

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 151. Question Time: Fergal Sharkey on water pollution, drug legalisation, and fishing

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

For the first time, I think, without Rory Stewart, who was finally after 150 discussions between has been beaten by the logistics of travel and he's currently somewhere above the Atlantic, not able to connect. However, Plan B is in my view as good as Plan A.

I am not going to record this episode alone, much as I would enjoy asking myself, of Rory, do you think it's a good idea to abolish private schools?

And Rory's saying yes. Instead, I'm delighted to say that I'm joined by a man who will be our next guest

on leading Fergal Sharkey.

Alistair, how are you?

I'm very well. So are you looking forward to being my co-presenter?

I have to say that having kind of walked off stages and had opportunities in my life to say those immortal words, goodnight Wembley, and the number one record, it all pales into utter significance

at this moment is the greatest achievement of my life.

Excellent.

That briefly I get to deputise for Rory in some kind of abstract kind of a way.

Excellent.

Delighted to be here. Thank you for asking me.

Pleasure. Well, when we do the leading episode, which we've got on Monday, we're going to do your whole life story, music, politics, punk rock, and above all, for me, this is why you're going to be leading your leading role in the campaign against our government and the Wembley industry.

Now, lots and lots will know you for all sorts of different reasons, but we put out a thing this morning saying if Rory was unavoidably detained and we had to get Fergal Sharkey off the bench, send us in some of your questions.

So can we run through a few?

Please do.

And then after we'll have a little break and then we've got some of the general questions that listeners sent in, which you and I can knock about if you're happy with that.

First question, we get some very, very influential, important listeners.

Mr Tim Farron, no less, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Who says, Fergal, if by some fluke you became a majority shareholder in one of our water companies,

what would you do first of all?

Oh, you see, that's kind of the thing, because I probably at this point in time would not want to be a majority shareholder in a water company.

But what would you do if you were in their shoes?

I would actually just go, you know what?

I've made £72 billion out of this over the last 30 years.

We've left these companies £60 billion in debt.

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We've absolutely creamed it.

We've completely robbed the bill payer.

I think these companies can still be profitable.

I think we may have to some pain on our way over the next five or six, 10, 15 years.

So I'm just going to swallow hard.

I'm going to grin and bear it and I'm going to hang on and I'm going to do what I'm told.

Because in 10 or 15 years time, I could end up with a company that's debt-free with a nice, new, shiny sewage and water supply system looking forward to a profitable, successful future.

Perfect.

Or I could face bankruptcy.

Hoggy, I'd like to ask Fergal how he began his activism and where did the interest in health of rivers come from

and if he has a favourite river?

A favourite river is very simple.

That'll be the River Itching in Hampshire.

It's a chalk stream.

There's only 225 in the entire planet.

85% of them are here in southern England.

And I have to tell you, we are treating them abysmally badly to the extent that we are decimating every single one of them.

In my view, the River Itching is just perfectly formed and should be the perfect illustration of what we need to try and protect and preserve for future generations.

And where the interest came from?

I've always had an interest in fly fishing.

I found myself becoming chairman of the oldest fly fishing club in England.

Anybody that's bored at this point in time can now turn over and run away screaming.

I found myself deciding that on behalf of the club that I was chairman of,

that I was going to have to go and pick a fight with DEFRA, TENS Water and the Environment Agency.

Dr Luke Blazersjewski, how do we encourage local communities to connect with and protect their local rivers,

particularly in cities?

I'm asking as a long-term campaigner.

That one's already there from my own experience, Alistair,

and it was one of the reasons, again, I suspect we'll come back to.

I began to realise four or five years ago this country and when I say this country,

I mean England predominantly and Wales is peppered with local community grips full of incredibly decent people who for decades, in some part going back 30 years, have been trying to look after and preserve their little local river.

They've known it's been failing.

I know it's ill, but these people are not, entomologists, hydrologists, biodiversity specialists.

They're certainly not activists and campaigners

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and that was one of the things that motivated me when I realised these decent people out there had put their faith in the system and the system took that trust and abused it in the most obscene way possible. Zebris, how long will it take to fix the sewage problem?

What should I be doing?

What you can do right now is simply get in touch with your local MP and get in touch with your water company, voice to them your concerns, your outrage, your anger at what's been going on, what's been perpetrated in your name for the last 30 years.

That's what's actually driving this forward and as you guys recently discovered as we speak, 69% of voters now think the water industry should be nationalised simply because of the sewage scandal and the impact it's been having on our rivers.

Raise your voice. That's all I did.

Neil Ward, all the focus in the national media seems to be on sewage discharges by water companies, but Environment Agency figures suggest agriculture remains the most extensive cause of poor river water quality.

What does Virgil think can be done about this?

Oh well listen, that's completely true and I will happily say that I made a strategic decision two or three years ago that I could use my resources as one bloke with a mobile phone and a social media account and pick a fight with DEFRA, Government, the water industry, the Environment Agency or also pick a fight with the NFU and agriculture and clearly I thought that might have been overextending myself. I'm hoping at this point we have created enough awareness, enough of a beachhead, enough outrage that we can now use that beachhead to start extending it from sewage and going, oh by the way, did you know that London is on the cusp of actually running out of water?

Driven by the same greed, failure of regulation, collapse of the water system and yes, agriculture actually is the biggest polluter in rivers in England and we do need to have that conversation.

Elaine Wilson, does he still fish in the river for him and is it clean these days?

I don't because I don't get back at it for people's experience.

I had this extraordinary upbringing.

A young man, 10, 11, 12 years old,

I could get on a bus in the centre of town, dairy and 20 minutes later, find myself standing on the banks of the river Fohen with a reasonably decent chance of catching a salmon.

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An extraordinary thing, a fish that has just swum 3,000 miles from the Fohen out into the North Atlantic, returned to the river it was born in and there is this 10, 11 year old kid from Derry trying to kind of shout at it and go, would you mind terribly, just biting on the end of this fly and hanging onto it for a small part.

Unfortunately, I'm afraid even Northern Ireland has been blighted by the impact of corporate greed and regulatory failure.

The river Fohen is now blighted with what actually turns out to be possibly the biggest illegal dump site in the whole of Western Europe in a place called Maboy.

The chemicals and the sludge and slurry from that illegal dumping site is now leaching into the groundwater and beginning to leach into the river

and as the people of my hometown are about to discover that also supplies the water supply to Derry the town I grew up in.

There's a massive scandal there waiting to explode.

Oh my God, I thought that was going to be one of the most gentle ones.

Well listen, has this warmed you up pretty well?

Oh absolutely, keep going.

Take a little break and then we'll come back

and you can throw a few at me, but I might throw some of them back here.

Fantastic.

Welcome back to the Restless Politics Question Time with me, Alistair Campbell.

And me, Fergal Sharkey.

Come on in, Fergal.

Purely because you and I have a mutual friend I suspect,

an incredibly glorious man called Lord Dubs

who not 24 hours ago got up in Parliament

and Catherine sent in a question,

what do you think of the instruction to paint over cartoon murals

in order to make asylum centres for children less welcoming?

I'll tell you what I think of it.

I would love to be in a very small space with Robert Jenrick

and genuinely try to find out what has to happen to you as a human being

that you think that is in any way justifiable.

Especially, I don't know if you know this, Fergal,

he's married to a woman who is the daughter of two refugees from the Holocaust.

There was another question we got this week,

I can't remember who sent it in, but said,

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what can we do to stop the Home Office's performative cruelty?

And that's what it is, it's performative.

The idea that there's going to be people in Syria sitting there thinking, oh, I've just seen on the news that there won't be any Mickey Mouse pictures if we go to the reception centre, therefore that will deter me from trying to get there.

I find it utterly hideous and I suspect you agree.

And the reason I brought up, for those of you that haven't seen it, you will find the aforementioned Lord Dubs last night challenging the minister in the House of Lords and for background, Lord Dubs came to this country as a child on the Kinder Transport in 1939.

And the minister's response to that one was pathetic.

It was astonishingly abrupt and simply saying that government's actual attitude was utilitarian and that these kids did nothing and deserved nothing of comfort and compassion in the difficult circumstances they were in. And on behalf of Lord Dubs, a plague of locusts upon all of their houses.

Oh, so Rory would have definitely said that.

Exactly the same way.

Of course he would have.

Steve Oh.

There was a Steve Oh in the music industry.

I suspect it's probably not the same man.

You both give us like 17 new book recommendations every week, slight exaggeration, and you clearly inhale books.

I often do both of you and both of you being Rory, I assume.

You actually read and how long in a usual session and at what pace a book a week, a book a month, etc.

I finished a book last night.

The book I mentioned a few days ago called Orkney.

And I probably had that on the go for about four days.

I try and read a one-fiction, one non-fiction at the same time.

And they're both at the moment written by Labour MPs.

Chris Bryant is actually the both non-fiction.

Chris Bryant has written a book about the state of our politics called Out of Order and definitely worth reading.

My favourite chapter is this, The Worst Parliament We've Ever Had.

And Ian says yes.

And the other one, I'm reading Wes Streeting's book.

Wes Streeting has written a really interesting book about his childhood.

What about you, Fergal, your big reader?

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Fergal I am indeed.

And in fact, ironically enough, I've just finished reading a book, Rory Recommended, which was to do with Protestant culture in Northern Ireland when he was visiting there a month ago.

Chris So was that the book that Rory recommended written by Susan McKay?

Fergal It was.

And he was clearly heading up into Northern Ireland.

And I can't quite remember the context,

but he mentioned the Susan McKay book, Northern Protestants.

And it is clearly, it is just cover to cover interviews, first-person perspectives of the Protestant community and how they perceive and view the world and indeed the last 400 years of Irish history.

And as someone who was born and brought up and spent 20 years living in Northern Ireland, brought up as a Catholic with a limited insight into the Protestant community,

absolutely highly recommended, everybody should buy it.

And indeed some of the current political leaders in Northern Ireland would be well advised to share Rory's advice, get yourself a copy, go and read it.

You might learn something.

Chris Very good advice.

Fergal Now this one, I have a slight kind of personal interest in this one for professional reasons.

From Georgina Newton, I am 13 years old and I'm an avid listener to your podcast.

Clearly a young lady with remarkably good taste.

I'm also read the week and have done so since I was nine.

Georgina, I think you're now showing off my dear.

By the way, big round of applause, well done you.

Canada recently decriminalized drug possession and I was worried about the implications of this if it were occur in Britain.

I have seen the damage drugs cause and if we taxed and enabled safer recreation drugs and use and use the profits for rehabilitation, drug safety programs and tackling crime, would this work?

Big question.

Fergal It is a big question.

And if you've asked me that question 20 years ago, I'd definitely have said no.

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If you'd asked me 10 years ago, I'd probably have said no.
But I've definitely moved on it
because I think the war on drugs has failed.
And I do think that we don't even focus on rehab
in the way that we should.
Now what about you?
I suspect you have more experience of drugs than I do.
We see fill enough music industry for the last 10 or 15 years
has worked with a number of charities
to provide particularly the bigger festivals
to provide drug testing facilities.
On the simple basis that you don't want
these young people are going to do this.
So you may as well actually provide the security
that if they're thinking of doing something
they can actually take it on site to a charity, to a unit
that will actually test and explain to them
the purity or what it is they're about to take
and then they can make an informed decision.
Do you want to guess which government this year
for the first year in 15 years
banned the operation of those charities
and those clinics on site?
Because these kids are going to go and do this stuff anyway
whether we like that or not.
And you can, as the music industry, I think
was trying to lead the way.
Trying to be secure that if they're going to do that
and make that kind of decision,
at least it has been done within some sort of safe space.
So would you go the whole hog
and decriminalise all drugs?
You know what?
I probably would go quite a long way in that conversation
because you're absolutely right.
The war on drugs and inverted commas has failed.
And I know some people that used to work professionally
in that kind of area
in trying to prevent drugs coming into this country
and I suspect they'd even share that same opinion.
Or at least they do with me on a Friday night
done the pub after three pints of cider.
Very last one I think, Michelle Bennett.

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After seeing a number of high-profile journalists at Gideon Osborne's wedding it prompts me to ask about MSN, direct their staff to keep politicians at arm's length and surely getting too cosy will lead to soft questioning and not properly holding those in power to account. What was your view of that? Well, the answer is obviously yes. I mean, I wasn't invited to the wedding. Well, that makes two of this. I don't think I'd have gone. I did go, I must admit, when I worked for Tony Blair I did go to some weddings that I was there not because I was a close friend. Now, whether they're close friends or not, I don't know. But that whole relationship is way too cosy. I was surprised at some of the people who were there. I was very surprised. You probably know, Fergal, this is the most you're now a co-presenter of the country's number one political podcast. I was surprised to see the presenters of the number two political podcast in the country were there. Indeed. As was indeed the presenter of the Today program, Mr Robinson. I think it does make it harder. I think it does make it harder. And I'll tell you the other thing, though, that I find about our media more generally is this, cos there is an incestuous relationship. There's no doubt about that. And you see it in the way that people weave in and out of jobs. Now, I went from journalism into the political side of the fence, but I was never really a proper journalist. I was always a bit of a... The political bit was more important. But I think that the socialising, the way that they spend... They go on holidays together. They just scratch each other's back the whole time. And I think the public have wised up to it a bit. My only comment is I also didn't get an invitation. I can only therefore assume that Mr Gideon Osborn is not a fan of the undertones or my solo records.

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And I'm still dingley with which is the bigger blight.
The fact he's not a fan of my music
or I never got an invitation to the wedding.
Did you not know until now that his name was not George?
I had no idea.
Absolutely no idea.
But I guess I'll settle on that public school thing
and I'm now going to get you started on that again.
Yeah, yeah, because like Rory Stewart,
we don't believe in private schools.
We think they're a cause of most of the problems in this country.
Well, I can name one school that seems to be at this moment in time,
but we'll talk that idea there.
Absolutely joy having you.
I suspect Rory will be a little bit worried now
that he's heard a proper performer in the role.
But many thanks for joining me.
Alistair, it was a pleasure and a delight
and it is something I will carry with me for decades to come.
Well, I thoroughly enjoyed having a new co-host for the day,
Fergal Sharkey.
He's got a lot of oomph in there.
And if you want to hear more of that oomph,
then you can tune into Leading.
He's talking about his whole life and times
and if you can't wait to hear more of Fergal Sharkey,
here's a few extracts.
Now, I guess your character is key to this.
You've obviously got a personality that you're driven
and if you decide upon something, you go for it.
I just want to go right back to the beginning
and you've mentioned Derrick a couple of times.
You ended up living most of your life in England,
but how much of a Northern Irishman do you feel?
I would listen distinctly because it's what created me.
And it is very Freudian,
but invariably tell me about your childhood.
And in my case, that was quite an interesting childhood.
My father was chairman of the Labour Party
in Derry when there was such a thing.
By the way, do you think there should be again?
Oh, I think there should be.
Oh, absolutely, and that's ironically enough

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when my father passed away,
the Irish Times did this quite big obituary.
And even in the 1950s,
he spent huge amounts of time in this ultimately futile effort
of trying to reach out to the Protestant community
on the simple basis that everybody needed
to bury the hatchet of sectarianism
because the industrialists in Northern Ireland
were using that division to separate the working classes,
to diffuse their ability to make a cohesive,
strong argument about pay conditions,
holiday pay, maternity pay,
housing and everything else.
And it was used to exploit the working classes
in both communities.
Now, as it turns out,
I could argue that my dad was clearly 40 years ahead of his time
and trying to make that argument.
And he never made the inroads to it.
He was also Brent's secretary of his local union,
the electrician's union.
I'm still traumatised and probably spend years in therapy
about being taken as an eight, nine-year-old child
to a meeting, a union meeting,
and I'm in a room with 400 other men and my father.
They're all referring to him as Brother Sharky.
And as a confused eight-year-old,
I'm going to who the hell are these people?
I've never met any of these.
You're not my brother, you're not my uncle,
you're not my dad's brother.
I have no idea who you are,
why you call him my dad, Brother Sharky.
The truth is, in the Sharky family,
it wasn't, my dad was the political powerhouse.
All good Irish matriarchal families,
that would be my mother.
My mom was massively motivated
about the civil rights movement,
massively motivated about trying to preserve
the Irish language and culture and the arts,
and was friends with people like Brian Freel
and Shannon Casey and all kinds of people.

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And it was my mom who, on the morning of April the 9th, 1969, demanded that the whole family climbed into the car, the dad drove us all to the opposite side of Ireland, whereas a family, we took part in the people's democracy, civil rights march between Belfast and Dublin, protesting against injustices to the Catholic community in Northern Ireland.

So you'd have been 12.

I was 10.

You were 10 then, okay.

10, 11.

Now just a minute, and just on your names, we know you as Fergal Sharky.

You're actually called Sean Fergal Sharky.

Shan.

Oh, plenty of problems.

You're called Sean Fergal Sharky, right?

Right.

And just tell us who you're named after.

If anybody knows a song, an Irish song called Shan South and Gario.

Sing it, sing it.

I'm afraid not even the Restless Politics podcast can afford that excessively modest fee.

Shan South and Fergal O'Hanlon were killed attacking a police station in Northern Ireland in January of 1957, a year before I was born.

My mother, clearly without the aid of Ultrascan or other aides, clearly decided that if her newborn child was going to be about a boy, she was going to name him Shan Fergal in honor of two dead IRA men.

Now, what might that tell you about my mother's politics?

Well, it gives me a fair indication that she wasn't maybe as committed to the Labour Party because of your dad.

And how do you feel about that?

Oh, well, listen, conversely, it's one of those things that I grew up in a household where it's extraordinary thinking about it.

And it is incredibly frightening, but I hope it does answer your question.

There was nights in my kitchen that the local plumber,

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the electrician, the housewife, the local poet,
the local schoolteacher would discuss
bringing down the national government in Northern Ireland.
And I watched as a 10, 11, 12-year-old child,
I watched the local housewife, electrician, plumber,
or electrician schoolteacher bring down
the bloody government in Northern Ireland
to play a role in achieving that.
So I grew up in a house where, well, anything's possible.
The other bit, my mom organized this festival called Fist
at a column kill, which was all about preserving
the Irish language and culture and everything else.
So other nights, there'd be people having mad
philosophical arguments about the merits and disdains
of how much Seamus Heaney tried
to replicate William Butler Yeats.
And maybe he should get his own gig together.
So when I reflect upon it,
you just go, what an extraordinary household
and an extraordinary opportunity to grow up in.
What an extraordinary life they've led.
And would you say you share the basic politics of your parents?
Oh, listen, without exception.
I did, there's no way around that whatsoever.
And I still have this very simple belief
that society has an obligation to protect the vulnerable.
And that's kind of my opening game
in any game of politics whatsoever.
If you want to hear more of the dulcet tones
and the passion of Fergal Sharkey,
then listen to the rest of his politics
leading out on Monday.