking in to see Tony Blair
lying on his bed
wearing a crash helmet
pretending that he was in the middle
of an earthquake
so you know
we had a
we had a good laugh quite a lot of the time
and I also think there is a fun in campaigning
I mean campaigns they can be hellish and
as Bill Clinton once said election campaigns are
the one form of activity that makes
everybody look like their passport photo
but elections can be very very good fun
I can think of lots of really really good moments
what about you, when did you have fun?
I think what's amazing about
being a politician is that
it's one of those rare professions which
actually allows you to get into
everybody else's house and I think
there are a couple of other professions that might
allow you to do that maybe a police officer
maybe some kind of journalist but basically
people often live quite a

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limited life you see your friends
and you go to their houses
but as a politician you can with your constituents
you're knocking on doors you're going to every village
and you're going to see
everything from the grandest houses
to the most remote outlying farms
to going into people's caravans
and I loved it
I'm quite nosy and I love
the privilege of being able to see every
different type of life being able to
spend time in the travel community
or spend time with
help with lambing
there's a lot of participation
I mean I spent a lot of time as a politician
in strange vehicles
canoes driving tractors
driving a mole plow
riding horses
all as part of being constituency MP
I mean there's a lot of fun to be had there
particularly if like me you're lucky enough
to represent a remote rural constituency
I don't think it would be quite the same if I was
representing Slough
Yeah but it would in a way because you're
absolutely right it's the same with journalism
I think the thing I used to love about being a journalist
is that you could literally walk up to anybody
anywhere and start talking to them
Hi I'm Alistair Campbell from the Daily Mirror
I'm doing a piece about X
five times out of 100 people would talk to you
Yeah I totally love it
and I think it's
I would recommend
as a way of getting to know your fellow man
there are very few things as good
so final question what books were reading
I put another plug in
for Raphael Baer's

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Amazing Politics a Survivors Guide
wonderful wonderful book
it's great on Russia
it's great on populism it's great on Britain
and another book
I strongly recommend it
I'm in Japan it's called Lost Japan
by Alex Kerr
and a lot of these recommendations on Japanese books
came from Twitter so I'm hugely
hugely grateful to Twitter
that's fantastic if anyone's ever looking
for a book it's just such a brilliant way
of getting book recommendations
That is one of the best I agree with you about
social media gets a lot of flak
deservedly but actually when you
say when you put things out
like anybody know a good book about so and so
a nice restaurant in such and such an area
it is amazing how
nice people are about
sending you information about stuff like that
I think it's just
absolutely brilliant and then finally
I mentioned
Tanaka Kakuya so in our
distribution I'm going to send a
book with a lovely article about Tanaka Kakuya
I am currently
reading a book that is
was sent to me by my good friend
Karl Bernstein
who and it's a book not about
Watergate it's about his life as a young
reporter
and any young
reporter out there or somebody who wants to
aspire to be a journalist it's just a
brilliant brilliant account of
and you get a sense of why he became one of
the greatest journalists of all time
and it's just about his relentless curiosity

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and I think that curiosity
is one of the most important
characteristics for all of us frankly
but obviously
for journalism and the other thing that I'm
that I'm reading is
it's a short history
of Germany
and it's called how we became what we are
obviously
of Deutsch very very good
well thank you Alison have a
you know good luck on the continuing extraordinary
successful book tour and look forward to speaking
again next week a book tour which I will be
suspending for the afternoon
as I am due to go to court
and be a witness in the Prince Harry case
about which we'll hear more in the next
podcast coming up soon
thank you all the best bye bye