

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 156. Labour on the defensive, Machismo in Spain, and Israel on a knife-edge

Welcome to The Rest is Politics with me, Alistair Campbell.

And with me, Rory Stewart.

And really, Rory, we both are absolutely desperate to talk about the same thing, which is Israel, to which we're going to devote most of the second half of the podcast.

And we're also going to, we're going to kick off with the continuing fallout from the by-elections last week.

Can't believe that we're still talking about Hules and whether Labour and the Tories should ditch all their, what David Cameron used to call the green crap.

And I think we should also have a chat about what's been going on in Spain with their rather interesting elections, where I hope we've got more interesting things to say than a lot of the pretty bang average commentary that I've been reading.

Very good. Well, let's start with Hules.

So just just remind listeners who those few people who might have missed out on our by-elections special.

The surprising thing in the by-elections was that although Labour did spectacularly well in Yorkshire, where it took Nigel Adams to seat, so defeated a sitting Conservative MP with a majority of more than 20,000.

So hugely optimistic and a great sign from Labour's point of view for how they do in the election.

A seat with a smaller majority, which was Boris Johnson's old seat in Axsbridge, which he was holding with a majority of 7,000, to their complete astonishment, the astonishment to most of the commentary, except for possibly you and one commentator, who I saw in the new statesman, and they failed to take.

And the Conservative campaign, which allowed them to hold that seat, was a campaign in opposition to extending the ultra-low emission zone out to Outer London, which would have charged people with cars that were considered polluting a great deal of money.

And this was the centerpiece of Siddique Khan, the Labour Mayor's policy.

And it's one that the Labour candidate supported.

But after the result where Labour lost that seat, it's slightly seen as though Keir Starmer, Labour leadership, has been backpedaling and they've been less keen on the ultra-low emission zone.

They've slightly been shifting the blame onto Siddique Khan's policy.

And it's raised a whole question about how much they're prepared to trade beliefs and environmental policies to win votes.

Yeah, just one small point of that.

Danny Beals, the candidate, did actually come out against the policy.

But it was well into the campaign by then.

And look, I've been quite troubled by this whole thing, to be honest.

And it has given it a feeling of Labour somehow snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. The result in Selby, as you say, was utterly stunning.

And the one thing that we know, because they have the help of such a biased right-wing press who also influenced the agenda of the broadcasters.

The Tories are very, very, very good at framing an argument.

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And I just, for the life of me, can't understand how they've allowed the whole debate about these elections to become about Ulez.

We had a question from a guy called Jeff Spink.

How on earth did Johnson not get named as the father of Ulez?

This is a policy that was designed by Boris Johnson when he was mayor.

The Sadiq Khan is taking forward, in part because he believes in it.

And I support him in those beliefs.

A belief strongly.

I mean, it's written the whole book on air pollution, hasn't it?

But also because the UK government has made local authorities, in this case, Sadiq Khan, take on the development of clean air policy.

And so this is a policy which I think Labour, they seem to be to have gone into the campaign without a clear line.

And so therefore the line developed, the Tories seized on this to make it almost a single-issue campaign, which is utterly ridiculous when you think that the newly-elated servant MP can do literally nothing to change it.

And Keir Starmer said something I think a bit worrying to my mind.

He said that we're doing something wrong if the Tory party is putting our policies all over his leaflets.

I don't agree with that at all.

In 1997, I loved it when the Tories came out and said, if you vote Labour and get a minimum wage, it'll cost a million jobs because it gave us the opportunity to go out and argue against that.

I loved it when they said, if you have a Scottish Parliament, you'll break up the United Kingdom because we could go out and argue while we felt that there should be a Scottish Parliament.

So I think that it's exposed a kind of defensiveness, which I think is not the best way to go into the best mindset with which to go into a general election.

And I do think on the bigger point about the environment,

I mean, here we are, what have people been watching on the news in the last couple of days, Corfu, terrible fires

and going right to the heart of this debate about about climate change and about clean air.

And so I just think that sometimes politicians have to be big and bold and brave and say, look, yeah, OK, well, we're going to take that one on the chin.

We move on. And the other point to make worry, we never won Uxbridge.

That was people keep making these comparisons with 1997.

And now we did not win Uxbridge.

No, John Randall of Uxbridge held on to exactly.

And we but we did.

Labour did win last week, Selby, another seat, which we didn't win.

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So this I'm afraid is I think that we Labour were just outdone politics.

Reminder for people listening who don't live in London about what this whole thing's about.

So people will remember that in the centre of London, something called the congestion charge.

And then outside the very, very centre of London, where the congestion charge was, was this thing called the ultra low emission zone, which covered, I suppose, sort of zones two and three on the tube map.

And then this is a push to take the ultra low emission zone out to the very edges of London.

I mean, Uxbridge is right out by Heathrow Airport, far, far west of London, bringing another two million people within the ultra low emission zone.

And if you've got a petrol car made before 2006, or a diesel car, I think made before 2016, you have to pay £12.50 a day to drive it.

You can get a little bit of assistance if you're on various forms of benefits towards getting a new car, £2,000 grant.

But the problem from the points of view of people in out of London is they will be charged, particularly people on lower incomes with older cars.

If you had a diesel car, which is 10 years old, £12.50 a day.

And what they would say is that it's much easier in central London to get buses, to get tubes and have other forms of transport.

So they feel it.

I mean, these these outer London areas, as you're aware, traditionally were more working class areas in central London.

So they feel this is a tax on working class people with older cars who are very reliant on their cars to get around.

Now, I agree with you 100 percent.

It's a policy that needs to be implemented.

It's a policy that I backed when I was running for the mayor of London.

But I was very aware when I was backing it that I was taking a huge political risk.

And the reason this matters, I suppose, is that putting aside the chat around the by elections, it's a classic test of environmental policy going forward.

Because environmental taxes, the kind of things you need to do to change behavior are almost always regressive.

They almost always hit the poorest people hardest because it's the poorest who find that more of their money is spent on transport,

more of their money is spent on energy and heating compared wealthy people where it's a smaller proportion of budget.

So big, big challenge for environmental policy.

Yeah, I agree with that.

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But four thousand people died of asthma in London last year. These are facts that just did not emerge in this debate, because I think Labour kind of hit away from it. When I think there was a there was a good attack to be managed on the Tories, their hypocrisy, the fact that they were lying about the nature and the history of the policy. You know, I actually think the very fact that Johnson, well, we were having this by election because Johnson had left Parliament because he was exposed for the whole world to see as a total liar. Yeah, that should have been more relevant, shouldn't it? Absolutely. Therefore, you'd have thought that his successors lying about the policy and his history could have been made part of the debate. Now, I'm not saying that that should have sort of tried. Labour should have come along and said, let's not talk about the cost of it. We'll talk about that. And I also think in the aftermath, I don't like this sort of, you know, there's a lot of people around the Labour leadership seem to be, you know, dumping on Sadiq Khan and saying he was being difficult and he didn't want to trim the policy. And we did the podcast on the on the by elections on Friday. I made the point that I think that what has to happen in these circumstances, if you've got a Labour leadership that is trying to get elected nationally, a Labour figures, be it Sadiq Khan or a council leader or Andy Burnham, whoever it might be in power now, you have to have you have to have discussions and you have to come agreements. But I don't like all this kind of dumping on him and and so forth. So I hope Labour learned some lessons about the way this this campaign has gone. They should not have allowed the expectations to run out of hand. You know, the expectation was so high that they would win that not winning became seen as a defeat. And I certainly don't think they should have allowed this defeat to lead to a wholesale review of policy. And we're talking about them, I think because people are looking for better standards than the Tories, the Tories are also now talking about because of this by election, because of their success, they're going to do more to quote David Cameron again, dumping on the green crap. And I hope they don't. Yeah, a couple of things. Sadiq Khan, I think, has been looking for an issue where he can show real courage, and this is a good moment for him. He is a dominant figure in London politics. It's going to be incredibly unlikely that a London Tory mayoral candidate

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can defeat him now, especially the ones that keep picking.

Yeah, London's a very, very Labour city.

And actually, the Tories are very unpopular around the country.

So this is the moment where Sadiq Khan will be feeling that he has the political capital.

What's the point of being mayor of London unless he can take a bit of risk?

He can almost certainly take through a policy that's a bit unpopular, but still win an election.

And you would have thought that was something to get behind, but it does mean that as we go into the general election, we're going to face this problem.

And I think it's going to be a theme all the way through this podcast

because it's true of Spain and it's true in spades of Israel, which is how does

the progressive left, the sort of Labour Party equivalent, respond to right wing populism?

Do they get dragged further right?

Do the right wing populists end up defining the debate so that Kirstam

will find himself completely unable to say anything about the environment,

to say anything about higher taxes or higher spending, unable to say anything

about immigration, unable to say anything about the European Union,

because basically the debate has been defined by the populist rights

and he doesn't want any gaps between him and them.

Well, the answer to your question is actually in the question.

It's about who manages to define the parameters of the debate.

And if you allow your opponents to define those parameters, it's very, very hard.

I'm not pretending that it's easy to take on these populists,

but you have to have very strong, clear positions that people are willing to support.

Before we leave the UK, I got a message from Bridget Philipson's office

saying that you were wrong in what you said about childcare.

There had not been a promise of, as it were, universal childcare.

And also there had not been a promise of free school meals for all.

There is a promise of massive expansion of childcare,

but it does not quantify as childcare for all.

Thank you very much.

Well, I think that the dispute is, and I'm largely here following the Guardian,

is whether the Labour Party signaled that it was going to be more radical

and then rode back or whether it was Bridget Philipson's office is trying to say to you, they were always planning to do something much more modest than people hoped.

Yeah, or they were trying.

They were they were planning something very, very radical,

but not as radical as it was described by the time Rory Stewart presented it.

So, maliflently, on the rest is politics.

Very good. Thank you.

All right. Hopping on to Spain.

So, Spain quit my people.

Spain, I think people underestimate what a big country it is, 47 million people.

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So, just there behind Germany, Britain, France and Italy, 15th largest economy in the world.

But unlike those other countries, a country that became a democracy much more recently, so became a democracy in the 1970s after the death of Franco, dominated in the 1980s.

So, I think we talked about this in the podcast, but dominated by Felipe Gonzalez.

Fine man.

They're equivalent to the Labour Party through to 1996.

Then a man called Aznar.

So, it then swung back to their equivalent to the Conservative Party.

Just on Aznar, by the way, he smoked.

He smoked the biggest cigar I've ever seen in my life.

Well, apparently, that's a big thing in right wing politics in Spain.

What, cigar smoking?

Yeah, when people try to define what makes a vox, it's machismo and cigar smoking that actually, strangely, far right politics in Spain.

Some people say it's less kind of Franco-esque, less anti-immigrant than you'd expect.

It's more about kind of macho guys smoking big cigars.

Well, Aznar, I remember once at a European summit in Nice

and Tony and Aznar were having, I think, quite friendly.

Tony went to Aznar's daughter's wedding, I think it was.

And Aznar, we'd had dinner and then Aznar said to one of his people, get me one of my cigars and the guy went away and he got one for Tony as well.

And I mean, I don't think Tony knew what to do with it.

It was so big. How does he get it in his mouth?

It was like, you know, anyway, he lit this cigar and sort of merrily puffed on it all evening.

Sorry, I interrupted your flow.

Well, no, so basically the story is that Spanish politics has seemed from the outside pretty regular after the 13 years of Felipe Gonzalez.

It then swapped back and forward from, as it were,

their equivalent of labor to conservatives, back to labor, back to conservatives,

back to labor again, with everybody getting six or seven years in office.

And that brought us basically up to May of this year, where Pedro Sanchez,

so according to the Labour Party, PSOE was back in power again,

did badly in the May elections, triggered an election.

And it seemed likely that Spanish politics was going to follow its normal rhythm, swing back towards the right again.

And it's true, they're going to the Conservative Party.

PP got the most votes, but they didn't get enough to get a majority in parliament.

They were going to form a coalition people expected with Vox,

which is this more far right party, the sort of McKismo cigar smoking proto Franco party.

And they dropped from 52 seats to 33 seats.

So this in the speech, and the reason I keep talking about cigars

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is that in Sanchez great speech, where he greets the results.
And Sanchez is an interesting looking man.
He's quite kind of good looking from a certain angle.
Looks a bit like George Clooney appears in his blue jeans denim shirt,
gives a speech in which he says this is a defeat of McKismo.
He took a big risk here because, you know, perhaps he sometimes
political leaders have a sense of things that the polls and the pundits
and the public even don't necessarily have.
Because I think the conventional wisdom that was forming was that it's a massive risk
and it's going to end up with their Tory party in coalition with,
as you say, the far right Vox.
But what seems to have happened is that the public have taken a good look at Vox
and thought, don't want you in government.
And there's a lot of interesting things happen.
So we're talking about, you know, labor winning, but looking like they'd lost.
I mean, Sanchez, in a way, lost, but he's looking like he won.
And likewise, the PP, they won.
But because they can't form a government, they're going as losers as well.
And the other thing that's, of course, very interesting in their politics
is Catalonia and the Basque country with separatist movements.
And Sanchez did very much, much better than he expected in those areas.
And though he probably won't be able to form a government, he might.
I think the other law, I think the writer, not going to be able to form a government.
I think Sanchez can only think about it by doing it with the hard left
and with the independence parties, which would damage, which would, you know,
and that was one of the reasons he did so badly in the local elections
because people felt he was too supportive of the independent
part, independence parties and outside those areas.
Most Spaniards want to keep Catalonia and the Basque territory.
And so what you see is that it's not essentially polarized,
but we've seen a sense of political stalemate here.
So I think the smart money is probably on another election within a few months.
And, you know, it's possible because the whole way back to expectations,
because Sanchez did better, it's possible, actually,
that that gives a sense of momentum to him and that he actually might think,
well, next time I can get it over the line.
Well, we've got a great leading episode coming, which going to Spain more
for people who'd like to learn more about Spain with Miriam Gonzalez,
who set up a fantastic new movement in Spain to try to define policies,
particularly in the central ground, where she goes into this.
But to remind people, I think Spain is the sort of odd shadow of France.
In both cases, broadly speaking, five parties emerged.
The old traditional equivalents of the British Conservative and Labour Party

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and then a centrist party, a far left and a far right party.

In Spain, what happened is that the center party basically collapsed, disappeared, Vox has performed quite badly, and Podemos has also, which was the left wing party that came out of austerity with an amazing kind of Jeremy Corbyn-esque guy with a ponytail, sort of communist with a ponytail. Those smaller parties went and the old left and right parties have reassert themselves, whereas in France, of course, what happened is the center under Macron came through and won.

The old left and right have vanished, leaving the extreme left and the extreme right in the center.

Yeah, if you mentioned Miriam there, her take on on the election, is that actually the vote ought to have been seen as a vindication of the more moderate parties over the extreme ones, because the two main parties, the PP and the PSOE, got 68% of the vote, which is pretty good. However, because they barely speak to each other, certainly can't reach an agreement, the ones holding the balance of power are the two extreme independentist parties.

And the Sanchez got into trouble in public opinion with them, because they are run by and represented by or amongst their leaders, people who are, you know, frankly, very, very close to the former terrorist organization, Etta, and he got into a bit of trouble with that.

And then the Catalanian party, likewise, their leaders under the European arrest warrant.

So it's quite hard to say, right, I'm putting my coalition together.

I'm going to go with the extreme left party.

I'm going to go with one former terrorist party.

I'm going to go with another one with a leader who's under a European arrest warrant.

That is, that feels quite unstable to me.

That's why I think an election is probably more likely.

Well, all of this is a much, much more mild and much more moderate than the subject we're going to go on to now after the break, which is Israel, which is politics at an existential tragedy.

I'm in a scale far beyond what we're talking about in the Uxbridge by-election in Spain.

So should we take a quick break and then come back and get into Israel?

So welcome back to the rest of politics with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alasdair Campbell.

And we've both thought that really the central theme for this week has to be Israel.

I've just returned from Israel, where I saw my friend Joval Noah Hariri and we're going to be interviewing him on the podcast later this week for leading.

He's been right at the very center of these huge protest movements, been going on for more than 20 weeks in Tel Aviv, over 100,000 people in the street. And they basically represent the more liberal, progressive side in Israel,

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taking on this right-wing government of Benjamin Netanyahu. And it's a very, very strange echo in many ways of a lot of the things we talk about on this podcast. There are elements of it that feel like Democrats against Republicans, like taking on Trump, because for many people, and you'll pick this up when we talk to Joval, they feel it's an existential threat to their entire conception of their country. People are beginning to talk about just leaving the country entirely. It obviously has echoes of the way people feel about Brexit remain. It's a sort of culture war in which often more working-class people endorsing the right-wing populists and particularly people from more Middle Eastern Jewish ancestry as opposed to European Jewish ancestry who felt marginalized and very much pitched as by the populists as the people against the elite trying to characterize the kind of liberals and Tel Aviv as the elite. But all of that made much, much more dangerous and risky because this is not Britain, this is not the United States, it's not even populism in Turkey. This is Israel with a full-scale occupation, with very difficult military relationships with its neighbors, with nuclear weapons, with an ultra-orthodox community, with a religious scientist community who are pushing very, very hard on religious laws. So what's your sense of the whole thing from looking at it from your end? Well, I find the whole thing incredibly depressing. It just feels to me like the place is on the edge. We said briefly last week that we couldn't see a way forward currently in the Israel-Palestine issue where you throw this into the mix and it just makes the very, very difficult feel like it's completely and totally impossible. And I suppose it's interesting to explain what this is all about. So you have a situation where Israel doesn't have a written constitution, doesn't have a second chamber. So they have a very, very powerful parliament, a very, very powerful government. The only real check on it is the Supreme Court. And the Supreme Court has annoyed Netanyahu at times. It refused, for example, to let him appoint somebody to his government who had been a criminal, who had been inside prison. Then when he came out of prison, part of the deal was that he wouldn't go back into public life. Netanyahu tried to get him back, the court stopped him. His argument is the court is too political. I think we've heard that in lots of countries where they've tried to shut down the power of the courts. But the other big thing here, of course, you mentioned the religious element is that two of the most powerful members of the government now,

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a guy called Itamiah Ben-Givir, who's the Minister of National Security and Bezal Smotrich, who's the head of the religious Zionism Party and is the finance minister.

They are it's hard to know what you'd call them.

I suppose in the you mentioned the Trump comparison, where there is an element of kind of white supremacy around,

I guess this is about Jewish supremacy.

Exactly. So I think that it's much more extreme than Trump.

So if the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, is the equivalent of Trump, in other words, somebody who's flirting with these people, whipping them up, the big difference here is this would be like Trump putting in his cabinet in his senior positions as sexually the Treasury or, you know, sexually responsible security, homeland security, people who were literally the equivalent of the January 6th insurrection people. I mean, these people are very, very far out.

So the man that Ben-Givir, who you mentioned, who's got the security job is somebody who until recently had a picture on his wall of a Jewish terrorist who had killed 26 Palestinians in an attack and a mosque. He was associated with a banned party that was actually associated itself with Jewish terrorism and came out of that tradition.

And recent events, as this gets whipped up, involve recently a Israeli soldier shouting to settlers, this will all be sorted out when Ben-Givir comes, because he and Smotridge are not remotely interested in Palestinian rights, two state solution.

In fact, their vision is that all the territory that Israel took, not just in the 1940s, but in 1967, right, which was the territory that stretched all the way, Golan Heights, West Bank, all the way to the Jordan River, stuff that used to belong to Syria and Jordan and indeed a bit used to belong to Egypt, is going to become the permanent Israeli homeland, that this was the traditional religious area of the Jews.

And Smotridge has called himself a proud homophobe.

We've not seen anybody in Trump's cabinet calling himself a proud homophobe.

He's somebody who's been out saying, as far as he's concerned, the Israeli army are much too wimpy.

They should just go in hard into all the areas he doesn't care about.

Oslo doesn't care about areas A, B and C.

So he's basically saying the entire Palestinian authority region, Ramallah, Nablus, all these areas should simply become part of Israel.

And as for the Palestinians, well, obviously,

he's not going to give them votes because if he gave six million Palestinians votes, the Israelis would be outnumbered in their own country.

So he's basically proposing that they just put up with living as second

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class citizens within Israel.

And when somebody said, what happens if children chuck stones?

Smotridge said cheerfully, oh, we would either kill them, imprison them or expel them.

So this is very, very hardcore stuff.

And and they're also, you know, one of the reasons they want to get rid of the Supreme Court is because the Supreme Court might say, do you know what?

They do have some rights and you can't just go in and wipe them out when they've done nothing wrong.

A bit of a reminder, then, of just just take people back through the history.

So after the Second World War, there is an explosion of violence.

And David Ben-Gurion, who's basically the leader of of modern Israel, spearheads an attempt in the late 40s, where essentially the Israelis fight their way to take control of a territory and set up a nation.

And during this period, 700,000 Palestinians are pushed out.

It's called the Nakba, pushed out of their houses.

But a loss of the world de facto recognizes those borders in 1947.

And Israel continues for the next 20 years to run this territory.

And Jordan has what we now call the West Bank and half of Jerusalem.

In 1967, Arab countries led by NASA, leading Egypt, but also the Syrians and the Jordanians announced that they're about to move on Israel.

And Israel launches a preemptive strike and in six days wipes out the entire Egyptian, Jordanian Syrian Air Force, advances forward, captures the Golan Heights from Syria, takes Gaza from Egypt and pushes right the way to the Jordan River, taking back Jerusalem and all the West Bank from Jordan and sits there.

And the world basically says this is an illegal occupation and endless debates in the European Union over the last 56 years have tried to work out what Israel's relationship is to this new territory.

And here I think it's worth bearing in mind that from the point of view of many Palestinians in here in Jordan and indeed many Palestinians in West Bank, it's all a bit moot because they actually don't accept what happened in the 1940s level in the 1960s.

But anyway, it's the 1960s bit that's been the main international dispute.

From that moment onwards, as you say, many Israelis, particularly the religious naturalists, thought this was a huge God given vindication of Israel's rights to the territory that the Jews had lived in 2,700 years earlier and time of King David.

They start referring to Judea and Samaria and they start building settlements.

And people like Smotrich, who is the finance minister, very much comes out of the settlement movement.

He lives outside the edge of a settlement.

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They see themselves as people who are deliberately reclaiming the land for the Jews that God has promised to them.

And they're doing it by taking land that is occupied by Israel and is supposed to be owned by Palestinians.

They will just occupy Palestinian farms.

They'll drive people out and then they'll sit there and then they'll demand that the Israeli government provides them with water supply, electricity, security to defend them.

Now, this has been back and forth for 50 years.

The Israeli governments have said, well, we're in favor of a two state solution.

A two state solution basically means the Palestinians are going to get back most of the areas that were taken in 67.

But we're going to have to do something about these settlements.

And their first big move is when they left Gaza,

they took the settlements out and handed Gaza back to the Palestinians.

That was seen in 2005 as the big betrayal by people like Smotrich.

Smotrich cut his teeth and those fights around Gaza.

And these settlers are absolutely determined that every inch of the West Bank and the Golan Heights is a permanent bit of Israel.

And they don't care about the fact that there are millions of Palestinians living there. And of course, if they try to take back those areas and hold those areas, they can only do it through a form of apartheid by denying civil rights and voting rights to those Palestinians.

Otherwise, they disappear.

What was your sense when you were there in recent days of where people think this goes?

Because I mean, in Yahoo, he's obviously a very, very powerful figure.

And he's been Prime Minister several times way.

You know, he was Prime Minister when Tony Blair became Prime Minister.

He's been Prime Minister since, you know, the mid 90s.

He's been in and out of power, but he's been the longest serving Prime Minister in the country's history.

He's actually, although he's pretty right wing, I think he will be.

He's also quite a pragmatist, I think.

I'm not 100 percent convinced.

I know he's become a hate figure for these people out in the streets.

I'm not 100 percent convinced he'll be entirely comfortable with what's going on.

He does actually quite like to be liked.

He likes to be fated in Washington and the other great capitals of the world.

And Joe Biden has very much got him on, you know, he's got his calls on hold at the moment.

And this thing is not over as the vote went through.

The opposition of state, they just didn't bother to vote.

They said, well, you're going to win.

So just get on with it.

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You're going to win this on your own.
Massive protests in the streets, as you say.
And I was listening on a German podcast I was listening to.
They were working out that of all the people who had taken part in protests over the last 28 weeks since they began.
If the American people were protesting on the same scale, we'd be talking about more than 60 million people.
If British people were protesting on the same scale, we'd be talking about 13 million British people out on the streets.
So that's how many people are engaged in this now.
It's a subject of such extreme contradictions.
So when I was in Tel Aviv, people wanted to talk about nothing else.
They saw it as the central issue in the world.
And remember for the protesters, they are not talking about Palestinian rights at all.
The protesters are Israelis.
They're almost entirely Jewish Israelis, not Arab Israelis.
They're there with Israeli flags.
They are arguing basically for a progressive liberal vision of the world against the ultra-orthodox religious nationalist coalition around this populist right-wing government.
But are they also worrying that there's a danger that Israel is on the road to becoming a theocracy on a kind of mirror image of an Iran or a Saudi Arabia that where religion is the driver of the politics?
We'll get into this when we talk to Joval.
But I mean, Noval, for example, is gay.
He's married to a man.
Tel Aviv is a very, very liberal city.
And one of the things that this right-wing government is trying to do, I mean, you know, as I say, the finance minister says he's a proud homophobe and organized a big anti-gay rights march and is very, very bound up with this issue.
They're trying to do things like back the rights of religious Jews to refuse to serve gay couples.
There's a lot of cultural war going on.
So there's a lot of talk about how feminists are taking over the Israeli military.
But you also have a huge attack on secular Jews.
So Smotrich is saying he doesn't recognize reform Jews as really being Jews at all.
And there are moves to try to say that the traditional rule, which is if you had one Jewish grandparent, you could come to Israel, is being challenged on the grounds that you need to check whether that grandparent was actually Orthodox, religious.
In other words, the whole nature of Israel, the sort of Israel that existed from the 40s, 50s, the Israel of Yitzhak Rabin, the Israel of David Ben-Gurion, the Israel of Goldemire, which was a dominated by people

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who were very, very proud of their Jewish identity, but were not religious. I mean, these were came out of movements in the 20th century, secular, atheist, agnostic people who kept Jewish holidays, but in a very non-religious way, you know, who did it in English. They they got rid of a lot of festivals. And that is now being totally challenged, partly by the birthright. So, you know, the ultra-Orthodox now 25 percent of the children in primary school are ultra-Orthodox now, and it will be nearly 50 percent by 2050. And then you've got the Orthodox settlers like Smotrich, who, you know, are a different form of religious conservative, but equally religious conservative, challenging the whole liberal identity of Israel. This piece of specific piece of legislation was drawn up by somebody called Sintje Rothman, who is part of that religious Zionism movement. And the other thing that I think people should be aware of is that we've talked quite a lot in this context about Trump and America. American forces are very, very... And I don't mean military forces. I mean, right wing political forces are right at the heart of this because there's something called the Coalette Policy Forum, which is a nationalist, libertarian, Israeli think tank. And a bit like some of our opaque think tanks are funded by some of these right wing American billionaires that like to have their influence felt around the world. So this does link. And of course, Israel's always had a very, very politically quite dependent on its links with America. Very rare that you hear American politicians ever criticising Israel, even when they've done some pretty grim stuff. But it'll be very interesting to see whether this moves the dial of the debate in America. I'd be surprised if it doesn't, to some extent, though doubtless. Yeah. Well, there's this strange American group, which is there's also Christian fundamentalists in the US, which are part of the Trump Coalition. And Trump actually became a close friend of Net and the IU, when Net and IU was the deputy ambassador in Washington in the 1980s and then the permanent representative to the UN. And of course, it was Trump who partly out of a favour to Benjamin Net and IU moved the American embassy to Jerusalem and brought together these Abraham Accords, which were all about reconciling Israel with UAE, for example. But this American right, particularly the Christian American right, have these messianic views, which basically are very, very anti-Muslim, very anti-Arab and and see the religious Zionists

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as being the sort of fifth column for achieving their own dream of a messiah coming back to the sort of, you know, it's the book of Revelation, a messiah coming back to Jerusalem.

What one more thing I think, which we talk about a lot, but is really being revealed in Israel, is the link between populism in the sense of culture wars and populism in the sense of crime and corruption.

That the main reason that Net and IU has found himself and he's in some ways occasionally sounds quite liberal, right?

I mean, in some ways he's a bit like Trump.

He's got sort of past where he's often made some quite liberal comments and has now allied himself with a far right.

The reason he's done it is that he was under corruption charges and people were so disgusted at his refusal to leave politics that he kept insisting on standing when he's basically about to go to jail, that most of the more moderate parties refused to serve with him, forcing him to pick up this very, very weird coalition of ultra-Orthodox and religious Zionists.

But there's also another bit of corruption going on,

which is that there's this major crime figures who are absolutely at the center now of the way the Likud party, the Likud party is the sort of conventional kind of conservative party, sort of mainstream right wing party that Net and IU lones.

But there are these there's a guy called Raf Qaim Qadoshi, who is, you know, a serious imprisoned crime boss who is to be found inviting publicly the head of the Likud party's judicial commission that's meant to be scrutinizing all these laws about simply in court to his house for parties.

So there's a lot of really nasty stuff going on with corruption scandals, crime figures all bound up with this new populist movement.

And I guess it's about shamelessness.

Well, we know a bit about ourselves.

I think that where it goes now is pretty.

I think it's going to be very tense for a while.

You've got this situation where the military reserve, some of the military reservists and that sounds like sort of territorial army, but they're not really territorial army.

These are people who are on they may have other jobs and so forth, but they've trained in the military and they're always on standby.

And quite a lot of them, particularly in the Air Force, which is kind of essential to the Israeli Defense Force, are basically saying they're not going to serve.

And it'll be, you know, and basically the extremists in the government

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are basically saying, well, if you do that, you're a traitor, and we can, you know, we've got every right to do whatever we want with you. But it's interesting how many of the very, very senior voices in the defense and security infrastructure.

You've got the former head of Shin Bet, which is the security agency guy called Nadav Hargaman.

He is basically backing those who now refuse to show up for duty.

You've got the former head of Mossad, which is their kind of MI6 and which has a very, very fearsome reputation, Tamir Pardo.

He basically says that he hopes that Nyahu is one day in front of a court, held accountable for this.

He says, we become Iran or Hungary.

We are ostensibly a democracy in practice.

We're a dictatorship.

And the former Shin Bet chief, Yoram Cohen, he has come out against it.

The guy you run the Navy Seals has come out against it.

You've got doctors talking about going on strike.

And so the, you know, it's not impossible to imagine a kind of civil war emerging from this.

And it's very weird, isn't it?

Because what you're seeing is that the progressive left is being forced in some ways to make common interest with the military in order to win this argument.

And the military, which, you know, most countries traditionally would be seen on the conservative side and now lining up behind the progressive left, because they think that the strategic implications of this are catastrophic.

They think if people like Smoktrich push ahead with their vision, you're going to end up with a completely untenable situation with the occupation and a completely untenable situation with neighbors.

But it's also a reminder of how much Israel has changed.

Because when I was talking about this world of the 40s, 50s, 60s, even the 70s and 80s, the military were the great, great heroes of the state.

I mean, a lot of these people that were Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, Moshi Dayan, all these people were military heroes, great, great kind of generals.

And even even on the Likud side, Ariel Sharon, again, was one of the big generals.

This was a politics dominated, not by people who'd served a few years in the military.

Benjamin Netanyahu served a few years in the Special Forces five, six years, and his brother was killed in the Entebbe raid.

These people I've just been talking about were literally the chief of the army's staff, the lieutenant generals, the heroes of the Six Day War, the heroes of the Yom Kippur War, the people who actually put the entire Entebbe raid together, and they dominated Israeli politics for a period of sort of 20,

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30 years. But they were also the figures.

I mean, Shimon Peres and Rabin, despite coming from this military background, were the guys that got the Nobel Peace Prize after Oslo for dealing with our offense. So the military and Mossad have often been not from the point of view of the Palestinians, who see them as very much agents of a brutal occupation, but within the context of Israeli politics have often felt as though they're more in the center than on the right.

Yeah. We're mentioning some of those names as well. And of course, some of those were prime ministers in the time that we were in government. And whenever you go to Israel and you're with the political leaders, you get a very, very strong sense immediately of the particular security challenges that they face and the risks that they're under the whole time.

I think I may have told you before that. I think it was Sharon that we were having a meeting with in his house. And to this day, I wouldn't be able to tell you where it is, because the journey to get there was like something out of a James Bond film, where we were escorted by military and police outriders.

We were put into this thing, which I thought was where we'd arrived at a garage.

But in fact, the garage turned out to be a lift for the car.

And then the car went up and then it came out somewhere else.

And then we finally arrived at the guy's house.

And I was just thinking with Netanyahu, because he's obviously had a couple of health scares in recent weeks. He's been in hospital a couple of times.

I was actually thinking, if the guy dropped dead, who takes over?

I mean, are these people, because these extremists are now, it seems to be to be called in the shots.

And you had a very interesting situation earlier in this whole saga, which as we say has been going on for months and months now.

You had the defense minister, a guy called Galat.

He actually put his foot down at one point and was arguing against this reform.

Netanyahu sacked him or tried to sack him.

And that led to one of the biggest protests.

I think we talked about it on the podcast before.

Eventually Netanyahu backed down for that time, but he's now got completely got the thing through.

And what happens now with the defense forces is a very interesting question.

If these reservists literally do refuse to serve, then that they would argue, the government would argue, is putting the security of the state at risk.

Yeah.

And that's what I mean about how this thing is on a knife edge.

Because of course, ever since the Six-Day War, it's the air force that the state has been very, very dependent on to neutralize attacks from neighboring countries.

I think a couple of things just to finish on.

One is we talk a lot about electoral systems.

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And we also talk about the way in which traditional right and left-wing parties disappear in different countries.

Israel is an extreme example of both.

It's a very, very extreme proportional representation system.

Even more extreme in the past, you only had a 1% threshold across.

I think it's now a 3.5% threshold.

But it's still a very low threshold where you can end up with these small radical parties coming in.

But it's also a case of a country where the traditional Labour Party,

and in Israel's case actually called the Labour Party,

which dominated Israeli politics basically in different names from the creation of the state.

And then in its own name, right the way through to the early 2000s, has basically disappeared.

I mean, it's gone from having 35 seats down to, I think,

now only four seats left in the Congress.

And there really isn't a left left in Israel.

What we sort of think of as a progressive left is a party, the Blue and White Party,

which is run by yet another ex-General, Benny Gantz.

But he's somebody who, by the standards of the old left, sounds pretty right-wing.

And this is one of the reasons why here in Jordan,

nobody is even thinking about this.

From their point of view, so many of the Palestinians I speak about

are just not paying any attention to what's happening.

They sort of have a plague on both your houses.

It's a bit like if I were to talk to strong Labour supporters about the fight between

moderate conservatives and far-right conservatives in the Conservative Party.

In Britain, people would be like a plague on both your houses.

We don't care whether Rory Stewart runs the party or Boris Johnson runs the party.

We're all a bunch of Tories who voted for austerity.

So in the same point of view, from Palestinian point of view,

this is all minor stuff.

It's kind of slightly nicer settlers against nastier settlers.

But basically, they are not taking on board the fact that this could be an existential threat to Palestinians as well.

If the wrong people win, it's not as they imagine.

Well, it's all the same.

They're all a bunch of Israelis.

If the wrong people win, things will get much, much worse.

Because as you say, a bunch of religious conservatives with theocratic views

who want to separate women from men on buses, who want to crack down on the Sabbath,

who are beginning to introduce more and more strong religious rules,

are going to find themselves in possession of one of the most powerful militaries in the world,

nuclear weapons, and a situation of military occupation.

That's a very important point you make about the Labour Party,

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because of course, for most of our adult lives, the Labour Party has been a really, really dominant force in Israeli politics, and indeed, leaders, which for a country of 7 million have become truly global political figures.

Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin, as you said, Perez.

Even Erud Barak, who was their leader when Tony was first elected in 1997, and then Perez, of course, came back in, I think it was 2003, Barak came back. I'm just looking at a list now.

Go on, Roy.

I'll give you £5 million.

Don't say that, because I'll probably get it right.

Don't say that, but anyway, you don't get £5, come on then.

The last four leaders of the Labour Party.

In Israel?

Yeah.

I can't do the last four leaders, no.

Okay.

Well, the one that was four ago was a guy called Isaac Herzog, and if Jonathan Power were here, he'd say, ah, yeah, another one you helped and lost.

Because just as I single-handedly lost the Columbian referendum in his eyes, but at that time, of course, they were dealing.

The Labour Party were struggling at that time with this question that you posed earlier.

How do you counter this really vicious right-wing populism?

Which Netanyahu mustered for a while, but I've got a feeling out of this that Netanyahu is going to become the ultimate victim of it.

Yeah.

Well, I think it's that sense that he's lost control.

It's terrifying people, because it's not really just this vote.

This vote, which is about whether the courts can act in a particular way, the reason it terrifies people is they see it as the beginning of a much, much bigger set of movements, and they just don't believe Netanyahu when he says that he's just going to do this and he's going to stop.

They see this as that because he's lied a lot in the past.

They don't trust him, and he thinks this is just the beginning of things that are much worse.

He's not in control.

He's very good at the public presentation in politics.

He did an address to the nation last night.

There was quite a lot of Orwellian news speak in it.

This is going to strengthen the country.

This is going to bring us together, all this sort of guff.

But these guys are now very, very, very powerful within that government and within that culture, and they've been planning this for decades.

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Good. Well, on that depressing note.

Very depressing.

We'll be speaking to Yuval, who's one of the big, big leaders of the liberal progressive demonstrations in Tel Aviv against the right-wing government,

and we'll be speaking to him tomorrow, and it should be out on leading on Monday.

Fabulous. Looking forward to that.

I'll see you soon.

See you soon. Bye-bye.