

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 137. Government taking itself to court, avoiding war with China, and Polish protests

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Welcome to another episode of The Restless Politics with me, Alistair Campbell.

I'm me, Rory Stewart, and Alistair I can share with the world is wearing a very fetching blue shirt. Royal blue shirt.

Royal blue? Ah, yes. I wonder whether that's because I was dressed in the dark this morning before I went for my very early swim. Now, we're going to talk about the COVID inquiry, which I think is becoming very, very interesting in its early stages, even as it sets out, as Baroness Hallett sets out what she wants to do with it. We're going to talk about China, and particularly China relations with the United States. And I think if we've got time, we're going to talk about Kosovo, what's happening there at the moment, which is alarming, but I will argue not as alarming as maybe some people are trying to suggest. And also Poland, where we're recording on Monday and yesterday, half a million people, it seems, turned out to protest against a plan, what is being perceived as a plan by the government, stop Donald Tusk from being a candidate in the upcoming election. So does that sound okay?

Sounds very good. Well, let's start off maybe with COVID inquiry and what's been interesting you and troubling you around this. Very quick explainer for people on this, Baroness Hallett, retired appeal court judge, wonderful desert island discs to listen to if people want to learn more about Baroness Hallett. Her father started as a beat cop, and then rose out to be a very senior policeman. But over to you on what she's doing with the COVID inquiry. Well, she says that she's going to, as it were, cliche time, leave no stone unturned, and it would seem from the approach that she's taking thus far that that's going to be the case. So she's got several different investigations going on, and she's calling the modules. So the first one is about pandemic preparedness and resilience.

The second is about core political administrative decision making in the UK and the devolved administrations. And the third is the impact of the pandemic on healthcare systems. And looking at the questions that we, what was interesting about, I do recommend that people take a look at the inquiry website, because they seem to be adopting the approach of, as they develop ideas, as they develop their thinking, they're putting quite a lot of, a lot of stuff out there. And we'll come on to the whole sort of row about WhatsApp messages and so forth. But in terms of what has ended up already in court, and this ridiculous situation of the government taking the government to court over its own inquiry, she's clear that she wants to see all unredacted messages sent and received by Johnson between the 1st of January 2020 and the 24th of February 2022.

Johnson's unredacted diaries, unredacted, there are 24 notebooks apparently that he was using at the time that she also wants to see. She's also named a few advisors and also Rishi Sunak, Matt Hongkop, Led Truss, Professor Chris Witte, the chief medical officer, Patrick Vallance, Dominic Cummings. She's asked for witness statements, as you would expect. And when you look at some of the

questions that she's, we're already seeing some of the key questions as she sees it for Boris Johnson. And if I were him, I would be having a quite a sphincter twitch, I think. This one, for example, notwithstanding that the Department for Health and Social Care was the lead government

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department, why did you not attend any COBRA meetings in relation to COVID-19 prior to March 2020, given the seriousness of the emergency? Were you advised or requested to attend any previous meetings on 24 January, 29 January, 4 February, 12 February, 18 February? What effect, if any, do you consider your nonattendance at those meetings had on the extent to which COVID-19 was viewed as a serious threat? And then this one, why did you attend a personal social meeting on the evening of March 19 after you had called on the UK on March 16 to stop all non-essential contact with others? And it turns out that this meeting was with the evening standard proprietor, Evgeny Lebedev, whose father is currently under sanctions from several countries, but not the UK. So that's all quite interesting. She asked him specifically about alleged breaches of social restriction and lockdown rules by ministers and what effect they might have had on the confidence of the public. She asked about the role of special advisor. She asked about the relations with the chief medical advisor. She asks about the relations with cabinet ministers. She asked about preparedness. And she also asked him some very pointed questions about when he learned certain things. Anyway, and of course, there's the whole sort of devolution and relations with Scotland, etc. Give me a very interesting couple of things that strike me. One of them is these inquiries in general and what makes for a good inquiry, a useful inquiry and what doesn't. So I guess the two that were relevant to you were the Butler Inquiry and the Chilcott Inquiry in relation to Iraq, I guess, were the two that you engage with in most detail? Well, the Hutt Inquiry was probably more personal, yeah. And what's your sense of what made for, when you were on the receiving

end of this, what made for a good inquiry, what made for a bad inquiry, what it takes for an inquiry to have public confidence or not? I mean, the Butler Inquiry was a little bit different because, I mean, I think because, you know, because he was very much a creature of government, having been the cabinet secretary and so forth. But Lord Hutton and Chilcott, although he had also been a civil servant, his inquiry was, I think, was the official Iraq inquiry, much bigger, much wider reaching. I think what makes them is an absolute determination to get to the facts on everything. And that does mean being very, very rigorous. And I think that I quite like the fact that Baroness Hale seems to be so determined to get to the bottom of all these different messages, because I think what I think is interesting, the government's cases that they shouldn't be expected to hand over lots of messages unless they're unambiguously relevant to COVID. But I think her point would be, and I had to endure this in relation to my diaries in the Hutton Inquiry, I was not allowed to decide what was unambiguously relevant. A lawyer had to do that. And I think, sorry, to come in on this, I think the same is true in this case.

It's the government lawyers who are deciding what's relevant and what's not. It's not the individual in possession of the diary. Which is fine up to a point. But I think that for the judge, particularly as what happened back in the, you know, when we were in government, even though texting existed and so forth, there does seem to have been this sort of, this move towards government by WhatsApp, where these groups are set up and that it seems is how decisions are being made. Now, I think she's perfectly entitled to say, for example, let's just imagine a situation, those questions that she asked about why Johnson didn't attend certain Cobra meetings. Okay. I think she's entitled, given that he seems to spend most of his life on an insecure phone, she is entitled to see to whom he is talking about what, if, for example, it emerges, that a third of his messages around that time were actually about

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this mysterious book deal that he was doing to write a book about Shakespeare. I think that would be relevant, even though it's got nothing to do with COVID. The relevance is the fact it shows the priorities. So I guess the point is this, that you didn't hand over fully unredacted stuff, did you? You, a lawyer decided what was relevant and what wasn't. So the big story here is that she's asking for something completely unprecedented. She's asking for something that goes well beyond what the Hutton Report, about the report that your court inquiry was doing. And so the government is, for better or for worse, and I'd probably argue for better, trying to get a clear legal ruling, because the precedent set around this is incredibly important for the way that you do government. And they're trying to, I think, defend an important principle, which is that governments need to be able to correspond with each other without fearing that every single thing they say, every off-color joke, every reference to football is going to find its way into the public domain. Otherwise, basically, you don't have any government. I mean, if every single meeting and every conversation you have is happening in public, you kill a lot of what makes unfortunates. I mean, I can try to illustrate this, but you'll know this from your own life. I mean, conversations have to be able to take place in private. And if every conversation you're having is taking place in the blaze of a media spotlight, it's very, very difficult to admit uncertainty, say that you're wrong, express any humility, ask stupid questions, or do any of the things you need to do. But all that is possible. All that was possible at any time. What I think I sense she may be trying to establish here, I don't know, is that the nature of the means by which we were being governed at the time was not serious government. Now, I don't know that. But for example, what you just said there now, I mean, I looked up the guidance on government communications. And this has been updated because of new systems of communications such as WhatsApp, government communications belong to the crown and must be handled lawfully. If you hold such communications, you do so on behalf of your department. Now, of course, you can have the idea that this judge is going to sort of take an exchange between Boris Johnson and his wife about their kids or something like that and put that into the public domain. I think he's absurd. Every single person who is working at senior level on the inquiry is cleared to a pretty high security level. But let me challenge here. Let's go back to your own experience with the Iraq Inquiries. You didn't simply say, we trust these inquiries and we're handing everything over to them unredacted. You had lawyers go through and decide what was relevant or not before it was handed over. Wait a minute. No, wait a minute. No, wait a minute. And they had discussions with the inquiry as to what was relevant. The same is true here. So that can happen now. But the reason that government's seeking judicial review is she's requesting something that goes well beyond what's ever happened in any inquiry in the past. She's essentially saying she's not going to get into a conversation about what's relevant or what isn't. She wants to see everything. She's basically saying that the height of a national crisis, everything that the senior people who are meant to be in charge of that crisis do and say may be relevant to her inquiry. Exactly. And that's what's being challenged. So that's exactly what's being challenged. So they could have said the same to you over Iraq. They could have said to you over Iraq, every single thing you did on any policy area, anything to do with your personal life was relevant to the Iraq Inquiry and you needed to hand it all over. But that wasn't what happened. The tradition in British government

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is that the lawyers discuss with the inquiry and then they go through and decide what's relevant and what isn't. It's a hugely different situation if you say they have a right to see everything and they will decide what's relevant and what isn't. Well, I just think that you have to wonder about the motivation. If that had happened, if that had happened with me, I would have felt two things. One, I would have felt that's a bit over the top, but I'd have had to go along with it, just as I had to go along with the process that I did. You wouldn't have had to go along with it. Your lawyers, the Cabinet Office lawyers, would have resisted. Well, they might. No, they would have. Well, okay, my suspicion is that the government would have said at the time, you are setting a very dangerous precedent for freedom of information doing this and we're going to take this judicial review. No, on the contrary, on the contrary, well, let me speak from the exact experience that will happen. On the contrary, Jeremy Haywood, senior civil servant, said, look, the Prime Minister has set this up inquiry up. He's set it up under an act of parliament which compels us to hand over anything that we're asked to give. And that is what we have to do. And I wasn't terribly happy about it. Tony wasn't happy with that. That's what we did. And what's more, because of the nature of the discussions with the inquiry, I was reasonably confident that had I had to give far more, such as, you know, Rory got told off at school or, you know, grace through a tantrum or kind of, you know, told me to bugger off, whatever, that that would not in any way be deemed relevant. I would have had the trust for that. So I think the optics of this are terrible for the government, not because of a principled position on this, I think, but because actually they probably do have an awful lot that they want to hide. Because I suspect what she's onto here is that serious government, because we didn't have a serious Prime Minister, broke down. As to why it's Rishi Sunak that is pushing the hardest on this, if you were to believe some of the briefing that's going on against him, a lot of it, I suspect from people around Boris Johnson, it may relate to some of the things that he was pushing in particular, eat out to help out and whether that was going against scientific advice, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So I think they've got themselves into a complete mess and it's probably down to the way that Johnson was operating. I think that the right way to resolve this issue is what the government's doing, which is to go to judicial review and let an independent judiciary determine what's relevant, what's fair in this case or not. And I think that's an important principle. I don't think you can, in any legal situation, say we're entitled to everything and we'll decide what's relevant or not. Well, maybe what's happened here then is that there's been a breakdown in trust in the institutions of government. I think that when we were subject to those inquiries, even though I think by all of them, Chilcock, Butler, and there's also the Intelligence Services Committee as well that I went to, and Hutton, I think we were put through our paces very, very rigorously. And I think there was a sense of, well, okay, this isn't very pleasant, but at least we feel there's a sense of institutional trust here. But I think what may have happened is that what we've already seen, what has already been in the public domain, gives you cause for alarm about their honesty, about their transparency. And the other thing I strongly recommend, because of course it's easy to put this in the context of lawyers and so forth and process, I was just happened to be in the car the other day listening to any answers. And I strongly recommend, you can go on iPlayer or whatever it's called, and you go to 20 minutes 43 seconds on this weekend, just gone any answers, where a woman called Philippa Bateman from Worcestershire is absolutely broken. And she tells the

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story of how her daughter was distressed. They were told by the police they couldn't go to see her because it was not deemed to be essential. The police would go to see that she was okay. The police took their time, they chased the police, eventually the police went and they found that their daughter had killed herself. And this woman was in tears talking about how she couldn't go to see her daughter, they couldn't comfort her. And then only three of them could go to the funeral. And they were told by the police that on that very same day, because of various things that were going on, they also had to clear her flat. And she said she got back home and saw Boris Johnson smirking and lots of Tory MPs saying, Oh, it's only a piece of cake and it's only this and it's only that. And I honestly, anybody who listens to it, I strongly recommend people listen to it.

There is no trust with this guy. There is no honesty with this guy. And even now, even now, it is all playing games. He says he's handing over all the WhatsApps, but it turns out that it was a phone that he couldn't hand over because it was taken away from him because it represented a security breach. And then you've got the security services, MI5, MI6, GCHQ, saying it's absolutely nonsense what he's saying. It's easy to find the phone and to open it securely and to see what's on there. So even now, we're not getting the truth on this stuff.

Well, I don't think we've got any disagreement about Boris Johnson.

No, but I think that's why your, I think your assessment of what the government is trying to do, you're being, may I say, too fair. I guess what I'm hoping for from this inquiry, though, is something much more than pointing out the Boris Johnson's an incompetent liar.

Well, of course, that's why the three modules that she set out are the right approach.

I think that if we look at the difference between Chilcott, Hutton and Butler, these different inquiries are very different in form. And Chilcott was a really, really good inquiry. Really detailed, really full, because what it got into in the end wasn't really the personalities of he said, she said, but the structural problems the British state.

So I think we had an unusually bad prime minister, but there were many problems that went well beyond Boris Johnson being terrible. What I really want to see this inquiry do is lessons for the future. It would be terrible if the conclusion that we drew from this is Boris Johnson's a fool, and therefore we'll be fine next time round because we just won't get him. Right, but I'm not disagreeing with that at all. And I think if you read her introduction and the way she set things out and the way she's splitting into these different investigations, that is exactly what she's going to do. But what I'm saying to you is I think you're judging the current government actions on the basis of this being a normal, rational, grown-up government. Whereas, in fact, I think we will find that because of the rot at the top, that the systems of government simply weren't up to it. But we'll see. But I just feel that the approach she's taking is the right one. I think the approach the government is taking is the wrong one because I think I have no doubt at all this could have been resolved without going to court. I just don't believe it couldn't have been resolved. And I think that the combination of a government that's worried about what's going to emerge because of all this sort of what-sappery,

which seems to have taken over sensible government, and Johnson playing his games, I suspect is what's driving her to be as rigorous and thorough as she is.

Well, I definitely think the what-sappery is a huge problem. And I think that's something that's changed a lot under Rishi Sunak. I mean, what-sapp I think had just begun at the beginning of

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COVID

and was completely out of control. You're totally right. It seems when Boris Johnson was prime minister,

almost everything seemed to be happening on what-sapp.

Let's see if Rishi Sunak was as grown-up as everybody tells us. It does seem quite interesting

that he seems so determined on this one. Alistair, I think if you had been in government,

you would feel much more sympathetic towards the idea that there has to be a limit,

and that it makes sense for lawyers to determine what's relevant to an inquiry and what isn't.

Yeah, I've explained to you. I was working for the government when exactly that thing happened.

And exactly what happened, Alistair, just to put it down, is that lawyers determined what was relevant and what wasn't. You operated under the old system. You were not asked to hand over everything unredacted. Everything unredacted was seen by somebody in that process.

Correct. And the same is true here. It's all seen by the voice. It's exactly the same.

No, it's not. It's exactly the same as what happened with you. The difference is that the judge in this case is asking for something that neither Hutton, Chilcot, or Butler ever asked for.

Well, we're not going to agree on this. Let's just move on.

Okay. So, I think one of the biggest issues that we should be looking at this week is

U.S.-China. We've just come out of the G7. Fumio Kishida, the Japanese prime minister,

has now announced that he's going to increase defense spending to 2% of Japanese GDP. And Japan is now the third largest economy in the world. And that will mean that it will end up with the third largest military in the world. It's going to be a very, very substantial force.

And this is essentially about the U.S. trying to create a very, very strong coalition of which the cornerstones, the Japan, South Korea, potentially the Philippines, and then other factors, Australia, Britain, and others, as a counterbalance against China. And it's getting very, very tense because you're beginning to see rhetoric coming out of the U.S. which sounds very much like you're with us or you're against us. And most countries in the world do not want to be forced to choose between the U.S. and China. It's true of countries like Singapore.

It's true even of India, which is playing a very complicated game in relation to the U.S.-China relationship. In many ways, it's tending towards the U.S., but remember, over Ukraine, it's buying oil from Russia. It's continuing to get arms from Russia. And this has become, I think,

for U.S. foreign policy their number one driving objective. It's building up with some of the same momentum that you saw the neocons building with their Middle East policy in the early 1990s.

China is now presented by both Republicans and Democrats, their number one adversary.

And the screws are now going on. We saw this with our Hillary Clinton interview on Leading and her very dismissive references to Macron. We can see it with huge anxieties from the U.S.

over the EU. So I guess one question that we need to get to is, is it too late for the U.S.?

Are they trying to form the sort of alliance they formed against Saram Hussein or that they tried to form against the Soviet Union, but in a completely different situation because they're dealing with a country that has such a huge percentage of global GDP that it's too late to

pull it off? You mentioned Singapore there. And of course, I think right now, I think it's still

going on. I don't know if you've been in the past to the Shangri-La conference. I was at it a few

years ago, and it's one of the big international defense gatherings. And yesterday, General Lee

Shang-Fu, who's the Chinese Defense Minister, he made a pretty significant speech. And if you were

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to really to sort of boil down the headline, he was essentially saying mind your own business. And also was very interesting is that he was saying that he's met, I think, 11 defense ministers or leaders of the defense infrastructure in 11 other countries whilst he's been at this Shangri-La summit. But he would turn down a request to meet Lloyd Austin, who is essentially his opposite number from the United States, which they apparently had a sort of brief handshake. But that was pretty much about it literally just sort of meeting in a corridor. And Lloyd Austin speech focused, as did the Canadian Defense Minister, their speeches focused on these kind of what they call these incursions and what they call dangerous incidents that are taking place of in the air over the South China Sea. And meanwhile, the General Shang-Fu, the Chinese Defense Minister, he was focusing on a situation where an American ship, he says, was in a place that it shouldn't have been and the Chinese ship cut in front of it. So that's the sort of evidence of things going very, very badly. Meanwhile, though, the director of the CIA, Bill Burns, has apparently just a month ago been in Beijing, don't know who he saw, but was there on a mission sent by Biden to try to get things on to a better footing. So I think it's very hard to read. I think on the one hand, you write the politics of this look to be going in one direction. But in terms of what the two governments may or may not be trying to do, I think it's unclear. There's a great book that I've just been reading by Kevin Rudd, the former Australian Prime Minister, who you knew, right? Yeah, and he wrote about in your diaries. He is something of an expert on China. And he has written this book, which is looking at US views of China and China's views of the US. And I think he's fascinated by this idea that we're getting into a Thucydides trap. And the Thucydides trap is that the Spartans felt that the Athenians were growing and they have to go to war. So there's an article in The Atlantic by Graham Allison, a Harvard professor, saying that if you look at the pattern of past great power rise, in almost every situation, it ends in war. And probably the only exception to this is when the US began to rise at the expense of the UK. And the explanation for that is that the UK maybe shared enough in common with the US to not feel totally threatened by its rise. But I think what Rudd is very good at is the culture clash between these two countries that they see each other in totally, totally different ways that China sees the US in terms of betraying them, giving their territory to Japan after the First World War, not helping them against the Japanese during the Second World War, playing silly games, balancing them against the Soviet Union for US interests in the 70s, and basically think that America is entirely cynical. They don't believe America's statements about democracy and human rights and free trade. They think that America is just out for its own national self interest. Well, no, the mutual suspicion is clearly intense. And you also have this sense that just as the Americans often would say that they can't reward the Chinese by the sort of diplomatic status that they would normally take for granted, I think now you see the Chinese doing something similar. I mean, I think it's pretty remarkable that that Shang Fu says, no, I don't want to have a meeting with Lloyd Austin when they're both literally in the same hotel building with all this sort of stuff going on. And the US ambassador Nick Burns in Beijing is really struggling to get meetings. Whereas there was a huge piece in the FT at the weekend about

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Elon Musk and Jamie Dimon, the banker, who were both in Beijing last week. I think there's the FT reported that the Tesla and Twitter boss had more top level Chinese meetings than most of the Biden administration officials have in recent months. Although Jake Sullivan recently met his opposite number. And again, it wasn't advertised, it sort of emerged after the event. So I guess it's these things that are going on at various levels. But what you're suggesting from Kevin Rudd's analysis is there's a danger you end up on a kind of automatic journey towards conflict. And I've just come from engagements with people who are very close to the Biden administration over the last three, four days. Did you get a bid in for leading with Joe? I did not actually get a bid for Joe. Okay. Well, I'll keep plugging away on that one. Keep plugging away. You'll probably get to do that. But what was I think really... I gently suggested that America's position in the world is more tricky than it was in the 1990s. And I cannot tell you what an incredibly visceral reaction I got from these senior Americans. How much they wanted to say, that's bullshit. Everybody prefers American values. Look at our friends in Asia, they're with us, they're against China and then very much got on to being brutal on Europe, saying, you know, Macron's got to step up, Schultz has got to step up, the EU's better decide which side they're on. And they were getting into the details of what exactly Macron had said in his political interview where he'd seemed to be pretty ambivalent about defending Taiwan. I mean, so I do feel that somewhere within Biden, Jake Sullivan, Tony Blinken, and indeed the broader Washington world, is a very, very, very strong sense that they now have to build a whole coalition against China. And it's a very difficult time to do it because in many ways, obviously Europe is distracted deeply involved in the whole question of Ukraine. The other thing I noticed this week was a report on US-China trade and it said that China's going to account for less than half of America's low cost imports from Asia. These companies are going to other places like, I know, Vietnam, Indonesia. And that's, that's reduced from way over half. Yeah, absolutely. You know, there's a, there's a graph that shows Mexico on the rise and as a share of US goods imports and China, you know, quite a significant fall, which I guess is, I don't know is related to the politics, I guess. And yeah, when he was at the G7 in Hiroshima, the one thing that Biden did say, he said he was expecting an imminent thaw in relations. Now, whether that was just because he wanted to say that, or whether he was hoping that the, the, the Bill Burns trip, which by then had happened, was going to lead somewhere. But I have to say, if you read General Shang Fu's speech in Singapore, then there wasn't much sign of it. I didn't as much thought, I think two, two final things. Within the EU, there seems to have been this move from talking about decoupling from the Chinese economy to realizing they can't do that, because 50% of the profits of European automobile and luxury goods manufacturers are made in China. Yeah. Towards now talking about de-risking instead of decoupling that they're just to integrate it into the Chinese economy to imagine decoupling. Yeah. And then within Britain, we have this very weird thing happening within the Conservative Party, which is you've got Liz Truss flying to Taiwan, making these incredibly aggressive speeches saying, you know, even if we have to give up on Chinese cooperation on climate, we've got to accept that, you know, we have to confront China in Duncan Smith attacking Rishi Sunak for not being critical enough of China and the national security strategy. And I guess a real difficulty for any government in Britain, which is Britain's economy is not in great shape. Trade with China is

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going to be increasingly important. And working out how you position yourself to China is going to be really important for Britain's economy. I wonder if Rishi Sunak tried to stop Liz Truss making that visit. Looking at Bill Burns previous special missions on behalf of Biden, it's not the most encouraging track record if we think that he's there trying to get better relations with Beijing, because he was the guy, if you remember, who was sent to Moscow in conditions of secrecy to try to persuade them, Russia officials against invading Ukraine. And then the other job he had was to try and persuade Nancy Pelosi not to go to Taiwan. So final thing just before we go to the break then. So I think my sort of summary of this is that the US as it tries to make allies is in a difficult position. I think a lot of Africa now is not going to come down on the US side against China. I think the Middle East, Saudi in particular, is signaling a much warmer relationship with China. Latin America, most of the more leftist governments in Latin America are likely to be more on the Chinese side. And in any case, China owns \$200 billion worth of Latin American debt at the moment. And with the rest of Asia, I think it's far from clear that people want to be forced to choose. So I think the US may find this a very, very difficult coalition to sustain. Okay, well, let's take a break.

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

And me, Alistair Campbell.

And you've just done a brilliant interview on leading, which anybody can search, typing, Mary McLeese, leading into your podcast. Tell us a bit about that interview.

Well, she was absolutely wonderful. And there's a lot of love for her and some of the responses we've had. I mean, I knew a bit about her, but I didn't quite know that her life story was so kind of dramatic. I mean, I knew that she was a Catholic growing up in a Protestant area in the Ardoin in Northern Ireland. I knew that she had personal experience of the troubles but when she told the story of the attacks on her house and this terrible bombing that reduced her father literally to years of catatonic depression in which she didn't even speak. And yet she's just got this humor and vivacity. But to go from that to become Irish president, from dirt poverty, I mean, the sound of her childhood was really quite extraordinary. Very funny stuff about her grandfather who refused to have electricity. He said this electricity thing is never going to catch on. And her first official opening was when she went down to head to switch on his only light bulb that he finally agreed to have. But also, you know, maybe to bring it up to modern times to today. I mean, honestly, she was, she talked about what the damage Johnson and Truss have done to Britain's standing, but also Brexit. She describes Brexit as a flesh eating disease. Anyway, I strongly recommend people listen to it really, really. And actually, we might have a back and do it together at one point because I think she's just absolutely brilliant. And on the Brexit thing, let's just briefly talk about Labour and Keir Starmer had an article last week in the Daily Express. And listen, I've got no problem with writing in the Daily Express, just as we had, you know, we got criticized for traveling around the world to see Murdoch, etc. But it was a piece about Brexit. And I just felt it was, it was almost on a par with the Brexiteers who say, we've just got to believe in this more. He's still talking about making Brexit work. He's going through the things, the areas where Brexit is not working. But I just don't understand the politics of this right now, I'm afraid. The mood on Brexit is moving to a very different place, I believe. And so he's obviously thinking,

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well, I've got to keep these people happy who voted for Brexit. I'm not going to tell them they're stupid. I'm going to tell them that they did the right thing and understand why they did it. But it's doing so much damage to the country at the moment. I don't understand why he's in that position. Can we just sort of get into this? Because it is the sort of \$60,000 question, isn't it? You are increasingly convinced that if Labour came out clearly and said we're in favour of, I don't know, Single Market Customs Union, Brexit, actually, they'd be fine. They'd still win the election. That wouldn't loosen the election. That'd be a good thing to do. I don't even think they need to go that far. I don't think they need to go that far because that does bring you back to free movement and all that sort of stuff. I just think saying in a very clear way, it's not working, it's going badly. We're not reversing it, but we have to revisit the arrangements. I think that's all he needs to say. And he sort of said that, but he was in a sort of hidden in all this kind of, there's no question of this and there's no question of that. And I understand why you voted for it and all this sort of stuff. And I just think it's in the wrong place.

Presumably, he's going to lose quite a lot of people who were passionate about the European Union and were hoping that he was going to change the Tory Brexit policy.

I had people, including somebody that I persuaded to join the Labour Party not long ago, who sent me a message saying, I've left. Because I can't see, I can't see, and it's not even the fact of seeing Brexit wanting to see Brexit fixed, which I think is the line to rather make Brexit work. I think he should be saying, we're going to fix this Brexit deal. I think it's also this sense of the positioning, all being about the kind of leaning into the right as opposed to what the Labour Party really, really stands for. And I would say, I have a little bit of a concern. I know you were interested in this situation up in the northeast with the Jamie Driscoll, who's the mayor up in the north, Metro Mayor up in the northeast.

And just to explain to us, Jamie Driscoll, Metro Mayor, but the local Labour Party has decided he cannot stand in the forthcoming bigger mayoral elections. And this is something that's caused real ructions, including Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Manchester, writing in and defence. And Steve Rotherham Liverpool.

And also, actually, one of Liz Truss's big allies, Simon Clarke, saying he found him a really good mayor who had the interest to reach in at his heart, who wasn't particularly political or ideological. And he thought, so he's got conservative defenders too. It's a very strange, I mean, he's been a popular bipartisan figure.

Well, I think that what's going on here is that one of the things that the Labour Party under Keir Starman is determined to show is that it's moved on from the Corbyn era, rooting out anti-Semitism, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So far as I can work out, the sin that has been committed has been to share a platform with Ken Loach, the film director. Now, Ken Loach is, you know, he's a brilliant filmmaker, including he's made some brilliant films set up in the northeast, which I think was one of the reasons why they did this event together. But he does have something of a track record on the whole, you know, zealously pro-Corbyn, anti-Semitism, et cetera, all that space. But I think it's the fact of sharing a platform with somebody, unless Jamie Driscoll has himself said or done something.

I think it's bizarre. I mean, it's one thing sharing a platform with, you know, somebody who's themselves the terrorist, but sharing a platform with a film director who has, I mean, you know, you're then going to get in a very, very weird world. Ken Loach was a big

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endorser of my Iraq book. You will be not very astonished to hear. So he's all over my book. I'm a big fan of Ken Loach as a result. I'm sure that Ken Loach would be, you know, would see me as being in the sort of war criminal category. But I see Ken Loach as somebody who is a brilliant filmmaker, who has a lot to say about the state of the world, whose views of politics and a lot of what's gone on in Labour parties in recent years, I profoundly disagree with. But I would happily share a platform with Ken Loach. Yeah, exactly. And I wouldn't be expect to be expelled from the Labour Party, of which I'm not currently a member, but I would not expect to be expelled just for, you know, if we would, let's say we were to get him here on leading. I mean, does that, I don't know, where do you draw the line on this sort of stuff? Well, no, we got Jerry Adams on leading. Well, and as you know, Rory, I'd met Jerry Adams many dozens of times prior to that, including when there was a vague suspicion that he might have been involved in terrorism, you know.

Can they reverse this decision? Is it too late? I don't know what the processes are, but it does seem a bit odd. It's very interesting that he's had such a, because Andy Burnham's not from the Corbyn left. And as I say, Conservative MPs in the area also rate him. So it seems a very, very unfaithful thing. Yeah, I don't know him well. But I mean, look, I think he's definitely on the sort of Corbyn Easter wing of the Labour Party. And I know there's sort of, you know, the kind of people like John McDonald have been out defending him, which is fine. And he's been going on picket lines. He thinks he may be in trouble because he appeared on a picket line. But again, that's a bit weird to start not allowing a Labour mayor to appear on a picket line. And also, if we're going, if we're serious about the evolution, we're going to have different characters and different people. So no, I think on, as you know, Rory, I'm not, I desperately want Keir Starmer to win. I really want Labour to, to win the next election. But these, there's two things in a week that I was not terribly impressed by. Well, I'd like to pay tribute to you for being non-tribal and unlike you, unlike you on the COVID inquiry. My massive tribal defence of the government's position on the COVID inquiry. Now, should we go to another, should we go to another place that I'm deeply concerned about? In which I think you, we can see the two of us. You playing the role of Alexander Vukic and me playing the role of Albin Korti. So here we are in Kosovo. And this is actually something we covered in quite a lot of detail, which I think thanks to you, you made us do this a few, few months ago. Yeah. And we talked through the fact that we thought there were very, very serious risks in Northern Kosovo. And indeed, they have been revealed in very dramatic form. And this goes to big, big questions of peace, of Serbia's continuing relationships with Russia, of whether or not these countries can join the European Union. And whether by joining the European Union, you might be able to resolve some of these tensions. But the immediate tension at this moment is that the majority of the population in these particular districts in Northern Kosovo are ethnic Serbians rather than ethnic Albanians. They boycotted the local elections and people with a few hundred votes who were voted for only by the minority Albanians were then imposed as mayors. And this has then caused this violence and NATO's had to deploy troops. And the general sense, I think, which we talked about a few months ago, is that Alvin Korti, the prime minister, the prime minister of Kosovo, is somebody who was welcomed because he was seen as less corrupt, more idealistic, cleaner than his predecessor. But has turned out, unfortunately, along with that idealism, to be very, very unbending and quite absolutist. And this pushing

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to get these mayors installed seems to have been a very, very provocative, unwise data. Well, that is a view that the Americans have expressed. It's a view that the European Union has expressed. And also, my friend, Eddie Rama, I don't know if you saw he did a long interview

on the BBC about this the other day. And he was saying, actually, that this is not as serious as it looks, provided that both Kosovo and Serbia get back to the deal that they did back in, I think it was March, where essentially, and this was quite a big, this was quite a big breakthrough, I think, when Josep Burrell, the European foreign policy chief, he spent 12 hours in talks between Vukic, the president, who looks nothing like me, by the way.

He was, however, he was, however, previously a minister of information.

That's true.

That's why he's drawing the taste, the taste, this comparison, yeah.

But he's also very tall. He's one of the few world leaders who's significantly taller than I am.

So, he and Kuwaiti, the Kosovo Prime Minister, were in these talks. And essentially, they came out and Kosovo had agreed to set up something which the Serb majority in these northern districts had been asking for, which is an association of Serb majority municipalities. And Serbia had said it would, quote, not object, it wasn't exactly saying it was support, it would not object to Kosovo's membership of an international organization. Of course, Kosovo's dream is to be properly recognized at the United Nations. They're currently on 99 countries around to the 193 that recognize them. That includes us, it includes the US, it includes 22 out of the European Union countries, Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain are the ones who continue not to recognize them. So, that was where it was heading.

And also, sorry, just to add to that, there was also this vote, April, which brought Kosovo into the Council of Europe, which was another big bit of progress.

And then, but then, so then with these elections, so the reason for the Serb boycott was they felt that there had been not enough progress made on promises already made about giving them some sort of, it's not devolved power, but some sort of authority that they could say we've been treated as a bit special. So, they were protesting at that. And then when the elections happened, and as you say, the turnout was less than 4%. Because although, if you look at Kosovo as a whole, 1.8 million people, 92% are Albanian and only 6% are Serb. But a lot of that 6%, they do live up in this northern patch. And so, they didn't take part. And you then literally did have sort of dozens of police officers who were escorting these four mayors, one of whom had had literally, I think it was in, you know, fewer than 100 votes. And that kicked off. There was then violence. Kuti is insistent that some of that violence is from criminal gangs. Some of it is being provoked by, endorsed and supported by Russia. And of course, the bigger picture here is about this is why the Americans and the Europeans are so involved in this. The bigger picture is how to prevent Serbia from being too locked into the kind of Russian orbit.

And on that, Vucic has been quite smart. I mean, people were very worried because he'd been associated with Milosevic in the past and was seen as a Serbian nationalist, that he would be drawn into Russia's orbit completely. But he's been quite canny on that. He has retained good relations with Russia. And I was talking to a Russian yesterday whose families moved to Serbia because it's one of the few places that they can go without visas. But he's also kept sufficient distance not really to become a kind of Putin tool. And one of the things when he began making

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these agreements with the EU and Kosovo, he then faced protests from the far right of people wearing

sort of pro-Putin t-shirts and symbols. So it's a sort of reminder with all these politicians that often, you know, when they try to take a moderate course, they end up with extremists on their inside. Yeah. But the Americans, the Americans have been pretty firm on this. They actually withdrew the right of Kosovo to take part in a military exercise that was being planned.

And then of course, you have this Novak Djokovic, you know who Novak Djokovic is, Rory? Yeah, he's a tennis player.

Tennis player. He inserted himself rather unhelpfully at the Paris, the French Open in Paris. You know, they have this thing of getting marker pens and they signed their signature on a camera as they finished a match and he went on and scribbled, Kosovo is the heart of Serbia, which of course is, it was, you know, not the most helpful thing that he could have done.

And just to go back to our previous discussion, to remind people that one of the big things that was that triggers all this is the refusal of Serbs living in that area to use some of them, not all of them, to use a Kosovo number plates. They have Serb plates on their cars.

But anyway, bottom line is tense, difficult, terrible soldiers got and police officers got injured, some of them very seriously, 700 more troops have had to be sent there.

But there is still a deal to be done and we should focus on that March 17th in North Macedonia. Both sides should go back to that.

Which I think brings us on to the final thing, which is Poland. So big demonstrations in Poland there just remind people the law and justice party came in and has been ruling in a very, very unpleasant populist nationalist style, Poland being obviously the sort of mirror image of Hungary,

of what Victor Orban is doing in Hungary. A government, people want to read more about it, there's a great book by Ann Applebaum called Twilight of Democracy, she's married to a Polish politician, but she talks about the domination of incredible conspiracy theories, the fact that the government's state-owned media at sort of BBC equivalent whipped up so much mad hatred against the mayor of Gdansk that he was actually eventually stabbed to death on stage with no apologies from the government, deep fights with the European Union because they've been refusing to accept the judges which are proposed by parliament or by the Judicial Commission stuffing their own people into judiciary as well as state media.

So big test I guess for rule of law in Europe, the standards of the European Union against Poland and now these protests over to you. Well, half a million people is what the mayor of Warsaw was putting it at. And of course, and two of the big names who were there, one was Lech Walensa, of course, was the leader of the Solidarity Movement in the 80s, became president. And the other was Donald Tusk, who well known to us through the Brexit debate with his role at the European Union. But he's now the leader of the main opposition party, the Civic Platform. And the tipping point that seems to have taken this into a different level really is this new law that they brought in. It's called the Anti-Russia Commission, which is going to have the power to ban people from public office who it is deemed to have been too helpful to the Russians in the past. And it's been called the law has been called Lex Tusk, Tusk law, because essentially, people think this is a sort of backdoor or prefrontal way to stop him from competing.

To disqualify Tusk from running in elections. Yeah, they'll say basically he allowed Poland

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to become too dependent on Russia. We see this more and more, don't we? Because of course, this is the other one stuff, disqualifying popular candidates from running in elections.

And I think it's something that we don't talk about enough when we talk about the laws around democracy. We often talk about free and fair elections, but I think really holding to the principle which I think we've gotten Britain, which is that anyone can run for election.

And that we don't get into the business of governments deciding who or who are not suitable candidates. I mean, we do end up with some rogues, but...

Yeah, we certainly do. We should maybe end on this because there's another situation. In fact, we had a couple of questions about it in Senegal, where exactly this is happening right now.

The social media messaging platforms have been blocked. There's been violence and unrest. And it's all because the opposition leader, Uzmane Sanko, has been sentenced for two years for immoral behavior. And people essentially are saying that this is simply a kind of fake thing to prevent him from contesting the election.

Well, and famously in Malaysia, the most impressive Malaysian politician was put in jail for accused of sodomy. I mean, it's very, very disturbing. And I think this whole theme that we're talking about with this new world order and whether the American world order is going to be able to survive and whether the Chinese world order is challenging it is partly about...

It doesn't matter whether we're talking about Malaysia or Senegal or Poland. There's three continents, this erosion of democracy that we're seeing and the erosion of civil society and the pattern of the way that they're learning from each other. So one of the things that's very striking in Applebaum's book is you can see American Republican think tanks turning up in Hungary and in Poland. And then the same think tanks who are putting Maloney on stage then end up involved in this National Conservatism Conference in London. And there's a sort of playbook which Steve Bannon used to be very, very explicit about and which will become much, much worse with two things. If Trump gets back in the States and if Le Pen wins the French presidency, we're going to see a much, much worse version of this.

Absolutely. And by the way, I have to thank your constant plugging of Al Jazeera. I didn't know about this Senegal situation until I was watching Al Jazeera. As of the last night when I was watching it, 15 people have been killed in the violence.

Can I speaking of plugging remind people that but what can I do is currently out and selling.

But take take take opportunity from that to plug the fact that I will be launching my book if anybody would like to come before you go before you go on before you go on. It's called politics on the edge. That's beautiful. I love the way you do that. It's like it's beautiful.

So second and third September in Manchester and London, if anybody would like to come along and details on the website is something called Fane, F-A-N-E.

Is it what is it? Old Traffin and Wembley?

It's I wish old Traffin and Wembley. It's called the Lowry in Manchester and the Barbican in Barbican in London. That's pretty cool. The Lowry is cool.

The Barbican is cool. Music, music venue in it. Yeah, that's right.

Excellent. Thank you very much. Thank you Alastair. Beautiful shirt, very envious of it.

Thank you. And look forward to speaking soon.