

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 138. Question Time: The Bullingdon Club, democracy vs. capitalism, and overcoming foot-and-mouth

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

Me, Alistair Campbell. Where do you want to start?

Well, let's just start on this because it develops a theme that we explored in the podcast yesterday, but I think it makes it a bit sharper. It's from Roger Wade. Given Keir Starmer's recent ad view, where he categorically rules out the return to the European Union or single market, do you believe the Brexit issue is bigger than the Labour Party and it is time to support the Liberal Democrats at the next election? And would you and Rory consider switching allegiances?

Well, you haven't come out for the Labour Party, but I get very angry with the Liberal Democrats as well. I don't feel that they're sort of really making... And by the way, even though I think leaving the European Union was a total catastrophe for our country, I'm not saying either of them should go into the next election, saying let's rejoin. I am saying that I think that they should be calling out the damage that it's doing and making clear that a new government has to fix the damage. But you can't be open about how you're going to fix the damage unless you're open and honest about the scale of the damage. And when you read, as I did the other day, in fact, Chris Patton, I don't even saw Chris Patton on question time, but there was a clip that went viral of him just going through why it had been such a disaster. But one factoid that sort of leapt out to me is when he said the poorest 20% in Poland are now better off than the poorest 20% in the UK. That's very interesting. And that's partly weirdly because, I mean, with all the horrors of what that party has been doing in Poland, they've introduced something called the Family 500 Plus, which has been given much more generous benefits to the poor. This is Marowiecki, the prime minister, who's a very weird figure. I mean, a lot of these people in the Law and Justice Party are people who are sort of university professors and talk in this very academic language. Marowiecki edited a book on European Union law. So you have this very sinister thing, which is a bit kind of reminiscent of, well, I guess it's a point, isn't it, that often these regimes are facilitated by smooth talking intellectuals, despite their very kind of sinister underpinnings. But the one good thing I suppose they've done is they've set up much, much more generous welfare payments. And that's one of the reasons why they're still quite popular.

Yeah. Now, the producer having told us that the main podcast was quite heavy. Let's try and keep this one light. You went straight back to one of the heaviest subjects in yesterday's podcast.

Oh, well, okay, here's a way of moving us on. Ready? Okay, I'm going to transition us on.

Ready? Go on. Go on. Okay. So Jeff Chambers has written me a letter, actually, long letter.

You promised to do an episode a month on happy news, which you so far have not done.

Did we do that?

The world is full of bad news, but this is an active choice. I challenge you to present just one episode per month that is nothing but happy and positive. So now, tell us, as somebody who is a veteran journalist, why is it that the newspapers tend not to report happy news?

First of all, did we make that promise? Because that was a very silly promise to make. Or was that just you? No, I think we both sort of did. I think we must be in an amiable mood. I think we did. Yeah. Well, the thing is, though, that the classic definition of news is something that somebody somewhere doesn't want published, right? That's the classic definition of news.

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And also, one person's happiness is another person's sadness. If we were to, let's just imagine there was a labor landslide, okay? That would be happy news, as far as I'm concerned. But it's very sad news if you're an active conservative. My mother points out that Bloomberg does happy news. So they get news like this girl was born in jail, but just got accepted to Harvard University or she just sent me a whole list of these. Yeah, but you get the sort of and finally things on news at 10, aren't they? But also, remember Martin Lewis, the BBC guy, he tried to set something going where it's sort of much more positive. I think the reason is that, look, I actually think our media gets it way off balance. I think people want something, they understand that if you've got a sort of rail crash in India, then that's genuinely newsworthy and people want to know about it. You've got a war going on in Ukraine, you've got the economy going wrong. These are really important things. But I think within that, people do yearn for something maybe a little bit more positive and a little less alarming. Well, here's a nice story then just on this. There's a man who stopped a bank robbery with a hug, declares love overcomes all. Oh, I'm really worried though that my mother actually has sent this. Oh my, oh, I'm very worried. My mother sent it to me claiming it was from Bloomberg. It's not at all. Where's it from? The Daily Star? It's terrifying. It's from Breitbart, which is that terrifying right-wing Trumpian thing. That's extremely disturbing. So for the first time ever, we have quoted, thanks to your mother, we have quoted Breitbart. Breitbart. Oh, that's awful. I'm so sorry. Never mind, never mind. Now listen, here's one definitely for you, this one. I've got two here. We haven't been into the sort of, you know, we haven't been into your background much of late. I've stopped banging on about Ian. Tom Hansen, was Rory actually invited to join the Bullington Club at Oxford? And before you answer that one, Russell Grant, I don't think it's the horoscope guy, does Rory still support Fox Hunting and why? Goodness Christ, why are those two linked in your mind? Because Fox Hunting is a pursuit of the TOF classes, in my opinion, historically, and because the Bullington Club is a really horrible organisation that says all that's the worst things about the TOF class. Right. Okay. Well, let me do both. Bullington Club, I was approached, and I went to a meeting. How does that happen? Oh, come on, go on, detail here. How does that happen? Are you approached to somebody's sideline up to you? What do they wear when they sideline up to you? Yeah, I think it's a bit like that. And it was so, to explain to listeners who are not in the inside baseball of this weird stuff, this is a dining club at Oxford, an ancient dining club where people wear tailcoats. And in the 19th century, it was full of all the kind of aristocrats of Oxford and was the smartest thing to be in. By the time it got around to the sort of early 90s, it was dominated by people like Boris Johnson and David Cameron. George Osborne. And I think Darius Guppy, who later ended up in jail and who was a friend of Boris Johnson's. I was approached and I found it very, very disturbing. I don't know whether it was a strange meeting, but it seemed to be aggressive, arrogant, drunken, and although I'm sure many of the individuals in it were nice individuals, I thought as a group, it was extremely unpleasant and seemed to me completely out of keeping with the modern world. Why were you approached? Who approached you and why were you approached? Well, I think I was approached because I was considered to be a general kind of,

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I don't know, it's a class basis, Alistair. It's the class. It's all about class, isn't it?

So it's because of your background and your schooling.

Exactly. That's the kind of stuff.

And what was the most unpleasant thing about it that made you think I don't want to go back to this? Well, I don't really remember. I mean, I think I had a memory not of that thing. I think the one that I went to was fine, but I'd remembered seeing when I'd first arrived in Oxford, seeing one of these guys in his tailcoat standing on a table in a pub, shouting at everybody around him. And I just was horrified by the whole thing.

Well, I must confess, I did that once a choice as well.

What stood on a table shouted at everybody?

I did, yeah. Usually people from the Bloomington Club. I did, I did, I'm afraid.

Do you think you were possibly quite an unpleasant undergraduate?

Oh, definitely. At times I was absolutely horrible. Yeah, I hated myself. I used to have a party trick as well of opening doors by headbutting them. Very odd, very odd, yeah.

Maybe lucky that I met you later in life.

I think it is, Rory. I think it is. And what about the Fox Hunting thing?

Fox Hunting thing is a Cumbrian thing. So in Cumbria, it isn't a thing done by posh people. It's largely local farmers. It's footpacks. People aren't on horses.

And it's a very, very strong community tradition in the Lake District.

But had you never done Fox Hunting prior to Cumbria?

I'd never done Fox Hunting prior to Cumbria. I've never hunted a fox. I never hunted a fox.

Even in Cumbria, I didn't hunt foxes.

Okay. Now, Archie Sykes, this doesn't need an answer. It's just, I think we should just do this because we're nice people. Are A-level politics teacher, Mr Carpenter, is a massive fan, recommends your podcast every week. Could you give him a shout out as it's our final couple of weeks and it would make his day?

So well done, Mr Carpenter, for inspiring your pupils to be interested in politics.

That's lovely.

And here's one similar theme, Mia Davis, should basic politics be part of the curriculum for secondary school covering national and local politics and what each party stands for and what each body covers? My answer to that is definitively yes.

I actually think we should teach in primary schools on how to argue.

Yeah. Well, and this is your whole thing. It's not called rhetoric, is it? It's called oracy that you've been promoting. That's the one.

Yeah. Do you support oracy?

Yeah. I think oracy is a really, really good... Well, I think you're absolutely right. I mean, in a way, one of the reasons why we end up getting dominated by these people who went to private schools is that they're given the confidence through being trained in public speaking. And actually, I think it's something, a reason why my father would say that Scots of his generation, coming out of small local schools in Scotland, often did very well in life, often did well in England when they went south because they were actually encouraged and trained to learn how to speak clearly, communicate clearly.

I wrote about how in the Scottish education system, less so now, I think, but there was

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a greater understanding, I think, of the role of debating and arguing in the development of people as human beings.

Yeah. Well, it goes all the way back to the Scottish Enlightenment.

Indeed.

Central the whole modern world. Now, CJ, you've mentioned there's a lack of ideas in politics right now. Why do you think that is and how can we generate more of them?

That's quite a deep question going on. So have a go at that one.

Well, I think it's because there's a sort of anti-intellectualism, which is partly driven by dumbed-down media. I think it's partly driven by the sort of politics that we've seen, that we talk about a lot, populism. Populism is kind of... It's the antidote to intellectualism in that it's sort of, you don't think things through, you just think up a snappy slogan and say, let's go and pretend to people that that's going to solve the problem. In addition to which, I think that within the campaign political infrastructure, I just think the ideas space has become a little bit diminished. Do you agree with that?

Yeah. I think that's right. And I think it's because the dominant model that we had really through the 90s of pragmatically regulated free market and our particular views on democracy has begun to seem tired and tarnished. And it's been obvious now that there's a big chunk of the population in Britain across Europe, across the United States that feels in a very, very precarious situation, feels their children's lives are going to be worse than their own lives. And we don't have solutions because we don't really know what an alternative economic system is like. And we don't really have the courage to think about what it would really take to resolve what is obviously an unfair and, in many ways, completely unsustainable society.

Well, that's probably a good point at which to plug our next episode of leading, which is Kate Rayworth, Donut Economics.

Donut Economics.

Having just done Mary McElize. What about related question, Rory? Martin Coleman, again, this is a really deep question, which is sort of PhD material, but we'll try and cover it in a minute. Is capitalism breaking democracy?

Well, there we are. Exactly right. That's, I think, collects very, very closely.

I think it is. And I think...

So do we need a new capitalism or a new democracy to fix it or both?

Well, I think we probably need both. I mean, I don't want to be sort of pompous about it, but I think it's a situation where our economic system isn't delivering.

Our democratic system isn't trusted by people. Trust in institutions. We haven't talked about this enough. But one of the things you see in the polls over the last 10 years is trust in institutions really beginning to drop very, very dramatically. And it's not just... I mean, I think this important week can get very wound up about the awful behavior of politicians in Britain, but it's a pattern across Europe and the United States. And it's partly because more and more people feel the system is unjust. It's just not delivering for them.

And so Alistair, I think maybe time for a quick break.

And welcome back to the Restless Politics Question Time with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

Right. Okay. Moving swiftly on was Gus Cassie, foot and mouth disease. I'd be really interested

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to know what Alistair's reflections are on how effectively foot and mouth disease was dealt with. Rory's thoughts as his old constituency right in the middle of it, and are we prepared for a similar incident now? So what's your memories of foot and mouth disease?

Oh, absolutely awful. Absolutely awful. First memory is of... And it's funny how I really have a specific memory of somebody coming to a meeting we were having with the Canadian Prime Minister,

Cretien, with a piece of paper and giving it to Tony and saying, there's an outbreak of foot and mouth in Kent. I don't think we got on top of it quickly enough because at the time, the Ministry of Agriculture were absolutely adamant that it was all under control, everything was fine, it was going to be okay. And by the time we got back, you sort of had a sense of it being out of control. And I do mean out of control. It felt it was one of those very, very rare periods when we were in government where you sort of felt, oh my God, this is just, this is beyond anything. And it really was only when we literally sort of got the army involved and the whole weight of government was sort of galvanized to say, this is, we've all got to just work out what we need to do and do it that we got on top of it. But it was absolutely horrible, really horrible.

Well, it's a classic thing, isn't it, that you often see with government, which is how long they take to really wake up and respond to a crisis or recognize it as a crisis. I mean, what's your tip in terms of crisis management for actually getting people to recognize that it's a crisis more quickly? Because that's often the problem, isn't it? I found it in everything I did with flooding and things that were often slow. I think that partly this is because we're so used to everything being defined by others as a crisis, particularly the media, that that maybe makes us reluctant sometimes to accept that something might be a crisis, added to which, I think this came through in the various sort of inquiries afterwards, added to which I think there is a sense of a government department because of the silo system or a government, you kind of want the government department responsible to be in charge, to take control and to run the whole thing. But he actually, with these things, often they reach a point very, very quickly where that is just beyond their capacity. And that's not a criticism. No, but I think that's, I think this is true in businesses too, that often you don't want to micromanage the department head underneath you. You want to trust them and let them get on with it. But pretty soon you realize that you've got to take it all the way to the top. Well, there's just no way of getting on top of it. There's a brilliant piece, if someone wants an amusing read, a really lovely, funny piece written July 2020 called Bad Resilience, Good Resilience by Russi, and written by someone called Paul Martin and also by Jonathan Evans, who was the ex-head of MI5. And it's a spoof on government management. Just to give you a glimpse of it, this is rule one, have a plan and stick to it. And it goes like this, have a big fat plan, not a strategy. Make sure you have a very long and detailed plan with lots of diagrams and annexes written several years ago by your business continuity specialist or a consultant who's since moved on. The plan should give precise instructions about what to do in a range of specific situations, none of which will apply when the next crisis strikes. If a crisis does arrive shoehorn it into one of your existing scenarios and stick to the plan, I'm just about to finish, your persistence in sticking with the wrong plan will reassure your colleagues. It will also reflect the universal psychological predisposition known as

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sunk cost bias, which is what keeps us digging when we've invested heavily in digging a hole.

So what, the former head of our intelligence agency is going around writing spoof government plans, at least shows you've got a sense of humor. Now here's one, Jay Woodier, when will governments start acting in a way that is commensurate with the level of concern and desire for action on climate change and nature? Perfect timing with great big green week starting on Saturday, where people across the UK will be taking action, encouraging government

to do so. And I want to plug another podcast, by the way, I did an interview on a podcast. What? Hold a sec, really? Yes, it's fine. It's fine. As long as I stay as a number one, I didn't, I actually tweeted about it after we had got to number one with both of our podcasts last week. It's called Planet Critical. And it's by a young woman called Rachel Donald, who's the daughter of somebody I trained as a journalist with many years ago, and who came to one of my talks on the book and she sort of basically asked me to be interviewed on her podcast. She got a lot of flag for it because I think a lot of her listeners basically are in the Ken Loach category of seeing me as a war criminal. But it was interesting because she's absolutely in the sort of, you know, out and out activism, but understands that you do need people who understand government and how it works and power structures and how you change them

before actually we're going to be able to get the level of concern that Jay Woodier is asking for. I mean, I think it's another opportunity to plug the Kate Roweth interview, which was, I think, a very interesting, difficult interview for both of us because she was being incredibly radical, really saying we have reached the carrying capacity of the planet that effectively growth needs to stop. And if anything, our economies need to start shrinking. And when listeners go to that on on leading next week, you'll find us both really struggling to work at how on earth. I mean, our systems, unfortunately, are built on growth, not least because we have aging populations, we're having to pay for pensions and also because health costs in every country go up much more steeply than inflation. And if the government doesn't bring in more money, we can't even stand still. So we've got to, in a sense, we were in a system that feels it's got a greater standstill and how we balance that with what we're trying to do on the environment and climate, I think it's going to be very, very tough. So political advice, Alex Kiriakou.

I am the youngest active member of my local Labour Party, 19 year old who joined because of the rest of his politics. Ooh, that's a bit troubling. Has it turned out that the rest of his politics is just driving everyone to the Labour Party during me? Well done. Well done, Alex. During me. And I recently met the former MP of my local area, Bill Ramel. And he told me that one of his memories of the Blair years was that when he became a junior minister for the first time, Alistair's only advice for him was don't fuck up. Well, that was the only advice you gave to him. Was that your normal advice to junior ministers? Anyway, what's the best but also funniest advice you received during your time at Parliament Strait Downing Street? Over to you, and then I've got one. Now, can you go first while I think about it? Well, my best advice I ever got was I was, it's not actually in Parliament Downstreet, but it's in government. I was down in Southern Iraq trying to, I was the acting governor of a province and Andy Bear Park, who was my boss, came down from Baghdad. And there was a civil war going on and I was trying to build these buildings. I gave these very earnest presentation on my 50 main priorities

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for the area. And he said, Rory, if I can return here in six months time and there's not a civil war and you can serve me ice cream, I'll be happy. I think don't, I don't remember saying don't fuck up to Bill Ramel, but you know, I have no reason to dispute you whatsoever. But the piece of advice that I feel helped me both as a journalist and as a communicator. And here I am going to be non-tribal, Rory. I'm going to quote a conservative chief whip by the name of Alastair Goodlard. Right. Yes, I like Alastair Goodlard. Yeah. Well, he once said to me, never use one word where none will do. Oh, very good. And I just say that. And I think that whole point about, you know, communication and valuing the words that you use and being tight in your communication,

I think is very, very important. And on which there's a question, Ingrid, what a name, Ingrid de Maerschalk. How did politicians communicate before email and WhatsApp? Is there a case to go back the old ways to encourage politicians to be more reflective? Absolutely bloody lootily there is. It's, I mean, I think it's, I think it's something not just for politics, it's something we all experience in our own lives, isn't it? I mean, we're all fighting these inboxes. We're all fighting the WhatsApp's pouring in. I mean, it's, I don't, you presume your phone's like mine every time I, you know, I'll get off this two hour call. I'll have another 100 emails. I have another 15 WhatsApp's. And it's, yeah, it's very, very weird. I'm my predecessor in Penrith on the border, predecessor's predecessor, woolly white law. I met the lady who ran his constituency office. And I explained that I was getting those days, I guess, about 280 emails a week.

And she said he got five letters a week. He could answer them all in the library at the House of Commons. Just sit down for half an hour. Right, right. Little handwritten notes. Here's a question for you. Interesting, very interesting question from someone called Andrew Gallacher. Macron didn't like his prime minister saying fascist this week. He said, the fight against the far right no longer involves moral arguments. We must discredit them by the substance and the inconsistencies instead of with words from the 1990s, which no longer work. Do you agree with Macron that? Well, I agree with Macron a lot of things, but I'm not sure I do agree

with him on that. What do you think he's trying to say there? Where's he going with that? I think he's trying to, it's the argument that we, we got into in a big way in this country over our boss, the gaffer Gary Lenica, when he was in that row with the BBC about talking about the language of the 30s being used in the debate on immigration here now, is that the minute you use that word, the resonance immediately is Hitler and the Holocaust. And that is not necessarily relevant to some of the arguments deployed by the hard right in France at the moment. I guess that's what he's saying. He said,

Well done. Thank you. I spotted you. I thought he's bound to make one error. I'll get him on one error at least. Well done. And the Pluto, you, you was just not quite sharp enough. The little circumflits on the you, you sharpen the you, Pluto, Pluto. It's beautiful. It's beautiful. It's hearing you speak French. Maybe I could do a whole episode where you could just read read French poetry to everyone instead of doing your bagpipes.

Sure. I'm not sure we'd have ready listening to the end. No, I'm not sure I do agree with that. Not least broadly, because as you'll remember from your very careful reading of, but what can I do? I do have a whole chapter about how I think the threat of fascism is something we need to take seriously right now. Yeah. A couple of quick ones.

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AI and inequality. Cain's predicted technology would lead to a 15 hour work week. AI could fulfill the prediction, yet the working week is getting longer and the pension age is going up. Do you think the benefits of AI will be shared equally? Or would it just make the rich richer? So two different questions there, I guess. I think there's a real risk that the benefits will not be shared equally. And in fact, it's interesting to a lot of the big AI founders are in favor of universal basic income because they're very worried about this. And I think one of the threats of AI potentially is in terms of unemployment. I think the other thing though is this bigger point about technology and the working week. There's a famous joke by an economist who said, we see computers everywhere except in the productivity statistics. And there is a sense in which weirdly, we haven't seen what people predicted in the 1950s, which is that as all these new developments would come, we wouldn't have to work as hard. And I think that's partly about the way in which computers and AI develop new opportunities for us to spend an enormous amount of time doing things we weren't doing before. I must say, Rory, I had quite a few people last week saying they thought you did a very good job explaining the sort of potted history and the background to AI. But I've been sort of reading a bit more about this. And this is first of all here, let me just hold this up for you, Rory. Can you see that latest front page in the European? Yes. Lots and lots of sort of coding. And it says in the yellow here, what if artificial intelligence saves the planet? And it's a very, it's a very interesting piece by a guy called Henry Shelvin, who is the Associate Director of the Leave of Him Centre for the Future of Intelligence, the University of Cambridge. And he's essentially putting the counter to this, is going to destroy humanity. And literally, no sooner finish that, and somebody sent me a message saying, you must listen to this podcast, there was something called Hard Fork. And it was with somebody called AJEYA, senior research analyst at Open Philanthropy, who was kind of explaining how we could get to the place where this thing destroys humanity. So I'm still sort of torn between these two things. And I don't know how to make my mind up. Very good. Well, I don't think anyone does, because I think, particularly if we move to more autonomous, generalized artificial intelligence, we don't really know how to define the threat, because almost by definition, it's learning and changing all the time. And it's very difficult for us to define exactly what it would or wouldn't do. On the inequality point, if you look at the people who made the most money on our planet in recent years, they do seem to be the same sorts of people who are kind of, you know, plugging into this now. So I don't hold that much hope of the inequality thing. But that is where it's got to be taken by governments. How do we make sure that, unlike other technological revolutions, that it is actually something where we get equal access for people? And tax is going to be sent for that. Now, Roy, we're coming to the end here. And I think we have to end with this one, Roy, so that we can talk about one of the most exciting developments in the history of the Restless Politics last week. Richard Paulson, could Rory say a few words to mark the retirement of the remarkable Slatan Ibrahimovic? Thank you very much. I was hoping you were going to move on to some extraordinary thing about AI, instead of which we're on the retirement of a football player, about whom I know absolutely nothing. Do you literally know nothing about Slatan Ibrahimovic? No, just he's a famous football player. But again, tell me about why we should.

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Did you know he was a famous footballer? I think I'm, no, probably not. Probably didn't really know. I think I was a bit of a guess that he's a football player.

Seriously, was that a guess? Tell us about him.

He's almost as big as Darren Bent.

Listen, can we just tell the story of Darren Bent?

We're going to do that, but let me just tell you, but they are related because

Slatan Ibrahimovic, he's just below Messi and Ronaldo, I'd say.

He's an amazing football and an amazing character as well. And I think you'd actually enjoy most footballers biographies are absolutely awful, but Slatan is not bad.

He's got a touch of Kant and Arabyte.

So the only thing that I'm guessing from his name is that he would have been originally kind of Bosnian or Croatian and he's been nicked by another country. So he could have been there with my great heroes winning the World Cup for them.

I know, I know, but never mind. I think if you had ever heard of him, he would have been one of your heroes, I think. So meanwhile, Darren Bent, so while you were traveling around in Japan or somewhere everywhere last week, I did it into you at Talksport because we discussed Darren Bent on the Q&A last week, as you'll remember, because a listener wanted to know why you had this obsession with Darren Bent. And the next day, Andy Goldstein, who's a Talksport presenter, he presents a show with Darren Bent, the former footballer. He played the exchange on his show and Darren Bent totally straight-faced said, there's no way they talked about me.

That is artificial intelligence. So we having discussed artificial intelligence last week, he said, this was artificial intelligence. So they phoned me up and said, would I go on and talk about and try and persuade Darren Bent that this really was real?

And but he spent the whole interview saying no. And he was saying things like, move your hand, wave your hand. And I was waving my hand.

And so one of the revelations was that Darren Bent wasn't that clear about who we were. So he thought I was Rod Stewart, as in I am sailing. And he believes that you, he knew you were out of the Campbell, but he believed you'd been the Prime Minister. Is that right?

Yeah. So I think that suggests that he probably did have a vague sense of who I was, but he did confuse you with Rod Stewart. It's true. I mean, it's quite a good idea, though. I love the idea of a podcast where Rod Stewart and a former Prime Minister present together.

I am, I did say, by the way, that the next time we do a show in London, that Darren Bent would be invited and he would come along to show that we are real.

And we would talk about Darren Bent. Very good. So yeah. And then the next thing I saw the next day, somebody in the swimming pool queue point said to me, did you listen to talk sport last night? No. So he said, well, Darren Bent's dad had phone had sent a message into the programme, tell Darren is them. Very good. That's beautiful. Well, there we are. So I'm glad we've we've got people focusing on the big issues on that beautiful vision of Darren Bent turning up to see one of our live shows. I think maybe we'll move to an end. See you soon.