

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 147. Question Time: The next global superpower, a royal panic, and Rory on Austerity

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

Alistair Campbell. We've got to ask this one first, I think. Soccer mama.

That's a good name. My question is why should I bother asking, as you'll never read it, let alone answer it, that is all. So there you go, soccer mama. We've read it.

But I have noticed that if you put at the beginning of the question, I've asked this seven times, Alistair is more likely to ask your question. I might also sometimes suggest if your question also involves, do you think the Tories are the most hopeless government that have ever been seen in world history? You're probably quite likely to get your question asked.

I think we'll do it a little bit more subtly than that. Just a little bit more subtly.

So on the Persevillian's points, Jane Wilkinson, I realize I need to ask at least 10 times to win a Persevillian's Award. So for the fourth time and counting, please respond properly to the year 12 question, which you chose to read out about medical school places.

Mark Richardson, will you please answer the question you had weeks ago from a 17-year-old asking why finding training places to be a doctor is so difficult? You promise to research it, so please can we have an answer to an excellent question. So I have done a bit of research and let's start off by saying something that is unspeakable in the current populist, post-truth politics that we have. It's very complicated.

Oh, good. Oh, well, I'm glad. We don't often say that, go on then.

It is complicated. I'm going to try and go through some of the complications. The first thing is, it's the general medical council rather than the government, which determines which institutions are allowed to offer medical degrees. They are looking to extend it so that they can grow the number of places. The next thing is that there does seem culturally to have been a bit of a sort of BMA leverage point about protecting the quote special profession.

Because I think it's now agreed that there is a workforce crisis, that is no longer holding. The big point as well that's been made is about quality of teaching. How do you advance the numbers without also advancing the number of medical teachers and where are you going to take them from when you want those people to be working? And of course, students have to learn from qualified doctors. They have to go in large groups, into clinics, into theaters, into A&E, into GP surgeries. But the planning of those clinical placements is something that is not easy when the NHS is under as much stress as it is now.

In an attempt to get on top of this, I did have a brief look at a very, very good briefing from the House of Commons Library, which I recommend for anybody who's interested in nerdy questions on

British politics. So points out that each year around 9,500 medical school places are made available across the UK to train new doctors. And since 2013, this figure has increased by around 2000. So it was 7,500. It's now 9,500. And they're currently capped in England. And the government claims, for all the reasons you've pointed out, part of it's about making sure the standards are kept high and high quality placements. There is an issue around money. So it costs about 230,000 pounds for each medical or dental school place. So another 5,000 students would cost approximately a billion pounds. But the biggest question, I think, isn't just the money. It's about getting

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the high quality capacity to train the doctors. And in the meantime, of course, the problem is we're bringing a lot of doctors from overseas because we're not training our end, which is not kind to other countries. And it means we're stripping countries like Zimbabwe as some of their most qualified medical professionals and bring them to the United Kingdom.

Yeah. And I've told you before about the in the Balkans, they are, you know, the Germans are absolutely they're having massive advertising campaigns to get nurses in the Balkans to go to Germany to fit the gap there. I do think as well that the other issue that has come through some of the questions in the many weeks that people have been asking us to try to address this is the whole thing about students from poorer backgrounds, even though they might have good grades, finding it really, really hard to get into medical schools. And some of them, some of the schools are now trying to address that. But of course, as you say, people want to be sure that the standards are very, very high. It's unbelievably competitive. 9,500 places only. I mean, it's incredibly small of the total number of university places and other subjects.

Also, I didn't see it at the weekend, but it's really soon, like he's apparently talking about moving to some sort of system where you can, we literally can begin to have what they will be termed, you know, apprentices working within the health service. And I don't know whether that applies to doctors and nurses, but we need to maybe check that one out as well. So listen, I don't think we can do justice to this because as we've both shown, we're very reliant on reading from other people's analysis as opposed to any direct experience. But our shorthand answer is that it's more complicated maybe than we thought when we first addressed it.

Very good. Okay. Now, Alistair, since last week, you have appeared on the second question time in the country, not the rest is politics question time, but the kind of BBC budget person a question and you appeared in Clackton. And it was a very unique event in which the audience were all people who had voted for Brexit, Clackton, very famous, strong Brexit voting town.

Tell us who you had on the panel, give us a sense of the panel.

Well, scandalously, in my view, nobody from the government put nobody up. They told question time they were going to and then literally on the day, I think they said, no, we've decided we're not putting anybody up, whether that was because they didn't want to celebrate Independence day seven years on, whether it's because they didn't want to have me raging at them or whether it's because they didn't actually want to face the people that vote for Brexit to be told that they've been let down, which a lot of them felt. I don't know. So there's John Redwood, Ben Habib, former Brexit party MP, Jenny Chapman for Labour, and Anand Menon, who we talked about

when you gave me your very, very sensible advice, Rory, last week, which I have to tell you was echoed. And this actually, may I say, had even more of an impact on me. I'm going to give a shout out for Clacton Coastal Academy, which I mentioned on the program, because I went there, when it was announced I was going, this school got in touch with me, they know that, you know, I've been going to lots of schools in particular since the book came out. And I went into this school, Clacton Coastal Academy, very tough area, included J-Rick, which is one of the poorest parts of the country, the whole country. And the kids were absolutely, they really were good. I mean, they were very shy at first and quite timid and expressing an opinion, but by the end, honestly, they were absolutely brilliant. And anyway, I said at the end, I said, right, I'm going off from here to question time, Brexit only audience, as you know, I'm not a big fan of Brexit, what's the

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best way to kind of, you know, to deal with them. And this young woman called Annabelle, she said, don't trim your views, say what you think, but say in a respectful way, try to persuade rather than criticize and try to understand why they did vote the way they did. And that is why that was the prism. So I actually, when John Redwood started talking absolute nonsense, I just had Annabelle in my head saying, just let him spout it, just ignore him, talk to the audience. Now, here's a question from Jude. I really like this question from Jude. I voted remain, but feel sorry for the audience members in Thursday's question time, who have been pilloried on social media for their opinions. Should they, and I don't know if this is possible, have been edited out, corrected? Anyway, it's played to a stereotype. What do Alistair and Rory think? So she's, she's worried about that. And it's true, isn't it? Some of the questions were kind of mocked on social media. There was one which I saw played a lot. There was a lady who said, I think she was trying to say the problem was that whenever rules were passed by Brussels, the British obeyed them and other people didn't. But she ended up saying, it's all about the roofs. When we go on roofs in Britain, we had to follow the rules. And whenever she goes to France and Germany, all these people on the roofs who weren't following the rules. Very similar question, Jamie Crawford. Is it fair game to have a go at the not on my roof or from the beaches to the benefits of his audience members? Or should I be directed at the cabal that fed them this nonsense? And he says, I felt Alistair was calm and collected one people over, that has to be the approach. I mean, look, just to give the context that the first there was this quite elderly lady who talked about the rules and it became thinking about the roofs. And then there was a guy who said he literally seen people come off, arrive in the country and go straight down to the benefits office. And James O'Brien, for example, did a pretty splenetic takedown of that one. Again, I had Annabelle in my head again. I basically said, right, I could say, well, actually, no, I think that's unfair because I didn't. And I do think it was unfair. And I also do agree with Jude that I think we do have to criticize the people who peddled a lot of this nonsense. The truth is that we've had three, four decades of anti European propaganda in a lot of our papers. We did have liars like I've got to tell you Roy, I got a round of applause for saying that, you know, the whole thing was run by a bunch of liars, Johnson, et cetera. So, but I went into it with the aim of trying to understand why people voted, but also to get a proper sense as to whether many any of them and many of them were changing their minds. And there was there was another question, which I thought was really perceptive. Rebecca Gould, this week's question time seemed much quieter and sadder than I thought it was going to be. Was it everyone trying very hard to disagree agreeably? What did it feel like in the studio? What it felt like was that a lot of people, there was no anger, apart from one or two people, there was very little anger directed at me, there was a lot of anger directed at Brexit and the way it was happening. And my favorite question of the lot, Josh says this, I'm a huge fan, enjoy your commentary, just wanted to know what was your funniest moment from question time. For me, it was a member of the audience saying Brexit could be good if it had gone to a different school. What it was, what the woman was saying was to Ben Habib, she said, I'm sick and tired of you people telling me if only we did Brexit the way I want to do Brexit, it would have worked. And what did you say one of the central characters in this

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is this figure called John Redwood, who was a cabinet minister under Margaret Thatcher, was a sort of academic, he's a fellow of all souls meant to be kind of very was obviously a very, very brilliantly clever student because he managed to get into all souls and has been the kind of Vulcan ideologue of the Brexit move. What did you make of him? I mean, he's kind of famously sort of clever, but slightly uncanny in his manner. What do you make of his communication style? What do you make of who he is and how he ended up where he is? Well, we had a question as well about what the mood was like in the green room before and afterwards. And at a personal level, I've always gone with, I find John Redwood somebody that's perfectly straightforward to talk to and doesn't really doesn't mind you challenging his views. And we'll come back and give as good as he gets. I thought Peter Kyle, by the way, who I know you think is terrific. It's wonderful. So do I. Well, look at Peter's takedown, we should put it, I tweeted it yesterday, we should put it in the newsletter. Peter Kyle did an absolutely brutal demolition of John Redwood by he'd gone back to look at John Redwood's website back in the days before the referendum, saying what was going to happen. And he absolutely took him down. I wish I'd had all the same stuff. No, I think John Redwood was just one of those guys who he's always believed the same thing. He always believes that John Redwood is right about the economy. He always believes

that and he says what he says with absolute conviction. And if you challenge him, as I challenged him, for example, when I said, you know, he said, he'd never, you know, the trade deal is not that big a deal. We don't need to worry about America, blah, blah, blah. I said, well, hold on a minute, why did he say that we were one of the big wins was going to be getting this trade deal? He just said, well, I never said that the populist thing. And lots of people posted lots of occasions where he had said it. But I don't, I don't sort of load him in a way that I load the liars. Because I think that I said on the program, I think people like him have always believed in what he tried to achieve with his very or his skeptic views. I mean, with the interview with John Major, for example, John Redwood challenged John Major, because he felt John Major was going the wrong direction on, on Europe. So I think he's a perfectly honorable kind of guy. I just think he's very, very wrong about a lot of stuff.

Okay. Over to you questions.

Right. Lord of the sheep.

Lord of the sheep.

Rory seems a decent person, says Lord of the sheep. How does he reconcile his ethics with the harm done to the public as a result of austerity? I have seen at first hand the harm that's been suffered. It cannot be denied. I believe the current mess in our country is largely due to austerity. So I think there was another question about this Roy that was about, could you explain, lots of people often post on social media quotes, your voting record, and I'm giving you an opportunity

again to explain why if you're in the government, you have to choose.

Look, it's a very good challenge, but this question around voting record is a question about what political party you belong to. Unfortunately, for better or for worse, in the British political system, you vote with your party, even rebels, you know, even people who are seen as famous rebels are voting with their parties 95% of the time.

But it's even more extreme if you're a government minister because it's a constitutional rule that

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you have to always vote for the government if you're a government minister because it's called collective responsibility, ministerial responsibility. And if you don't vote with the government, you resign. And if you don't vote with the government on something important, you're kicked out. On how many occasions did you vote for something as a government minister that had you been a backbencher, you'd have felt very, very queasy about?

I never voted for anything that I felt deeply queasy for. I often voted for things that I thought, oh, I'm not quite sure about that. But when push came to shove, on things I felt very queasy about, I voted against the government. But the result of that was the first time I did it. I was not promoted for the next four years. And the second time I did it, I was kicked out of the Conservative Party. So I voted against the No Deal Brexit. But people need to understand that the deal is that it's better or worse the team sport. And the justification for that is that the public vote for a manifesto, they vote for a party and they expect the party to deliver that manifesto. They don't expect the local MP they voted for to start rebelling against what they think they've signed up for. And we can debate that whether it's a good thing or a bad thing, but that's the way the systems work. So these things where they say, look at the voting record, is completely absurd. All you say when you say, yeah, this guy looks like a nice guy, but look at his voting record, is what you're saying is this guy looks like a nice guy, but he was a member of a Tory government. That's all you're saying.

Yeah. But when you were not in the government, when people sort of raise things on your voting record, is there anything in your voting record when you were a backbencher that you sometimes think, oh, we shouldn't have done that? Yeah, I think that the way that austerity was done was very, very, it was often incredibly damaging. So I saw that very directly in prisons. Hacked the number of prison officers, hacked the budgets of prisons, increased the number of prisoners and ended up with drug filled, violent, filthy, unsafe prisons. So that's a very good example of austerity gone completely wrong. Why did I support the principle? I mean, that goes into the question of how much debt I think the country can handle, how much deficit I think the country handle. And I disagree with people who believe that there is an easy way to just borrow money and spend money and generate growth by doing that. But I guess that's because I was a conservative, not on the other side of the house. Now, Rory, while I'm being the interrogator here, I've got one here from Amy mentioned, would Rory kindly regale us with the story about the time he found himself trapped inside the King's panic room at High Grove? Then I'll tell you my High Grove story. Very good. Okay, so I was, I think, 19 years old, and I had been employed as the tutor to Princes William and Harry. For how long? For the summer holidays. So I had just arrived and I went off to have a bath about 11 o'clock at night. And weirdly, there were two doors on the bathroom. Anyway, I locked the door that I thought was the right door to lock, got into my bath, got out of the bath, tried to unlock the door and I couldn't unlock it. And I thought, for goodness sake, and I kept struggling with the key and I couldn't shift it. Eventually, there was a knock on the door. And this familiar voice, it's the voice of the King, but I'm not going to commit Lacey Manchester's day by trying to imitate the voice of the King. But anyway, the voice of the King then says, Rory, would you mind turning out the lights out when you go to bed? He obviously cares about the environment once you turn the lights out. So I say, I'm really sorry. So I'm now very, very scared 19 year olds. It's my first proper job. I'm really sorry, sir. I seem to have locked myself in the loo. And he says, don't be so ridiculous, Rory, turn the key in the lock.

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So I'm so terrified. I turned the key in the lock so hard that I'd snap it off at the half. And I'm left with this thing. And I then look around. And I say, I'm really, really sorry, sir. I've snapped the key off in the half. And he says, you're not seriously suggesting it's midnight that I have to wake up the whole house and get them to axe down the door. And I say, no, no, no, sir, it's absolutely fine. I'll sleep the night on the bathroom floor. So there is a sort of rum from the other kind of the door. And did you sleep there? The Princewell disappears. So I then look around this thing and realize what's happened is that this is the anti terrorist panic room of the building. And there's a big sign up saying ring Scotland yard and jump out of the window. And the thing that I've locked is this kind of bombproof metal door to prevent a terrorist getting in. So about 20 minutes later, there is the sound literally of axes on the door. And eventually the door is broken through. And there is the Princewell's in his dressing gown directing a group of people with axes driving out. And for the rest of my time at Hydro, literally I would sit there at the breakfast table on the lunch table. And all the people serving me could not stop themselves sniggering every time they try to pour the soup. Listen, Rory, that is just such a great story. I think we should have a separate podcast. The rest is Rory's time at Highgrove. I've got it. That's quite impressive, though, that he's going around turning the lights off. Is that part of his eco-warriordom that he goes around making sure there's no lights on? Well, I think he does care about the environment. Yeah. Are you going to tell us your Highgrove story? Or are we going to move on tomorrow? Well, my Highgrove story is that at one point when Tony and Cherie were going for lunch with then Prince of Wales at Highgrove, and we were meant to be going on to Coventry, so I was with them in the car behind, and I just texted ahead to one of the protection people and said, look, can you check out if there's a swimming pool? Because a lot of us swim while Tony's having lunch. And I later discovered this caused absolute sort of protocol consternation because, of course, there is a swimming pool, but only he is meant to swim in it. And I don't think he swims very much. So after a sort of bit of, you know, Republican badgering, eventually they sort of, you know, rather grumpily agreed that I could go in this swimming pool. But I've got to tell you, Red, if you ever went in the swimming pool at Highgrove, but it didn't feel like it was swimming very much. There were a lot of green things in there. Well, thank you. You swam in a lot of unique places. I mean, someday we need a book out of you on places you swam. Right then. We'll be back in a second. So let's just take a quick break. Now, here's a more serious one, right? I think we'll both be interested in this. James Mools, what would you say are the key criteria for a country to be considered a superpower? And which countries do you believe have the potential to meet that criteria in coming decades? Related to that, Tim Johnson, why does the UK still deserve a permanent seat on the UN Security Council? If the UN was founded now, would the UK be in that same position? Well, so I think the answer is, of course, if the UN was founded now, the UK would not be likely to be in the same position. I mean, its only claim is that it's a nuclear power. But in population terms, it's very small compared to the global population. Its economy is increasingly small compared to its big competitors like the US and China. Criteria to be a superpower? Well, I guess the obvious rising powers are China and then India. And I think to be a superpower is really about being able to hyperbolically project your power globally, not just on a regional basis, but be able to bring the full force of your economic and military might to bear almost

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anywhere around the world. Go on, over to you. Well, yeah, I think that's right. And I think it means that actually, although we talked during the Cold War about America and Russia, or the Soviet Union being superpowers, the Soviet Union was only really a superpower because of the strength the size of its military arsenal, particularly its nuclear arsenal. America are genuine superpowers. I'd say at the moment that China and America are the only two superpowers. And I think there are others that could emerge in that way. I think it's economic, military, cultural. And it's also really about how they relate to the rest of the world. I mean, there's not a single other leader in the world who doesn't, you know, if the phone goes and it's, it's the Chinese embassy saying President Xi would like to have a conversation or it's the White House, President Biden would like to have a conversation. They're kind of the top level. And I do think that the UK, I said this on question time, I really do feel that Brexit has reduced us further, that we're no longer, you know, we're no longer top tier, other than, you know, for the historic reasons in the UN. But I think there's a danger that we're, we're going down, you know, not just from second tier, but lower than that. I think what about the African country? Do you think any of the African countries could ever emerge as a? Well, one in 10 children born in the world will be born in Nigeria by 2050. That actually is a segue into a question from Fred Gray, friend of mine in the US sent an email which mentioned a community work program in Rwanda called Umuganda in Kenya, Rwanda, which means uniting to achieve a common purpose. So this is an amazing event. He's asked whether either of us have seen it and I have definitely seen it and it is for real. So on the last Saturday of every month, if you are a citizen without disabilities aged between 18 and 65, you basically have to get out there from eight in the morning for three hours picking up the rubbish and doing some other stuff too. That's the community meetings. And essentially you'd get arrested if you're not picking up the rubbish and it's incredible. I mean, on a Saturday morning, the traffic is at a complete standstill and the streets are full of people tidying up the capital city or out in the rural areas having community meetings. And as a result, Rwanda is pretty clean. It's like the Switzerland of Africa. I nearly got into an altercation yesterday when Grace and I were out walking the dog and she stopped me from confronting these people who were literally just throwing litter. Oh, this was on Hampstead Heath. They were having a sort of picnic type thing. And you didn't get an altercation? I didn't because Grace said, no, please dad, don't please. I'm fed up with getting you out of fights. But it was, it was, it just disgusted me so much. It was literally, it was like wiping things and throwing the tissues into the grass. And then her husband or partner or boy from whatever, necking this bottle of beer and just sort of chucking it over his shoulder. It does my head in. Now, we said on the main podcast, we were going to cover this, Dorothy Darling, disappointing to see Keir Starmer, West Street, etc. at Murdoch party. Why toadie up to him instead of rejecting his poison? Are they too worried about lack of or negative coverage? I think people will be thrilled to see politicians giving him the cut, prove that they're not just more of the same. Well, I mean, I was quite proud not to go to his parties. And I thought it was actually a bit embarrassing to do so. But colleagues went, Labour politicians, Conservative politicians, because they believed that if they didn't go, I guess they would get negative coverage in the newspapers.

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Yeah, I think it is about this sort of, you know, it's like they, I think it's the Murdoch empire in particular, sort of feel that they are almost like a kind of state. And you have to treat them like that. And they have diplomats, they have ambassadors around the place. And I do think I was pleased that Ed Miliband, when he was leader of a party, really went for them over, you know, over their role in phone hacking and the criminal abuse and the media and so forth. I get why Keir does it, but I think there will be quite a lot of people like Dorothy there who... Why does he do it? Sorry, just to... For the reason, for the reasons you said in the main podcast that it's about trying to neutralise something that could be quite a nasty enemy. No, I think there'll be a nasty enemy anyway. I don't think that Labour are going to get a fair deal. And do you really think that if you don't, I mean, I didn't turn up, didn't respond to the invitation. Do you think he actually is vindictive against people who don't come to his party? I don't think it'll be necessarily vindictive about people who don't go to his jamborees. But I think vindictive to people who he feels do not show him what he considers to be respect or who, you know, veer too far away from political views that he deems to be palatable. I don't think he's just vindictive, but I think he puts the word out to his papers, you know, do what he can do this guy in. Final question, Roy. This one made me laugh. Paul Cutterford. How does Rory feel when having made a good point? Alastair usually says, right, in a way that illustrates that he hasn't listened to the point as he's so consumed by what he's about to say. It's not a criticism. I find it quite funny. It happens a lot and I love you, Roy. Let me just tell you, Paul, I say right in that way when Rory has made a point that I actually think is worth just allowing to stand on its own. I'm like Rory, who regularly, after I make a point, says good or very good and then moves on. Is that not true, Rory? Yeah, yeah, right, right, right. Very good. Thank you. Let's go. Bye bye. Good bye. End of.