

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 136. Question Time: Johnson vs. Stewart, protests in Serbia, and are think tanks actually influential?

Thank you for listening to The Rest is Politics for ad-free listening, early access to episodes, membership to our chat community. Please sign up at TheRestIsPolitics.com. Or if you're listening on Apple Podcast, you can subscribe within the app in just a few clicks. Welcome to another episode of The Rest is Politics Question Time with me, Alistair Campbell. And with me, Rory Stewart.

Now, Rory.

Yes.

You know, when we get things wrong, unlike our national newspapers, we correct ourselves. Oh, yes.

So last week, I said that Nigel Farage had appeared on BBC Question Time more than any other human being. And didn't that just show how populists have got a grip of the BBC, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera?

Uh-huh.

And I got a very nice email from none other than Fiona Bruce, presenter of Question Time, who said, this is a, this is a well-worn, but inaccurate, untrue statement. And she sent me the list. So would you like to have a guess who, which politician has appeared on Question Time more than any other in its entire history?

Oh, what a good question. What a very, very good question. Michael Heseltine?

No, he's not in the top 10.

Okay.

He is a Tory and he's from that era.

That era. So earlier than William Hague?

Uh, yes, but been around a long time.

Ken Clark. It's got to be Ken Clark.

Correct. Correct. Ken Clark 59, Shirley Williams 58, Ming Campbell 47, Harriet Harman 45, Charles Kennedy got bless him 44, Claire Short 38, Paddy Ashton and Roy Hattlesley tied on 36, and then on 35, Nigel Farage. I still think it's 35 appearances for Nigel Farage.

He's somewhat high.

No, but, but wait a sec. Wait a sec. Wait a sec. Wait a sec. In defense of you, those other names are real old veteran politicians. And I bet he's been on much more intensity because he only came to public prominence much later than people like Ken Clark or Shirley Williams. I mean, they managed to do that because they were coming on regularly over many, many years. I think if you looked at frequency in a year, I bet he beats them all.

Yeah. I also think that I was probably quoting something that I'd read that he'd made more appearances than anybody else in the last X years. And I think that I think you're right.

I'm sure you're right on that. Yeah. So let's, shall we withdraw the rebuttal? Shall we say that we don't, we don't, we're sorry at all.

I'm very pleased that you were responsible about that. And here's a question for you. Elnaz Kashif, what did you both do for your work experience when you were in school? Did it have anything to do with politics? What have you learned from it that was useful for your career over the years?

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Well, I spent every summer doing, working on my uncle's farm. I did work in a light bulb factory. I don't think that helped my political career much.

Like, like a light bulb joke, you were like screwing a light bulb.

I was screwing in light bulbs all day long. Nothing else. Honestly,

Wait a second. Is that not what Charlie Chaplin does in the film, that his hands just going back and forth like that?

Well, he does. Well, I was testing the light bulb strength and you, according to the color of the light that came on, you put them into different boxes.

I did loads of sort of part to, but I don't recall, I don't recall ever doing work experience.

I did paid work.

That's, that's good.

Serious stuff. You also worked on a farm.

I worked on the farm's lots and you, but you also worked on a trade union, didn't you?

I, that's right. I work experiences with the transport and general workers union.

Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.

Now, listen, Rory, as you know, in, in, in my new book, which is called

But what can I do?

Fantastic. Well said again.

Yeah, I have invented this word called Persevilliance and there's a guy called Fraser Webster, who is Persevilliant because his question readers follows.

I'm just going to keep asking this until you get to it.

So well done Fraser. We've done it.

The defeat to Johnson.

This is definitely for you, Rory. It's very personal.

The defeat to Johnson obviously still runs deep for Rory.

Did he really think he'd get near him?

I seem to remember Johnson being the clear front runner from the start and Rory being the outsider candidate from a Rory fan.

Well, I just felt, I guess, that he couldn't win.

I felt that in the end, he was not suitable to be prime minister

and that the British public might think he was, you know, could be amusing,

that he might even be someone they could see as mayor of London,

but that they couldn't possibly see him as being serious enough to be prime minister.

So I had completely convinced myself that however it looked in the end,

when they had to face the fact that he had no clear answers.

And this is honestly what the debate was about.

That catastrophic debate that I lost to him in 2019 TV debate

was literally on what are you going to do about the Northern Ireland border?

How are you going to sort out your tariffs?

Why do you think that you're going to be able to get a better deal out of Brussels

and get Britain out of the European Union by the 31st of October?

You can't, can you Boris? You can't do that.

I thought these points were so obvious.

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I mean, particularly the points about Northern Ireland border that in the end, he would have to lose, that he wouldn't be able to make it through a campaign without people just seeing that he was grotesque, that he was so obviously either lying or incompetent. Or as I began to realize, sort of both at the same time in an intricate way. And of course, I was completely wrong. So in historical hindsight, could I have beaten him? Well, if I'm allowed to just indulge myself for another 45 seconds. If Sajid Javed had got one less vote, fewer, sorry. If Sajid Javed had got one fewer votes in the round, I think it was on the Tuesday, he would have been eliminated. I think his votes, the majority of them, at least on our spreadsheets, look like they could have come to me. I would have moved ahead of Michael Gove. He then would have been eliminated. I think his votes, again, would most have come to me. And I might have gone ahead of Jeremy Hunt, and that would have put me in the last two against Boris Johnson. And again, the question is, was there any chance, if it had been me instead of Jeremy Hunt, of convincing the Conservative Party in the country that Boris Johnson was taking them on hiding to nothing? And I guess the answer, probably, as I would have lost there, too, because the Conservative Party in the country was very, very pro-Brexit, very suspicious of somebody like me, who was seen as a remainder, who was too soft on Brexit. So probably structurally, I was doomed, and I guess you'd agree. Yeah, but also you have to, if you're involved in a campaign like that, so like the Lib Dems going to the next general election campaign, they don't think that Ed Davies is going to become Prime Minister, but they have to set big objectives and go for them. So you had to tell yourselves that you could win. Otherwise, you wouldn't get out of bed and do the things you needed to do. So I still think that was the right thing to think. And sometimes in elections, the impossible does come off. So I think you had the right mindset. And Macron did it. Macron did it. I mean, a different electoral system, but he did do it. So maybe I just wasn't good enough or Macron's just much better. Hannah Haith-Plaetz. I'm writing my dissertation on the influence of think tanks and British politics,

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mainly focused on the mini-budget.

In your experience, how valuable, if at all, did you find think tanks when developing policies?

Alistair, did you find think tanks valuable?

I think they can be.

I think that there's a real problem in recent years that the because particularly during the Corbyn period, the sort of the left think tank field got pretty much hollowed out.

People sort of felt they were whistling in the wind.

And the right has become very co-opted by this 55 Tufton Street ideological.

They're not really think tanks at all.

They're just another arm of a political machine.

But I can remember way back the influence, for example, of the Social Justice Commission.

I don't know whether you call that a think tank,

but it was it was a policy development specifically set up

to try to create ideas that the politicians would be interested in.

I actually think a lot of the work that Tony Blase Institute is doing at the moment, if I were a political party or a government in any different parts of the world, I'd be looking at some of the papers they produce.

So yeah, I think think tanks camp.

I think the resolution foundation is very good.

I think some of the I think that onward group

that actually they do some interesting work,

more maybe more analytical public opinion.

But I think the think tanks, I think, can be can be very, very useful.

And also, don't underestimate the the importance of trying to find think tanks in other parts of the world that come up with ideas.

Because I do think one of the problems with our politics at the moment is that, you know, the ideas industry feels very, very tired.

It does, doesn't it?

And there's desperate, desperate push for new ideas.

And I think it's it's the thing that, you know, we keep coming back to this, but makes me worried about Labour.

I don't feel that Keir Starmer is coming in with the same confidence and ideas that new Labour was coming in with in 96, 97.

Now, is that just that there are fewer ideas out there?

Is it that Britain is just in a very difficult situation?

Is it that the whole world's just feeding more tired?

I'd also say, though, that think tanks, yes, they can change things, but it can also be a pretty depressing business.

To be honest, as a minister, I'm struggling to think of many examples where think tanks really made a difference.

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I think actually, sorry, there's one example.

Think tanks who made the case and I think influenced the Ministry of Justice to look at it more carefully for abolishing short sentences and prisons, which would have massively reduced the prison population and reduced reoffending by getting rid of sentences, magistrates ability to give sentences for under six months.

That, I think, probably originated in think tanks rather than in the penal reform campaign organisations like the Howard League.

Well, I guess I'm sort of connecting

Howard League and all these things to the think tank world.

And certainly in justice, that group, Prison Reform Trust, Howard League, were very, very important, were trusted by.

And I guess in defence,

Rusey, IWS, but even Chatham House, which is partly funded by the Foreign Office, very close to the Foreign Office, often, I think, do get a bit frustrated at the sense

that they're not really on the inside, whereas US think tanks, Brookings Institution, Council on Foreign Relations,

some of the US universities, you really do feel have a much, much more direct line into the administration than their UK equivalents.

I think the other thing that think tanks struggle with is

some just want to sort of create interesting ideas and get into the public policy debate,

but they want to have the sense of having influence over be at the government or the opposition.

And the issue of think tank political alignment, I think, is quite difficult.

I mean, it's possible.

I think it's unlikely, but it's possible that those Tufton Street mobs could come up with the occasional good idea every now and then.

It's very unlikely to be accepted by a progressive government because of where it's coming from.

Likewise, I think there are probably think tanks on the left that the Tories would never look at as well.

Now, here's what we talked about the Greenbelt last week.

George Parish, two related questions here.

How does Rory plan to solve the housing crisis if building on the Greenbelt is forbidden?

And Katie Del Rey, who occluded with her question and linked to Wikipedia, telling us there are 131 golf courses in London. What are your thoughts on the idea of building on the many golf courses in London instead of the Greenbelt?

A minority of people use golf courses.

Does London really need 131 of them?

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I'd be surprised if many of those golf courses aren't actually in the Greenbelt.

I wonder how many of them are in London proper.

Katie, you need to check out your source and let's know.

But what about the idea, though?

I mean, that is not the first time I've heard that as an idea.

I mean, generally speaking, I guess I'm trying to hold back against building on green space.

I think what we need to do is get what I would call gentle density into London.

If you compare London with cities like Paris,

they have a lot of very good five or six stories, seven story buildings,

which are attractive, which don't destroy the landscape,

which at a human scale and which fit in many more people, you can see it actually.

Do you know where the most one of the most density populated areas in London is is around Sloane Avenue around Sloane Square?

So often the most density populated areas of London are some of the poshest, most valuable areas of London.

But the problem on London is that we have very been reluctant to

well, very reluctant to deal with the fact that we've got this huge spread

of semi-detached or two story houses spreading out over mile after mile after mile.

I also think the mayor of London has not been as imaginative as he could have been

on building on thousands of acres of transport for London land,

mayor of London land, which which is just there for affordable housing to be built on.

And I'd like to see a government come in that was really bold about providing.

I'd like to see them literally build the equivalent of council houses,

because I think it's a good investment for a city like London.

Don't pay developers and tell them to put in 20 percent affordable.

Build and own the houses, rent them out at an affordable rate.

And then you'll be sitting on a fantastic store of value for the city

for the next 200 years and build them six stories high, proper avenues,

like Sloane Avenue, and you'll find you'll get a lot of people in

and you can have a very, very human scale

fulfilling existence in those communities.

I'm going to give a shout out to Siddiq's new book, which was out this week called Breathe, which is about air quality.

It helps to explain and the climate and helps explain why he is

despite a lot of political opposition and organised campaigning against him,

extending the the the Ules in in London.

Now, here's one, Rory, Prita Badan.

What is your favourite Tina Turner song?

Can you think of anyone more resilient than Tina?

I think, Percivillian, you'll find is the word.

And also, is Alice to able to play simply the best on the backpipes?

I'll give it a go. I can give it a go in today.

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That's very good.

Unfortunately, the Tina Turner tune that I know best is simply the best.

Do you know any others? Come on, Rory, let's get into the culture.

No, I kind of, you know, weirdly, I'm not sure about Tina.

I was listening to Tina Turner recently and I was trying to get my head around that you're much more musical than me.

But do you not agree that Whitney Houston has a much, much better voice than Tina Turner?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. But Tina Turner is just an amazing performer.

I love simply the best because when my boys were growing up and I was first indoctrinating them, the art of being a Burnley supporter, which meant for our car journeys up, dragged up there to watch the game.

We used to play simply the best as the teams came out.

I think you're I think you're dating yourself there.

I am. I had a ski teacher, British ski teacher from Essex in in the mid 1980s, who insisted that every time we went down a hill, we had to play simply the best.

And still, when I ski, I can sort of hear simply the best in my head.

That's good that you have that sort of musical resonance in your life.

All right, let's just take a quick break.

And here we are back from the break with the rest of politics question time.

Now, here we are, Aidan.

Do we talk a little bit about the press on the on the main podcast?

Aidan, to what extent of the far right tabloid press poisoned political discourse in the UK, particularly England, and is their behavior simply the price of democracy?

Very good. OK, go on.

That's one of your favorite questions in the world.

Give us give us your answer.

If I want to know your view, I want your view.

Well, let me let me start by saying thank you.

Thank you.

I think they've done a huge amount of damage.

I think it's been very, very damaging for political life, for trust and politicians, for our views, the monarchy, and many, many other things being hugely destructive force.

I would say that I've experienced some in a pretty, pretty unfair, hard reporting from tabloid newspapers on the left as well as on the right.

But I do think the British press is pretty terrifying.

Go on over to you.

I think I remember a guy who used to work for Murdoch in Australia and I was out in Australia and he said, he said, mate, the thing about the British papers, they're the best in the world and they're the worst in the world, and it's usually in the same edition.

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And I think I think I think there is a little bit of a rough with smooth.
But I do think now, I mean, a classic example last week,
you have the net migration figures.
Now, how many thousands of forests have been fell
so that the papers can tell us that this is the most important,
significant issue in these terrible immigrants who come in here
and stealing our jobs and destroying our public services, etc.
and the hate that is pumped out there.
Then along comes some truly dreadful net migration figures for the government.
I don't think they made a single front page
apart from the daily express, which had yet another sort of cheerleading
soon act to get tough, soon act to sort it out.
And when you see that you look at the reality,
for example, of the damage that Brexit is doing to the country
and the economy at the moment and, you know, day in, day out,
they're telling us how well it's going.
I think they've damaged their credibility hugely, particularly in the last few years.
But I agree with you.
I think that they've done considerable damage to the nature of our debate.
One of the things that comes out in these talks that I'm doing around the book,
and I know you've been in loads of this stuff as well, is that.
And I think it's one of the reasons people listen to our podcast
and another podcast in such numbers is because people just don't think
they really are getting any true debate or any honest analysis.
Everything is designed to fit into the prism of a few very, very wealthy,
very, very right wing media owners and editors.
That's it. And I think we have to recognize that's what they are.
And the problem is that the BBC, which I really do love,
I mean, I'm a huge fan of the BBC, but they are very, very constrained
by these very difficult impartiality stuff,
which often means that they can't be quite as blunt as outspoken as we'd like to be.
Here's a question I quite liked, which resonated with me,
but I'd like to see what you made of it.
Michelle Fox, I'm an Irish actor living in London for nearly a decade.
Why do many English people have zero idea about Irish British history?
Constantly dismayed when English people ask me if my country is part of the UK
and are completely ignorant about the troubles.
I really did feel that I was very embarrassed, actually,
as a member of parliament by how little we talked about Northern Ireland, particularly.
How rarely people visited Northern Ireland, how vague the views of me
and many of my colleagues were about the different parties
that were sitting with us in the House of Commons.
And there was something that was almost kind of tragic about it,

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because Northern Ireland, particularly Unionists in Northern Ireland, feeling deeply part of the United Kingdom.

And but so many people in England, Scotland and Wales, you know, almost behaving as though it wasn't part of their country at all.

Any any thoughts on that?

Yeah, I think I think there are there are parts of Scotland where

I think that the sense of Irish politics is very deep in the debate.

And you know, you see it most obviously in every time Celtic play rangers and but so I think Scotland, maybe a little bit different.

But there's no doubt about this.

I mean, one of the you know, when we were doing the peace process in Northern Ireland, one of the difficulties we had to deal with domestically.

And this this used to show up in polls at times.

It's like, you know, the view in England, in particular, that we were wasting quotes, wasting so much time on Northern Ireland and the attitude, you know, why just let them sort themselves out.

So I think the questioner is right.

I think there's a lot of times of almost willful ignorance.

And that's why, you know, I do think that maybe laced into the question

is this sense that maybe what's happened with Brexit

and the current manifestation of the Conservative Party

is that English nationalism has become a very, very potent force.

It's very odd, isn't it?

Because when we were interviewing Jerry Adams, he very much was on the view that Great Britain, but particularly England, is the sort of immense, suppressive imperial power, you know, there to kind of crush the life out of Ireland.

And that sort of view, that Republican view,

unfortunately, may exaggerate how much the English or the British government actually think about it at all.

I mean, the Republican view is, you know, this is an imperial power

trying to crush them. I mean, often the reality is more tragic and difference, isn't it?

Well, just they don't care.

Yeah. Andrew Gallagher.

Serbia has had some massive protests in favour of gun control.

This follows the two mass murders in schools recently.

But we hear very little about it.

If it had happened in the United States, it would have been big news.

Is this a deliberate attempt to have as equate the U.S. as us and Europe as them?

Goodness gracious.

I must admit, I didn't know if that's I didn't know about the protests.

Did you? No, I didn't completely unaware of it.

So that's probably just to do with the fact that, you know,

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we're back to the problem of a very kind of Anglo-centric media.

We don't, I'm afraid, cover abroad as much as we did.

America is different and American politics in particular is different.

But Andrew is absolutely right.

If there were big anti-gun law protests in America, we would know about them just as we hear about all their big shootings.

And I was aware of the of the mass murders in the schools, but I was not aware of the of the call for change.

Yeah. I mean, I completely agree with you.

I mean, and I, you know, only looking this up after hearing the question, enormous demonstrations and Serbians handing in thousands of weapons voluntarily.

It's an amazing political moment.

Australia under, I think, John Howard was very, very a good example of a skilful politician seizing a moment after a horrible series of mass shootings to completely change gun laws, do it in a country like Australia with a strong tradition of gun ownership amongst farming communities and get it done.

And and I think it'll be interesting to see how Serbia responds to this, whether they're able like Australia to use use the momentum or whether like the United States, they just get stuck forever.

What does it say, though, about our media that you and I follow reasonably closely that neither of us were aware that these protests were going on in what is quite a significant country?

I think British media is very, very, I'm afraid, bad on foreign reporting.

I mean, you very rarely read very much about Eastern Europe.

I mean, there's simply a fact about it, which is that newspapers are short of cash.

They have fewer and fewer foreign correspondents when they do have them, they're super stringers.

When they do write stories, it's extremely difficult to get them printed.

One of the problems as we've talked about is these algorithms where the editors are very influenced by how many page views a particular story has.

And the truth is, you know, Panda falls over in Edinburgh Zoo.

It can guarantee to get kind of a million views and protests in Serbia at gun violence doesn't get the views in the editor.

You know, it may well be that there's some stringer in in Belgrade trying to sell the story to an editor and just not getting anywhere.

Yeah, I think also we like to have sort of images of different parts of the world and the sort of conventional image of the of the Balkans is, you know, very violent.

And therefore, a story that goes against that, which is what I would describe as the definition of news, is deemed less newsworthy than something that actually says, yeah, yeah, we were right about and they're very violent.

Because it shows peaceful civil society demonstrations in Serbia

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when we want to characterize Serbia the way they cover the mass murders, but not the fact that the country is up in arms about them.

Now, here's one, Rory, a closer term, Carol Mason.

The government has refused to supply unredacted documents to the COVID inquiry.

Who is the government in a case like this?

Is it the PM, the cabinet, the cabinet secretary, and what are they trying to hide?

And whatever it is, do they seriously think it won't come out anyway?

So these are, I guess, the kind of things that I dealt with very, very frequently with the minister and which were the result of your government.

So under new labor, freedom of information requests were introduced.

I think Tony Blair is actually on record saying that he's sometimes wonder whether he'd done the right thing.

He wishes he hadn't done it.

Exactly. I mean, it's a very, very odd thing.

As a minister frequently, I was having to sign bits of paper brought to me.

And what tends to happen is a request is made for information.

The civil servants in your department, the professional civil servants, go through the request, try to identify what they think they have to release legally and which things they think should be preserved confidentially.

For the sake, the phrase often is, I think, something like,

for the sake of being able to encourage open discussion in government.

So the idea is that you don't want ministers or civil servants to be so terrified that everything they say is going to be public, that you're not able to sit around a table and say, I don't know anything about this or have an argument or maybe come up with a radical idea which you'd be horrified would appear in the press.

But you obviously want to be able to sit around the cabinet room or sit around your department, not thinking that every single thing that you say to a civil servant or everything you discuss could be on the front page of the sun tomorrow.

Otherwise, you're likely to just keep stumped.

So I guess the government has engaged in that.

Civil servants would have gone through the request and they will have tried to suggest that many of the discussions are things that they don't want to share with the committee.

But this is the public inquiry set up under the very specific terms in which public inquiries are set up. So, for example, when we had the Hutton inquiry, so Tony Blair announced the inquiry, Lord Hutton was appointed to run it. And then I get a letter from Lord Hutton saying, he wants to see my diaries.

Yeah.

And I was like, oh my God, and Tony was like, well, why should you have to do that? Nobody else is being asked. And I remember a conversation with Jeremy Hayward, who was the cabinet secretary,

said, look, the prime minister said of the inquiry said, we'll do everything we can to cooperate with it. That means everything. And I think what the question is about here is the fact that Boris Johnson sacked his lawyers because of this kerfuffle over his WhatsApp messages,

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and he doesn't want to give unredacted WhatsApp messages. He's angry because the diaries that he kept at the time have been given to the inquiry. But I think you have to accept, particularly when you're at that level at the very top of government, you have to accept that every single thing you say and do potentially is irrelevant if an event is then put under the microscope. Exactly. And I think the good approach to this, which is sometimes taken in Britain, is to have a committee which looks at this stuff on a confidential basis and where you trust the judge or whoever is leading the inquiry to see all the information, but treat it respectfully and not set about leaking things to the sun for sensational reasons and hoping that they have the judgment to tell the difference. No, it's like with my diaries, I had to literally sit next to a lawyer and go through every single word, including what my kids were up to, what my mum was up to, whatever it might be. I had to read every single word to them for them to decide what was relevant to the inquiry. Right. So I think if you're going to have a public inquiry, and I like the feel of this Justice Hallett, I mean, she's going after Johnson's stuff and demanding that he hands it over, she's asking George Osborne, and I think I read somewhere, maybe even David Cameron and Jeremy Hunt as well, in their previous roles to appear. So it's going to be interesting. Very, very important. Well, it's so important, and I wish we'd done a proper inquiry on Afghanistan. We never did, and I suspect we never will. But

I thought the final Iraq reports are extraordinary documents, really, really impressive work. And I think the learning from this COVID inquiry is going to be so important. It's critical. We made a lot of mistakes. I think, you know, we've talked about it a lot. We can talk about what those mistakes were, but let's see what the inquiry comes up with. Right. Jason Brown, in one of the leading interviews recently, Rory mentioned Darren Bent. Given Rory's a version to sport and Bent's relative contemporary obscurity, it made me laugh a lot. What's the story there, Alistair? Well, Rory, you know this story better than I do. Where did this utter obsession with Darren Bent stem from? Do you want to tell our listeners who... I'll tell you where, Rory, here's a quiz for you. I'm watching you. You cannot Google. Okay, you cannot Google. Here are my hands, hands up. He played for nine Premier League and Championship clubs. I'd like you to name two of them. No, I absolutely can't. And let me tell you why this comes up. So, Darren Bent comes up because at some point in this amazing WhatsApp thing, an incident on WhatsApp correspondence should be subpoenaed to and seen by some inquiries. Somebody proposed Darren Bent as a candidate for being interviewed on leading. And the fact that I am unable to name a single team that he played for, I think slightly confirms the reason why I'm perpetually making comical references to Darren Bent. Right. Well, it was Ipswich, Charlton, Spurs, Sunderland, Villa, Fulham, Lone, Brighton, Lone, Derby, Lone... Do you agree with me that he might not be the ideal candidate for leading? I think if we were looking for a candidate for leading, who came from the football world, I think we're looking at Pep Guardiola, Jürgen Klopp, Gareth Southgate, play at Cantona. I think Cantona would be a good interviewee for leading. Darren, then, of course, we've done. Get Cantona would be so great. Arsene Wenger? Arsene Wenger, definitely. He said that he will come on at some point. And Darren Bent, maybe just, you know, a little bit below that, possibly. Very good. Okay.

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Shall I give you one last question?

Get it going then, yeah.

This one made me slightly depressed, actually, because it made me realise how old we are, now that I'm 66 and getting my pension. James, this year's first question on the Edexcel Politics A-level was, to what extent did John Major lose the 1997 election as opposed to Tony Blair win it? Since Alistair will most likely be on the mark scheme, I was wondering how he would answer that first. I would say that it was Blair actually had a very, very strong, impressive, positive campaign. I think it's true that you could have gone in with a lame campaign and you probably would have been able to win a slender majority, but the scale of the majority that you won in 1997 was a very focused campaign, a very fresh charismatic candidate and a sense at that period that the sort of moderate left was at its most innovative, creative, confident.

That's the 90s. It's the end of the Clinton era. You had an exceptional campaigning candidate in Blair. Whereas this coming election, I think we may more be in a situation in which the Conservatives lose it because they've been in power too long rather than the other side winning it. That's what Labour has to fix in the next year. I think it has to become much more about Labour positivity than the Tories being awful. I think the first thing I'd answer in that question is that although it's focused on John Major and Tony Blair, but actually within the context of the campaign itself, I think John Major campaigned extremely effectively, the Conservatives lost the election. Now, obviously, he was the leader and he was the Prime Minister and they'd gone through ERM, which was one of those sort of critical moments where

people lost faith in the government of the day. But I think the country was ready for the change. I think we're agreeing agreeably here. I think the country was ready for the change and they were able to look across the other side and think, do you know what, that guy could be really, really good. He looks like he's got a decent team behind him and there's a new government there. So that's how I would answer the question, James. I feel free to quote both of us in any future exams that you get. Did I tell you the story that when my daughter sat one of her exams, Jonathan Powell and I were a question and she didn't know the answer?

That's very good. That's very good. I hope she could, but she could have just made it up. Couldn't she take the confidence to make it? The thing is, Roy, that the examiner would have known.

She could have said something. I think she should have said, look, you know, you're coming to my personal space here. You're reminding me about my father. You're asking me about my father.

It's very unfair and I think they're giving the two marks for that. The question was, why did Jonathan Powell announce to Campbell have an ordering council signed by the Queen? I see. She might struggle with that, wouldn't she? Will Lloyd, as my last question, although it's obviously something I'd love your views on, I'd also like to go out. After the next election, will the Conservative Party need to go through a detoxification process as Labour has successfully done? Do you believe the Conservative Party will have a similar moment of recognition and waiting and who would be your preferred candidates to do so? Right, over to you.

Well, it's a very good question and I honestly don't know the answer to that because I don't know the today's Conservative Party well enough. My instinct of where it is politically and the sort of MPs who are in the Ascendant and the sort of candidates that seem to be lining up is that it will go to the right, particularly if Labour win a majority. I think they'll go to the right.

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So, I think if you are looking at the Suvala Bravo, I think it'd be a terrible mistake for them, but I don't see them moving to the centre any time soon.

It's very, I mean, the pattern after the loss in 97, particularly when Ian Duncan Smith came along was of course, it was William Hague first, but then when Ian Duncan Smith came in was very much a move to the right. And it was Cameron coming in that moved the party back to the centre and for my money made them an intellectually viable party. I think it's a very bad move. But you're right, there's a strong possibility that people will think that, you know, they lost because they weren't right wing enough. That's often the case with parties that lose, they draw the wrong conclusions. No, the Labour Party is a bedevil for years because we had this pretty strong strand in the party that said, you know, we'd lost because we weren't benign enough. We hadn't, we hadn't, we were too centrist. That was very much where Corbyn came from, wasn't it? Yeah. That the odd thing there was that actually, David Miliband would have been much more threatening to the Conservative Party than Ed Miliband. Ed Miliband was a bit more to the left, but of course, when he lost, instead of concluding, they needed to go back to the centre, they concluded

they needed to go further to the left. So I think it's likely that we'll end up with people like Kemi Badnok and Sualab Rahman coming forward. But it would be a catastrophic mistake because although the Conservative Party managed to lurch the right and win in 2019, that was with this bizarre figure of Boris Johnson, who's not repeatable. And he was somebody who was able to play to the right, but also sort of flirt with the centre and essentially was a celebrity in a way that these other right-wing candidates can't, they will be creating a much bleaker small world of true believers. Also that NatCon, that National Conservatism Conference we talked about, I think if you look at it from the left perspective, it felt like the kind of momentum within the Labour Party, it felt like something that was trying to create something separate. And it's almost like psychologically, they think, oh, we're not going to win the next election, but we believe that we've got to move even further to the right. And we're setting this up now to drag it that way. Which I agree with you, I think is a terrible mistake.

A really big mistake. And I think it's such a challenge, but it's something that the Conservative Party needs to do, which is if they lose the next election, and if Rishi Sunak then steps down, it's so important that Conservatives who care about the future of the party and on the centre start joining the party and start organising around the few MPs that still credibly represent the centre in that party, rather than just giving up and handing it over to the Swallow Government. By the way, talking about John Major, I did this fabulous event the other day at Wimbledon Book Festival. It was at Roehampton University, and they got 600 state school kids there.

And at one point, I asked, you know, there were sort of 15, 16, 17 roles for a show of hands of who might in future, who thinks that they might go into politics. And, you know, I'd say 2030 or so hands went up, but there was a little gaggle of them in one group. I was like, wow, what's going on over there? There's something very political going on in this school. Which school are you guys from? And if I tell you the name, it might ring a bell with you. It's Rutlish.

And that's where John Major went to school. Oh, goodness. Oh, that's fascinating. Well, I wonder whether that isn't part of, I mean, whether if you go to a school which has produced the Prime Minister, whether that doesn't make it feel much more tangible and possible.

Yeah. Yeah. I'm sure that's right. Yeah.

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So that's a more positive note to end on the one that we just ended on.

Very good. Okay. Let's end this. Thank you, Alastair.

And have a nice time in Japan.

Thank you. Bye-bye. Bye-bye.