

Welcome to an Extra Restless Politics podcast with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alice Campbell, as every day this week, Rory, this is getting ridiculous.

It's unbelievable. And where are you? You seem to have a lot of sporting trophies behind you.

I'm in a school in Blackburn.

Very good.

I've just had a talk with some of the students, most of whom want us to go back into the European Union, I should tell you, as per every school in the country. One young man who was a supporter of the reform party, I found one. And so he was giving me a very enjoyable hard time.

But yeah, they're all the school trophies.

So, Alice, and you're on your way to Buxton?

I'm on my way to Buxton, where a year ago, this weekend, you lost your wedding ring.

That is exactly right. And are you going to speak at the same festival, that beautiful, beautiful hall?

No, I'm not. I'm just going to look for your wedding ring. I'm not going to take part in the festival at all, just go and punt the ring. No, yeah, I am. I am. I'm going to speak at the festival with Mr Ian Dale interviewing me. He's back from his travails and injuries.

Yeah, yeah. Well, that's a good gift from my very best. That was very, very sad. He's had a couple of tough times. So, very, very quickly, to remind people what we're talking about today, we've just had these by-election results. And this was Boris Johnson stepped down from parliament, so his seat was up. Nigel Adams, who was one of Boris Johnson's sort of key left-handers and key allies, also stepped down. Some feel because he was angry that he'd not been put in the House of Lords. And then there was a final case of an MP who'd been a bit mired and scandal, who stepped down in some certain room. So, three conservative seats came up for election, and the results were that Labour took one, the Conservatives took one, and Lib Dems took one.

What's your sense of the results?

Well, I think if Uxbridge hadn't been involved in the results, if you'd just been talking about Selby and Ainsley and Froome, then I think the Conservative Party would be, frankly, absolutely in a state of total shock and despair. And I'll come into Uxbridge in a moment.

So, the swing in Selby, where we now have a 25-year-old MP, insulted by Johnny Mercer as out of the in-betweeners, which I'm not sure was the smartest thing to say.

Johnny's going to feel great heroes, isn't he?

No, he's definitely not one of my heroes. He's one of the few Tories that I don't, you know, want to sort of knock their head off. But although a couple of times in recent weeks, he's got a bit close. But I think that I actually think it's good to have a 25-year-old, and I think it would be terrible if every MP was only 25, but we definitely knew young blood in our politics. And he seems like a very, very engaging and intelligent young man. So, that was a huge swing. I think it almost as big as our biggest swing back in the mid-90s. And then the West country, I think, is really interesting because that is the Lib Dems now, four in a row. And that was huge. That was also well into 20% plus, which is pretty big. And I think some of the Tory West country MPs will be very, very worried. And also makes the Lib Dems feel that they can possibly target the Tories in some of the seats closer to London, where they can perhaps persuade people that the tactical voting that clearly happened, a lot of tactical voting in both of those seats to a lesser extent, I think, in Uxbridge. But it was happening in Uxbridge as well. So, I think those two are devastating for the Tories. But obviously, we talked before about the

Expectations game. They were playing a pretty good Expectations game. I think I said to you last week that I didn't think Uxbridge was in the bag. And I did say as well, it was because of the way that the U-Lairs, the ultra-low emission zone policy of the London mayor was breaking through. But all in all, they're pretty bad for the Tories.

So, let's drill into this a little bit more. Summerton and Froome, when I was in parliament, was an MP called David Heath, who was a defence minister. So, I guess a traditional Lib Dem seat in the way that I viewed it in 2010 from 1997 through to 2015. But when the Lib Dems went into the coalition, it was one of those seats where the Lib Dems were completely eviscerated in that 2015 election, basically punished for being in the coalition, lost that seat.

So, them taking it back, I think is encouraging for the Lib Dems, but it's them taking back a seat that they held traditionally. The Selby result is spectacularly good,

spectacularly good for Labour. I mean, that's a real landslide victory. That was a seat that was a proper traditional Conservative seat, and it was being held with a 20,000 majority. So, that will leave a loss of Conservatives very worried around the country if seats with 20,000 majorities are being lost. But Labour will be very, very disappointed about Uxbridge.

Uxbridge is a seat which has got increasingly marginal. Boris Johnson was holding it onto it by a majority of a few thousand. Normally, when a party like the Conservatives are 20 points behind in the polls and when they're in government, you would definitely expect them to lose that kind of seat in a by-election. Small majority, unpopular government. Last MP hadn't exactly crowned himself

in great favours. So, Labour will really be asking questions about that. What's your analysis of what went wrong for Labour in Uxbridge? Well, literally, while you were speaking,

I got a text message telling me that the Labour Party chairman in Uxbridge has just resigned and criticising, says that it has nothing to do with the by-election and he was always planning to, but is very, very critical of Sadiq Khan's leadership and the party's quotes moved to the right. So, look, there's no doubt at all that this issue of Ullles ultra-low emission zone

really broke through and it shows that the Tories, despite having been in government for 13 years, are still very effective as campaigners when they can almost be operating like an opposition.

So, if you think about this, a policy that was introduced by Boris Johnson, who was the Mayor of London, who then went on to become the MP of Via Henley, become the MP in Uxbridge. So, in a way, it's his policy, which Sadiq Khan is taking forward for air quality reasons, but also is part of a settlement that he's done with Grant Shapps, who's the Transport Secretary. It's almost like you could say it's a co-owned policy and yet Labour didn't seem to manage to explain to people, any of that. So, it just became, they managed to turn it, the Tories, for a lot of people into almost like a referendum on Ullles, which actually the new MP, the new Tory MP, will be able to do precisely nothing. Just on that issue of the ultra-low emission zone, I mean, this is something we've talked about in the podcast before because it matters for much more than Uxbridge.

Absolutely.

This is an attempt to try to introduce a measure which is about improving the environment, cleaning up air quality by putting taxes on cars that emit a lot of pollution.

And when I was running to be Mayor of London as an independent, I remember a very, very powerful figure in London politics saying to me, I can win the selection for you.

All you've got to do is put on your pamphlets in Outer London that Sadiq Khan is planning to extend the ultra-low emission zone to these outer areas of London, which in those days was

calculated. I don't know whether it's still true, but when I was running, they were calculating, was almost £60 a week on the bill of somebody on a low income in Outer London for driving their old car. And he said, I'll guarantee you, I can win you this election if you're prepared to do this. Now, I wasn't prepared to do that because actually I agreed with Sadiq Khan's policy. I thought it was really important, in fact, that we did this. And in fact, I wanted to extend it to the Heathrow area as well. And I thought that could bring revenue into London. But my goodness, it's a reminder of how difficult it's going to be to get through environmental policy. And I mean, I do worry now that the Tories having seen the effect of their campaign there, that they'll now push back even further on some of the environmental stuff that they are committed to. And I think it's fair, in fact, I wrote my new European column about this this week, that I don't get the sense that Sunak sees the climate as a big priority on any level, really. And this will, I think also, the Tories will try to find these this sort of single issue right in different constituencies right around the country. And as we both know, there aren't that many constituencies that they're really going to have to fight hard in, in terms of, you know, which are going to decide the outcome of the general election. So if they can do that sort of politics, and Labour's really got to think through this thing of how do you fight a government that is behaving like an opposition, because that's what we've seen in in Uxbridge, and it's been successful for the the Tories. I just should say, by the way, on on tactical voting, tactical voting, essentially, when you have an incumbent government that a lot of people want to get rid of, we saw a lot of tactical voting in the in the two constituencies that we've talked about. There was considerable tactical voting in Uxbridge. But if you just look, the numbers of the other parties, so the Greens got 893 votes. Now, Labour lost by 495. Now, that might be real sort of, you know, strong Green Party voters might actually have not liked the fact that Labour, the candidate and the leadership tried to move away from the the Siddique Khan position. Lawrence Fox, the kind of, I don't know what he calls himself these days, he's got 714 votes, Lib Dems got 526, Social Democrat 248, Independent 208, Pierce Corbyn, Jeremy Corbyn's brother got 101 votes, Christian Alliance 78, Raving Looney 32, and on it goes. So it wouldn't have been that difficult for a bit more tactical voting for Labour to have won. And of course, if Labour had won this by election by one, we'd all be saying this was an absolute disaster for the Tories. That's right. But I think those figures actually are about as good as you can hope to get the tactical voting. I mean, a lot of those people lost their deposits. So it was a very, very heavy Labour conservative thing. There weren't many votes in in proportional terms going to small parts. No, I agree with that. I agree with that. I think just following up on your point of what this means. So it shows the Conservatives and that this is a point David Gork has been making in in his New Statesman pieces are still capable of weaponising issues. Yeah. It's also, I think, a reminder. And again, I'm stealing from David Gork here that this is potentially going to be a pocketbook election. In other words, an election which is really all about how people's finances feel. People are in real pain in terms of their incomes, in terms of inflation, hitting their incomes, just the whole cost of living issue. And Labour's biggest point of vulnerability as they get into the election is if the Conservatives are able to suggest to people that they're going to put up taxes. And the ULEZ is just one example of that. And then I wonder whether that maybe isn't an argument against the two of us, an argument in favour of the Mingva strategy. Because if it's like in Selby where it's simply a referendum on the Conservatives, Labour wins very easily. But if it becomes a fight over an issue on taxes,

the Conservatives can squeak through. When you talk about being a pocketbook election, I think if you look at the kind of macro picture on the economy, the Tories are in bad, really bad state, whether it's inflation, it's debt, it's cost of living, it's all the stuff that we've talked about endlessly. But as you say, what they managed to do was within the context of a cost of living crisis, make it about Labour. And on the point about the Mingva strategy, I think that one of the reasons why Labour perhaps didn't get a proper, really strong strategy around the ULEZ issue was that they just hoped to kind of park it as opposed to what I think they should be saying to them is they actually have to have really strong, coherent positions on every single issue. And because the Tories, as you say, they do partly because they've got the press, partly because they're very good at the blow of the radar campaigning on social media and fake newspapers and all that other stuff that they do, Labour, I think, has got to have stronger, clearer positions that they can defend. Now, Keir Starmer seems to be saying today that they're going to take a look at ULEZ and see whether it can be, I don't know what. Can I just just sort of question that? Yeah, because the rumor is that Keir Starmer is now trying to blame Sadiq Khan for the ultra low emission zone rather than what I would hope he would do, which is coming behind him and defend the policy. Or get together and work out how the policy can be better explained and better articulated in the context of a general election campaign. And I think that's what wasn't done in this. It just became a sort of blame thing. And I don't think anybody ever looks good if you're sort of casting around for blame. There is a real possibility, by the way, that when you get back to the dynamics of a general election, it's not impossible. You could envisage a situation where Labour don't hold Selby but do in Uxbridge. Yeah. So, Keir Starmer's quote, there's no denying that the ultra low emission zone was the reason we didn't win in Uxbridge. We all need to reflect on that and the mayor needs to reflect on that. And that's worrying, I think will be worrying for people like you, like me, like indeed Sadiq Khan who believe in these things for environmental reasons. Absolutely. Final point, I think, is there is a hint of what the Tory strategy could be for the next election, which is whoever gets in next is going to have to put up taxes. It's going to be very difficult to pay for the teacher's salaries, doctor's salaries, the NHS transformation plan before you think about any of the other investments you want to make in public finances. And it'll be very tempting for the Conservatives to say, Labour is proposing to do a 28 billion green prosperity fund. How on earth are they going to pay for it? And of course, Labour can't earn a difficult place. They're saying we're going to delay it, but we're going to introduce it when we're ready for it, which still allows the Conservatives to suggest this is a big spending, big taxing party coming in. And the danger is that the public is more likely to believe that Labour is going to raise taxes on the Conservatives. And if this election becomes about people feeling under financial pressure, that's a problem, right? Even though the Tories have got taxes at kind of record highs across the front. And as we've said before, a spending merrily and got as massively in debt as well. So I just think it's about Labour being much, much more confident about owning some of that space, because the one thing that's going to happen, we know this election after election, the right wing media will manage to frame it as though it's only Labour's tax and spending plans that have to be costed, have to be thought through, have to be worked out. But when we talked the other day about where Labour gets kind of boldness from and new ideas from, I don't know if you had time to follow any of that future of Britain,

Tony Blair conference that Keir spoke at. But I do think there are areas of policy that are not really being addressed in the way that they should, that are about a different sort of future for the economy and some of the technological solutions and so forth. And that's what we're not hearing anything about. 100%. And I think Tony Blair is completely right. And what he was largely emphasising is that artificial intelligence could lead to huge savings in the government budget. And that's something we're going to discuss, I think, a little bit more when we interview Yuval Noah Harari and when we also interview Mustafa Suleiman and others. But one of the problems with that, of course, is where are those savings coming from? Those savings are coming because artificial intelligence will be able to replace people with AI.

And the question is, is Labour going to be brave enough to embrace the policy which is going to involve laying off a lot of public sector workers? Within the context of a general election debate, Labour needs to get to a position where the Tories and their cheerleaders just banging on about old fashioned campaigning, tax and spend, where they're going to do this, you know, double whammy is exploding bombs and all the stuff that they do. Labour has to get a sense of the future and ownership of a different sort of future. And I think that is rooted in these issues of we can modernise public services, modernise the way the economy runs. And I mean, they have to do

all the other stuff as well. But this is why I say that the Mingvars, the Mingvars holding on to things is fine. And I get why they want to do that. But this sense of a debate about who owns the future and what that future looks like, that's the bit that I feel is missing from our politics at the moment. Very good. I agree very, very strongly. So I think a by-election result that probably doesn't change our joint view, which is that Labour is still well on track to win the election, doesn't feel like it changes that. But a slight reminder in Uxbridge that there is an issue about how Labour deals with environmental policy, how they deal with accusations that they're the party of increasing taxes. And I love the point that Tony Blair made and that you're now endorsing, which is that AI is going to change everything and will begin to be changing things very fast by the time we're going into the next election. And Labour, if it's to have a hope, needs to own that agenda. And my goodness, I think the Conservatives will be trying to own that agenda too. Well, it's very much where Rishi Sunak is most comfortable, isn't it? The whole sort of tech thing and Silicon Valley and all that stuff. One final point, by the way, which I think may be worth bearing in mind, which I haven't seen much debate about, there is within that kind of outer ring in London and places like Uxbridge. And we've seen it, we saw elsewhere in the local elections as well, fairly large Indian community that I think historically would have been seen first generation immigration in particular, historically very, very pro-Labor. And I think that has shifted significantly and probably shifted even more with the advent of an Indian heritage Prime Minister. This is purely anecdotal, but I was in a taxi recently with an Indian, British Indian taxi driver who was saying to me, you've got a bit of a problem with the Indian community at the moment.

I said, oh, why is that then? And he said, well, they don't like all this attacking Sunak over how wealthy he is because we're very, very aspirational. And I thought that was an interesting insight. It's a fascinating thing because it was the thing that during my whole time in politics, the Conservatives were trying to crack because many of our members of Parliament from those areas of London would say, look, our Indian community should be natural Conservative voters. They're often people who seem to embrace Conservative values, but they're still voting

Labour. And the question was, how were you going to tap into people who were often running small and medium sized enterprises who were very focused on low taxes, on hard work and entrepreneurial activities? How would you bring them over? And if the Conservatives actually are managing to do that, that will make a significant difference in particular areas of Northwest London. Yeah, absolutely. I see that I was just flicking through some of the media earlier and there was a report from Betty's Cafe in Uxbridge. And the final line said that the one thing that everybody was agreed on was that they couldn't, they were glad that the area would now go out of the limelight, having had weeks of visits from politicians and journalists and too many leaflets through the door. But I do think the point you made right at the start though, if you think about, there are so many issues you can look back on where the short term political interest was very much in not doing something. You can think about seatbelts or smoking in public places and things that were very, very difficult at times, but quite hard to sell or some of the tax rises that had to be done at various points. But ultimately, I think that what Sadiq Khan is doing is the right thing. But politically, Labour have to find a way of doing it in a way that doesn't allow it to be weaponised to use your word and doesn't allow the Tories to exploit it in the way that they've done in this pilotation. If I could just finish with a small tribute to John Randall, who was the MP in Uxbridge before Boris Johnson, who was deputy chief whip

when I was in the party, a really lovely man who was from the centre. I'd sort of sound like I'm giving you as a bituary, still alive, but lovely man from the centre right at the Conservative party, very interested in the environment, became Theresa May's environment adviser. But he was a real Uxbridge man born and bred. His family's department store, Randall's of Uxbridge, was there for 127 years in the middle of the high street. And he was a man who handed over this great

majority to Boris Johnson and then saw it almost lost. But just a small reminder of a great MP who was there for many, many years. Can I make one final point, which we haven't in all this, even the tactical voting thing. We haven't mentioned the Greens, but the Greens actually, it would seem didn't indulge in quite the same way and tactical voting as Labour and the Lib Dems did for each other.

And that's worth watching as well. They actually, they got 10% in Summerton, which was their highest by-election vote ever. Now, this was a white power. This was not close at all. But you can imagine Lib Dem, Tory and Labour Tory marginals, where 10% could actually be the difference

between winning and losing. So I think although tactical voting is definitely happening in a way that perhaps hasn't in the past, I think the Greens feel that neither of the main parties are really pushing the environmental agenda in the way that they want. And they're going to stick to the Greens. Maybe that's why the chairman, the Labour chairman in Uxbridge has resigned criticising Kirsten of being too right-wing. Maybe that he's aware that he could have got more of those green voters over if he hadn't felt that he had that problem. And I think the second issue is that it's difficult for the Greens to tactically vote because with the Lib Dems and Labour, it's obvious that they're going to be given seats in return for that tactical voting. The Greens are a very small party and it's difficult to see what they get in return for helping the other parties in. Johnny Good. Well, I don't know whether we've added anything to the billions of words that are doing their rounds, but doubtless, a few people will find it interesting

what we say, Rory. Well, let's hope so. And Sepulnerce on Monday. Amazing.
Sepulnerce on Monday, yep. British scientist and Nobel Prize winner on leading.
Let's have an agreement now, though, that we're not going to do five podcasts next week.
You know, I was meant to be on a silent retreat this week. I was meant to be literally inaccessible and out of contact, but somehow we've put five in a week. It's not much of a silent retreat.
And Rory, I don't want to intrude into your private life in any way, but I'm looking behind you and looks to me like a pretty standard hotel room, but it's got single beds. What's going on there?
That's because it's me and my two sons. I've got a spare bed as well in the corner of the room. So I'm not going to get much sleep as my sons snore their way through the night. Lovely. We'll have a lovely time.
Thank you very much. Bye bye. See you soon. Bye bye.