

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 154. Question Time: Ben Wallace, intellectual PMs, and the fight for the Israeli flag

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

And me, Rory Stewart.

So Rory, shall we start with Ben Wallace?

Aha, yes.

I want to start with this one because of the name of the person who's asked the question.

Rory Conboy.

Oh my goodness.

Yeah.

I'd like to know Rory and Alistair's opinions of Ben Wallace.

We rarely hear about him in the news, I'm not sure about that as we do Home Secretaries etc.

But he's been talented for PM before and now NATO chief.

Yet I doubt many people know who he is.

I guess he is fairly low profile for a defense secretary in the middle of a war.

Yeah, he was very high profile of course at the beginning of the war and I think was impressed a lot of people when he was Boris Johnson's defense secretary which put him in, he was leading the polls when Boris Johnson stepped down to be the potential Liz Truss alternative and again to be the potential Rishi Sunak alternative but chose not to run in either situation and I believe is now signalling that he's going to stand down at the next election.

No, you said it.

He's going.

He's somebody who I've known for a very, very long time.

He's actually my neighbor from Creef in Scotland.

So Creef in Scotland producing these great statesmen as you can see.

Ben grew up about a mile away from me.

He was a Scots Guards officer.

He was a member of the Scottish Parliament and then got into Parliament five years ahead of me.

He really did not get on with David Cameron who completely refused to give him any kind of job at all and Ben was a sort of a very, very funny, acerbic backbencher who could be absolutely relied on to take piss out of everybody.

He was Ken Clark's PPS and he loved Ken Clark and very unusually PPS is a member of Parliament who's supposed to act as the minister's interaction with Parliament and for most people it's not a very big job.

It's an unpaid job but Ben Wallace completely embraced it, would have lunch with Ken Clark almost every day, obviously adored spending time with him.

So I was very fond of him but he wasn't really getting anywhere and his career only really took off finally when David Cameron stepped down.

Theresa May came in, made him security minister.

He managed both Boris Johnson's campaigns to be leader which normally would be from my point of view a black mark against someone except he could not have been more charming.

He called me up and he said, Rory, I'm supposed to be calling you up to get you to vote for

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Boris Johnson but my honest advice to you is don't bother, it's not going to have any impact on your career one way or another, keep your head down, you don't need to endorse any of these people.

So I'm quite a supporter of Ben Wallace and I think he's done a pretty good job as defence secretary and will be missed.

Well he's off and I can't quite work out whether he jumped before he was pushed.

The talk was that Sunak was going to chop him in the upcoming reshuffle so he did an interview where his military credentials were highlighted and he said that he'd done his time and he was fed up of waking up, being woken up in the middle of the night the whole time and he was going to go off.

He had a very nice popper, Soella Braverman.

Oh good, what did he say about her, are we like that?

Well he basically said that you know essentially I'm paraphrasing but you know if only we had a home secretary who did their job properly I wouldn't have to keep shipping out soldiers to clear up the mess that they made.

He's an unusual person because you know it's his friendship with Ken Clark complies, he was a remainer, very very pro-European but also strangely seemed to be sort of charmed by Boris Johnson which is the one thing that I don't fully understand about him.

But I think he's been an interesting defence secretary, I think he's highly credible, I think he's performed well, he hasn't been public eye much recently but I think that's partly to do with number 10 message control, he was much more public under Boris Johnson.

I think he performs well on the media because he knows what he's talking about.

I do think from the military's point of view it's sometimes been a bit challenging, they don't always like having a defence secretary who's been in the military because obviously he has pretty firm views on things and is often challenging the conventional wisdom.

So he's an example of something we've talked about but in the past about whether one really wants ministers who come from that field, the great advantages they know what they're talking about, disadvantages that they often can get into the micro details which is what I was accused of doing in the foreign office.

I think maybe the disadvantage is that they think they know what they're talking about, that's how I think the top military brass sometimes think of soldiers who become politicians.

Donna Mooney asks whether we might be able to highlight an important event which is an exhibition on the 5th of July, Victims and Prisoners Bill Amendment, tabled to move the following clause, re-sentencing those serving a sentence of imprisonment for public protection.

I know this is something we've talked about before but I thought you might like to give it a plug.

Yeah, Donna Mooney has been campaigning for an extraordinary injustice in the British system which is that relatively briefly introduced by David Blunkett was a new form of prison sentence where you could be sent to prison indefinitely. It was a sort of life sentence but it was given to people who'd committed minor offenses and the idea was that they'd remain in prison until such a time as someone thought they were safe to leave and Donna connected with this because her brother had committed a relatively minor crime, had been left in prison for a long time and was eventually tragically killed in prison so she has been campaigning for this issue. These sentences were abolished under David Cameron so they

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don't exist anymore. You can't get one of these sentences but governments have been very reluctant to let out the people who were sentenced during that seven odd year window and so many of them are recalled to prison on trivial offenses and end up spending most of their lives in prison without having committed offenses for which they would be entitled to get that kind of sentence. All right, question for you sir. Bill Jones, more straightforward name than Rory Con Artist. Bill Jones, how necessary is it Alistair for PMs to be intellectually clever? Oh that's a very good question isn't it? I like my political leaders to be very, very clever. I think people underestimate how clever you need to be to do that job well and I think you definitely all sorts of leadership skills and empathy. By clever I mean the ability to analyze the problem based upon studying it from every which way. So yeah, I like them to be clever. What do you think about the kind of classic figures who were deeply, deeply admired and respected but didn't necessarily have a reputation for being very clever? So I guess Willie Whitelaw, Clemat Lee, Jim Callahan. I mean none of these people were seen as great intellectual titans but people thought they had kind of judgment bottom. They were able to do a good job. No, I would say all of those were clever. The only, the two I knew personally, Jim Callahan and Willie Whitelaw, I knew Willie Whitelaw a bit when I was a journalist and I think he had a kind of, he put an act, I mean not as sort of blatant as Johnson's Act but he sort of, I think he liked to come over as a bit bumbling but I thought he had a very, very sharp mind and Jim Callahan likewise I think was acutely intelligent. It depends what we mean by clever I guess because you also do need in politics, you need to be a bit street wise. You need to be able to look after yourself in whatever circumstances you get thrown at you. I think that's what Michael Ignatieff struggled with when we talked to him on leading. Yeah and definitely in American politics there's a strong urge to not come across as being too clever by half. So I remember LBJ, Robert Carey's book is full of examples of LBJ being as kind of coarse and outspoken as he possibly can be. When he talks about, talks about the CIA, he says, the CIA remind me of a cow I used to have in Texas called Daisy. Whenever I was trying to milk it, its tail would flick the shit into the milk. But that's quite clever. That's quite clever. I didn't think LBJ was foolish but he definitely didn't go for intellectual name-dropping. Now we'll have this one from Heil Gast. Politicians always seem to want to reform public services. Should they look closer to home? Should there be a complete reform of the House of Commons, the House of Lords, electoral system, MP's expenses? Should every aspect of our politics be looked at to bring our system up to date? My answer is yes. 100%. 100%. We desperately need to bring our system up to date. I think that the promise, of course, will get into the devil details how we do it. But I think a proportional representation system that would allow new parties to emerge, so these sclerotic old horrors of the Conservative and Labour Party can be disrupted a bit. I think a chance to have a properly appointed professional House of Lords, which wasn't stuffed full of aging old politicians and Boris Johnson's spats would be a great step forward. I think much stronger local democracy, much stronger local mayors with proper fundraising powers. Anything from your side on that? Well, I think this goes back to what we've talked about in the main podcast. I really, really, really hope Labour get into this in a big way. Angela Reiner, I think, was putting her toe in the water of it in her speech last week. This isn't about tax and spend. This is basically about saying one of the reasons, I mentioned that polling that was presented at the Tony Blair

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Institute conference that Keir Starmer spoke at, it could not be clearer that people don't just think the country's stuck. They think that our politics is part of the problem. So if it's part of the problem, you have to change it. Very good. I've got one for you, Ryan Whale. I have a question possibly more for Alistair, but would love to hear about Rory's experiences. I'm 28, an already a senior person in my company and flirted with Labour, overstanding as a counsellor. I suffer with depression and during these episodes feel guilty about losing my edge when it comes to my work. Often senior individuals are less inclined to talk as they feel it could undermine their position. What are both your experiences on this and could you share any advice? I'm going to give you that one. Well, I would say don't feel guilty. Just go with whatever those feelings are. I get that. I get times when I, if I'm in the middle of a depression, when I feel worthless, it's not just that I just can't do anything. But I have to tell myself in those situations that there are lots of times when I do do a lot. So I think retaining a sense of your own self and your self-confidence when you're depressed is very, very, very, very difficult. But keep going. All you can do is keep going and understand that 99 times out of 100, you're going to get through it. I must say, by the way, I got a wonderful letter the other day from a guy who had read my book, Rory, which is called? Which is called, But What Can I Do? Thank you. You're going to remind people what my book's called. Your book is called Politics On The Edge. Available for pre-order now, coming out in September. This is the time to get the pre-order of that rare first edition copy for anyone listening. Sorry, that rare first edition copy, Rory, they just press a button now and they come out. I mean, honestly, it's like, if you're going to at least keep it serious, that's like the Brexit 12 trillion pound deal, the rare first edition copy. Anyway, this letter came from a gentleman by the name of Stephen Lister. And he said that as a result of reading my book, But What Can I Do? he decided to become a candidate in his local council election. And that is part of what I'm trying to do with the book is to get people to think whatever's going on in their life, they can give something ago. So, well done, Stephen, and good luck. And I hope you win in your upcoming by-election. Very good. On this, there's a lot of skull-duggery going on. And it's happens we've seen with the Labour elections, so with Jamie Driscoll and the things we've been talking about. It's happening with the Tories too. There's people getting in touch with me with stories

of individual constituencies shifting the dates of their selection to make sure they can manoeuvre particular candidates in and other particular candidates out and all this kind of stuff.

Part of the political reforms we need is much more

clarity and transparency about the way these people are selected, because in some of these seats, particularly safe seats, Labour or Conservative, it's the sort of primary selection that determines who's going to be the member of parliament, more or less than the general election. Yeah. Views on Nicosia and Cyprus, Mike Peary, and I'm doing this one because this guy has asked his questions so often. Next week marks 49 years since Turkey invaded Cyprus. What are your views on Nicosia being the last divided capital city in the world? What are the prospects of the Cyprus issue ever being resolved? Not good, I would say. Well, I mean, I think it's incredible that it's been almost 50 years. 1974, there was a coup d'etat. Greeks at that point was ruled by the colonels, and they sponsored a coup d'etat in Cyprus. Five days later, the Turkish military invaded. 80% of the population in Cyprus was Greece. 150,000 Greeks were then pushed out of Northern Cyprus, and then the enormous number of Turks were then pushed north. And the standoff

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comes from that moment. If you think about it, the UK has these two sovereign base areas in Cyprus, and since 1960, has had quite substantial deployments. And I remember my friend Ambassador Richard Holbrook in the United States seeing this as an issue that was going to be solved in the 1980s.

But we're still in a situation with very, very significant presence and essentially a frozen conflict between Turkey and Greece following an invasion and a situation that defines the European Union, because the votes of Cyprus have huge consequences in terms of things like Turkish accession. And very sadly, in a way that nobody could have imagined in 1960, something that I can't see an easy way towards solving. And one almost gets the sense as 50 years past that people give up the energy. I mean, the negotiations just keep going on, don't they? They'll have another round and then another round. And I guess quite a lot of the people involved in the negotiation at the start will be dead. They'll have died before this thing got resolved. Here's a little quiz question for you, Roy. I know you love your history. What was the name of the British general who drew the line on the map of Nicosia that led to the divide?

Oh, my goodness. I don't know. What's the answer there?

The answer is Peter Young. And I only know that because somebody sent me something to read about this a few weeks ago.

Right. Lots more questions to come out. So let's take a quick break.

Are leading guests paid up the pyramid? Can you clarify if any of your guests are paid?

I don't want my subscription to be funding the likes of Jerry Adams or George Osborne. Well, there we are. Are you funding a terrorist ousted? Or an austerity guy?

Well, because of austerity, George Osborne's living standards have collapsed calamitously. So we paid him the princely sum of absolutely zero. And we paid Jerry Adams zero as well.

To cut to the chase, we don't pay our guests. For some extraordinary reason, up to this moment, the guests seem to feel sufficient privilege to come on this show without us having to pay them.

They are all free guests. Good question, though, Rory. Who would you, if somebody came on and said, I'll only come on if you pay me, is there any guest in the world for whom you think that would be justifiable? Goodness gracious me. Oh, that's a really good question. It would have to be somebody that really irritated you. And I just don't know enough about Burnley to be able to put my finger on who exactly it would be that I could pay to come and wind you up.

Michael Seale, the UK's music industry can be counted as one of our best exports. Why, especially since the Tories came to power, has music been neglected in schools?

When the benefit of learning an instrument and participating on the ensemblers of all types and sizes are huge to society? Now, even though you're not a massive music bod, Rory, would you agree with the sentiment of that question? And also when we talked to Fergal Sharkey on the on the leading podcast, he was making the point that Britain and America, the absolute superpowers of music and Brexit has made it a lot harder for Britain to maintain that status. Well, I think there's a huge case to be made for more government investment in culture and the arts and music and other things like video games and basic science. The tough challenge, I guess, in education is that there are only so many hours in the day. It's all very well, and somebody actually challenged me on this on Twitter when I was talking about the number of hours you can fit in an boarding school. In a boarding school, you've got huge resources,

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a lot of money in private schools, and teachers who can then run a day, which is 12 hours long. And the problem, I think, in most schools in Britain is how do you balance the government's attempt, which I think is completely right to make sure that we went up the PISA scales in literacy and maths. I think that was a very important thing to do, while also providing space in the curriculum for all that other stuff and to do it at a high quality. I mean, that's something definitely in Cumbria when I visited schools that people often complained about, which is that they felt that, yes, there was the theatre offering in the school, there was a music offering in the school, but it wasn't at the quality that they would have liked to see. So here we go. Joy Adams, this is a good one. This is worth listening to the podcast just for this. I worked for Virgin Atlantic for two years and used to suffer from terrible jet lag, so I picked up a trick from the pilots. Work out eight o'clock in the morning in your arrival destination, subtract 15 hours from that, and fast for that length of time, brackets only drink water, sleep as much as you can. Your body will go into starvation mode, and upon eating a hearty breakfast will reset your body clock, avoiding all jet lag. I haven't asked the question, so will you run for mayor again next year, and can I volunteer for your campaign? Well, what's the answer to that? Yes or no? I'm afraid I don't think I'm going to be doing so. If I do run for mayor, though, Joe, I will definitely be in touch. Listen, I saw that question, and I was, as I confessed on the main podcast, I was about to take a flight, and I just couldn't work it out. I mean, I used to be really good at maths, but I don't understand how that works. And also, I'm very worried about pilots doing long haul without having any sustenance at all. That's a good point. So how do they, oh, so tell me what you have to do. So let's say I'm getting a flight. This is something called, I mean, I think a lot of listeners will know about this. This is called ketosis. So many people actually think it's quite good for you to do a 15-hour gap between meals. Many people skip breakfast, skip dinner now. It's kind of intermittent fasting, because your body begins to digest toxins, is the claim, by driving your body into ketosis. But there's no doubt at all. I wear one of these aura rings, which monitors my sleep and readiness. And it is total night and day. If you have a very light supper or don't have supper at all, you sleep so much better than if you have a meal, let alone a meal and a drink. Well, I should have done it because I've slept about an hour and a half last night. Lady Girasol, she actually asked about four questions, and I'm going to give you this one. It just says, Boris Johnson, new neighbours and EU flags. Have you heard about this? No, gone then. So basically, you know when Boris Johnson goes for those 20-yard runs, if he sees any cameras, and then he gets back in a car, we see him on television constantly doing his little jogs for the cameras. The neighbours, near where he's bought this posh gaffe down in the middle of, I don't know where, where he just put a planning permission in for a new swimming pool, they've started to raise European flags. So is that when he goes out for a jog day, he has to run past several European flags? Well, what do we think of that, Roy? I quite like that. Well, I think that sounds very British. Sounds very jolly in British. Speaking about more sort of, yeah, I suppose it's more gritty politics. Sivan. My name is Sivan, I'm in Israeli. With the judicial overhaul steaming ahead, things have gotten pretty crazy around here, even by Israeli standards. Every conversation eventually reaches this topic. Spending Saturday night at a demonstration has become standard

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practice, and I have sunscreen and a flag ready to go at all times. But since we're also immersed in this, I'm actually wondering what things look like from the outside. I'd love to hear your take on this. So I'm actually going to be in Israel, Palestine tomorrow. And it is really fascinating. As Sivan says, there are over 100,000 people in the street now every Saturday night.

The flag that Sivan is carrying is almost certainly an Israeli flag because the protesters are trying to make it very clear that they are supporters of the state of Israel, but very angry about BB Nyeth and IU's reforms on the judiciary, which we've talked about in a previous podcast, these extraordinary, I mean, it's always the classic move of populist and authoritarian to try to overhaul the judiciary and stop the judiciary from being able to challenge the executive and legislature. I think people have been struck, particularly in the US, by how peaceful these demonstrations are, that they've been going on week in week out, and that they're conducted in very good humor, and that it's a sign of a particular kind of maturity of one part of Israeli civil society. But of course, people outside are also noticing that this is happening at the same time as the attacks on Janine, and how those crowds 30 years ago would have included many more people from the old Israeli left who would have been much more concerned with the issue of Palestine. And there's been a sort of bifurcation in Israeli politics where a progressive group has emerged very concerned about the Israeli constitution, but they seem to be less and less concerned about the question of Palestine, which remains very raw and unresolved. Well, it's like, you know, when we were talking about Cyprus and the divided capital,

I was thinking that is there a danger that the Middle East peace process, insofar as it relates to Israel and Palestine, just sort of drifts on forever without any real resolution. And I think there's a generally accepted that it's not going to get resolved unless some of the big powers, especially the United States, get focused, stay focused and really try to drive it. And there seems to have been something of a breakdown between in relations between Biden and Netanyahu, that the White House are now saying that, you know, they might meet

sometime later in the year. Herzog is going to be making a visit. I think in answer to the question about how they're seen at the moment, I mean, regardless of where you stand on the Palestine question, Israel is coming, I think, coming over very, very badly to the world. Netanyahu facing all these charges, the most right wing government they've ever had, and all the sort of, you know, the creeping settlements, the violence has become yet again becoming normalized. And I'm afraid the question of, you know, as far as most parts of the world are concerned, I think actually the dial has been turned down on Israel, if anything, there's not, there's just not that much focus on it because people look at it and think it's pretty hopeless. Is that right?

Yes, I think that's right. And it's also true that the traditional supporters of Palestine have lost patience and are largely abandoning them. And you've got the Gulf countries signing up these Abraham Accords agreements with Israel. You've got Israeli tourists now going to Dubai. You've got a sense that, you know, the center of Middle Eastern politics has shifted to the Gulf away from Palestine. It's a miserable situation. Let's finish with this one. Stephen Kenney, I really enjoy the podcast, but it triggers me when you both adopt a Westminster-centric approach whenever Scottish independence is discussed. Is it such a huge ask for one of you to at least adopt the devil's advocate approach to discussing its merits on democratic deficits, etc. Thanks.

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I think that's a bit unfair on me, actually, because I regularly say that I do understand the desire for independence much more than I did, particularly at a time when we keep, you know, in London and the rest of the UK, we keep serving up these breached and pretty useless Conservative governments. That being said, I think I'm then entitled to say, but I hope that a Labour government and a return or a revival of the Labour Party in Scotland might lead people to think that their interests are better served by staying in the UK. But I do, at an emotional level, I do understand the desire for independence. By the way, Brewery, I bumped into Douglas Alexander the other day, who lost his seat against Mary Black in Paisley, but he's now coming back and he's standing in a seat in Midlothian where he's got a chance, but I bumped into him and he said, I've got a very good line for you, which you can feel free to use on your podcast, which he and his children all listen. He said, the SNP of now being in power in Scotland since before the iPhone was invented. That's a good line. It's interesting the attacks on this. I mean, Mary's written in, why is it that despite both declaring pride in your Scottishness, you hardly ever talk about Scottish politics in any depth on the podcast. My observation is when you do, you show quite limited understanding of the context and make quite superficial and fleeting references to the Scottish political environment. Also, when might you invite Nicola Sturgeon to come on as I think she could help you really grasp what's going on in Scottish politics? Now, I think Mary, I think quite a lot is given away in that last sentence, I'm afraid from my point of view. The idea that we should be inviting Nicola Sturgeon to come on because she's the person who could help us really grasp what's going on in Scottish politics. I'm afraid is essentially claiming, and this is what I feel as somebody who's very proud of being Scottish. And I think we'll probably end up living the majority of my life in Scotland. I don't think that means that you have to believe in Scottish independence. And I don't think the Scottish National Party has any kind of monopoly on a right to speak for Scottishness. That being said, if Nicola Sturgeon would like to come on the podcast, she'd be very, very welcome, Rory. She certainly would. She certainly would. Very happy to have her. And in fact, I think you've invited her in the past. I have. And I've interviewed her before, various outlets. And I suspect at the moment she won't be doing that many big interviews, but if she's listening and if she wants to come on, she'd be more than welcome. I think she's making a fair point, but it comes 100% from the perspective. And I think this is what happens when people believe something as passionately as some SMP supporters do and some backers of independence do, that they think that somebody saying they don't agree with their basic point means that they don't understand their basic point. I do understand their basic point. And at times, I am more sympathetic to it than others. Johnson Premiership, mid-Brexit, Fiasco, I was particularly sympathetic towards it. But in general, I still veer to the view that we're better off as part of the United Kingdom. Yeah. I mean, if I can push back at Mary, my view on this is that I think that the belief that you can make your problems better by cutting off something else, which is basically what the Brexiteers believe. They thought that all their problems came from Europe. And if they just got rid of Europe, everything would get better. And I often feel that some of the SMP rhetoric suggests that all the problems in Scotland come from Westminster. And if you just got rid of England, somehow all Scotland's problems would be solved. I think that doesn't work at any level in life. It's like feeling that if you cut off your friends or your relatives, somehow your life will be

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simpler and better. Generally speaking, the problems that we have in our own countries are 95% within those countries and blaming some other force or assuming that by lopping off, you're going to make your life better. I think it's just something I disagree with.

I didn't like the idea of making yourself smaller.

Yeah. Well, that is definitely the argument against Brexite for sure.

Okay. On that note, Townsend, let's bring it to an end.

All the best.

Bye-bye.