

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

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Hello, welcome to The Restless Politics with me, Alistair Campbell.

And me, Rory Stewart.

And Rory, before we get on with the podcast today, a little bit of news for our listeners about, and don't get too excited people, it's not going to be any day soon, our next two live shows. Pen's ready. Wednesday, September 13, we will be in Edinburgh.

Restless Politics live at the Arsha Hall.

And the following day, Thursday, September 14, we will be in Bath, or I spent Bath, as Rory would call it, at the forum.

And Rory, by an amazing coincidence, these are going to coincide with the launch of a book, Politics on the Edge.

Politics on the Edge. Thank you very much for remembering that.

And I'm really excited to see people in Bath and Edinburgh, and it's a tiny plug for me again, which is anybody in the Manchester area wants to come along.

I'm doing a solo thing on 2 September in the Lowry, and I will be doing sterling work signing.

But I believe Alastair will also be prepared to be signing a little bit.

So there'll be a double opportunity, the two of us sitting next to each other at the desk.

So, presale tickets to these shows for members of the Restless Politics Plus are on sale right now.

If you want to take advantage of that opportunity to buy early tickets in this presale, just sign up at therestpolitics.com.

If you're someone who's really keen to secure tickets, this is worth doing, as the general sales often sell out literally under five minutes.

So, head to therestpolitics.com to avoid disappointment.

And the general sale will still then open to the public Friday 16th at 9am.

We'll tweet the ticket link from the Restless Politics Twitter account at Restless Politics at exactly 9am on Friday.

Now, Alastair, tell us where you are and what you've been up to.

I'm at home in a very summery shirt.

I'm feeling quite virtuous and fit having done the great North Swim in Windermere up in your old part of the world.

Since when Fiona and I have been going, we've been doing absolute culture vultures in recent days.

We've been to the theatre three times.

We've seen Patriots at the Noel Cowan Theatre, which is about Putin and Berezovsky's relationship.

Absolutely brilliant.

We've seen The Motive in the Queue,

which is about John Gilgood directing Richard Burton in New York in Hamlet in 1964.

Sounds very niche, but it is absolutely brilliant.

And last night, James Graham, who's a declare an interest,

a good friend, probably the best playwright in the country, I'd say, at the moment,

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

and his new play, Dear England at the National Theatre, which is about Gareth Southgate and penalties and, honestly, Rory, even though you know less about football than anybody on the planet, you will really enjoy it and I think anybody will enjoy it.

It's just absolutely brilliant.

Oh, thank you.

Well, my news, I'm at Naaman.

I'm about to fly to Doha this evening when I get off the phone with you.

And Shashana has been in Syria and in Afghanistan.

And it's been fascinating.

I mean, I think, firstly, the sense of Syria,

just how tragic things are on the ground in Syria at the moment and how depressing.

And then in Afghanistan, oddly encouraging.

She was visiting the primary school that we set up together 15 years ago and meeting female graduates who came back to speak at the school, who've done degrees in chemistry and it's been really kind of moving.

So anyway, we promised at some point maybe to see if we could get Fiona and Shashana on the show

and we should try to do that.

Well, and also we promised that we'd give some good news every now and then and that sounds even in a pretty horrific set of circumstances.

She's there on the ground saying things are showing some signs of improvement.

That's rather encouraging.

So, Rory, as for today, we're going to talk about Johnson fallout.

I mean, I was really hoping we wouldn't have to talk about him again,

but I think that the sense of absolute open warfare now between him and Sunak and this utter nonsense about Nadine Dorris and peerages and interns

going to the House of Lords, the whole thing is horrific.

But we'll talk about that.

I think we should talk about Nicola Sturgeon as well.

That was sort of quite big news as we were driving back from Windermere when she was arrested by the investigation into SNP finances.

Little retrospective look at the life and times of Silvio Berlusconi, dead at 86.

And also, you've been saying for a while that we don't talk enough and you're right about this.

We don't talk enough about Latin America.

So, we're going to do a little section, well, probably quite a big section at the end, on Latin America and in particular, relations with Beijing and Washington.

So, do you want to kick us off with the whole sort of Johnson mess?

Given that you've got a lovely, you enjoy nothing more than the question of Eaton.

There was a good letter in the newspaper from someone called John Clawton, who was a master at Eaton, writing in The Times saying,

Whatever wider strategy Eaton adopts, the school will continue to educate the global elite.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

Perhaps its most important mission will be to ensure that its pupils are saved from the sense of privilege, entitlement and omniscience that can produce alumni such as Boris Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mogg, Quasi Quoting, and therefore damage a country's very fabric. Sadly, I failed in that purpose, John Clawton, master Eaton College, 1984 to 2001. Wow, very good, nice letter like that. I mean, I have to say, Roy, I think it is the inbuilt privilege, etc., that leads to such people thinking that they're entitled as they are. But Johnson's levels of entitlement are now reaching, barely imaginable, that he can seriously think that having been kicked out of office by his colleagues, if you remember going back to Downey Street, there were sufficient ministers willing to stay with him, and then a parliamentary committee of his peers deciding that after all, you know what, yes, he is a total liar and he did lie during Covid, that he somehow thinks that despite all that, one, he's done nothing wrong, two, he's the victim rather than the cause and the villain in his own problems, and three, that he should be entitled, despite having been by you and I agree on this, the worst prime minister in our history, he should be entitled to send even more people to the House of Lords than these 25-year-old interns and others who have gone off to the House of Lords. And Nadine Dorries, meanwhile, is touring the studio, saying that there's been this terrible establishment plot against her. She who has basically given up being an MP anyway, hasn't been to the Commons for God knows how long, barely speaks there, spends most of her time in her own TV studio. And meanwhile, Sunak is sort of pretending that he's standing on a point of principle because he didn't, because some of them weren't allowed by the committee, but I go back to a basic point I've been making for some time, every single one of these honours had to be signed off by Sunak. He could have said no to a lot of them, and in my view, he should have done. Yeah, I mean, you've said that from the beginning. I mean, he did more than you thought. I mean, he stopped some of them, which is why we have people like Nadine Dorries enraged, but definitely some of them. I mean, it's very odd what Boris Johnson and his attitude towards these honours. I mean, I've never seen a prime minister like it. There was a little bit of that going on with previous prime ministers. You know, Tony Blair had to feel, felt he had to bring in 400 Lords in order to deal with the fact that the Conservatives had a majority in the House of Lords. David Cameron brought in about 402, didn't he? Hold on, Rory, hold on, hold on. Point of information, point of information.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

Just for the record, Tony Blair, who was no fan of the honour system, didn't even have a resignation honours list.

He just thought, I can't be bothered and I don't blame him.

Good on him.

Anyway, there have been a lot of pretty peculiar people put in the House of Lords.

There are also some very impressive people.

I mean, I'm full of admiration for people like, I don't know, distinguished judges, scientists, the astronomer royal, and it's just a real, real pity that an institution which is the only bit of parliament that actually does serious scrutiny work.

I was talking to a civil servant again yesterday who was saying

that in their experience of bringing through legislation,

in this case it was on pensions, the House of Commons was a complete waste of time.

They never bothered to look at any of the detail, never scrutinised anything.

The only thing that really concerned them was the House of Lords,

where there really were people who went through things forensically

and, you know, you will have friends in the House of Lords who you admire

and who do a really hard job.

But boy, oh boy, as Johnson, I mean, taking the piss, I mean, it's extraordinary.

I mean, it began, you remember, his first thing when he came in as Prime Minister was to put his brother in the House of Lords.

But it's as though he's behaving like...

Like a Berlusconi.

Yeah, well, sort of weird medieval monarch, isn't it?

Well, the thing about it, apparently, I mean, who knows what's true and what's not true because the number 10 version of events does seem to change a little bit from time to time.

Rishi Sunak said yesterday that he was asked by Boris Johnson to do something which he did not think was the right thing to do

and that, I think, was to overturn or to resist

and go back to the House of Lords' Appointments commission and say, can you look at these again?

But also it seems that Boris Johnson was absolutely furious

because he'd obviously told his father that he was going to give him a knighthood and it turns out that somebody in the system,

whether it was number 10, whether it was a commission, I don't know, or it was Sunak said, no, that would be utterly absurd.

But do you know the one that I think is, if anything, the most absurd of all?

What on earth has this young woman, Sharla Owen, done to deserve to become a life peer?

That means she takes a seat in the House of Lords,

she becomes part of our legislative for the rest of her life

alongside others who've sort of helped Johnson through his useless premiership.

She's 29, she's got a 2-1 in politics and international relations from the University of York,

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

and the main points of her CV has been that she's been an intern and a parliamentary assistant to a succession of Conservative MPs. Now, honestly, can you explain to me how that justifies a peerage? It's totally astonishing. No, no, I think he's, I sometimes think that he's deliberately trying to bring the whole house down around his head. I mean, he's doing things so provocative, like, I mean, partly, you know, putting his brother in the House of Lords, giving his father a knighthood is very out of central casting for some of these kind of Edward II medieval monarch types with their favourites and their families and that, but it's really, really weird. And I think some of these appointments are sort of him just thumbing his nose at the establishment and trying to discredit the whole thing as he does it. If people want to look on Twitter, there's a writer called Nicholas Shakespeare who's just written a very good book on Ian Fleming, but who absolutely specialises in brutal takedowns of Boris Johnson and has collected the greatest articles written on Boris Johnson over the last few days. And he picks out Anthony Selden in The Times, who says his inner emptiness made it imperative to be the centre of attention, not a single person whom he encountered in his life has not been cheapened or damaged by their association with him. And then Matthew Said, I can't help thinking that the UK has in certain respects taken the qualities of the former PM, his deceptiveness entered the body politic like a poison, and finally, Max Hastings. He's perhaps the most selfish human being I've ever met. Indifferent to the welfare of anyone's safe himself, it's striking that he has few, if any, personal friends. He demands loyalty, but is incapable of giving it to others. But you know what, you mentioned Anthony Selden there, of course, has written this book about Johnson, and Robert Saunders, who is on social media, is at Red Historian. He, I'm grateful to David Miliband for this, because David sent this to me, he spotted it. Robert Saunders has written a very, very, very, very long thread on social media, which we'll put in the notes, pointing to very, very long list of statements made in the past in his writings by Anthony Selden, essentially saying what a marvelous chap Boris Johnson was as he rose through the ranks. So I do think that it's all very well. At least some of us have been consistent from the word going that this guy should never have been...

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

Listen, there's another one in the House of Lords, this is, I've just looked up, Ross Kempall, who is heading to the House of Lords. So this is his entire Wikipedia entry. It won't take me long to read it. Ross John Kempall, born 1991 or 1992. My assessment is if the Wikipedia can't be bothered to say where exactly you were born, then you're really not up to much. It's a British political advisor who is political director of the Conservative Party and director of the Conservative Research Department. He was given a life period in the Prime Minister's resignation on us. Kempall was educated at the Blair, where he wrote for the Weekly Student Newspaper Varsity. He is a former journalist at the Guido Finks political website. In 2019, Kempall interviewed Boris Johnson during his campaign for the leadership of the Conservative Party in which Johnson declared that he liked to make models of buses to relax. He also worked as a journalist for Times Radio and was political editor for Taught Radio. That is it. That is his life on Wikipedia and he has been sent to the House of Lords by Boris presumably for services to interviews about how to make model buses to relax. Can I ask one question? One of the things that you've been picking up in our podcast a lot is that Boris Johnson was very keen to put Paul Dacre, the editor of the Daily Mail in. In fact, so much so that he put him in one Honours List. It was rejected by the Appointments Commission. In March, he put him back on the Honours List. Am I right in saying though that this is something that Rishi Sunak did ultimately manage to prevent, that Paul Dacre has not become a Lord? Well, Paul Dacre has not become a Lord and that is great news for the world because it's the one thing above all else that he wanted and a man who's done as much damage to our public debate as Dacre shouldn't be given anything that he wants. But Rishi Sunak's line is that apparently there have been eight people who have been rejected

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

by the House of Lords Appointments Commission.
Now, it is an absolute failure of modern journalism
that we don't yet know the names of these eight,
but I suspect over time we will hopefully find out
who they are.
I really do hope that Dacre is one of them,
people saying it is.
I'm assuming that Dean Doris is another.
I'm assuming Alec Sharma is another.
I don't know whether that guy Adams
who's provoked this third by-election.
But honestly, Rory, what does this say about our country
that I was flicking through my German news websites
as I do every evening last night
when I go about in the theatre?
And there's this story there about,
this is the row between Sunak and Johnson
about whether his dad should be called Sir Stanley.
I mean, we're just a joke at the moment.
I mean, it's beyond imagining.
It's absolutely beyond imagining.
In fact, so disturbing.
Unfortunately, north of the border,
we now have something else going on,
which is really peculiar,
which is Nicola Sturgeon was put in custody.
I mean, the police actually took her into custody
and then released her again.
And that's an incredible thing.
So just to quickly remind people of this story,
this relates to a police investigation
into 660,000 pounds of donations
that went to the SMP
that seem in some way to...
Well, something's gone wrong with them.
And we have to be a bit careful here
not to bring ourselves sued or put in prison ourselves.
But anyway, that's what the police are investigating.
And amongst the people they've started investigating
were Peter Murrell,
who is Nicola Sturgeon's husband,
who we talked about this too
in an incredible conflict of interest.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

He was this chief executive of the SMP
at the same time as she was the first minister in Scotland.
So he's been interviewed by the police.
She's been interviewed by the police.
Is there some kind of mobile home that was bought
which was seized from his parents' house?
Also, the party treasurer has also been interviewed by the police.
All three have been interviewed and released without charge.
Now, at the risk of my Scottish Labour friends
shouting at me as they have in the past
for being far too nice to Nicola Sturgeon,
I think we should make clear she was released without charge.
No charges have been brought forward.
And Police Scotland have been very, very clear
that all of us, and that includes us, Rory,
should be very, very careful about how we discuss
what is clearly a live investigation.
Very good.
I was talking to, you get some amazing people
in the swimming pool that I go to,
but one of them was a judge.
And I was sort of asking about this thing.
I said, why couldn't this have been done?
Why do these things have to be done
with this sort of process of arrest
and taken to the station and so forth?
And he was saying it's partly to do with taping.
They have the equipment there to tape everything.
But it's also that they want to give people,
the police in this sort of investigation,
want to give people a real sense of the seriousness of it.
But I think it is, it's a pretty astonishing turn of events.
One of the big things happening in the SNP
is there are huge calls,
including from one of the last leadership candidates
to have her suspended.
Partly because Nicola Sturgeon was actually famous
for frequently suspending or removing the whip
from any other SNP politician
who faced police investigations.
And there's a great list of them on the BBC.
So Alex Salmond quit the party in 2018.
You remember he was tried and cleared

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

at trial of sexually assaulting nine women.
Patrick Grady was suspended from the party
for making another MP,
for making a sexual advance to a teenage member of staff.
Former Mike Finance Minister Derek Mackie
was suspended for messaging
a 16-year-old boy on social media.
Margaret Ferrier lost the SNP
whip after speaking in the Westminster Parliament
while awaiting the results for COVID tests
since September 2020,
before travelling back by train to Glasgow
without self-isolating.
And another former SNP MP,
Natalie McGarry was sentenced to two years in jail
for embezzling £25,000 from the SNP.
It's quite a long list, isn't it?
It's quite a long list.
And I think, you know, one of the things
that obviously Nicola Surgeon was doing
by suspending these things quickly
was to try to say,
this is not a tiny, cosy set of people.
But it's striking that Hamza Youssef
hasn't done what I guess
you would advise him to do,
which was suspend her straight away
until the results became clear.
Or is that not your advice? What do you think you should do?
I was aware of some of those cases that you mentioned.
I wasn't aware of them all. It does suggest
that that was the approach.
It was obviously taking a very different precedent,
because he said in an interview
on the back of this, when he was, as you say,
under pressure from a lot of people
to suspend Nicola, Nicola Surgeon,
he said, I'm not suspending Nicola's membership.
I'm treating her in the same way that I've treated,
for example, Colin Beattie.
Now Colin Beattie is the aforementioned
former SNP treasurer
who has already

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

been arrested and released without charge.
So he's decided that that is the precedent he wants.
He says, those that have been released without charge,
I see no reason
to suspend their membership.
So that says that he's decided
he will suspend them from the party
if and when this escalates further.
But look, I do feel a bit sorry for him, to be honest.
I mean, he is what a total mess he has now inherited.
And every time he tries to get onto the front foot
and speak about something else,
there's something else is popping up
to kind of knock him down.
So my friend, Angus McNeil,
who's from the Highlander Islands,
who I used to go canoeing with on the Thames,
he was one of my friends.
He's a Gallic speaker, isn't he?
He's a Gallic speaker, and he was a friend of mine in Parliament.
So he's been out saying this soap opera has gone far enough.
Nicola Surgeon suspended others from the SNP
for an awful lot less.
So I guess Angus McNeil would be appealing to you
as an expert on communication,
saying that he thinks the longer she remains,
the more the soap opera continues,
and he thinks it's necessary to move fast
to cauterize this by suspending her.
The only thing I'd say to that is that I think
that when you're talking about a former First Minister
and you're talking about somebody as well known as Nicola Surgeon,
I think it moves to a completely different level
when it involves Police Scotland making these inquiries.
So I think, look, what happens now is what's important
in terms of that police investigation
rather than some sort of short-term tactical thing
that Whomsey Yusuf tries to do.
So look, I'm guessing that what Angus is saying there about this
is part of this.
What I think has become clear since Nicola Surgeon left
is that the divisions within the SNP,
both personality and policy and political,

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

are much deeper than maybe you and I,
looking in from the outside, were aware
because the sense we got the whole time was that Nicola Surgeon
had a really tight grip of the whole party pretty much.
Yeah, it's amazing.
I've been reading David Torrance's biography of Nicola Surgeon.
He also wrote a biography of Alex Salmond,
and it's very striking.
He wrote it just after the Brexit referendum
when she was absolutely at her peak
because after the referendum she came out very, very clearly.
She was celebrated internationally
for being the one leader with a very clear view in Britain
about how to respond to the referendum.
And it's an extraordinary story.
It's the story of somebody who was a very, very hardworking girl
from a tough working-class background in Ayrshire
who got to Glasgow University
was fanatically interested in politics and SNP politics
from the age of 16 onwards.
She'd spent her holidays at SNP youth camps.
And her first connection with Peter Morrell,
now her husband, former chief executive of the SNP,
was that he was running SNP communications
and put her on television at the age of 18.
That was her first appearance
because he already spotted the talent.
And somebody who was initially far to the left of you,
she was disgusted by Neil Kinnock, for example.
She thought he was far too right-wing.
She very much on the kind of Benite side of things.
And, you know, very much CND was incredibly important to her.
That strand exists still in the SNP.
And I think that's the thing that she's managed to straddle pretty well.
There's no doubt she's been a very, very significant political figure
and has been viewed widely as a very, very effective politician.
But the big thing that she's fought for all her life
looks to me like it's less likely to happen than it did.
And obviously, her statement was very, very strong.
I'm confident I haven't done anything wrong, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.
So that's why I say, ultimately, where this case now goes
will decide her legacy as much as anything.
Well, as we move to the break,

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

we're about to move on to another major political figure who had a lot to do with the police and courts.

Silvio Berlusconi, who claimed to have appeared in over 30 court cases and appeared in the witness stands, he claimed 2,000 times.

But his relationship with the truth was always a bit peculiar, and we'll return to that after the break.

So welcome back to the Restless Politics with me, Alistair Campbell.

And with me, Rory Stewart.

And Alistair, one of the things that we wanted to just touch on is we did this interview with Kate Rayworth, who's an economist who developed the side of Donut Economics, which people can listen to on the rest is politics leading.

Kate Rayworth, what did you think of that interview?

Well, it seems to have gone down very, very well.

Lots of love for her on Twitter.

Because we said in our discussion afterwards that we both, I think, found something utterly compelling about her vision and the need for the scale of change required.

But we just couldn't quite see how to make it happen politically.

But I'll tell you, I don't know if you've been following this.

I'm going to just hold this so you can see it,

and we'll put it in the show notes as well.

Have you seen these graphs on the temperatures of the water in the Atlantic?

No.

Which are just absolutely terrifying.

So essentially, it's a graph that shows that water temperatures are rising way higher than they should be.

And she was talking about the dangers of actually reaching a tipping point.

You look at stuff like this, and it's just terrifying.

And I'll tell you the other thing I think is interesting.

I do think it's important that at some point those people like her

who are utterly not single issue, because it's everything,

but absolutely fixated, fanatical, and I use these words in a positive way, campaigning on something as important as that.

But understanding that you have to at some stage engage properly with the political process.

And I guess that's where you and I can maybe, I don't know, help do more.

I don't know.

By demonstrating the world weary cynicism of the political process.

And you getting on another bloody airplane today as well.

Exactly.

That's it.

That's it.

Quite right.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

Now, we are now going to move on to the amazing story of Silvio Berlusconi, who you met, right?

I met many times.

Yeah, absolutely.

I want to really hear about that.

But I'm just just for the sake of listening, just to remind them a little bit about Berlusconi.

He was only born in 1936.

So he was born in Mussolini's Italy.

He started life as a law student.

He was a very, very keen singer.

Famously, he was a crooner on cruise ships.

And he then went first into real estate development where he built these enormous sort of interconnected

1970s futuristic skyscrapers for 4,000 people connected by weird bridges.

Then set up a television company initially serving his skyscrapers and exploited the fact that Italy was a pretty conservative lockdown place in the 1970s and early 1980s.

And their equivalent to the BBC was a very, very prim Catholic broadcaster.

And he pioneered essentially women with their tops off and entertainment shows and eventually managed to persuade an Italian prime minister in the early 1980s to pass emergency legislation allowing his shows to be shown through the country and ended up controlling 90%, literally 90% of Italy's television.

And he used this position to go on to, I bet you'll tell us a bit about this too.

He owned AC Milan.

He wrote the theme tune for AC Milan, thus getting into his musical theme.

He co-wrote it with a proper writer.

And then in 1994, he decided to go into politics and using his incredible television platform, he got 50 of the advertising executives on his company to also stand with him, used his coverage of 90% of Italian TV to get himself and then eventually his 50 advertising executives elected, became PM in 94, served 94 to 95, prime minister again 2001 to 2006, which was very important because he came in behind George Bush in the Iraq war.

And then again, 2008 to 2011.

And the reason we're just talking about him is he's just died, but over to you who has some personal experience of the man.

Well, he is a truly extraordinary figure of our times.

And I was doing an interview with CNN yesterday about my book as it happened.

But because of Trump in the indictment and Johnson going through his troubles, they wanted to talk about the whole sort of populism thing.

And the researcher had done his work because they flashed up a quote from the book as follows. When it comes to the use of post-truth strategies in Western democracies, perhaps the first big mover was the media magnate, Silvio Berlusconi.

I think he is in many ways a precursor of Trump and of Johnson.

And I think what he did, which was incredibly clever, if his aim was always to go into politics, which I suspect it was, and he once said to somebody, by the way, the first time he went

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

into politics, it was to avoid landing himself in a terrible court case where he thought he was going to go to jail.

So he basically understood, as many politicians have, that getting good media on your side is very, very helpful in politics.

But he did it completely differently.

He created this media landscape, as you say, with 90% control, and then went into politics.

And that 90%, you're talking almost kind of authoritarian levels of media control.

And the other thing he was, he became the showman.

He was a crooner.

I actually think he's one of those guys who was much better looking before he had all the plastic surgery.

I think he was actually a very good-looking young man.

Apparently he was quite a good singer.

I did hear him sing once, but only in a kind of he was messing around sort of way.

But he then became this great showman.

The football was a part of that.

Italy's a pretty football-crazy country.

AC Milan, he owned AC Milan from 1986 to 2017.

They had a lot of success during that period.

So that made him popular.

The TV stuff made him popular.

And this kind of populist, blokey, the whole Bunga Bunga party staying.

Let me just quickly interrupt, tell people what the Bunga Bunga party is.

I thought you'd be interested in Bunga Bungas.

Bunga Bunga parties were his names for these parties where he had an enormous number of young women gathered at a villa.

I came to public attention because one of these women was arrested by the police.

And he managed to get her off by telephoning the Italian police and telling them that she was the niece of, I think, the president of Morocco or something.

And that it was incredibly embarrassing to create a diplomatic incident and she was then released.

She subsequently claimed that he never slept with her and that it was all very innocent.

And he was just a lonely old man who liked having 17-year-old girls performing in parties.

One of his wives did make a very voluble complaint about his seeming predilection for very young women, which seems to have lasted his entire life.

Part of his whole identity, wasn't it? I mean, he was...

Totally.

I suppose a bit like a lot of populist leaders.

I mean, it's part of, I guess, what initially appealed to people about Boris Johnson, which is his kind of off-color humor that he would make these kind of bar jokes all the time.

Some of them were completely extraordinary.

Even more straightforward, he would say, come and invest in Italy because we have the most beautiful secretaries in the world.

But then he would compare a German member of the European Parliament.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

He would say, she looks like the kind of person who'd work in a Nazi concentration camp.

I'll tell you my favourite Berlusconi story.

So, NATO summit, Berlusconi has...

Because remember, he was Prime Minister, I think, in total of nine years.

He was Prime Minister through four different governments of varying length.

But at one point, he became...

Italy took on the rotating presidency of NATO.

He hadn't been Prime Minister that long.

And he made this sort of amazing speech about NATO and the power of NATO, the Transatlantic Alliance and the relationship with America.

And it was very, very, very pro-American, very pro-NATO.

And as you said earlier, he supported George Bush on the Iraq war.

And he was a very Atlanticist when it came to security.

Jack Shirak was sitting there getting grumpier and grumpier and grumpier as Berlusconi became more and more sort of florid in his pro-NATO statements.

And so Shirak, very loudly, had demanded la parole, demanded to be the next speaker.

And of course, he was quite a senior dude.

So, Presti's microphone and the lights on, and there's Shirak speaking.

Shirak then starts to give Berlusconi a rather gentle at first,

but then getting less gentle taste of his opinion as to why, you know,

Europe is where his heart should be and all this stuff about, you know, NATO.

Let's not lose sight of Europe and da-da-da-da-da-da-da.

At which point, Silvio Berlusconi sort of clicks his fingers.

And this is the bit I'm not sure.

I think I have to describe it in this way because it is relevant to the story.

A truly stunning young woman who was clearly one of Italy's most renowned models suddenly walked into the room, walked round the room.

And I have to say, I think virtually every single person in that room,

male or female, was looking at this incredibly beautiful woman walking into the room.

And she went over to Berlusconi and she whispered into his ear,

and he turned to her and whispered into his ear.

And then she went out of the room and she came back while Shirak was still speaking away with fewer of your people listening.

She came back with a tray of watches.

These watches which were then sort of being offered to the various leaders around the table.

All guarantees make sure that as Shirak was making his serious speech,

nobody was paying any attention at all because they were all looking at the woman or the watch.

They were looking first of all at the woman and then they were looking at the watch and then they were trying on the watches.

But I'll tell you what, the one thing I would say,

where I think we can maybe laugh about that kind of thing,

but he was also a precursor to Trump and Johnson and Putin, if you like,

in the constant undermining of the rule of law.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

The whole thing about, he used politics to change laws to help him get out of legal situations that he was in.

And he totally, and of course, used politics completely for conflict of interest reasons, for his own media and property empires.

Absolutely.

I mean, he was a very, very strange, disturbing figure.

And I think he, you know, at some points he'd pay tribute to Mussolini.

He clearly had, like Trump, an incredible chip on his shoulder about what he perceived as the establishment.

So even though, like Trump, he's a billionaire, both some kind of property billionaires.

But both of them felt the establishment never took them seriously.

He was always known as Cavaliere.

He had got this sort of dodgy knighthood, which he'd eventually given up.

But I think a lot of his life was about feeling weirdly that he was the kind of underdog, fighting against the kind of sneering.

And someone like Chirac will have really, I guess, wound him up

because he would have represented the kind of great ota of the sort of French intellectual talking down at him.

Yeah, he's, I haven't really thought of it in that respect

because he always emanated a sense of incredible self-confidence

and he had a real kind of look at me feel to him.

But you could be right, maybe, because his background, I think, was quite, his dad was a fairly lowly bank official.

His mom, I think, was a housewife who just looked after him, the family.

If you sort of look up Berlusconi, I guess this is inevitable, given the role of organized crime in Italian history.

But you know, the links with the mafia, there's always that sense of, you know, how close he was or wasn't to organized crime.

Because Delutri, who was the co-founder of Forza Italia with him, was eventually sent to jail for nine years for his mafia links.

And there's a loss of questions about where, I mean, it's the same with that horrifying figure in the United States, Jeffrey Epstein.

With both of them, there are huge questions about where they got their first money from.

People can sort of understand the logic of how he managed to use the money he made from his 4,000 apartment blocks into building the media empire.

What's much less curious, where on earth he got the money from to start?

Well, apparently, it's reckoned that, I mean, the various assessments you see is that he's worth somewhere between six and eight billion dollars.

So he's got, I think he's got five children between two different women.

So they all stand to gain a fair few, Bob.

The favorite little fact that I didn't know until I saw some of the obituaries is that he was a Freemason, and his lodge was called,

I think if I was a Freemason, this is the lodge that I would join,

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

it was called Propaganda Due.

Propaganda Due, yes.

Propaganda Due Lodge, it was Berlusconi's lodge.

That's a good fact.

Now, we don't have much time left in Pocas, so we wanted to touch briefly on Latin America, and you've been looking at something called the Lithium Triangle and relationships with China, and obviously we'll have chances to come back to Latin America in more depth on other pods, because we don't do enough on Latin America, but I'd love to hear from you a bit on what you've been finding out.

Well, this was your idea, really, to say, you know, we didn't really talk about Latin America much, but I think that, you know, we've talked about Africa and you've got a lot of experience of Africa, and it seems to me that during the Cold War, there wasn't that much interest being paid to Latin America, particularly by China.

And I can't remember who it was.

Somebody came up with the idea that we've gone from the Cold War to a Cold Peace, and that China has actually been very, very, very systematic about developing relations in Latin America.

It was Richard Haas, who's the President of the Council on Foreign Relations.

He's got this view that power is now spreading to a greater number of actors in the geopolitical space, and that Latin America is a target for that.

And you've probably heard this phrase about geopolitical swing states.

You know, we all know what a swing state is in the American electoral context, but there are now geopolitical swing states who basically are, they're not necessarily pro this side or pro that side, they're making calculations according to their own, sometimes commercial, sometimes strategic interests.

And, you know, the Lithium Triangle is essentially, Lithium is such an important commodity for batteries, for cars, for transferring to renewables and so forth.

And Argentina, Chile and Bolivia are right up there in terms of possessing the Lithium that other nations, and particularly the Chinese, want it, because the Chinese then have the capacity to take it and do with it what they will.

So I just think that you're seeing far more attention from China, from America, interestingly how, you know, America is starting to look slightly different than Venezuela in recent months. And so I think there's a lot going on there.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

Yeah. I mean, one of the things that we've talked about in the podcast, and I was, I mean, looking at the kind of big six, so Peru, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, you can see that there's a kind of, obviously there's a pattern that many, many countries around the world have followed, but it's maybe more dramatic in Latin America than elsewhere, which broadly speaking feels like a Cold War history, often military governments.

And then as they move from the late 80s into the early 90s, the emergence of these kinds of technocratic, Washington consensus, new presidents.

So in Brazil, Cardoso, who's an intellectual, in Argentina, Menem, in Chile, Largo, in Peru, Fujimori, in Colombia, maybe Uribe, in Mexico, Zidia, and there's this credible boom largely driven by commodities, which means that they're not hit as hard by the 2008 financial crisis as Europe or the United States are.

But what hits them is the commodity crash in about 2014, and it's from then onwards that you see these populist governments emerging.

I mean, dramatically as we've talked about on the right, Bolsonaro in Brazil,

but we've also talked about the left-wing populists who emerged. Absolutely.

So Boric, for example, Gustavo Petro, Obrador, Pedrillo Castillo, and I think, I mean, maybe this is where your friend who brought us the three P's of populism.

Why is his name?

Yeah, populism, post-truth, polarization.

His book really begins in Latin America, doesn't it, and sees that this phenomenon as being something that Latin America explores first.

Yeah.

There's another book, I mentioned, in which he actually, he does feature, and it's a very staid title, but it's worth looking at.

It's called China and Latin America, Development Agency and Geopolitics, and it's written by Christopher Alden and a guy called Alvaro Mendez, and it is literally that, a history of relations between China and Latin America.

And the turning point seems to have been Deng Xiaoping in the late 70s and the whole sort of reform program,

and the restoration of diplomatic links that, frankly, during the previous era had just been sort of virtually untouched.

And interestingly, the country that really seems to have sort of led this in a way was Peru, and there was a new Peru-China trade agreement in 2009,

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 140. Johnson and Sunak at war, Sturgeon's arrest, and the death of Silvio Berlusconi

and that led to sort of, you know, massive new foreign direct investment. Argentina, obviously, hugely important. They've got an election coming up this year, but part of the debate in that has been, are we America, are we China? And obviously, Brazil, Latin America's biggest economy, biggest population, lots of natural resources and so forth, and Lula, interestingly, has been out to China quite recently, and they're talking about this big partnership on a satellite. Yeah, so this is related to the Belt and Road Initiative, which is this amazing Chinese infrastructure investment, \$4 trillion worth, which you see a lot of in Africa, you've seen in Pakistan and in Latin America, which is about building an incredible network of infrastructure from dams, ports, roads, bridges, and actually has even had European and Eastern European outshoots as people have signed up to the Belt and Road Initiative. It's a sort of Chinese, massive, soft-power play with an enormous amount of development finance behind it. No, that's exactly what it is, and the point is that in the past, a lot of Chinese diplomacy has been conducted through stealth, and they're now out there very, very open, openly inviting partners in Central and South America in the Belt and Road Initiative. They've got this new partnership with the community of Latin American and Caribbean states, and China's now become South America's first trading partner, largest source of financing in space, infrastructure, energy, 2,700 major China-funded companies operating around the place. And the other thing that's interesting that comes out in the book that I mentioned, China and Latin America, is that that experience of African countries of, in a sense, being drawn into development traps linked to growing external debt, there is obviously the worry that that is going to be replicated across Latin America. Listen, just as we come to that, I'd like to plug a guy called Michael Reed, who's written a very good book called *Forgotten Consonant*, who I think was the economist, but anyway, a British journalist who's done some brilliant work on Latin America. Good. Well, okay. We should call it a day then. Well, thank you all very, very much. Or thank you in particular, not all of you. Well, also the team, but thank you to the team. Thank you to our producers. We don't thank enough. And also, thank you to you. All right, Rory, speak to you soon. See you soon. All right.