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

And with me, Rory Stewart.

How are you, Alistair?

I'm very well.

You've got a tennis racket on the wall behind you.

I do.

I do.

I'm in Cape Cod in the United States, and I'm in my wife's, a grandparent's house.

Lovely.

And that's an old tennis racket because they've been playing tennis a long time.

But I have a small story for you.

So here we are.

Here's a question on how up-to-date you are and things.

I got on a tiny plane to come here.

Actually, very exciting.

It was a sea plane, which took off from 25th Street in Manhattan.

Wow.

Eight people on the plane.

Yeah.

It was like some sort of lead-up to a joke.

So I got on the plane, and there was a very nice guy who worked for a tech company who recognized me and started showing me pictures of my tweets.

Then I noticed the person sitting next to me had recognized the person in front of them, and then the person in front of me had recognized the person in front of mine.

So it turned out that there was a woman called Dylan Mulvaney.

Have you heard of Dylan Mulvaney?

I've heard of A Mulvaney, but not a Dylan Mulvaney.

Okay.

So Dylan Mulvaney, we discussed in the podcast a few weeks ago.

She was on the plane.

She was the transgender face of the Bud Light campaign.

Oh, yeah.

Absolutely.

Yeah.

Yeah.

So Dylan was on the plane with another social media influencer called Chris Olson, and they were all on their way to an amazing wedding being hosted by a woman called Mikayla Noguera, who's another social media influencer, does makeup stuff.

She's very interesting.

She's got Boston access.

And then there was a Democrat congressman on the plane.

So what I discovered was with these three completely different worlds, there was somebody who knew our podcast, there was somebody who was really on top of TikTok stars with 15

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million followers, and there was somebody on top of the congressman.

And then amongst them all was a very quiet psychiatrist from New York who said, I literally don't know who any of the three of you are.

I never watched television, never heard you do.

But I was just trying to work out what would happen if our sea plane had crashed in the sea, how different media would have covered the story.

Let's just cut straight to the chase.

On American TV news, what would have been the first name mentioned?

Dylan Mulvaney.

I think it probably would have been Dylan Mulvaney.

Alissa, who's the Democrat?

He's called Richie Torres, and actually bearing in mind, so he's a young African-American congressman from New York.

I thought incredibly impressive, thoughtful, relaxed, interesting, first Afro-Latino gay congressman.

And I actually, bearing in mind that I'd be told off by you, I did ask him if he'd like to come on the pod, and he would like to come on the pod.

So I think Richie Torres could be a future president.

Oh, Lord.

I think Dylan Mulvaney would have been quite interesting.

I mean, to have crashed to the share price of Budweiser, it's a really interesting, leading phenomenon.

Well, there we are.

I think the news story on the BBC of the plane crashing would have been Alissa Campbell was tonight looking for a new podcast partner after Rory Stewart died with a trans activist and some influences in a tragic crash in America.

How about that?

That's very good.

Very good.

You're right.

It would have been all about you in the end.

Yeah, of course.

Yeah, of course.

Tony Blair's spin doctor looks for a new partner.

There we are.

Okay.

Very good.

Now, Alissa, what do you want to talk about?

Well, we're going to talk about France and the riots that have followed the police killing of a young man called Nahel.

We're going to talk about where you are now, America, and specifically the recent three very important decisions by the Supreme Court and maybe talk a little bit about how the Supreme Court operates and why it's become so very, very high profile in the political

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world.

And then I think we should talk about Thames Water, which is a major car crash waiting to happen.

And also, I think we should talk a bit about the NHS in the light of Rishi Sunak's 15-year workforce plan.

How does that sound?

Fantastic.

Well, let's start with France.

And you are, as we know, the French expert here.

You spend a lot of time in France, speak very good French, and you even know Emmanuel Macron.

So give us a sense of what you think is going on in France at the moment.

Well, it seems to have calmed a little in the last 24 hours or so, but since the killing of this young guy who was being chased by the police, the police, they claimed at first that their lives were in danger.

Video showed that not to be the case.

They were trying to stop him.

They claimed that the boy has a record of avoiding arrest.

So he was just shot in the chest.

And the police officer is now in custody.

He's going to be charged with, it would seem, with murder.

And obviously, this became very, very quickly a matter of political handling, very, very strong memories for anyone in French office of 2005.

Very similar incident, which led to more than 10,000 cars being set alight, over 200 public buildings that were damaged.

And the back then, Sarkozy had been very, very pro-police and just sort of stood by the police and anybody who attacked the police was sort of, you know, low form of life.

Someone did come out straight away and say that he thought this was unacceptable.

He was critical of the police officer who'd done it.

That was politically risky because, of course, the far right was straight out saying he's weak, not supporting the police.

So what he's trying to do is to have this divided line, pretty tough crackdown alongside saying that what happened was unacceptable.

And one of the things, sorry, that you often say about him is that that's very characteristic of his attempt to hold the center ground, this sort of em-mem-ton.

And actually, frequently, he does it strangely not by being nice to both right and left, but by being rude to the right and then rude to the left.

And in this case, quite aggressive towards the police and then in the next minute, quite aggressive towards the rioters.

Is that right?

Exactly.

I think that's exactly what he's trying to do.

But it has been very, very scary.

And of course, the other point he's been making is that social media has made it a lot worse

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than it was the last time this kind of thing happened.

And obviously, am I right in saying that this is part of a much, much bigger global issue?

In this case, it's about French treatment of Arabs, but there are echoes of the killing of George Floyd.

There are echoes of the killing of Mark Duggan, who people remember in 2011 sparked the Tottenham riots.

He was killed by the police.

Jury ruled in the end he was carrying a gun, but almost certainly not showing the gun when he was shot.

But in every case, what happens is the police killing of somebody then sparks very, very widespread rioting and then gets tied into bigger narratives around deprivation, racism, exclusion.

And I think that's particularly the case in France.

I do think when these things happen, you're right about Mark Duggan and there were riots and there have been riots in the UK in the past, but a lot less.

I do think we are perhaps better at integration than the French.

And the trouble with a lot of these big French cities, Paris being a case in point, but we should also talk about Marseille, which I probably know better, is that you have a kind of really vibrant and affluent and successful centre.

And then around it, the Bonne Lure, where they, you know, to be absolutely frank, a lot of them feel completely forgotten.

And you know, there's a film, if you've got a spare couple of hours, there's a film that's worth watching about Marseille called Back North, B-A-C-N-O-R-D, and it's about, it's based on a true story about some police officers in Marseille who became involved in drug trafficking and racketeering.

But essentially what you see there is what I think is happening in some of these cities now, which is that for the police to police some of these areas is becoming virtually impossible.

It's interesting that when Macron visited Marseille recently, and you know, fair play, he goes to Marseille, he supports the football team, he announced a lot of money that people say hasn't come through and that has fed into this sort of sense of, you know, disenchantment, disappointment.

But he actually didn't go to some of the toughest areas, because some of the toughest areas you can't get into, because there are roadblocks.

Some of them controlled by these drug gangs, and some of them very, very heavily armed.

And so there are, in a way that I think maybe we don't understand here, I think most places in the UK, even if there are all sorts of gang crime going on, I think the police in general will feel the ability to go.

Yeah, just very quickly on that, there was an article we can share in the link about Marseille, and in particular this Cartier Noir, and a tower block called Fan Valley,

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which seems to be terrifying, and it sounds like it's a massive series of tower blocks surrounded by motorways, 70% unemployment, the police station and the area closed, descriptions of people stashing AK-47, Kalashnikovs and drugs up and down the stairs.

So, and that I think we don't quite get in Britain, although I think one thing to bear in mind is that we're always maybe closer to it than we think.

I mean, in this case, and I'll say the police station was closed 10 years ago, and that happened in France and a lot of Europe and in the United Kingdom, a lot of closing at police stations.

And of course, there's always a good sort of accounting argument for it, which is it's cheaper to have your police in a fewer locations, and you can always pretend that they can get out in cars and do just as good a job out of their cars as they can with the local police station.

And this is what the people in the article are complaining about is any sense of a group of 10 police officers who really know the local community, know the children are there, are on the street, can pick up the tactical information.

And that which both in France and Britain is increasingly presented as a luxury is of course, really essential, particularly for excluded marginalized communities for reassuring people.

Well, I think we need to be a little bit wary about this because I think what you are seeing is what happens if you do have a breakdown of any form of community policing.

Now, the French police have a reputation anyway for being pretty rough, probably instinctively a lot rougher maybe than the policing culture that we're used to, although maybe our policing culture has changed a lot.

And you know, he's got this, Macron's got this very, very hard line interior minister.

And by the way, when I talked about 2005, Sarko wasn't the president, he was the interior minister at the time.

So he was in charge of the response to those riots in 2005.

But if you look at people say that during the recent protests that the police made things worse rather than calmed it down, there is increasing evidence there are quite a lot of very, very hard right people within the police force in France, just as there are in Germany.

And again, there may be within the UK policing, but I don't feel it's quite as prevalent.

We've had almost sort of different problems, haven't we?

I mean, we've talked about this a little bit and there's been this, these reports recently on the police, particularly about sexual violence and corruption.

And I think that there are still significant problems within the metropolitan police around those issues, around officers not being held to account for those things.

Yeah.

In parts of France, if you're African or North African origin, you are 20 times more likely to be stopped by the police and searched.

And they're usually looking for drugs and for guns.

And the other thing that's really, really quite interesting at the moment is like so, if you think of the great iconic events that happen in France, one of them is the Tour de France, the great recycling race in the world, it's on at the moment, and they're having

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to put extra security in for the Tour de France.

They've got the Olympics coming up next year in Saint Denis, the main stadium is in Saint Denis, which is one of the, one of the areas that we're talking about.

And meanwhile, Macron, who had the embarrassment of having to tell King Charles, you can go straight to Germany rather than coming here because of the pension protests, now cancelling a state visit to Germany, which would have been the first state visit by a French president to Germany in 20 years, meant to be a big thing, trying to re cement the Franco-German alliance, and instead of which is in sort of permanent crisis management session, trying to deal with this.

And presumably, this is one of the themes that leads into the support for Le Pen and the anxiety we've both talked about, that Le Pen still seems in a very strong position to be the next president of France following Macron, because Macron hasn't yet appointed a successor, very difficult to find where challenges from the other main parties are going to emerge from, that this is an issue that really gets to people.

And it's a sort of odd combination, isn't it?

I suppose it's something that we notice a lot in Britain too, that often places with less integration, you seem to have more anxieties about race than places with more integration. I mean, for example, I don't understand French politics enough, but if you think about the number of people from minority ethnic backgrounds at senior levels in the British cabinet, do you have that equivalent in France or not really?

Not at the top levels.

Not at the top levels.

But yeah, you do have.

There are cabinet ministers of colour, but I don't think that the upper echelons of French society are quite as integrated as ours are.

I think that's a fair statement.

But the politics of this are really, really quite difficult.

Eric Zemmour, who's the hard right guy who ran for the presidency and he's a sort of, he's a never off the telly and off the radio, he's a bit like Farage, he's just sort of out there the whole time pumping populist messaging.

And he says the issue is one of our inability to deal with what he calls foreign enclaves.

Now, you're talking for most of these young people who have been out on the streets, you're talking second, third generation French citizens of immigrant background.

For him to call it foreign enclaves is an indication of how the far right likes to project them as other than as not being French as it were.

And the other thing that's tricky politically for Macron is, I mean, Le Pen isn't doing very much at the moment.

She's actually not that high profile in the French political debates.

She's just hoping, you know, that the people turn against the government and they turn to her.

But her, their baseline, the far right have been calling on Macron to call a state of emergency to give more powers to the police.

But actually, it's not because they want more powers to the police.

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They know that having a country that's living under a state of emergency is basically a country where you've lost control and then that plays into their strengths.

It is, it's interesting, isn't it?

I mean, France does so many things so well that we talk about a lot on the pod, you know, we might suggest their health service functioning better than ours, their water systems functioning better than ours.

Both of these things right now without a doubt are true.

Yeah, it's interesting.

I mean, I was in the U.S. and actually Ricky Torrance, the U.S. congressman on the plane was asking me about this and, you know, he said, is Rishi Sunak the first person in color to ever be a leader in the United Kingdom?

And I said, yes, but I sort of paused for a second just to check in my mind before I said it and then I realized I wouldn't really have checked in the same way with President Obama.

I would have known at once that this was a kind of big defining feature and he certainly as an American congressman looking at Britain does see things that he thinks are more positive than maybe we give ourselves credit for.

I mean, this is so, I mean, obviously we have huge problems and David Lambie on our leading interview talked about a lot of them and has pointed to a lot of our problems in criminal justice and policing and many, many other issues that we need to address, but maybe not quite as severe and extreme as what we're looking at in France.

Just maybe to close on this before we turn to America and the Supreme Court.

Macron was due to make one of his reasonably infrequent addresses to the nation, probably around about now or certainly maybe the weekend that we've just gone through, where he was going to talk about how the nation has become pacified again after all the protests over the pensions, Lord.

So that didn't go according to plan.

So Supreme Court, I mean, you're in America, presumably it's huge story there, isn't it?

It's completely amazing and I think the first thing to bear in mind is that in a way that's very difficult for British lessons to understand is that Supreme Court justices are almost household names, certainly for readers of the New York Times.

I remember I knew a Supreme Court justice called Stephen Briers and the immense sort of extraordinary admiration he was held in Harvard and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

He was one of Clinton's, wasn't he?

Yeah, he was certainly on the Democrat side.

I don't know whether he came in with Clinton, but I mean, you know, people write whole biographies of Supreme Court justices.

You know, there's a great American tradition.

If you go to a certain kind of American home, they have big, hardback biographies of presidents and Supreme Court justices lining their walls.

And you can see that these figures on this current court are almost household names.

People will remember Brett Kavanaugh because while he was being confirmed, somebody came forward, Christine Blasey Ford and accused him of sexual assault when they were at high

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school together.

Of course, the same was true going back in day with with Clarence Thomas, who was accused famously by a woman called Anita Hill of sex assault during his confirmation hearings. He's been there for 34 years.

And who I suppose is the most leading celebrity on the on the right.

Yeah, but the thing is they're there for life.

Let's just very briefly go through the reasons why we're talking about this, because they've just finished their their session and the last three decisions they made were all pretty controversial and are seen ultimately as in some cases as political rather than judicial.

The first big call is on so-called affirmative action, the taking into consideration of race on college admissions.

They basically that's been going for decades.

And they said that that's now no go.

The second was in relation to one of Joe Biden's central promises when he came to power, which is the right of a student debt.

They basically said, no, no, no, you can't do that.

And the third one was a woman who she makes websites for weddings and she refused to take a same sex couple as a customer.

They took it to court.

It's gone to the Supreme Court.

The court is ruled in her favor.

So these are three very, very political decisions.

And the other thing that's really interesting, just looking at some of the stats this morning, the 20 year average for unanimous decisions across the court was 50%.

In other words, over 20 years, a half of all decisions were unanimous.

That declined to 30% in 2021.

The party line, what they call party line rulings in line with the official policy of a political party were close to zero over the 20 year average.

And that rose to 21% in 2021.

And some of the statements, what's happened is a bit like select committees, don't know whether you ever had a non unanimous report.

But with these judgments, some of the judges, the liberal judges have put out statements and opinions that are absolutely scathing.

There is no disagreeing agreeably between these judges at the moment.

Sonja Sotomayor called the website decision a grave error.

And Elena Kagan, she said of the student loan policy, the court is substituting itself for Congress in making national policy about student loan forgiveness.

And if you look at the powers of the Supreme Court, it is not supposed to have the power to decide non justiciable political questions.

Yeah, well, so I just to do a quick explainer again for people.

So completely unlike the British system, which still very much has rooted in the idea of parliamentary sovereignty, although, you know,

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there's been a challenge to that potentially over the court intervening on the government's Rwanda decisions.

But basically speaking, parliament sovereign in the US, of course, it's a written constitution and the arbiter on the Constitution and its amendments is the Supreme Court.

And the only way of changing what Supreme Court rules on would be changing the Constitution, its amendments, which is unbelievably difficult to do.

Although it can be it can be expanded without a constitutional amendment.

And that may be what Biden will be thinking about is actually appointing more judges.

Very interesting.

Although that would be a very, very controversial thing to do because it hasn't been done for a very long time.

Yeah. And and in a way, a lot of it, of course,

the composition, the court, how many conservative judges you have against how many Democrats is in some ways a matter of luck and aging.

It's to do with who lives longest, when people eventually step down.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who was this very, very famous female,

more liberal judge, stepped down, created a vacancy into which other people stepped and and unfortunately in the four years of Donald Trump

in three Supreme Court justices were appointed,

which was very, very upsetting for the Democrats.

And they are aged 51, 55 and 58.

And they are there until they die, retire, resign or get impeached.

So you now have this inbuilt six, three, two that are appointed by Obama,

one appointed by Biden, George Bush senior, we've mentioned,

who appointed Clarence Thomas and then George Bush, Jr.

appointed to and then Trump with his three.

One of the interesting things, if you again,

if you go back to the founding of the Supreme Court,

that puts a lot of store on trust and credibility

and the trust and credibility would seem to be very, very low.

The the polls on independence and Democrats, in particular,

on their levels of respect and trust for the Supreme Court

have absolutely plummeted in recent years.

And this is partly that last year, the most famous rulings

were on the right to abortion and expanding gun rights.

Roe Wade, yeah. Yeah.

But you can make an argument that maybe things are improving a little bit since last year.

So you mentioned that last year, unanimous decisions were down to about 28 percent.

So far this year, unanimous decisions have risen up again to 47 percent,

very close to that 50 percent average that you talked about.

And in fact, strangely, the Liberals have won the majority decisions

in a number of recent cases, Voting Rights Act, immigration,

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road of state legislatures, Native American rights and Chief Justice Roberts has often found himself as has Gorsuch and in some cases, Emie Korot Barrett siding with the Liberal judges.

The ACLU won 11 out of its 18 cases, which is a ACLU, very, very progressive, separate organization, which is the bell weather for some things happening.

And they've also been relatively consensual on prisoners access to court, social media free speech, so they let a transgender girl compete.

They allow particular types of abortion pills.

So from the point of view of the hardline conservatives, they're very, very frustrated and they think that Trump's three nominees were much too moderate.

Well, I don't know if you saw, I saw yesterday a video that Ron DeSantis has put out about Trump, where it's basically suggesting that Trump is a sort of massive friend of, you know, the LGBTQ community. Whereas he DeSantis, you know, really can't stand trans.

And, you know, if you really want somebody who's going to be mega homophobic, vote for Ron. I mean, it's just, you know, the politics around this is so, so poisonous.

So the interesting thing with Donald Trump is that his appointments were not as provocatively, aggressively right wing as many people expected.

I mean, there were huge questions around that the personal behavior of Brett Kavanaugh, but he's not a notoriously right wing figure.

And again, Barrett, nobody doubted her academic credentials or her seriousness or her conviction, although people were worried about her Catholic background.

And it's partly, I think, that I'd be interested in getting into this.

But one gets the sense that maybe Trump slightly delegated this issue and delegated it to more sort of formal legal officials in his department rather than really doing what people like DeSantis says he should have done, which was to bring many more radical voices.

I don't know. I got the Trump did a rally at the weekend and he was making hay with this and saying that this is, you know, this shows my power and this is my legacy and all this sort of stuff.

So I think he was very, very conscious of the of the significance of the appointments that he made.

And this thing about age is so important, isn't it?

It's like the Supreme Court was established as part of the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Now, I don't know what the average life expectancy was.

They would all have been men back then.

But what would it have been? I don't know, 60 max.

Yeah. And so if you say that they're appointing somebody to the Supreme Court, who's probably in their fifties, they're going to live a few years

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and then they're going to die and then they're going to get replaced.

You're now appointing people.

I mentioned Thomas.

So he was 43 when he was appointed.

And he's now 75. He's now 75 and he could live to 100.

Oh, it's extraordinary. I mean, Amy Coney Barra is the youngest.

She's 51. She could live another half century.

And she decides when she leaves this court.

There's a broader issue, which I think touches on a lot of things that happen in the British Civil Service.

So at the time when I joined the Foreign Office, becoming an ambassador was something that you got right towards the end of your career.

Yeah. And people were sort of happy

as a result waiting because you saw that these were jobs that you got when you were older and older and older.

But rapidly, for understandable reasons, we began to move to a world where you got to become an ambassador in your late thirties or early forties.

And suddenly you have a very, very strange organization where you have a lot of very angry younger civil servants who feel how come that person became an ambassador in the late thirties and early forties and I'm not.

Well, you have even more angry older people who look overlooked.

Exactly. Stuck down in the number three or number four.

And I do think there's an argument for something as our life expectancy extends and as actually people are competent, much, much older in life.

And in fact, as retirement ages are being raised, it's very, very odd.

I mean, the Secret Service until recently was still retiring people at 55.

Foreign Office still retiring people at 60.

So I would say that with the Supreme Court, you'd want to be bringing people in ideally in their mid sixties and they do it for do it for 10 years.

I think that would require a constitutional change, but I think that you can add to it.

And I wonder whether Biden might try to do that.

But as you say, that would be incredibly difficult to do politically.

Right. Well, maybe time for a break and then back with

NHS reform and water. Yeah.

See you soon.

Welcome back to the rest of politics with me, Rory Stewart and me, Anastasia Campbell.

And while we were in the break, we were just talking about the fact that, of course, it would be very difficult for President Biden to put an age limit on Supreme Court justice and say they have to step down at 70.

Because he's he's 80 and I am beginning to feel I'm afraid.

Look, I absolutely, like most of our listeners, think Trump is the most

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incredible threat, not just the United States, but also to the world.

And I agree that it feels like President Biden is the only credible

Democratic candidate against him so that it's incumbent on people to support him.

But I am not at all sure about his age and health.

I'm afraid. I know I keep falling into this trap.

I know that Republicans say it, so people don't like me saying it.

But I'm increasingly prepared to take a bet with you.

I'm afraid that Trump is going to take a bet with you.

I'm not saying it, but I'm increasingly prepared to take a bet with you

that President Biden is not going to be the president after the next election.

OK, as you know, I'm not a big gambler, Roy, but what should we say?

Five million.

Did I have never put a bet on in my life?

Oh, OK, well, I have a son.

The real Rory is a professional gambler.

I've never put a bet on my life.

OK, well, maybe we might do a bet.

It's interesting for someone who loves sports so much,

but you've never never been interested in betting at all.

No, and I was at the cricket the other day with people who are in the gambling world.

And they were trying to explain to me that watching sport is so much more

enjoyable if you have a bet on it, but I don't see it that way.

You don't. You don't. Well, you love sports, so obviously they're wrong.

Yeah, well, no, they're wrong for me.

They're not maybe not wrong for them.

Well, quickly, Michael Ignatieff.

So my mother just sent me a text and we know how much we we respect our mothers

saying that Ignatieff discussion totally brilliant.

So for people who want to listen, this is Michael Ignatieff,

the ex-leader of the Liberal Party in Canada, being interviewed on the rest

of politics leading Ignatieff discussion totally brilliant,

possibly the best for my taste that you have ever done.

Oh, wow. I wonder, Rory, if that's because she saw in Michael

a very clever, intellectually minded person

who gave politics ago, but never quite fulfilled his absolute potential.

Do you think the mother could feel a sort of special

some special resonance?

I think maybe there. Yeah.

Funny enough, I said to Fiona, my Fiona, that we were doing Michael Ignatieff,

she said, you know, why never even made it to the top.

And I said, yeah, but he went into politics and it's really interesting

to talk to somebody who went into politics and really crashed and burned.

And I thought he's I thought what he'd learned about himself

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and what he learned about the process of politics,
that what he thought it would be and what it was, I thought was fascinating.

Yeah, I think if you were teaching students politics,
that's an amazing podcast.

If you're actually interested in the business of politics.

Yeah. Now, Rory, why are you talking about your mother?

Yeah. I wonder if you've ever heard of somebody called Jilly Green.

Jilly Green is my mother's first cousin, Alistair,
but this is getting a bit scary.

Well, Jilly Green has sent an email to RestisPolitics at gmail.com.

And this relates to your very, very funny story that I have labelled AxeGate
when the then Prince of Wales had to rescue you from his bathroom.

Yeah, from his bathroom where you locked yourself in,
not knowing it was the anti-terror panic room.

So this is the letter to RestisPolitics at gmail.com from Rory's Aunt Jilly.

When Rory's parents lived abroad, he often spent time with me.

I remember trying to get his only respectable shoes mended for that visit to Highgrove.

No time for a proper cobbler's job, so I stuck some souls on.

Sadly, as he walked around the halls of Highgrove, one peeled off
and he was seriously hobbled and no day embarrassed yet again.

So actually, here's me thinking you're a toff
and you can't even afford a proper pair of shoes.

Well, it's a real tribute to my Aunt Jilly, who is an amazing innovator
to kind of stick on a stick on a soul.

I think the fact that she's prepared to give it a go, being a cobbler,

I think is a real tribute to her, even if it slightly came to pieces in the palace.

Now, shall we talk about Thames Water?

Yeah, Thames Water. All right.

Well, can I do the quick introduction to Thames Water?

So Thames Water, it's a really, really interesting story.

But Thames Water, so for people, again, listening around the world,
the UK privatized its water utilities, 1989, under Margaret Thatcher.

And so, unlike most of Europe, water provision in Britain is done by these companies.

And Thames Water covers 15 million customers around London and the Thames Valley.

And the traditional story used to be when I was the water minister.

So this really kind of connects to me.

When I was my first job as a minister, was as the water minister.

And I used to deal a lot with water companies.

The story in those days was it's a pretty good deal for the public
because billions of pounds of investment have been put into the water networks.

And you're getting your water out for about a pound a day.

And that's better than the government could have done
because the government probably wouldn't have put the investment in

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because it's difficult for governments to make capital investment and the prices probably would have gone up.

Since then, of course, things have got increasingly ropey.

So with Thames Water, big water leakage, sewage spills, excessive executive pay, big dividend payments.

And now they've managed to accumulate 14 billion pounds worth of debt and seem to be on the verge of bankruptcy having been acquired in 2007 by Macquarie, which is an Australian investment firm that took their debt from 3.2 billion up to 10.7.

So over to you.

Any thoughts on this?

And then maybe we can get into my thought about water for my time there.

There was an editorial in the Financial Times at the weekend that was absolutely scathing and almost reaching the point of saying that this whole privatisation experiment is sort of, you know, has to be re-judged. You've covered some of this already.

Three decades later, investors have loaded up the sector with borrowing and taking out billions in dividends while infrastructure is crumbling.

Public anger rising over leaks and sewage discharges.

News this week that the government is on standby to take Thames Water into temporary public ownership in case of its potential collapse.

Another sign that the great experiment has failed.

I think people in my experience are really, really, really angry about all this sewage and their rivers and seas.

I think they're angry at seeing the lifestyles of some of these people who have made fortunes out of the water industry.

So privatisation, as you say, 1989 in 2006.

And, you know, I think the government that I was part of can be criticised for this.

The German company RWE, they sold it to the highest bidder.

That was this investment consortium headed by Macquarie.

When the Macquarie guy left his job in 2021,

he got he got 10 million that year, Martin Stanley.

But he said on the sale when they sold it off into 2017,

he said, Thames Water is better, stronger and more customer focused than it was in 2006, when the truth is anything but that.

I bumped into, you know, this a lot of this campaigning on water.

You know, Fiegel Scharke, who's a former singer with the undertones and we bumped into him on the heat the other day.

And Fiona was telling him that he's her new hero.

What I love about Fiegel Scharke, he's not just a sort of rent-a-quote celebrity campaigner, he knows this stuff inside out.

And when he was going through the figures of the scale of the dividends set against the lack of scale of investment.

And there's one point in 2017, they worked out that it would take

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three hundred and fifty seven years to repair the network on the rate of investment that was going into it at that time. I mean, I think one of the issues is that the scale of investment required is unbelievable. Unlike countries that modernized more recently, we have a huge amount of Victorian pipes around the country. The government has brought in a plan to put in 56 billion pounds worth of investment. But of course, that's falling on the back of these privatised companies. So these privatised companies are going to have to put in that 56 billion over time. And 56 billion, you know, that's 56,000 million pounds. It's an unbelievable scale of investment to try to improve our water networks. At the same time, Thames Water is currently losing 630 million litres of water a day. That's out of 2.6 billion. So that's about 24 percent, about quarter of the water they pump is lost through leaking at the moment. But when you try and this maybe goes a little bit to my time as the water minister, when you actually get into the details of it and try to talk to these companies about what's going on, of course, it does turn out to be very, very complicated. So two things have had a big impact on water leakage over the last 12 months. One of them is drought. So when soil moisture comes down, there's there's more leakage from the pipes. There's also more demand. So they put more pressure through the pipes and more water comes pumping up. And then there was an incredible change in temperature in December, where there was a 17 degree temperature rise, centigrade temperature rise in 24 hours from frozen pipes suddenly heating up, which then crack them open. And I don't think any of these companies are really going to be able to stay on top of it because the regulations that the government is now trying to bring in, 56 billion pounds of investment and a regulates and prevent on paying dividends. So that's the government trying to use off what regulation to say you can't pay out these dividends. You're not performing is basically going to crack the financial models. These companies are gaffer, Mr. Gary Linnaker. I sent you a tweet that he did three words. He's Gary is getting into the take back control, three words, sloganizing, renationalized water, colon, simple, he said. But of course, it's not simple. It's not simple because if you renationalized it, you would have to come up with a 58 billion pounds worth of investment yourself. The government would have to take over managing all these pipes, managing huge numbers of people. And the question is, would they do it more efficiently than these private companies or not? And then I think goes to a basic question, which was at the heart of all this privatization.

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Does it make sense to privatize companies, which are natural monopolies?

I think I think of all the privatizations, water was the most politically ideological and stupid in my view, but it is very, very hard to renationalize.

Will Hutton, who writes a column in the observer, had a very interesting piece about this.

And he was basically making the point that the problem and the privatization model of the kind of Thatcher-Friedman variety is that there was an assumption that the pursuit of profit would alongside it have a social purpose.

Have these Macquarie investment people really been driven by the sense of social purpose as it affects Thames Valley customers in places like High Wycombe?

I don't think so.

But he was making the point that if you've got a government facing all the economic challenges we have now, net zero is going to cost about a trillion. Leveling up if you do it properly is going to cost about a trillion.

Are you really going to spend a quarter of a trillion or so renationalizing the water industry?

So there has to be a different solution found.

And certainly this model of privatization in water, and this is the conclusion the FT reached, it's failed.

Well, and it's partly because a bit like the railways, you have this monopoly because you can't build parallel railway tracks alongside the existing or parallel water pipes. They're too expensive to do before.

But four of the rail companies have been nationalized, haven't they?

Effectively, yeah, because I think for the same problem.

I mean, the solution is not, I'm afraid, the gaffer Gary Linnaker solution.

The solution has to be much, much tighter regulation and oversight by off what if we're going to have these private companies.

But and this is something that I discovered with the privatization of probation services, privatization of people who were supervising prisoners is that you can quite quickly find yourself in a situation where as you increase the regulation and the demands on the private companies, these indebted private companies end up going bankrupt.

And when they go bankrupt, the government then has to take them over anyway.

We had that with prison maintenance contracts.

We suddenly found ourselves putting more and more pressure on a company called Carillion, which wasn't following through on its maintenance and ending up in a situation in which we had to take over those maintenance contracts at nearly three times the cost of what we were paying Carillion.

Maybe final point.

There's Dieter Helm, who's the Professor of Economic Policy at Oxford University.

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Oh, I want us to interview if you end open to it.

I'm going to try to send him on him.

I like Dieter very much.

He's a super smart guy.

Is he is he German by background?

I guess probably by ancestry, but he's very British in turn.

But he's he was he was a guy who I worked with very close.

He's one of the few academics I work with in government who was brilliant at communicating and a policy and an understanding policy

Well, I'll tell you, I'll tell you what he said about this.

Thames Waters Travails mark the beginning of the end of the privatisation model.

It goes on.

This has been a massive regulatory failure, and it could all have worked better if the regulators had done their jobs properly.

Now it is probably too late to do anything other than buy a bit more time.

Oh, dear me. There you go.

Clever guy. Now, this brings us to a very, very big government announcement, which is that they have finally come out with an NHS workforce plan.

And the NHS workforce plan is trying to deal, you know, we've talked a lot about what's going wrong with the health service.

I mean, and it's unbelievable.

And we have many, many listeners writing in on their own individual experiences of a creaking health service and incredible waiting lists.

And the government has put waiting lists right at the centre of their agenda.

And it's a big struggle.

But one of the issues that we've talked about in the past is the need for more staff that's currently predicted by 2037, which isn't very long away, sort of that's 14, 15 years away.

The number of people over 85 in Britain is going to grow by 55 percent.

And we're going to end up with a shortfall of between 260,000 and 360,000 staff in the NHS.

So they've been focusing in this plan on new initiatives on training.

So double the number of doctors being trained, which we talked about last week, bringing in apprenticeships, cutting some of the training courses from five years to one year and doing more on retention and reform and putting £2.4 billion worth of investment into this.

Now, any any thoughts from you?

Well, one of my friends that I swim with, who I've taught you before about, he's a doctor, read it in full.

And his conclusion was they've turned the taps full on, but forgot to put the plug in.

In other words, they're going to spend a lot of money making these grand promises about getting more and more people in.

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But until they sort all the recruitment and retention issues, he doesn't see how it can how it can work.

His fear is that you train up more and more people and they all go off to Australia. Australia. Now, I did think I, by the way, don't think it is a bad idea that one of the points that Rishi Sunak made when he announced this was that, for example, if you're trained at public expense to be a dentist, then there should be some level of commitment to dentistry within the National Health Service.

He then rather ruined the point I thought by saying that not all dentistry would have to be done by dentists.

I just put horrible visions of car mechanics being sort of brought in.

Exactly. I'm offering to do your dentistry.

If you're very cheap, my aunt, Jilly, my aunt, Jilly would do your dentistry.

She'd be great. Although the shoes, she sounds to me like she didn't get a shoe. The soles of the shoe properly done.

We actually, when we get to Q&A, we had more questions on dentistry than anything apart from the riots in France.

And it was actually taking the mickey out of Sunak.

You know, the other point that my friend Jim Dan was making is that, you know, how I don't know whether you did, but when the armed forces pay for people to go through universities and then you commit to a certain number of years in the armed forces, there's a commitment. Yeah. Or you pay the money back. Yeah. Well, I think I don't see why we shouldn't do that within National Health Service training, but at the same time, honestly, if you talk to some of these doctors who are heading to Australia, to New Zealand,

then they're being respected, they're being paid well, there's a nice lifestyle.

But those same doctors are often defending the NHS against the Australian Health Service and we're going off to take big salaries with the Australian Health Service.

But we talked briefly last week when we did the special episode on pre-Gosian, because that feels a long time ago. It's only a week, nine days.

I went to the Margaret McDonald's wake, you know, Margaret McDonald, former General Secretary of the Labour Party, and some of the team, the oncology team that had been looking after her were there.

And I was speaking to one of them. He said he has never, ever, ever known the National Health Service to be as challenged as it is right now.

He said, to you guys' credit, he said, during the new Labour years, we really felt we had proper backing, proper investment.

We could do things properly.

Now, he said, we are absolutely all of us just running to stand still.

Well, it's interesting. I would like to, you know, maybe have a sort of look at this Australian health care system, because the point is that it's a shared public-private model. And that's something that many, many people...

As is the French.

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Yeah. And, you know, people encourage to purchase health insurance. And these are things that many of these doctors who are going off to Australia because they're paid higher salaries are resisting in Britain. They don't like the idea of a public-private model. They don't like the idea of people purchasing health insurance. And then they're going off to work in jurisdictions where that happens. There was a poll at the weekend that said that seven out of ten people believe that we will be charged for some aspects of health care in the near future. On this, I do think public opinion is interesting on that. I mean, I wondered whether if you were a politician or working with a prime minister and you heard that seven out of ten people thought that they would be charged. Is there something that might actually encourage politicians of any party to think, well, if the public think it's inevitable anyway, maybe we are going to introduce a measure of charging? Look, I'm not a conspiracy theorist. I'm really not. But I do think there is part of this ideological Tory right that wants to push us down that road, that actually thinks it will be impossible to keep funding the National Health Service in its current form. And not just the Tory right. I mean, I think this, of course, you're correct, there is a Tory right bit. There's a fringe with some very strange views about the NHS. But there's quite a lot of relatively mainstream people from both left and right that think the current NHS model is pretty broken. And Alan Milburn, who we interviewed, is quite close to seeing some very fundamental problems in the way that the whole thing's organised and run. Yeah, but he's talking there about organisation of use of the private sector within the model. And to be fair to West Street, he's saying much the same thing. But just a final point maybe on this aging business. You talked about the aging population. What are we to make of this guy, Lee Anderson and Miriam Cates, this sort of Christian evangelical who seems to be one of the new voices on this national conservatism stuff that you've got 165,000 vacancies in the care sector. And they're basically saying to Rishi Sunak, don't take any more immigrants in to do these jobs. I mean, what planet are they on? Particularly in the care sector. I mean, I think that this should have been something that people like Lee Anderson would have been very aware of should have been before Brexit, how incredibly dependent our care sector has been on people coming in from overseas and how as the number of people aged over 85 is going to go from about one and a half million to about 3 million in the next 15 years, we're going to need people to look after them. You mentioned Brexit there, I think because the Brexit people, because they won that campaign, people like Lee Anderson think they're sort of experts on how to win elections.

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Lee, if you're listening, I am telling you, if you start saying to people that we're not going to bring in people to staff the 165,000 vacancies in the care sector and we're not going to look abroad to fill some of the teaching gaps, you're on a vote loser mate, believe me.

Very good. Well, on that fine bit of political advice, I think we should bring to an end.

See you soon.

Bye-bye.