

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 141. Question Time: Labour greatest hope, what a Trump presidency would mean for Ukraine, and should we ban vaping?

Thank you for listening to The Restless Politics for ad-free listening, early access to episodes, membership to our chat community. Please sign up by TheRestlessPolitics.com. Or if you're listening on Apple Podcast, you can subscribe within the app in just a few clicks.

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

Fantastic. Well, what have we got as questions? Is the one that particularly appeals to you to get us going?

All right, Stephen Clark. If Boris Johnson in his post-parliamentary career decides at some point to launch his own political podcast, what advice would you have for him in this venture and what should it be called? The Restless lies, probably. What do you think?

Let's leave it at that. Let's just leave it at that.

Very good. Okay. I can't, I can't, I didn't, yeah, I wasn't quick enough.

I'll tell you something that I liked in the questions this week is some disagreeing agreeably going on. And this one's on vaping. Bobby Richmond, I'm surprised to discover the UK government still have not seen sense to place a high rate of tax on vaping despite it reaching epidemic use inside schools up and down the country. Incomes, somebody called Charles Gardner, a high tax on nicotine vapes would cause hundreds of thousands of UK adult vapors to shift back to smoking, which kills half of all users. Incomes, FL Stephanato disposable vape should go apart from being cheap and cheerful enough to track kids. They're horrid of the environment and a waste of precious battery material. So where are you on vapes?

It's amazing. Well, I mean, I guess I maybe this is just my age is dating me. I was so wowed by the way in which vaping helped to move people off more dangerous cigarettes. I mean, I can understand all these arguments about it being a gateway and a problem and environmentally I'd say, well, but I do slightly see the point of your second questioner that it's been a miracle for a lot of people who would otherwise be smoking much more dangerous things that they've been able to transition to vapes. So question for you. Ukraine, Stevie Ray Williams, do you worry about the potential return of Trump, particularly with regard to how it might impact the war in Ukraine?

Oh, totally. Absolutely. It was a completely horrifying incident. I mean, I'd love a bit on this too, but I'll give you give you a chance first.

It's hard to follow what's actually going on in Ukraine at the moment. And we keep hearing about this counter offensive. And, you know, that's clearly underway. I found that the dam incident, I found that one of the most upsetting things of this whole war so far.

And I'll say something that I was really troubled by was the extent to which very quickly it became a kind of who done it as though it might be Ukraine, it might be Russia. And I thought, what planet are we on here? Okay, there's an outside chance that there was some kind of terrible accident that went on. But I cannot for the life of me understand how anybody could seriously be suggesting that the Ukrainians did this to themselves. Am I being naive here?

No, no, no. The overwhelming logic is that the Russians did it because it was time to coincide with the beginning of the Ukrainian counter offensive. And it's massively distracted the Ukrainian state and having to provide emergency support for all these people.

I mean, it's horrible watching these some of the I mean, we look at flooding is always horrible. It's horrible when you see it in your own country, it's horrible when you see it anywhere.

But this was on a with all else that they're having to deal with at the moment, this was on a

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 141. Question Time: Labour greatest hope, what a Trump presidency would mean for Ukraine, and should we ban vaping?

truly horrific scale. You saw some of the people involved and the animals and houses floating away and and all that stuff. And it's just kind of hard to think that the Putin's kind of sitting there, probably saying result really good result. Yeah, just on that, I mean, just to reemphasize what's happened here with this dam. So the bursting of this dam, people will have seen I'm sure the incredible visions. So destroyed on June the 6th, village after village flooded. And, you know, as we've discussed before, I was the flooding minister. But the kind of floods we deal with in the United Kingdom do not begin to touch the enormity of what happens here. I mean, so all the things that we understand from floods in the United Kingdom, which is terrifying, dangerous, and even for people who aren't injured by it, the loss of all your personal possessions, your photo albums wiped out, you're made destitute, you have no home. But in this case,

it's uprooted landmines, it's torn through caches of ammunition, it's carried 150 tons of machine oil to the Black Sea. And the environmental catastrophe could last for decades that have followed on from this. Listen, can I do a little plug for our sister podcast, which is called Battleground Ukraine, done by Patrick Bishop and Saul David. If people want more on the dam disaster, I could recommend the June 9th episode, 37 minutes. And for people who are really interested in Ukraine, I couldn't recommend anything more. Rory. Yes.

Kath Foster, on the Emerges podcast, Rory, apologize for the sound of the Jordanian musical gas tank. What on earth is a Jordanian musical gas tank? Well, so the truck that carries gas cylinders around for people who get their gas cylinders has a sort of musical sound. It's a bit like an ice cream truck. And there's another one that goes past, which careful listeners, careful listeners hearing now will currently be hearing the Azan from the Muizine. But you will also sometimes hear a man with a truck who is shouting potatoes, potatoes as he goes past. Listen, I just wanted on the serious one, though, somebody asked about how worried we should be about Trump. I mean, we should be unbelievably worried about Trump. He's currently leading Biden in the opinion polls. And I know we disagree a little bit about this. And I know, you know, Biden is far, far better than many, many alternatives. And we've got a great interview with Michael Ignatieff, I think coming up on leading next week, where he just pays tribute to Biden's ability as a kind of deal maker and a modern democratic politician. But the truth of the matter is Biden is quite old. And even it's a horrible thing to say, because the horrible Republican right exploit this. And they put out memes making him out as kind of sleepy and doddery. But the truth is he is old. And I'm afraid he does look older and frailer than Donald Trump. And I am terrified about what Trump coming in will do for everything, for US international credibility, for their attempts to try to put world alliances together on Ukraine, on China, and indeed any hope for what we call the liberal world order or what remains of it will be finished off if Trump gets reelected. Yeah, I don't know if you had time to read the indictment and also what I mentioned, I was on CNN the other day, and they played a clip. I hadn't seen it, but William Barr, the former attorney general, Trump's attorney general, was on Fox News. And he, who clearly understands these things better than I do, he had read the whole thing as well. And he said, this is really, really dangerous for Trump now. This is really, really, really serious. I mean, is it too much to hope that actually, for all the sort of noise and the fuss and the protests around him that actually he will be found guilty of a serious federal crime and he'll bend his days in jail? Well, if he goes to jail, of course, and he's held long enough not to be

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 141. Question Time: Labour greatest hope, what a Trump presidency would mean for Ukraine, and should we ban vaping?

able to run in the next election, that changes things an enormous amount. But I'm afraid if he doesn't go to jail, there's a very, very strong part of his base who sees this stuff as being purely politically motivated. And you will have seen Elon Musk tweeting out saying, it seems as though they go harder on Trump than for other people. Why is that?

God, he's disgusting that man.

Alistair, Neil Allfoot, I'm a big fan of the podcast and the motto, disagree agreeably.

However, does Alistair feel he always sticks by this when doing media outside the podcast?

No, he does not. He occasionally, there is something quite, I mean, you and I have had our ups and downs and we've had a few sort of choice spiky exchanges at times, but you are quite a calming influence on me, I think. But no, I can still get very, I can still get very aerated. Here's a bit of breaking news for you, Rory. And I think Neil Allford might be interested this as well. Have you followed this thing about BBC Question Time? They're doing a Leave Voters Only episode on June the 22nd in Clacton and C for the 7th anniversary of the referendum.

And they've asked me to go on it and I've said, Yes.

Leave Voters Only and they've asked you. Yes.

That's kind of weird. You mean the audience, the audience will be Leave Voters Only and you're going to be up there as a remainder? Well, the audience will be Leave Voters Only and then they'll have a normal panel. I see, I see, I see.

And they've, and most of the questions, even all of the questions are going to be about Brexit. From a Leave Voters Perspective.

From a Leave Voters Perspective. When it was announced that they were doing this format, there were lots of people on social media saying this is typical of the BBC, they're pro-Brexit, they're always pandering, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

And a lot of people were saying to me, don't do it. But I was thinking, well, actually, no, I think it'll be very, very interesting to see whether in a place like Clacton, where the audience is entirely Leave Voters, I think it will be genuinely interesting to see whether there's been any shift of opinion and if so, how it's taking shape.

Fascinating. Now, you having asked Neil Orford's question, suggesting, I am not always sort of level headed and straightforward.

Blue Toffee, why has Rory been grumpy in the last few episodes?

He was pretty rude to Jonathan Powell and then to Alistair over the COVID inquiry.

Is he thinking of a return to the benches and getting tribal?

I hear there are a few seats available if he's interested.

That's very sweet. Listen, I mean, obviously, my attack on Jonathan Powell had Zippo to do with being tribal or conservative. That was to do with my views on the Iraq war. And I have apologized a couple of times on that podcast, but that has nothing to do with it.

And attacking me over the COVID inquiry, what's up?

And attacking the COVID inquiry, I don't think I was being that vicious over the COVID inquiry.

We definitely disagreed. I don't think I was being particularly vicious.

We should acknowledge, by the way, that we're recording this on the day that the COVID inquiry proper has begun. Very interesting observation already, the lead QC for the inquiry, saying that one of the issues they're looking at is the level of preparedness. And apparently, it's already said that it may well be the case that we weren't very well prepared at all.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 141. Question Time: Labour greatest hope, what a Trump presidency would mean for Ukraine, and should we ban vaping?

We shall see. Look, I've got a question here that I wanted to use to come in on something on this. So, Tim Northens, question for he whose mother is a Breitbart reader, should PMs get an honor list if they don't leave office to the general election? Question for he who headbutts doors open, should PMs get an honor list at all? So, I'd love you on that, and then I've got something to say about that. I actually think the whole thing is utterly absurd. I'm so proud seeing the sort of people that have been put into the House of Lords right now, that both Fiona and I have turned down

peerages. I agree with you, there are some great people in the House of Lords, but I think the whole institution has had its day. And I just think the whole concept of resignation honors is utterly absurd. I remember Bill Clinton once saying that sometimes people think they should get a blue ribbon for doing these jobs. The job is the blue ribbon. I think to have worked, so people say it's to reward the people who've been there helping the Prime Minister, etc, etc. That is their reward. They've had an amazingly privileged experience of having been a special advisor, a speechwriter, a press officer, whatever it might be. The idea that then on top of that, you should be sent into the House of Lords or allowed for the rest of your life to call yourself Sir or Dame this or that, the whole thing's nonsense and I would get rid of them all.

Here's my idea on this. I think that Boris Johnson has discredited it so much. It was already being pretty discredited by what's happened actually over the last 100 years. I mean, Harold Wilson put some pretty weird people in the House of Lords. But I think the central thing is I want to propose that if Prime Ministers want to keep doing things, we should create a completely separate order. So a bit like, you know, the Royal Family has the Royal Victorian Order, which is a medal they give to people who've worked with the Royal Family. There could be a completely different system which is called, I don't know, some polite term for friends of the Prime Minister's order, which Boris Johnson can splash out in every direction.

Order of the Liar and Charleston Crony, the OLCC.

Well, I'm seeing this as a thing that would extend to all Prime Ministers. So you could call it the Order of St David or whatever you want to call it. But the point would be that everybody would know that it's for politicians and spads and party donors. And it's given us a kind of thing by a Prime Minister to make people feel jolly.

I just listen, I get the thing about the military. I think medals for military campaigns. I completely respect that. And I think that is a good thing. But I think this notion that just because you happen to work for a Prime Minister, you're entitled to some sort of special honour, I just don't buy it. What I think what's so particularly offensive is that they get the same things that much more deserving people get. So I think what's so awful is that you're the Astronomer Royal, you're one of the most distinguished scientists in the whole of the United Kingdom, you become a Lord. And then suddenly you find that some 29-year-old spads become a Lord. Or to give another example, let's say you did something impressive in the military and you got a CBE. And then suddenly you find that somebody who's worked for a few months in the press office in number 10 gets something that you've based... Well, CBE for several servants is like 25, 30 years of their career building up to this amazing thing and someone else picks it up in six months. So at the very least, it should be a completely separate thing. You shouldn't be able to kind of make people feel that they are the Astronomer Royal or the senior civil servant or a general by giving them the same titles. And apparently we've got List Trust Resignation on us to come. She's probably going

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 141. Question Time: Labour greatest hope, what a Trump presidency would mean for Ukraine, and should we ban vaping?

to have an honour per day that she was there. I mean, the whole thing is utterly ridiculous. And really, she soon actually just say, no. I'm absolutely with you that Prime Ministers should be stopped from doing it. And if they insist on it, they can have a completely separate thing where they're not allowed to give anything that resembles anything that's given to deserving members of the public. So, Alastair, I think should we have a quick break? Yeah. Now, here's a good one. I think we're going to agree on this one. Ben Kluge. In Obama, Barack Obama's most recent memoir, he describes Al Jazeera as the Arabic equivalent of Fox News, is that fair? My answer is no. No, I'd absolutely no. I really find Al Jazeera has been very, very good. And I watch it a lot. And often they give me information on parts of the world that nobody else is covering. And so I completely disagree. I'm sad to see Obama say that. Got a lot of time for Obama. Very sad to see him say that. Now, here's a great question. It's from somebody called At Your Man from Northern Ireland. Which will get us first, climate emergency, AI or another more lethal pandemic? And do I win most depressing question of the week? He definitely wins most depressing question of the week. And we can add to it. We can add bioengineering. We can add robotics.

I mean, Yuval Noah Harari, who I was in touch with last week, who's wrote this book, Sapiens, is very interested in the ways in which these threats build up and get on top of each other. I think that one of the most important things that we have to talk about is AI, because it's moving at a different pace to climate change. Climate change is a horrifying existential threat moving very quickly. But AI, if you had autonomous general AI, you could see impacts beyond imagining within 18 months or two years. And beyond imagining. I mean, on a far higher scale than currently projected for climate change over the next 18 months, that doesn't mean that climate change isn't an existential threat, doesn't mean that it isn't one of the most fundamental threats to our planet and our survival. But if you're talking about what's hitting you straight away, if we don't get the regulation of AI right, we are in real trouble. There was a very, I think it was in the New York Times the other day, had a sort of quiz type thing where they had a load of quotes that people had said at the time that nuclear weapons were being developed and things that are being said now. And you had to guess whether that was a statement made about nuclear weapons or about artificial intelligence. It was quite interesting because a lot of the ones that people were saying back then are exactly the things that we're saying now, which sort of did give me a kind of probably a false sense of hope. Here's a question from Charlie Rowan. Neil Kinnock, great man and one of our regular listeners, repeatedly has said to students interested in politics, don't aspire to be politicians instead first go out and do a proper job. But Alistair, your book encourages people to go out and aspire now. Who's in the right and are career politicians acceptable? I think we're both in the right, but in a different way. But what's your view on that? I actually do, I do like the idea of very young people going to politics. I came into politics quite late. And I remember having this conversation with David Cameron. So it was 2010. And I was a professor at Harvard University. And I'd spent a lot of the previous years in Iraq and Afghanistan. And he had suddenly said that people who'd never been involved in politics before could stand to be MPs because of the expensive scandal. So I sat down with David Cameron, and I'd been told by Michael Ignatiev, who in fact is the guy that we're infusing on leading next week. To say to Cameron, look, if I'm giving up my job as a professor at Harvard

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 141. Question Time: Labour greatest hope, what a Trump presidency would mean for Ukraine, and should we ban vaping?

University coming back to Britain, will you tell me whether if I become an MP, I've got any chance of becoming a minister? Because Michael said clearly what you're interested in doing is running a government department. And I realized that when I asked David Cameron this, he looked at me with such kind of derision and contempt. Because from his point of view, he'd gone into politics at the age of 21. Conservative research department, he'd been a spad, he'd been through Black Wednesday,

he'd seen Blair take over, he'd, I think spent seven years trying to get a parliamentary seat. He'd then fought his way to become leader of the Conservative Party. And here was me thinking I could just come in from another job and somehow become a minister. And he must have felt, look, you don't understand, this is what George Osborne often says, this is a game for professionals, it's not a game for amateurs, you can't just come in. So there's a huge culture clash there. And I think the public are very interesting on this. Sometimes they favor people like David Cameron, who went in early on, Nicholas Sturgeon, who basically was a politician from when she was 16. But other times, I think they're quite attracted to people like Keir Starmer, who came in much later in life, having actually already got his knighthood from being director of public prosecutions and became leader of the Labour Party after he'd only been in parliament for a couple of years. I mean, I guess you need the mix, don't you? But I think both have their role. And yeah, I think it's a very interesting, I think getting the mix right is very hard, because of course, you know, it depends upon people being chosen in different constituencies with different interests and different needs. But I guess what the question is suggesting is that, you know, is there a right way or a wrong way to get into parliament? And the answer is there isn't. It's just so varied as how do people get there? Well, there's also the fact that one of the interesting things is how difficult it is actually to come in in midcareer, that it takes a long time to get used to how weird things are in parliament. I mean, one of the things I'm trying to do in this book, *Politics on the Edge*, is trying to describe the... No, Roy, Roy, it's *Politics on the Edge*. *Politics on the Edge* is just describe the strangeness, how surreal it is, the way the whips work, the way legislation goes through, the fact that you don't really have a free vote, your relationship with the public, the way ministers work. And it takes such a long time to adjust to that. And if you haven't come in when you're young, so these people who come in when they're 21, 22, it's sort of second nature to them. But if you're like, there was a guy called Archie Norman, who was the CEO of Ancestor. And he came in to be a Tory MP. And it was an incredibly

difficult and I think humiliating experience for him. I remember talking to MPs who basically loved sitting in the tea room saying, I don't care what you did in outside life, you know, you're on the back benches with us now, and I don't know who you think you are, you've got to serve your time, etc. So there is this huge tension, which I think makes it difficult. Or again, Mark Malek Brown, who was head of the UNDP and had been, you know, Vice President of the World Bank

was brought in by Gordon Brown to be an Africa minister. And I think found it very, very difficult leaving a very big job to go into British politics because you basically get humiliated by Spads who are 26 years old. Well, another one, David Simon, who ran BP, one of the biggest companies in the world, came into Wendell's House of Lords, became a minister in the Labour government. And, you know, I just suddenly found there having been a reasonably high profile business

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 141. Question Time: Labour greatest hope, what a Trump presidency would mean for Ukraine, and should we ban vaping?

person with a little, you know, some interest from the media, that suddenly they were into kind of every financial deal he'd ever done and into his earnings and these and so forth. And I think found it very, very difficult. So yeah, it's tricky one. This is from a rival podcast, I'm assuming, it's called Talking Scared Podcast. At what point, this is a variation of a question that I was asked at the Kite Festival, I did the Kite Festival of Tortoise, which I think you did last year, didn't you? I did it at the weekend. And this question is, at what point does carrying the Mingvars simply become cowardice and lack of vision? Are Labour so concerned with capturing disillusioned Tory voters that they are neglecting what matters? So the question I got at the Tortoise event was from a guy who said he'd been a member of the Labour Party for 50 years. And he felt that he was finding it very difficult to answer the question in a very simple, straightforward way. But what are you going to do? The point I made to him is that if he's been in the

Labour Party 50 years, he can't be blamed for that. There has to be, this is, I keep saying this, that the next stage for Labour has to be the point at which every Labour activist knows the answer to that question straight away. Yeah. And I think the other thing is that there isn't that much time. I think time is getting shorter. Absolutely. And the local elections Labour did well, but nothing to be complacent on. They were only just about three points ahead of what would have delivered them a slim majority in the House of Commons. So they're really going to have to get that clarity. And this is something we keep talking about. But, you know, I often talk to you about how much I admire people like Alan Milburn. And the reason I do is that as a kind of now I'm an independent, I'm a sort of floating voter, I can completely see the appeal of people like Alan Milburn because they're able to talk quite bravely and quite precisely. So he says, Alan Milburn will say things that really upset people. He'll say there's room for the private sector in the NHS. But by doing that, he at least makes it clear that he's taking risk and he's got a vision. He's got an idea. And it's reassuring to voters because they feel that he's balanced. He's not too ideological, but he's also got that forward, forward motion. And that's what I'm lacking. I mean, Wes Streeting is the best hope, isn't he? He's probably the guy who's best at that. I was just going to say you mentioned Alan, who of course is probably best known for his work at the Health Department. I do think Wes Streeting has that sense of energy and an agenda. But I think in terms of, you know, I think Labour are very, very good at the moment at looking competent, sounding serious, looking like they're just going to be much, much more serious and competent than what we've had for the last few years. But I think it's that thing that's going to get the pollsters racing for people to be able to say, like that guy in the tent, who, you know, he's probably 70s if he's been a member for 50 years. But he said he just wants things to be able to say to people when they say things like, oh, there's no point voting, they're all the same, that he's got the one, two, three, four, five thing that says, look, there you are. And that's what we stand for. And it fits with what people are hearing the whole time. And I think one important thing, which is going to be very, very tough for Labour coming in is the whole question of public sector reform. Because Boris Johnson was so obviously horrible that it's very easy to pin the whole blame on an individual, like a sort of great man, theory of history, that all the problems that we face in a country come down to one person. But the truth is that for a whole series of reasons, some of them, which are the conservators fault by austerity, some of them, which are just the structures of the modern age, a lot of our

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 141. Question Time: Labour greatest hope, what a Trump presidency would mean for Ukraine, and should we ban vaping?

government simply isn't functioning in the way that it should. And there is a huge reform agenda which people aren't beginning to talk about. Now, I think we shouldn't probably close with this one, because one of the biggest events, it refers to one of the biggest events of the week. This is from Dave the Dunfedandi, question for Rory. Does Saturday's win in Istanbul make Pep the equal of Sir Alex, or is he now actually greater?

Well, that's a very, very, very good question. And I think, you know, in analysing the connection between Sir Pep and Alex, go on over to you, Alastair. Tell us about the great victory on Saturday in Istanbul. Do you know what happened? Well, no, I do know that I know about it only because you and Dom, who's the producer of our podcast, were in a conversation about getting tickets to go to Istanbul. So tell us all about it. Okay, well, Manchester City won the treble, and that means that they've achieved the same feat as Manchester United did back in the day in 1999 under Sir Alex Ferguson. So both clubs have now done the treble. I think United's was greater actually. Sorry, Dom, but I think United's achievement was greater. Why was United's greater?

Because the final in Barcelona, which I was at, was just one of the most extraordinary sporting events ever. Whereas, I think the Champions League final was a bit dull, and actually City weren't on it. They weren't at their best.

They weren't at their best. It's not that they're just so dominant that they got there effortlessly. They didn't get there effortlessly, and they nearly blew it late on. But listen, it is an amazing achievement, and they are one of the best sides that's ever played.

But I think in terms of, does it make Pep? Listen, Pep is probably the greatest manager in the world at the moment, and that's for sure, apart from Vincent and company, of course. Very good. Well, my little boy has just popped his head into the room and is keen for a chat. So I think we're going to use that as our close for question time.

All the best. See you soon.

Bye-bye.