

**[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 161. Question Time: Rebuilding the Tory brand, Macron's successor, and the militarisation of Mexico**

Welcome to the Rest is Politics Question Time with me, Alistair Campbell.

And me, Rory Stewart.

I love this question, and I don't quite know what I'm going to say and answer to it, so I'm going to just ban it on you, Rowan Wilkinson.

The role of ego in political decision making has recently been clear to see with the rise of populism, politicians like Trump and Johnson.

One, did you have any personal checks or balances you would put on yourself to make sure you were making decisions based on what was right for the greater good and not your own ego?

Two, were you always able to get out of the way of yourselves or are there examples of when, in retrospect, you didn't?

I think it's a really good question.

I think it's one of the things that makes politics so dangerous that it's horrible.

I mean, it's very damaging, I think, particularly modern politics, that the politics of 24-hour campaigning, the permanent campaign, social media, is very damaging for your mind, your body, your soul, and it does very weird things to your ego because you are in a weird situation where, on the one hand, you are absolutely the center of attention.

One of the things that surprised me, oddly becoming a politician, is just how much time newspapers and television devoted to politics, given that many of my voters weren't very interested in politics.

I was rather surprised how much time newspapers and television did on it.

You are in this very insecure situation where you oscillate between sometimes being treated with incredible deference, put in a ministerial car, put in a sort of enormous office.

My ministerial offices were about 10 times the size of anyone's else's office and people bring in Cappuccino's view and calling you minister and bringing briefing packs to your narrow place, going from that to then getting on the tube and people coming up and screaming in your face and calling you every word under the sun and issuing threats on Twitter.

It produces a very odd lurch between politicians sometimes feeling all-powerful and a lot of the time feeling completely incapable of doing anything, totally powerless.

I think you need very, very unusual people who can survive that.

My experience was I wasn't very good at getting that right.

Maybe 90% of my colleagues in the House of Commons, I felt were really damaged by the profession.

It's not a healthy thing to do.

It's a bit like, I don't know, working, cleaning up, Chernobyl.

It's something that may need to be done for the public good, but it's not really good for your health.

Oh, Lord, that's very negative.

I think the key in answer to question one, did you have any personal checks or balances?

I think the key to those are the people that you put around you.

I actually think we were in the Blair era pretty good at that.

I think Tony Blair was very good at surrounding himself with people who were not yes people.

We always challenged him.

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We always recognized that he was a formidable political talent, that he was the boss and all that.

But there were quite a few of us who would always, he saw our job as to challenge him. And I think I did the same thing within my own team.

And also, I don't know, but I get the sense with you and your wife, Shashana, I always did feel that Fiona was an incredibly, and the kids when they grew up, were an incredibly important sort of leveler.

You just don't get above your own station and call you out.

You have to have people who call you out when they think that thing is happening because the truth is, you do need a big ego.

You have to believe that people really care what you think and what you say, otherwise you're not going to go out and think and say it.

Yeah.

And I think the great weakness of Boris Johnson, the striking difference from Theresa May to Boris Johnson is she went from a cabinet of some pretty powerful, outspoken people who challenged her strongly in the cabinet room.

And Boris Johnson very much with people like Dean Doris was bringing in his own very marginal fan club, which he used to make humiliating jokes about all the time.

He make open jokes to people about the fact that his supporter base was a pretty peculiar group of Johnson worshipers, which I think stopped him getting a loss of these calls right.

I mean, I think it's what tempted him down to develop a lot of the worst aspects of his personality.

Better, I think, as London Mayor, partly because he had a guy called Simon, who is his chief of staff, who was much better at standing up to him.

And I think when politicians lose that, I mean, you can see that with Trump, that anybody who stood up to him was immediately swept aside.

And with Mrs. Thatcher, I think one of the ways in which things began to go badly wrong after seven or eight years is she lost her ability to listen to challenge.

People haven't listened to the John Major leading podcast.

He's really interesting on the way in which she took or didn't take challenge.

Now, we don't talk enough about Mexico.

Santi has asked this question.

What do you think of AMLO?

That's President Obrador.

What do you think of AMLO's increasingly close relationship with the Mexican military?

Is it a rare good example of politics and the armed forces working together up to a point?

Lord Copper, do you want to take that one on?

Then I'll come in.

I think first thing to bear in mind is Mexico very unusual in Latin America because it's one of the very, very few countries in America where the military's traditionally been quite weak and there haven't been any threats of military coup.

Look at a map of Latin America.

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Most of the landmass was at one time or another ruled by military governments.  
And that wasn't true in Mexico.  
But over the last few years, he's using them for more and more.  
He's using them to run airports.  
He's using to build train lines.  
They now control the whole customs of the country.  
He's brought the national police under the military.  
He started defending some pretty peculiar senior generals and defense ministers  
against drug smuggling scandals, corruption scandals.  
And all of this coming from somebody who was famously sort of from the political left,  
from the populist political left, and who started his career being very skeptical about the military.  
Now, what's your sense of what's going on?  
Well, in 2019, Obrador actually was campaigning on a pledge to get rid of the army.  
And now, as you say, they're absolutely...  
If you fly into the main airport in Mexico, Mexico City,  
you will see uniformed marines who are in charge of immigration, customs,  
looking after security in the terminal.  
And they're doing that right across the civilian airport network.  
They're running the ports, two new train lines, as you say.  
And the policing has been militarized.  
So the National Guard Force, which is over 100,000 officers,  
which replaced the federal police there.  
And they've now been moved under the Defense Ministry by presidential decree.  
The Supreme Court, we've heard a lot about Supreme Courts recently,  
they decided that move was unconstitutional.  
But we're into this kind of, you know, back to the Trumpian theme of the age of impunity.  
The government has yet to act on that.  
And of course, what some are worried about is that Obrador's not going to be there forever.  
He obviously sees political mileage in, you know, it's a bit about Mussolini,  
the myth about the trains running on time.  
Apparently security is better at the airport.  
There is less corruption, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.  
But what it leads to is a strengthened military, as you say,  
in a part of the world where once the military gets stronger and stronger,  
they do tend to use political power.  
The other fear that people have is whether this then goes into other areas of the national life.  
So for example, he's been there for six years.  
And in that time, there have been 155,000 murders and 43,000 disappearances,  
a lot of it related to drugs.  
Disappearances, I guess, will also likely, many of them, to be murders, too.  
I mean, it's absolutely beyond imagining to live in a country where nearly 200,000 people  
have been murdered or disappeared during.  
Totally, totally staggering.

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And it's sort of unimaginable in some, like Britain, where you're looking at numbers in the hundreds rather than the numbers in the hundreds of thousands.

One thing I suppose, which we often get questions on, is the general question of where you bring in the military or where you don't.

So you had experience of this, I guess, during foot and mouth.

What is it that tempts governments when you have a civilian emergency, like foot and mouth, and I have to do with anybody invading, it's a bunch of livestock getting sick.

What tempts people to bring in the military to fix things?

They're reputation.

And even though, as you say, in Mexico, defense spending has been historically very, very low, and yet, when there have been civilian crises, such as natural disasters and so forth, the military have come in and done a pretty good job.

So I think reputation is part of it.

You know, we've talked about the foot and mouth thing before.

It was just, the system was breaking.

The system wasn't capable of addressing the scale of the crisis.

And it was only when, I remember that guy, Bert Wessel, when he came in, that was when we started to get a grip of it.

So I think it's that feeling of the military.

That's what the military do.

But I think that's very different in a system like ours than a system like Mexico, where it does appear now to being used for pretty clear political effort.

In Britain, there are very, very clear guidelines around it.

We, of course, when I was flooding minister,

brought in the military to help with the floods, Cumbria, Yorkshire, 2015, 2016.

And there, I think it was a reminder of the fact that the civil service, normal civilian government, doesn't have sort of standing people in reserve.

Everybody's already working at their desks.

You don't have any slack capacity.

What the military provides you with is thousands of people who can be deployed to come in and sort stuff out.

Well, though, as Ben Wallace said,

in when he was announcing his plans to step down,

and he had a little dig at Swallow Braverman,

I think you've got to be very, very careful,

because as our military gets smaller, which I'm afraid it has, then there's less slack.

And I think there is a danger that governments think,

oh, we've got a crisis, let's bring in the military.

Now, as you say, we did it from time to time.

We did it with the fuel protests.

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We did it with the footmouth, as you say,  
the military were very involved in security around the Olympics  
and all those sorts of things where you bring them in.  
But I think you've got to be very, very careful.  
And what you're seeing in Mexico is almost like they're becoming like an enterprise.  
Well, it's fascinating, isn't it?  
I mean, it is amazing what happens when they begin to take over.  
And we've seen that historically Turkey, Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia,  
how quickly militaries can get involved in running businesses,  
how corruption takes over,  
and how often actually they turn out to be quite bad at running countries.  
They're very good at responding to the emergency.  
So they think we can come and clean things out and run the country well.  
And it turns out often that they're not awfully good at that.  
Right, another question for you.  
Alan Salazar, can you give us an update on political conditions in France  
and Macron in particular?  
And I believe, judging by your relaxed look,  
you may be actually in France as we speak.  
Current poll of polls on Macron,  
65% disapprove, 32% approve.  
Okay, so that's not good.  
Just to understand that, I never understand these polls  
and net approval ratings in this and the other.  
And how does one know what's good and what's bad with these things?  
What would it be a good figure?  
A good figure for a French...  
It's pretty rare for the French that they get above 40, 50%.  
Got you.  
Since Macron was re-elected, he's never been above 40%.  
He's been close a couple of times, but he's actually on the up.  
The lowest point was during the whole sort of pension reform thing.  
He was down as low as 27% on the poll of polls.  
So he's now up to 32%.  
If you look at the national party polls,  
and these are always a bit silly because you know,  
the question is if there was an election tomorrow and of course there isn't.  
But at the moment, looking at trends,  
the left, Melanchon, he's doing pretty well.  
They're up at 25%.  
Le Pen's lot, the RN, they're on 24% just below.  
And Macron's party is on 22%.  
And then Le Republicain, the sort of Tory party, they're down 11%.

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And then you're down to the rag bag down below.

And again, that trend, that suggests Macron's slightly on the up.

His party is on the down.

They've gone from 26% back in November down to 22%.

And the reason that matters is that he's not allowed to run again.

Exactly.

What does this mean, Alistair, for the forthcoming election and when is it?

Well, you're not going to have an election for some time.

But before that, you're going to have European elections, which are pretty important in the French context.

In fact, Macron did a big interview at the weekend.

I thought it was quite interesting.

He made his assessment of his opponent's views on Europe

a big part of what was clearly, I think,

the beginnings of the contours of that campaign.

He basically was saying that you can't trust Le Pen on Europe.

She used to be in favor of taking his hand now.

She's not, you can't trust Melanchon on Europe

because nobody really knows what he stands on it.

But I think that there's something very strange going on in French politics at the moment.

If you look at the facts of France,

got GDP growth that's going faster than either the UK or Germany,

got unemployment lower than it's been 15 years.

But he is still struggling to connect.

And this perception of arrogance has really stuck through.

But the problem for him politically

is that in a way he's been a victim of his own success,

his rise was such a phenomenal thing

that he completely destroyed the old left-right party system.

And the mainstream left and mainstream right parties

haven't really recovered.

So what he's finding himself, he's up against these extremes

without any sense of where the succession plan is going to come from.

And I think that Obama, for example,

his legacy was tainted by the fact that Trump followed him.

And I think Macron really worries

that his legacy gets tainted if Le Pen follows him.

Now, I still think it's not probable,

but it's more possible than it was last time.

And the other massive problem he's got

is that because he lost,

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his party lost a majority in the assembly  
at last assembly elections.

If you remember famously,  
he had to use this 49.3 article of the Constitution  
to get stuff through,  
which essentially is basically saying  
the government can pass a bill without a vote,  
which is not very democratic.

He may have to use that again and again and again,  
and whether that further weakens him.

I think it's very, very hard to call a long way to go,  
but I think that French politics  
is really gonna be worth watching in the next period.

So I think let's take a quick break.

Right, Roy, this is definitely one for you.

Ian McCulloch, people always say be true to brand values,  
but I struggle to understand the brand values  
of the conservatives compared to the clarity  
of previous years.

What is today's conservative brand  
and what do they stand for?

Well, that's a hugely important question.

It's not the brand that I cared about when I was conservative.

For me, being a conservative,  
the brand was about supposed to be.

People disagree, but supposed to be  
about fiscal prudence, being careful with money.

It was supposed to be about respect for tradition.

It was supposed to be about a cautious,  
incremental approach.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

And for me, also, respect for landscape, history,  
traditions, the military, the monarchy,  
all this sort of stuff was bound into the conservative brand.

So here's one for you.

If in the very unlikely event  
that I was actually doing this podcast  
with Soella Braverman, not with you,  
what would her answer be to that question  
about what the brand is?

So I think she'd say that she's on the side  
of small business people, low taxes,  
smaller state, getting on your bike,



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reducing the amount of immigration  
coming into the United Kingdom,  
being hardheaded and practical about money  
and costs on families, I guess, would be her pitch.  
Do you think they're values  
or are they just sort of political postures?  
No, I think they are values.  
I mean, I think there is a voter group.  
I mean, famously, a lot of the people  
who voted for Mrs. Thatcher voted for her  
because they felt that she was gonna cut their taxes,  
it was gonna be smaller government,  
and it was going to give more opportunities  
for them to make money by their council houses, et cetera.  
And then I guess people who voted  
for Boris Johnson and Soella Braverman in 2019,  
particularly red war voters,  
liked the idea of sovereignty, control over immigration,  
getting rid of red tape,  
challenging the elites and Westminster.  
So I think there's a constituency for it.  
All the things that they haven't been able to do.  
Did you see the footage of the first arrivals  
onto the barge at Portland?  
No, tell us about this.  
I mean, I thought it was pretty horrible,  
and I'd love to know what she actually would think  
as she watched it, whether she'd actually think  
this is a moment of triumph  
because there we are live across all the channels,  
these bedraggled people walking up the steps  
onto this floating barge and there to be incarcerated  
until God knows when, you know,  
when actually surely what they need to be doing  
is investing in sorting out the backlogs  
and actually getting a system that works.  
So I just think there's a kind of performative cruelty  
to her that I don't really like,  
and I certainly don't understand it.  
Here's one for you, Colin Jeffrey.  
Do we need a citizens assembly for renewables?  
Listening to the discussion surrounding the need  
for electric grid infrastructure



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to support the transfer to and connection of renewable power sources.  
The issue of NIMBYism quickly raised its head.  
Is this not the sort of issue where the use for citizens assembly will be very useful to inform policy?  
Why do governments not rely on this option more to de-politicize issues and find consensus across parties and communities?  
So I'm a huge, huge supporter of this.  
Citizens assembly is just quickly to remind people.  
This is where you get a randomly selected group of people meant to represent different demographic groups across the country, like a jury, like 12 randomly selected people on a jury, in this case might be 300 people, sit them down for two, three days with an expert, and the experts brief them and they get into the details of an issue and they make a recommendation.  
And it worked very, very well in Ireland as a way of resolving abortion issues.  
I think it could have been very powerful in finding a middle way towards a soft Brexit if we'd been brave enough to do it in Britain.  
And I think it's a very good thing to do on renewables because as people who listened to yesterday's podcast will have picked up, we're in a world in which you have these two strange views.  
One of them is that it's easy to get to net zero and we don't need to worry too much about the politics.  
I agree with the very few people who think that, but there are people who seem to suggest that and then there are people who suggest that the end of the world's gonna come.  
And of course, what the Citizens' Assembly, I hope, would reach is a compromised position which says, yeah, it's tough, but it's eminently doable.  
It's not as expensive as people think and these are the steps we need to take.  
So any views from you on Citizens' Assemblies?  
Well, the other one that's happening, I think still going on here in France

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is the Citizens' Assembly on assisted suicide.  
And interestingly, I mentioned the interview  
that Macron did with Figaro.  
He announced what he called,  
he loves these big things.  
He launched a grand scale political initiative.  
And I wonder whether this is going to be  
more Citizens' Assemblies,  
because he said he wanted to work more closely  
with those who wanted to move forward in issues  
like climate change, public services,  
security, progress and immigration.  
There might be that he's just trying to sort of  
reach out to different parts of the parliamentary system.  
But I wonder whether on some of these issues  
where he's gonna have real difficulty,  
for example, he is bringing forward an immigration bill  
and the writer already up in arms about it  
because he wants to give an automatic leave to stay  
to illegal immigrants who are working in sectors  
that are hit by labor shortages,  
which of course the right don't like.  
So whether actually he's gonna try  
and bring the public into that,  
I think it would be a good idea  
and I wish that we use them more.  
Now, Michael Freeman, what do Rory and Alice  
to think about Canada's new bill, C18,  
due to take effect 180 days after June the 22nd  
and how it could affect tech, news and politics worldwide?  
Are you across this one?  
No, tennis about it.  
Canada's got this bill called C18  
and it became law in June.  
And essentially it is saying that tech companies  
have got to compensate those media organizations  
whose product, whose content they use.  
And this is aimed directly at Google and Metta.  
And Google and Metta is very interesting.  
If you Google the issue, Rory,  
which you're probably doing right now,  
don't be put off by the fact that the first sort of 20 things  
you'll see will be Google's own reaction to it.

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And why Google hate this?

This is an argument that's been going back for years about how Google and now Metta, they just use all this stuff that local papers, regional papers, local television, you and I, they just will take stuff and put it onto their platforms.

And this bill, this law now is going to make it impossible for them to do that without paying something to the people whose content they're using.

And as a reaction, Google say they're just not gonna be putting Canadian stuff on there.

Huge issues, isn't it?

Because these companies are making tens of billions of billions of dollars profits every year.

And many people suggest they're doing it basically by stealing our stuff.

They're stealing our data or they're stealing our news or they're stealing content produced by other people and then making enormous amounts of money repackaging without paying the content producers.

But obviously that's their entire business model.

So if we were to get rid of that in the way that C18 is trying to do, it is an existential threat to the profitability of Google and Metta and to the whole way in which the internet basically works, which is generally open source.

And in fact, the entire way that chat GBTE and AI systems work,

which is them being able to access this stuff for free.

If you look at the stride that's going on with,

I mean, it's called the Hollywood stride,

but it's going right throughout the creative industries at the moment in the United States.

And you've now got individuals suing organizations

because for example, they're taking their books,

they're acting their scripts,

and they're feeding into these large language models.

And so basically the owners of that work

are saying, you can't do that.

Now, when we talked to Paul Nurse,

the head of the Crick Institute,

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if you remember, he said that, you know, with AI,  
we've got to get on top of this early  
in a way we fail to do with regard to social media.  
And I think this is another one where we saw the problems  
as Google was sort of conquering the world.  
We saw the problems.  
I can remember talking to people in newspapers saying,  
this is going to destroy us  
because their, you know, their business model  
is going to destroy our ability  
to attract readers and advertisers.  
And to some extent that has happened.  
So now the Canadian government is trying to,  
quotes, do something about it.  
Google is reacting very, very aggressively,  
as you would imagine.  
And meanwhile, the politics around this,  
the populist Canadian leader  
that we've talked about, Parievra,  
he is running the line that this is all about Justin Trudeau  
trying to bring an Orwellian approach to news.  
And this is 1984 in Canada.  
So I think it's a classic example  
of where a genuine issue, we're addressing it too late.  
And whilst we address it too late,  
it's so drowned in the politics of business  
and the politics of real politics  
that it's very, very hard to see how this is going to work.  
And of course, a real example of the limits  
of the power of an individual sovereign state  
unless you can get international cooperation  
because in the end, Canada doing it on its own  
is not going to be able to swing it.  
Britain doing something like this on its own can't swing it.  
And this is why cooperation between US and China  
is going to be vital if we're going to do anything  
around these really big issues around social media, tech, AI.  
Because at the moment,  
Google and Meta can just respond  
by shutting off all its services in Canada  
and not carrying Canadian news.  
And that's what they're talking about doing.  
Very gravely, the person asked the question

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because I think it's something that I've not seen much about in certainly the UK media, but I think it's a massive issue this. And it's one that other governments are going to have to address sometime. Linda Ray, I've started to read Ian Dunn's book *How Westminster Works* would be interested in Rory's comments on the privatisation of the probation service. Finally, it also immensely disturbing and shocking that I'm not sure I'll be able to finish the book. So Chris Grayling decided to privatise half of the probation service in Britain, which is obviously the service that looks after offenders and people who've been released from prison. And it was a very interesting example of extreme private sector mentality applied to government. In theory, it sounded fine. The theory was that nearly 60% of people on short-term prison sentences reoffended within a year of release that there was a lot of evidence out there on how you could reduce reoffending through getting the right interventions on housing, on employment support, on mental health support, addiction support and other forms of support. And the idea was that if you set up the right financial incentives for charities and private sector companies in which you would pay them if they reduced reoffending and they would pay you if reoffending went up, you could get them to do it more efficiently in a more focused way than government had been able to do. So this was all launched. And the idea was that if these companies who bid for these contracts got and reduced reoffending, they would make, let's say 100 million pounds. And if on the other hand, reoffending went up, they would have to pay the taxpayer 50 million pounds. Fast forward to the time at which I ended up in the Ministry of Justice responsible for probation. And we were in a situation in which reoffending was soaring through the roof.

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The companies were exploiting loopholes in the contracts to say that they weren't even obliged to meet to release the prisoners because they were allowed to innovate to reduce reoffending. They were doing it to cut costs. And when we finally came to them and said, okay, could you please pay us the tens of millions of pounds that you owe us? They declared bankruptcy on their UK subsidiaries despite the fact they were owned by massive international companies that could have covered the costs and simply walked away forcing David Gork and myself when we were in there, David Gork was my boss, to effectively renationalize the entire probation service and take it back into government hands. A very nice plug for Ian Dunn's book there. Emily Maykirk, have either of you been to see Barbie or Oppenheimer, we need your thoughts. Answer from me, no. Over to you. But I am definitely going to see them. In fact, Fiona and I are desperately trying to find a cinema where either or both will be showing. But what we don't want is dubbing. I can't stand watching films if they're dubbed. I don't mind if there are French subtitles on, that's fine. But I can't stand watching films that are dubbed. And I have to say, I really want to see both these films. When the whole Barbie hype thing started, I thought this is ridiculous, what this is all about. But everything that I've heard and read about it means that I really, really want to see it because it strikes me that it's actually very, very funny but also a very, very important film. So I am definitely going to see Barbie and I'm definitely going to see Oppenheimer. Will you, are you a cinema person, Rory? I love cinema, absolutely love cinema, yeah. So will you go and see them? I will go and see them. And I'm also extremely keen to see

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the new Tom Cruise mission impossible.  
Oh Lord, I don't know if I want to see that.  
I'm not really into that sort of stuff.  
All that talking of missions impossible type films.  
The other thing we're watching at the moment on Netflix  
is the three-part series on Arnold Schwarzenegger.  
Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you?  
Well, we watched the first part last night.  
I didn't quite realize  
when he's got an amazing story to tell from his childhood,  
really troubled relationship with both his parents,  
troubled relationship with his brother  
who later died in a car crash  
and that sort of obviously had quite a big effect on him  
and had this feeling when he was growing up in Austria  
that actually he was American and he's always watching.  
But the whole story of,  
I didn't quite realize that bodybuilding was such a big thing.  
Some of the shots of the bodybuilding stuff  
are just kind of mind blowing.  
We talked about Trump on the main podcast  
and you can run for office for president from prison.  
You can do it with all sorts of bad stuff against your name.  
There are only four qualifications to be president.  
One of them is you have to be born in the United States.  
I reckon Schwarzenegger,  
if he hadn't had the misfortune of being born in Austria,  
I think he could make a go of it.  
He comes across so well  
and he's a great storyteller.  
So I do recommend that if you haven't seen it yet.  
It's three hours worth of anybody's time.  
Very good.  
Okay, well, thank you  
and look forward to speaking again very soon.  
Speak soon, all the best.