

[Transcript] Leading / 16: Tony Blair: Taking insults, swallowing pride, and negotiating with both sides

Welcome to the Restless Politics Leading with me, Rory Stewart and me, Alistair Campbell. We're about to interview Tony Blair and four listeners who are not absolutely on top of the Northern Ireland peace process.

We're going to have a very, very intense half hour conversation which I think people are going to love, but just a very, very quick introduction to some of the terms that we're going to be looking at.

Essentially, Northern Ireland exploded at the end of the 1960s and it exploded in a conflict between the Unionist community, predominantly Protestant, very attached to the United Kingdom

who comprised about two-thirds the population in Northern Ireland, and the Republican community, predominantly Catholic, who comprised about one-third of the population in Northern Ireland. And it had been a trouble that had been brewing in increasing amounts since the 1930s, and a lot of it initially was about civil rights.

The Republican Catholic community felt discriminated against in terms of housing, in terms of voting and local council elections, in terms of employment, and above all, they didn't have proper participation in government.

The place was run by Unionists, the police, the judiciary, the members of parliament, the government.

And in this brief conversation with Tony Blair, we're going to go through his early memories of this.

Tony Blair was born in 1953, and as he's going to explain, he came from a family which had connections back to Ireland, connections back to the Orange Order, and the Orange Order was that the fundamental, I suppose, spiritual heart of Unionism.

It was a movement very closely connected to the Unionist parties that celebrated Protestant victories in the late 17th century that led marches through streets that had a network of orders and lodges throughout Northern Ireland.

And he's going to talk a little bit about that, how his grandmother came from that tradition. He's going to talk about how in the 1960s, the Unionists, which had had a stranglehold on Northern Irish politics and which had been dominated by the kind of people that wind up Alastair.

So the leader in the 1960s was a classic oldie-tonian Irish guard's captain.

Look at everywhere.

They get absolutely.

Captain O'Neill had tried to do an opening up.

He'd tried to compromise.

This was the era of Kennedy and Wilson.

He was trying to bring employment and new jobs.

He was talking about delivering civil rights to the nationalist community.

And as often happens with the revolution, those first moves towards reform instead of improving the situation in fact accelerated the drive towards conflict.

And by the end of the 1960s, real extreme violent conflict into which the British army was dragged in the late 1960s and increasingly the Republican community, some of whom were

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grateful when the British army initially arrived, began to see them as much too closely connected with Unionism, as prejudiced against the Republican cause, and as part of defending those communities

and increasingly defending the Catholic nationalist cause, the re-emergence is a real force of a group called the IRA.

Terrorist force that ultimately is letting off bombs in Canary Wharf, tacking Downing Street in the mainland of the United Kingdom, killing army officers, killing police officers and on the other side, terrorists on the Unionist side, killing Catholics, mounting attacks so that by the end of the period, over three and a half thousand people have been killed and 50,000 injured.

The streets through the 1970s, unrecognizable horrors of piled barricades and buses and no-go areas and my father was involved in this in the British government with Edward Heath in the early 1970s, but I joined the Black Watch in 1991 and the Black Watch Scottish Regiment had been in and out of Ireland continually through the 70s and 80s.

I remember very, very difficult conversations with soldiers who had pictures of the Red Hand of Ulster up in their barrack rooms and were much too closely connected to the Unionist communities.

Many of our soldiers remembered people being killed, had been involved in very violent confrontation

so that was part of my early life as a young army officer aged 18 and Tony Blair will take us through that whole period and during this interview, he will touch on O'Neill, the old Etonian, he'll touch on the emergence of Ian Pacy, this radical figure in the 1960s, Presbyterian clergyman who becomes the real representative of the hard line Unionist position against any form of compromise, the emergence of David Trimble who represents the more moderate

wing of Unionism and finally bringing in these iconic figures of the Republican nationalist movement connected to Sinn Féin and the IRA, Jerry Adams and Martin McGuinness who eventually participate in the Good Friday Agreement and by, as he says, the mid 2000s, a situation where Martin McGuinness and Ian Pacy are sitting down on a sofa in the middle of all of this is you, Alistair and Tony Blair and I think an opportunity to hear Tony think very, very creatively and thoughtfully about how a Prime Minister and a politician deals with this situation. So here we go, here's our interview about the Northern peace process with Tony Blair.

Welcome to the Restless Politics leading with me, Rory Stewart and me, Alistair Campbell and we're very, very lucky today because we are in Belfast and we have as our guest, Tony Blair. Thank you very much for joining us. Thank you. And I just wanted to start with a sense of how you came to understand this conflict. I was reading an article which appeared in the Jordan Times. You may not have written it exclusively for the Jordan Times, but that's where I read your article. This is an article supposed to be by me, was it? I read it last week and in it you had a rather lovely line. You said participants in the conflict often felt that the problem with outsiders is they didn't understand all the history and you said sometimes that's quite important to have outsiders who don't understand everything and it's one of the ways to make progress. I did write that, by the way. I want to just follow up on that and see if I can get you to be, because we think a lot about politicians

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and statesmen, honest and open about what in retrospect you didn't really understand if we go back to before becoming Prime Minister. So maybe the early 90s, what didn't you understand

about law and that you had to learn when you were really getting into it?

I think the most important thing was the depth of the mistrust, that each side had its narrative in which the other side was the aggressor. And one of the most important things about a peace process is you get both sides to understand, even if they don't chair or fully empathize with the other side's pain. And one of the things that we did that was really important, I don't think we'd ever got this peace process off the ground if I hadn't been prepared to sit down with Jerry Adams and Martin McGinnis. And obviously, in the 1980s, in the UK, for example, Adams wasn't allowed to appear on our television screens. It actually was blocked. When we decided that we would have the meeting with him and Martin McGinnis, I mean, obviously there were a lot of people who were very shocked by this and a lot of people appalled by it because these were people responsible for conducting the IRA campaign. And so I think if we hadn't done that, though, we would never have got them to understand that we were prepared to listen to their narrative, even if we didn't agree with it, which we didn't, but we were prepared to listen to it.

I do remember you read an awful lot. You'd go away on holiday and you'd come back and have read Gladstone and trying to get the thing sorted. And related to that, your family history. Just tell us a little bit about your family history as far as it relates to Ireland.

So my mother was brought up in Donegal. Her father was a Protestant, but living in the South. Her mother, my grandmother, was staunchly orange. And I always remember my grandmother

saying to me, this is in the 1960s, son, there's a great saviour that's arisen in Northern Ireland and his name is Ian Paisley. And she was a huge fan of his, which I told Ian Paisley about later. And, you know, she said, I totally got the Unionist side of it. And, you know, one of the reasons, I guess, which did play a part of my own interest in trying to solve the situation Northern Ireland was, I remember very vividly at the end of the 1960s, when the tone of the correspondence that we would have with our relatives in Ireland changed from, you know, everyone gets along to these people are our enemy. And it made a big impact on us. I was just, I was a teenager at the time.

One of the figures that I'm fascinated by is Captain O'Neill, who was the the leader in the in 63 onwards. And he's often looks in retrospect, as though he was trying to do the right thing. So Unionist leader, making gentle moves towards trying to include the nationalist community, address civil rights. And yet it was under his watch that actually everything went terribly wrong. And the Union is split. And as you say, Ian Paisley ends up representing a radical faction. Do you ever think about him in terms of lessons for politicians about the sort of contrast between policies that seemed on the surface right, but an outcome which was completely catastrophic? Yeah, 100%. I mean, there are a lot of lessons in political leadership in this. And in particular, with the elements of unionism that came to be represented by David Trimble, who, who, you know, to his own political and personal cost really shifted unionism in favor of the Good Friday Agreement. And all the way through, you had people on both sides. I mean, John Hume was a classic case on the nationalist side.

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I mean, John was the politician that understood that in the end, you had to accommodate republicanism, even if you were fighting it at the same time. And, you know, the interesting thing about all of those, all of the people who made a difference on the Good Friday Agreement, all of them were prepared to say no to their own supporters, which I always think is the big test of leadership. George Mitchell, when he spoke at the start of the 25th anniversary event at Queen's University Belfast said that without John Hume, there would have been no peace process. And without David Trimble, there would have been no peace agreement. Of all the different characters that were involved, would you accept that David Trimble had the most difficult job, the most pressured position? I think so probably, because it would have been so easy for him to have been hostile. And had he been hostile, by the way, probably a section of the Conservative Party in the UK would have gone with him. But, you know, Jerry Adams and Martin McGinnis, they also, as they used to say to me, if we get this wrong, where it's our lives are at stake. And I think for them also, I mean, they were having to pull republicanism away from a position that said you can never trust the Brits, you can never trust the Unionists. And, you know, I hear this a lot when you see disputes around the world. I mean, it's very, a lot of the context is very different. Even in the Israeli Palestinian context, you hear the same two things. You hear, first of all, no one understands this conflict like we do. And we understand the other side better than they understand themselves. Neither of which turns out to be true, really. And secondly, that the other side is never going to change. And your naivety and believing that they will or that they will in some way accommodate us is just is just force. And why do you think David Trimble did ultimately make the decision that he made to go with it, knowing probably that it would lead to his own political and decline? Because I think that he could see that without it, Northern Ireland was just going to be stuck in the past. And, you know, for all the problems, this is why the interesting thing, when you look at Northern Ireland today, and you see, for example, how the technology sector is developed here, Belfast is actually a very thriving European city. The economy's doubled in the last 25 years. You know, people come and invest here. It's, I think after London, is it the second fastest growing region of the UK? I mean, David, for all, and you and I know this well, because you were intimately involved, Alison, and all these negotiations, David could be a very difficult person to deal with, but he understood that. And also, like, I'm struck rereading it how he had to make some very cunning, difficult and pretty controversial political decisions. I remember there's a moment just after you came in, 97, 98, where he walks into a big meeting accompanied by two Unionists who've been convicted of terrorist murder attacks on either side of him to reassure the Unionist community that he isn't selling out. And I guess all these people were having to do that kind of stuff all the time. None of them were quite the sort of pure vision we have of Nelson Mandela that they could be saintly all the time. They had to be perpetually signaling to their more radical supporters that they weren't selling them out. Yeah, for sure. And all of these things are always in their journeys of imperfection in many ways. And actually, because I knew him quite well, Mandela would tell you similar types of situation that he'd been in. Yeah, David Trimble was doing that. You remember Alistair when Jerry Adams and Martin McGinnis every so often, they would ask us to see what was called a wider group of people, pretty obviously, the people who were actually involved in the

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violence. And they would come in. And if you remember, Jerry and Martin would really talk at us, but in a sense for the benefit of those other people describing the iniquities of the British government and what needed to be put right and so on and so forth. And then they're all troop back out again. I remember when four of them knocked on the door to ask whether I would care to clarify the briefing I'd just done. Which I do. But the interesting thing is that you see that's the other thing about a process like this, which is that you have to end up being able to have with the participants what I call a strategic conversation. In other words, and that requires them, by the way, to have the intelligence and the far sight of this to have such a conversation. But the strategic conversation is to say, look, I understand what you've got to do tactically, but here is the biggest strategic objective. Now, how do we get there? So I would often get briefings from the UK and intelligence services that would say to me, look, you know, we've picked up, you know, the Jerry Adams, Martin McGinnis and other people from the leadership, which in feign are saying to their own supporters, look, this is, you know, this is a sense of tactical move. We don't, you know, don't worry, you know, we're still on the same course and so on. And they would say to me, that's evidence that they're not sincere. And I would say to them,

I don't think it is. I think it's precisely the opposite. I think it's evidence that they're saying what they need to say to their support whilst they're still moving in our direction. But I only knew they were moving in our direction because I was having that direct conversation. So you had a direct understanding of this because you understood even as Labour leader, how important it is dealing with your supporters, your party saying no to people. You'd had to do that over Clause 4 and other things. But the person I find most mysterious in this is Ian Paisley because he had made his political career as the arch populist. He destroyed other Unionist leaders. He'd been always on the most radical, uncompromising, aggressive end of things through the late 60s, 70s, 80s. He'd understood that there's no such thing as bad publicity. And yet somehow at the end, in the 2000s, he actually joins a government and he starts talking about peace. How on earth do you understand that, that evolution? Well, I think in his case, actually, it's a more simple thing. And he explained it to me. He said to me, this was around about 2006 or early 2007. And when we did the Good Friday Agreement, he had been literally outside and his people with placards saying, yeah, absolutely. I mean, saying betrayal, essentially. But he said to me then, he said, I've been in my community, I've been listening to people, and I think it's time to move. And it was very, I was quite taken aback. Now, the truth is, even then, by the way, he would have found support if he'd said, I'm not moving. I'm going to stand up for what we really believe, et cetera, et cetera. He could have done that. So he obviously, I think to a degree, he mellowed somewhat. But also, again, we created a process in which there was a perpetual conversation. So he didn't feel there wasn't any time when he couldn't come in and say that. I mean, occasionally, he would be pretty insulting about us in public. And I used to say to my own folk, it doesn't matter. I don't care. You know, just when we're together, I'll find out what he really thinks. His son, in Paisley Jr., did it as I last lied. He reminded me of when, I think, your first meeting with Paisley in Stormont, and in Paisley Jr. was with him. And Paisley came in and read you the riotat for about 15 minutes and quoted various passages of the Bible at you and basically told you what a terrible human being you were and you condemned, et cetera.

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And then waited for you to reply. And as you started to reply, the fire alarm went off, to which you jumped up and said, what's that? And Paisley said, it's the lie detector. Which did happen. But you developed a sort of, I think, quite a strange fondness for him, Paisley, given that through the process, he had given you a lot of difficulty.

Yeah. Yeah. I think he called my wife at one stage a painted Jezebel.

I said to her, I recognize quite a compliment. Yeah, because I understood where he was coming from. And unionism is always important to understand that it came from a profound sense. That really, this is the thing with unionism, that it's part of the UK, but it's still immensely distrustful of all the institutions of the UK, and in particular, the British government.

And a Tory government or a Labour government, by the way, in that sense, they don't discriminate. And I think that with Ian, what happened in the end was that, and he was a religious man, I mean, a lot of people would say, oh, it was a front or something. It wasn't. He was a deeply religious man. He came to the conclusion in the end that this was the right thing to do.

When he was, I mean, was it helpful dealing with people who used the loss of religious rhetoric that you were more comfortable in your faith that you understood biblical references? Was that something that you could actually use in negotiating?

Yeah, you had to be careful with it, though. There was one time when I remember Ian Paisley actually asking me, do you think this is the will of God that I do this thing?

And I thought about it for a moment, and I said, I can't really say that. And I think that was important because I think if I'd said yes, no, I'm sure, really.

He's speaking to you through the ear.

Yeah. Just hang on a minute. I'll get a clarification. No, I think he would have, you had to be careful with it. But Martin McGinnis, by the way, was also someone who's of the Catholic faith who would go to Mass. And I think that because the oddest couple in the whole show was really Paisley and McGinnis sitting together. I mean, that was a, if you told me when I was growing up in the 70s and 80s and 90s, if you told me that Martin McGinnis and Ian Paisley would be sitting together on the same sofa, swapping jokes with each other,

I would literally say, well, that is never going to happen. Never ever going to happen.

That is a wild and amusing fantasy. Tony, Rory, we'll take a quick break and back in a minute.

One thing that I'd love to get a sense of for you as a very practiced communicator, how do you then and now deal with the issue of the victims? Because there is a risk always that this is very triumphalist that we're celebrating all the achievements and the peace. How do you find the language to acknowledge victims? How would you talk about that in this context?

Yeah, it's a very good question. And it's a constant problem. Because the truth is, when you're celebrating something, it's easy to have that come across to the people who were the victims of these troubles and there were thousands and thousands of them as completely insensitive. And I always found with the families of the victims that they divided into two categories, those who simply couldn't forgive what we were doing. You're literally sitting down with my child's murderers and others who would say, I don't like what you're doing, but if you can tell me that by doing this, you'll stop other families being in the same position that we're in, then okay, you go and do it, but make sure you do it properly. I went to see the play the other day agreement, which sort of told the last few days of the talk. So I know it's difficult to order them

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because they all came together. But what would you define as the most difficult issues towards the end out of that list of policing, decommissioning? But where would you sort of put the hierarchy of difficulties? And just tell us a little bit. I think we'll be interested in this. What you were saying to which parties about prisoner release and how you were trying to get them to a position that they could all live with. And did you have to do what's become known as a bit of constructive ambiguity to get that over the line? Well, you had to be pretty, pretty tactically cute at some points, for sure. I think prisoners was the most difficult thing. And that's about your point about the victims. And we actually underestimated that. Because there had been some release of prisoners before, I think in the 1970s and 1980s, when things moved forward at that time, but then it all stopped again. And so releasing the prisoners, naturally, when the prisoners came out, and I remember the prisoners, first prisoners getting released, this was before the referendum to make the agreement. And it was just, that was a bad moment. Because the IRA were obviously celebrating their release. And the victims felt completely traumatized by the fact that here were these people now greeted as heroes, we'd killed their loved ones. So that was the most difficult thing. There's one thing in the course of the agreement. I mean, everything was difficult, policing, criminal justice, all of it was difficult, all of it was difficult. Because you have to remember, once you make a formal agreement, that's not the end of it. Because that's the technical or legal part of the piece. The spirit part of the piece has to come later. That's about people getting rid of the mistrust and the dislike and the hatred and the sectarianism. That all takes a long, long time. And we're still dealing with that today. And so in anything that emotionally puts the pain of it back right in front of people, which the release of prisoners did, that was the most difficult thing. Very, very briefly, because you don't want to get stuck on this, but you went from this extraordinary achievement to be the Middle East peace envoy. And I'd be interested in whether you took lessons from that and what works and what didn't work, and what did you learn in the process of going from one peace negotiation to another about why this works in Israel, Palestine didn't?

Yeah. So I was involved, and in fact, still am an Israeli-Palestinian issue. And I have very clear views. I mean, there's a whole other broadcast as to what would work and what hasn't worked and why it hasn't worked. But the things that were absolutely necessary for any peace process to work is, first of all, you have an agreement that people consider fair, right? So both sides, it's an actual, there's an intellectual part to this, and that agreement has to be fair. But secondly, you've got to have leaders on both sides who've decided they really want to make peace and that they're prepared to take risks for it. And then thirdly, you've got to then, because normally these peace processes involve external players, the external players are going to keep working at it the whole time. And you've got to be able to then just to, you know, when you hit the obstacles, because how many obstacles do we hit after the Good Friday Agreement? It was nine years of the additional negotiation. And I often think had there been maybe a change of government in that period, it would have been much, much more difficult. By the side of the island over UK.

Yeah, absolutely. So we were very, very lucky that we had that stability. But the single biggest difference is that you had a politics on both sides in Northern Ireland, which had decided we're exhausted with this conflict, we want to make peace. And you had the leaders with the

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intelligence to work out how to do it. And I'm afraid that is where, where in the Middle East case, it's, well, I can explain all the reasons about it, that those elements that I've been describing, they're just not present. But also, if we bring it back to Northern Ireland now, situation now, the truth is, we're all here celebrating this quarter century achievement with the institutions on top. Rishi Sunak has brought forward his Windsor framework, which the DUP is still talking about. And it kind of feels stuck again. Now, people aren't killing each other. But in terms of the process, it feels stuck. So what, what would you think could be done, should be done now to try to get it moving?

You've got to sit down and work it out. You remember, we had these problems constantly. I mean, I bumped into the general de Shastland last night, who's the Canadian general we brought in to do the decommissioning of, of the IRA weapons, which is an an ordinarily difficult thing. And which was, oh my God, the trouble we had over it. But in the end, you just have to sit down and work it. I don't think these problems today are that hard to overcome, but it will require the prime minister to sit down with the key people and just work, just work at it until it's done. Look, the Northern Ireland protocol was supposed to be, you know, unable to be agreed until it was agreed. These things can be worked out if you're, if you're determined to do it.

And it's obviously in the interests of people in Northern Ireland to get the institutions back up and running. And I think it's in the interests of unionism to have them up and running because the, the friend of the union is stability and its enemy is instability. But so, so how do you see, because Jeffrey Olson was around at the time of the confer agreement. Yeah. And, you know, one of those people making David Trimble's life occasionally

better and quite often more difficult. Do you see in Northern Ireland politics at the moment the leadership that's needed? And do you see in the UK government leadership and the commitment that's needed to get it done again? I think, I think it should be. I mean, I think if the UK government really forces the pace on it, it will get it done. And look, I've known Jeffrey Donson for a long time. I do believe he ultimately wants the right thing for people in Northern Ireland. And, you know, there'll be all sorts of detail that you need to get into in order to get it sorted out. And that was one of the other things that was interesting about, about this, is that you, one of the things you need to do in a peace process like this, and this also is absolutely true of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, is sometimes when you've got a very difficult problem, you've got to enlarge the cards you've got to play with. So if it's a very, very narrow, if you've got, you're holding a very narrow hand, you've got to bear to enlarge that somehow. And there always are ways that you can do that. And that's the other thing that you've got to look at this is, okay, what are the other things that people may want that can compensate for the fact they're not getting precisely what they want on the thing you're debating?

One of the things I was very struck by is how difficult it is when one side celebrates. So you were talking about releasing IRA prisoners and then the IRA celebrating. And you're doing this constructive ambiguity or what you call some tactical cuteness. It must be enraging when you've done something very, very controversial, quite subtle, made a huge concession to one community

that's going to alienate another. And then instead of them taking that concession quietly and sort of responsibly, they're out on the street doing a huge party and rubbing it in the other

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side's face. Was that not something that felt unbelievably difficult and was really difficult? It was really difficult because when we were actually doing the Good Friday Agreement negotiation, if you remember Alistair, I ended up saying, we can't have the next group of people waiting to come into this room seeing the people come out of the room happy because if they come out happy, they're going to come in sad. And it literally was as simple as that. So I said, you've got to put them somewhere else so that they don't see whoever's coming out unless the people coming out are sad in which case you might want them there because then they'll come in happy. But no, it's getting away from the zero sum game. It's a real thing in politics that people think, if I'm losing, if the other side is winning, and actually it's interesting, if you talk to anybody in business who does deals and so on, they'll always tell you the best when it looks like a win-win. I mean, maybe it isn't, maybe it isn't, but if it looks like that, and it's exactly the same in politics. But it would have been virtually impossible with social media. That's a very good question, actually, as to whether you could have done this with social media. Tweeting they were happy and sad and telling each other and telling other people. Whereas we did at least manage to have some control over the broad agenda. I'm not sure you'd get it these days. And I wonder whether that's one of the things that makes the current Middle East peace process so difficult when people are turning away from it. Yeah, but the end politics is going to have to find a way of getting over all this. As I think we've discussed before, we talked before, in the end with social media, you've got as a political leader, okay, you may be aware of it, but you can't have your positions determined by it. I mean, otherwise, it's just, it's madness. Just one, just to briefly go back to prisoners, when Mo Molam informed us that she'd get a little visit to the Maze prison and sat down with a few lawless terrorists, which I think if you'd known, what would you have thought if you'd kind of known 100% what she was going to do that day? Was that a kind of big, bold thing to do? Yes, it was. I was actually okay with it in the end, because I thought, I mean, most of you rightly was that you had to have the loyalists on site, that we always focused on the IRA and the Sinn Féin, the Republican people, and we didn't focus on the loyalists enough. And that visit to the Maze was very important. And there were people, I mean, the late David Irvine, people really should remember, because he was an extraordinary figure, bringing the loyalists along with this agreement was very important, because they also had an influence then on the right wing of unionism. I think we're coming to the end of your time, but we're hugely, hugely grateful. I'd love one last thought before you go on politics and peace resolution. Give us a sense of uniquely how being a politician gives you a skill set or a perspective that maybe a senior civil servant might lack when they think about these things technocratically. Well, the most important thing is that you manage to feel the situation and not just analyze it. So, and it's when you feel it that you feel whether there's a real opportunity for peace. And that should be a skill a politician has, because you should be able to work out what makes people tick where their emotions are, what's really driving them. So that feel for a situation is really important. And then the other thing about a politician is that in the end, this is different from a civil servant, is that you end up in politics understanding that at some point you've got to take a risk. Thank you for chatting to us for the second time on The Rest is Politics. I think you're our first double. And we've got to get you back from at least peace process. Yeah, that's a whole other

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podcast.

Rory, we got the best answer of air as he was leaving.

Which was your favorite moment, wasn't it?

Well, I just wish we'd had it on air. Well, I informed him as you said to me this morning, the Hand of History's got its own Wikipedia entry. It's on my list of things to cover.

And then as he went out, I said, the Hand of History's got his own Wikipedia. And he said, you know what, I went and had another look at it. It really was dire, wasn't it?

To remind people again of listeners what that was, turning player appeared on the steps after this agreement was signed. And he said,

No, no, no, no. It was it was it was at Hillsborough when we arrived for the talks.

Very good.

Before anybody had been seen by anybody, we were waiting for David Trimble, who was the first meeting we were going to have at Hillsborough Castle. And there were a few media there.

So Tony went out and said, you'd better just go and say, we're here. Don't worry too much about it. Not important. He went and said, this is not a time for sound bites, but I feel the Hand of History upon my shoulder. I really do. I've seen as one of the kind of classic examples of New Labour spin. You know, this is not a time for sound bites. I feel the Hand of History on my shoulder. Anyway, well, it was though, wasn't it? He did turn out to be right. It's just that we didn't realise it at the time. So what did you make of that then? Did you enjoy that?

I loved it. Actually, I'm often, as you know, have a love hate relationship with your boss, who you adore. But I thought he was very introspective and thoughtful and genuinely watching him. We're not filming this for people, but you could see him really struggling to think and reflect. And I thought that was lovely because so often with politicians, as I grumble, they're talking on autopilot, they're just repeating something that's said 50 times before. And I thought he really was working his way towards some unusual insights. And I particularly like his emphasis on the human factor, the emotional, the sense of the room, the sense of how far you can push people. And of course, the biggest point of all, which is people's constituencies, the limits that these players have that they have to in the end sell the deal to their supporters. And I guess that's something that we've talked about, you and I, just before he came in, you were making a joke that Jonathan Powell, who I hope we can interview, Tony Blair's chief of staff, didn't always understand the Labour Party. Do you feel that for people like you and Blair, in a sense, understanding practical politics, having your own political party, helps you to understand why a unionist or a Republican had their own party that they had to sell things to? I think so. I think what was really interesting about what he said about the character required for the sort of job that he was doing and other people are doing in different peace processes now. I actually think the skills that he brought to it were as much the skills of a lawyer. Both he and Bertie Hearn had the ability to dissect points that other people were making and then play them back to other people in a way that was more palatable than if they were coming direct. So Adam's direct tremble would have been very, very difficult and famously they didn't speak. The process, you didn't put them in the same room most of the time, you were doing one-on-ones. All the time, all the time. So Adam's and tremble were not sitting in the same room, you were sort of ventriloquising from one to the other without them directly engaging. I think I'm right in saying that, apart from a very, very brief exchange in the gents,

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that there was no exchange between them. So this point that he says some pretty nimble, cute tactics is possible. I saw you might have pushed him a bit on that, Rory. I was lobbing the ball out there for you to sort of nod into the... Because I find it quite difficult doing these interviews where I sort of know... Too much. I know the answer and I know what happened and I sort of wanted him to tell the story about you were trying to get one side to leave the room with this opinion and one side and the prisoner issue became the single most difficult thing because it was like, you know, Sinn Fein wanted them out virtually immediately and they wanted a year persuading people that you could let them out so quickly would have been very, very difficult politically. But you were giving the Unionists the impression that they'd keep them as long as possible and Sinn Fein... I guess that's difficult for them, isn't it? That politicians never quite want to be as open and clear about their cuteness. I mean, obviously the answer is a great politician is very, very political and part of that is being ambiguous and making one side think one thing and the other side think another without quite lying. But I guess no politician is actually good about ever really being fully open about it because, in a sense, it's the magician's trick. It would be like asking the magician to actually show you how he got the rabbit out of the hat. Well, I suppose what we had there was a little bit of tale rather than show, whereas back then it was show not tell.

What did you... Well, what do you think looking at him 25 years later? Has he changed as a person? Is he the same person? Is he older, wiser, more battered? What would it have been like having this conversation 25 years ago? I don't think fundamentally he's changed as a person. I think he's still got a very... He's still an optimist and you saw that when he was talking about the situation now. I actually find the situation quite depressing at the moment. I think there is... I'm feeling this strange disconnect between all this celebration and standing evasions for the people involved, alongside the police raising the warning to severe and worried about resources and the politicians not seem to get gripping the thing in the way that they should. So he's definitely still an optimist. I think his basic character hasn't really changed. I think he's definitely more battered. And I think he finds modern politics and quite frustrating and quite difficult, as do you, as do I. But no, I think he's still the same, so basically the same person, but much more experienced. And I think the other big difference is back then, I think Tony did allow criticism to get to him quite a lot. Maybe because he had so much, particularly over Iraq and tuition fees and other situations. He's just, I think, developed a resilience which has strengthened, whereas I think his intellectual and political acuity has not weakened. I think at the heart of the whole thing, which is so difficult, is that it's difficult not still to see it as a sort of miracle, that we can kind of explain what the factors were. But it is still pretty peculiar that those figures in the end would prepare to do this. I do worry that the sort of people that we have in politics now, whether you would be able to find that collection. And whether the culture allows it. I mean, that's the other thing that you were getting up the social media. I do think it's difficult now to imagine a Prime Minister being able to give the uninterrupted time that he gave to the Malnambuist president. Yeah, for sure. I'll tell you the other thing. I mean, one of the many reasons I always defend Tony, and you say a door, that's not the word. I like Tony, and I think I've got huge respect for him. He's a very, very close friend. When you think about what is the level of achievement that that was 25 years ago,

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with him as a very young Prime Minister, who was, you say, absolutely dedicated to it, thousands of hours, literally thousands of hours. And then somebody like Jonathan Powell, who, you know, was Tony's chief of staff, but also became the chief negotiator once John Holmes had left Downey Street. For me, it just puts him right in the top league of UK Prime Ministers. That is a massive historical achievement. And it does annoy and sadden me that people, the what about Iraqy is still so prevalent. And I get why people are angry about Iraq, but don't overlook just what it took for him, Bertie Her and the other political leaders here, George Mitchell, etc. Don't overlook how big a deal it was. Yeah, I mean, of course, the way I look at it, it's a tragedy because all that intelligence, pragmatism, humility, self-discipline that he brought to Northern Ireland went a bit awry, but that's a subject for us. I don't think we need to use that in our sentence. I think we shouldn't end on me. What do you think? No, Alastair, I've not laughed yet. Thank you very much. I think you've already had the first word in this podcast. I should have laughed. Thanks very much. Thank you.