

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 164. The Trial of Lucy Letby, the domination of the dollar, and politicians vs. lawyers

Welcome to the Restless Politics with me, Alistair Campbell.

And with me, Rory Stewart.

And we're recording on Monday and we've just had the sentencing of Lucy Letby.

So we'll talk about that and then also I want to stay on something related to the law and that's this whole business of the government taking a legal position with this attack on so-called lefty lawyers. I think there's something very, very dark and a bit dangerous about it.

And then after the break, Rory, I think we should talk about bricks, not the things that you build houses with, but Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa. Of course, they're meeting in Johannesburg as we speak and fancy themselves as something of a new big player on the block. And then another five-letter acronym, AUKUS. We've just had the Australian Labour Party Conference

and this Australia-UK-US deal on agreement on nuclear-powered submarines and as part of a big defence strategy was a bit of a problem for Prime Minister Albanese. Should we talk about that as well? That sound okay for you? Very good. Sounds very good to me. Where were you, soon in France? And then my last day and my last day. And you know what, Rory, we've taken to not recording the temperature, but when we look at the temperature now, we've gone back to Fahrenheit

because it's 101 today. And I can remember, am I wrong to think that when I was growing up, 100 degrees was like seeing as one of those things that would never, ever happen. Is that right?

Yeah, yeah. That seems very high, absolutely, for Britain, absolutely. Yeah, yeah. And then you're on your way home and I'm going to see you in Scotland. Indeed, yeah. I'm going to see you in Scotland, looking forward to that. And I've just got back from the States. Brief outrageous plug for my Manchester event in case anyone wants to come and hear it.

What's that got to do with America? How do you interest?

Well, I suppose, I mean, it's just a ridiculous segue, but I've managed to sell out Barbican on two nights in London. Excellent.

But there's still tickets available. Anyone wants to come and see me in the Laurian Manchester on the 2nd of September, where I will be debating with Simon Jenkins.

So there we are. Any of our Northern listeners who'd like to come along.

Excellent. Although what you didn't do in that row was mention the title of your book, which is Politics on the Edge.

Thank you. Now, moving on to more serious subjects. So we've had this horrible, horrible situation where for listeners outside the United Kingdom, a nurse in a maritoneonatal ward, over time, attempted to murder and managed to kill a number of babies and was able to do so for quite a long time until consultants in particular began to pick up on the very, very unusual spike in deaths on the ward whenever she was present. She's been convicted for seven murders and the attempted murder of six more. The jury took a long, long time and I think she was charged in total with 22 offenses and was found on these 13 to be guilty. So I think it's one of those situations. And by the way, you said for listeners abroad, I think this story has been getting huge coverage around the world because it is so horrific. I guess the only thing that might compare of which I have any direct experience when we were in government was Harold Shipman, a doctor who killed I think over 200 of his patients. And he amazingly, I say amazing just as a way of underlining how rare these kinds

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of crimes are, he I think I'm right in saying is the only doctor who's ever been convicted in the UK for killing his own patients. Presumably, I mean, it's awful thing to say, but presumably it's because it's a doctor really knows what they're doing. And it's extremely difficult to prove that a doctor has deliberately killed their patients if they're being thoughtful about it.

I mean, there were cases in France before the war where the doctor's defense was when they were caught that they by mistake put the wrong injection into someone. I mean, it's given the doctors are handling what are basically dangerous poisons. They have the opportunity that other people don't have and they have the knowledge to be able to cover up their traces if it's ever happening. But has there been much interesting written about why she did it? Or is that just something that people just stay away from?

Oh, I mean, it's had absolute blanket coverage. And the police who interviewed her say that when she was being interviewed, once they finally, the police were called in and they spent a long time investigating this. And by the way, the police get a lot of bad press these days. I think that we should give both them and the CPS a shout out. This has been really, really painstaking stuff. But what you get a sense of is a nurse with something of a bit of a God complex.

Look, I don't know. I didn't wasn't there. I've only read it really. I've only read it since the trial ended rather than I haven't I can't pretend that I followed it closely. What was horrific about it? One of the most moving and upsetting things in the whole thing, apart from the impact statements of the families of the babies who were killed today, was an interview I saw with one of the doctors who'd been trying to raise the alarm and who ended up having to apologize to her because the hospital authorities were not keen to call in the police. They were not keen to get it properly investigated. It would seem she was moved on to a different department. She wanted to come back because her great love, she would say, was looking after babies and children. And for her to come back on the ward, she had to these other people who she'd been working with had to apologize. And I mean, I think we've got to be careful because the whole thing about whistleblowing and governance, there's such important questions, a very good letter in the Times today from Professor Sirian Kennedy, who is a friend of the podcast, as they say, and he chaired the Bristol Babies Inquiry.

Remind us of that. What was the Bristol Babies Inquiry?

So this was back in 1998, I think it was, when 29 babies who were having heart surgery, the Bristol Royal Infirmary in the late 80s and 90s, and they died. So clearly numbers way too high. And Ian Kennedy did a huge report. He got a lot of credit, actually, for the way he did the report. And subsequent reports have taken on some of the things that he, the changes that he made, much more modern, lots of use of technology and so forth.

But he was making the point in the letter he wrote to the Times today, that if we're saying that the Lucy Letby case is the consequence of the failure to manage properly whistleblowing, then he says that's a failure of leadership. We should not have to rely on whistleblowers to expose wrongdoing within the public services. That's about data and it's about management and it's about noticing things and then properly investigating them rather than trying to turn a blind eye or, for example, not calling on the police because they felt it would be bad for the reputation of the hospital if the police got involved.

I mean, it's a story that's very, I think, understandable for anybody who's worked in a large organization, what seems to have happened here. So the consultants pick up quite quickly

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that there's a very unusual number of deaths happening. I think the number of deaths in two weeks were what they would have expected in many, many months. But of course, because it's very difficult to prove what's happening, the chief executive of the hospital, who incidentally was himself a former nurse, concluded quite quickly that these were unfair allegations being made by consultants against a fellow nurse who was liked by some people on the ward and basically shouted at the consultants and ordered them to write her letter of apology to her and to her father for causing stress and causing offence and insisted that she'd done nothing wrong. Can I just quickly on this? Obviously, one of the things I've noticed, I've just been reading my favorite French novelist, Maegre, who wrote a wonderful novel called Maegre Siediverte. Maegre enjoys himself. Was Simonon not Belgian? He was, but he wrote almost entirely about a French detective. Oh, I see, so you're claiming that the novelist is the star of the novel as opposed to the author. Okay, very good. Yeah, no, he's the chief inspector of the police judiciaire based in Paris. So it's right in the middle of the 1930s and Simonon, who was a journalist of the time, writes a very, very good book, which is all about the way in which journalists in the 30s covered crime reporting. And I was reminded of it a little bit. I was reading the Daily Mail today. And the Daily Mail has just got over 6 million downloads on their podcast. It's an incredible number of downloads on their podcast about the Lucy Let The Case. And it's shot to number one. And you can see the way in which the newspapers really embrace these things. And I guess

all of us of a certain age are going to remember Myra Hindley, Rosemary West, Harold Shipman, of course, the Judgment. But one of the changes, I think, in the way that journalists report these things is that increasingly, the focus has been on the evil and the horror of serial killers, often serial killers who target children. Rather than on the detectives in the 30s and the 40s and 50s, there were these celebrity detectives. The newspapers created these incredible figures in Britain was Fabian of the Yard. There was Slipper of the Yard, who broke the great train robbery. Nipper Reed. Do you remember Nipper Reed? Nipper Reed, the Kray Brothers. He arrested the Krays, yeah. So what's changed, do you think, in the media landscape? Why have we gone from these

days where a lot of newspapers were really dominated by taking you day to day through new developments and cases and putting the detectives on the front pages and really bringing the public into the detail of the great train robbery, for example? Oh, I don't know. I mean, as you know, I can't stand the Daily Mail, but I did, I saw the Daily Mail podcast was getting an awful lot of traction. And so I gave it a little listen this morning. I have to say, I thought it was very, very good. Tell us about it. Well, there's two women reporters. They've sat through the whole thing for 10 months. They were doing background interviews with some of the police who were involved. They had a very interesting interview on the one that I listened to with a criminologist who was, I guess, speculating about possible motivations, but also analyzing the conduct of Lucy Letby in court and how she was trying to control her space. They had a very interesting discussion about the fact, for example, that the judge allowed Lucy Letby, who seemed to get very, very flustered if anybody came in and out of the courtroom. They allowed her, when she was giving evidence, to take her seat in the witness box before anybody else came to court where the normal process would be that people would come into court and then she'd have to walk from the dock. But interestingly, this criminologist at the end, this sort of underlines the point you're making,

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he actually praised the two journalists. One called Liz Harley, I think is their Northern correspondent and a think of freelance broadcaster called Caroline Cheatham. And he said that he felt that they were reinventing the reporting of court cases. And was, you know, if I go back to my time as a journalist, court cases, they filled the papers day after day after day. And most crown courts and even magistrates courts would have reporters covering them, not necessarily working for all the national papers, although certainly the big courts would, but agencies and local stringers. And I suspect that obviously this case is so horrific, it was always going to get massive, massive coverage. But I suspect that there are an awful lot of cases going on around the country that we never ever hear of, because it's all, it's kind of, you know, the reporting of them has changed substantially. I wonder, we're in relation to this thing about the police officers involved in this becoming big personalities. I guess the nearest that I can remember in recent times is Yates of the Yard, who did the cash for all his investigation. And I actually found his, I thought the whole thing that nonsense around that was, was, was exacerbated by the fact that we had this sense of this guy who's being profiled in the papers and so forth. But I think the other thing that maybe has changed is that people, they see what happens to a lot of other people in public life and public service, who suddenly become very, very well known. And I don't think they enjoy it very much. Look, I mean, when was the last time we had a chief constable that got a really good press, for example, not often. But in a way, what they're doing is old fashioned background reporting. This is what I used to happen on newspapers when I worked there. If you had a massive court case like this, is that while the trial was going on, you had reporters covering the trial, and you had other reporters out trying to get close to the police, trying to get close to families, and they were called backgrounders. So that's, that's one of the things that I pick up from the Magarene novel is just how enormous these teams are. So they have a team openly shadowing the chief detective on the case. He gets on a flight down to the south of France. They have another stringer to pick him up at the airport and follow him. They put a lot of energy into interviewing everybody they possibly can. And it's amazing how open people were in giving interviews in the 1930s, how happy all the different participants in a case were to go on the record. You know, parents, sisters, everybody in a way that I think today people would be much, much more cautious about giving interviews to journalists. And also how much, how much the police are deliberately feeding the press to because obviously I think for a long time the press were very useful to the police because they would help to flush out rundown stories. And finally, I guess they had three or four editions of these newspapers. So people would buy the afternoon edition, the evening edition to get the latest updates via a new revelation on the jewels of the lady or the movements of Dr. Ja would suddenly come through. No, well, that's the other difference, of course, is that news now is 24 seven. You know, because I knew we were going to talk about this, I was following the sentencing today. You could follow it online minute by minute. There were people in court report updating minute by minute. You know, that when I was a journalist, you could sit there and call all day. And you'd go out five o'clock at night and find a phone and do a reverse charge call to the copy takers and you'd file away. It's completely different now. So for example, when when May Gray was around, he would not have had a police film crew with him filming her as she was leaving her house post

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arrest. Right. So I just think it's a case of the way that the technology around the media and indeed the way the police operates has changed. But I think I think that's the big difference. Presumably when you were a young journalist, there were very, very close relationships between the crime reporters and the police. They used to spend all their time together, go drinking together, famously. Well, I went to one of the crazed funerals and it was an unbelievable event. And I was I wasn't like a crime reporter. The reason I went was because they needed reinforcements because there were going to be so so many people there. And also here's the thing, there's Gray, one of the most notorious gangsters of all time. They had a police escort for the coffin. It was out in, I think it was out in Bethmore Green, East End of London, but thousands and thousands and thousands of people came out. And I've got a feeling that this is my memory may be playing tricks on me here, but I've got a feeling that Reggie Cray was let out of prison. And I have a I have an image of him in my mind of him in handcuffs.

As he was walking, I couldn't even get near the church that we had reporters inside the church, outside the church. I was basically there discovering the crowd. Anyway, after the event, George Weber, who was the mirror's main crime correspondent, he said to me, I'm meeting some of the coppers who know, you know, were involved in sort of sorting these guys out, getting them inside this pub up the road. We're going to this pub, but it was like a, it was just coppers and journalists sort of, you know, getting a bit smashed together. There was a legendary crime reporter on the Daily Star called Jimmy Nicholson. Now I was sometimes called the Prince of Darkness

and Peter Mandelson was sometimes called the Prince of Darkness, but Jimmy Nicholson was called the Prince of Darkness. And he used to wander around, he had his big black coat and whatever you bumped into him in the studio say, okay, big boy. And he'd say the same to police, come on, then big boy. And he just had this sort of, he had this ability to get stories out of the police. And the police, of course, it's a mutually back scratching relationship, which I think, I don't know whether it still goes on, but I think it goes on a lot less than it did.

Can we stick on matters legal? Because I do have a real problem with this lefty lawyers attack, that it's clearly a campaign. And it's clearly been done in part because Keir Starmer is a lawyer, was a lawyer, he's now lead of the Labour Party. I suspect from one of the interviews where she soon did recently, they're going to try and sort of go through every case he ever handled a bit like the press used to do with Cherie Blair, when she was still practicing after Tony Blair became prime minister, all the stuff that he did as CPS Boris Johnson tried it before with Jimmy Savile. And I think this was when you were away in America, there was a, I think, really troubling incident where a lawyer by the name of Jacqueline McKenzie, who's an immigration and asylum lawyer, and she got approached by newspapers. You won't be surprised which newspapers the Daily Express, The Mail, The Sun and The Telegraph. And they had been given information about her, which one of them admitted to her was given to them by the Tory party, Tory Conservative campaign headquarters. And she's black. I don't know whether that was relevant or not.

She's also involved pro bono in a working group that's looking at race disparities within the legal system. And she's also a trustee of an NGO, which supports people in immigration detention centers. And lo and behold, one of the papers, I think it was The Telegraph had a story saying,

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I've got the intro here. A key member of Labour's race equality task force is a top asylum lawyer who boasted of blocking a client's deportation to Rwanda. And I've got a friend who is a lawyer who says that within this world, immigration asylum, where you often talk about some of the lowest paid lawyers who take on these cases solicitors in particular, that a lot of them are now saying, I don't want to take on any more cases because this is the sort of thing that is going to happen. And that may be music to the ears to, you know, the people who are running these campaigns in central office. And I just think that both Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer, and your friend Alex Chalk, I think Alex Chalk, by the way, he did, he was interviewed about this, and he did not condemn it. He basically, a bit like with Lee Anderson last week, we talked about what he should have heard or shouldn't have said about that. And I just think this is, this is fundamental. The basis of this approach says that the lawyers who defended a nurse killer are somehow guilty of it. You have to be able to separate that. It's completely desperate stuff. And it's desperate stuff on two levels. It's desperate, partly because it shows the pretty desperate state that conservative central office has got itself into since the days of Boris Johnson. It's become that and even what used to be conservative research department, which used to be a sort of think tank generating policies on education or social policy, has over the last two, three years talking to people working in it become a more and more desperate attack factory for manufacturing stories to leak to the papers to try to take on the labor party. And I think an example of this was the beer gate, where there was a big attempt to pin, which you complained about a lot of the time, pin Keir Starmer for drinking beer during COVID, where they just dropped briefing after briefing to the Daily Mail about this. So I think that's the first thing is completely sort of desperate. And it's very demoralizing. Young idealistic people join thinking what they're going to be doing is thinking about policies that are good for the country, and they find themselves dragged with these kind of desperate manufacturing of dossiers to go out and try to brief friendly journalists to attack the opposition. But I think the second bigger thing is your point about the lawyers, which is that the whole thing is mad. I mean, obviously, lawyers have political opinions. I mean, many, many politicians are lawyers, Tony Blair was a lawyer, Alex Shaw himself was a lawyer.

The idea that lawyers don't have political views is completely mad. I mean, very, very high proportion of members of parliament and politicians all over the world are lawyers and they join political parties. It's also not very surprising that lawyers who work in asylum work tend to be more on the left. If you're somebody who is prepared to work in a low-paid job,

often you care deeply about it. And that's true in the US, where many people taking on these cases have more liberal views. But you're also completely right that lawyers have a duty to defend their clients and they should not be interpreted when they defend or prosecute someone, that that's their personal views. Yeah. And I see, I think this goes back to when Liz Truss was in the position that Alex Chalk is now in as Justice Secretary, and the Daily Mail ran that front-page headline about the judges who ruled that the government had to take parliament more seriously in relation to the Brexit process and that front-page headline, Enemies of the People. And lots of lawyers and judges that I know were absolutely appalled that Liz Truss literally sat on her hands, said nothing, did not defend the principle that judges are there to interpret the law. And I think with this, I think in a way this is even

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worse because judges are sort of, you know, you expect judges to be able to take it in a way and to be fair to them, they did. They weren't very happy, but they didn't sort of go out and whinge about it, they just got on with it. But this case has led to the chair of the Bar Council and the president of the Law Society have issued a joint statement, which I really think anybody's serious inside government ought to take seriously because they point out, you see, United Nations basic principle that lawyers should not be identified with the causes of their clients, because if that were the case, how can defend anybody? I think Rishi Sunak should step in on this. I really do. I couldn't agree. Couldn't agree more. But I want to go to a deeper issue, though, which is I also think that it is something's happened to the role of Lord Chancellor. And part of that goes back to the reforms that were brought in by you guys, brought in by New Labour. So being Lord Chancellor used to be a very, very grand position for a very senior dignified person who was semi-detached from the government, as far as I know, until New Labour, they only sat in the House of Lords. And the change was to create this new joint role of Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, which has now blurred the responsibilities of Lord Chancellor and got them much more into the political actions of the cabinet. They're now often much more junior people who are on their way up. And some of them are not even lawyers at all. I mean, Liz Truss wasn't a lawyer, Chris Grayling wasn't a lawyer. So we've began to develop a world in which the number one senior person in charge of the law in Britain is often somebody who does not have a deep experience of law. And it's very, very different from the tone of people like Lord Halsham, who were very, very much saw themselves as semi-detached from the government and a check on the government instead of being just an ordinary cabinet minister. I'm just looking. I've done what you normally do. I've Googled. So when we came to office, Derry Irvin was Lord Chancellor. And when this change was made, the first incumbent was Charlie Faulkner, who was in the House of Lords and was and is a pretty well distinguished to use your word lawyer. Next up was Jack Straw. And so Jack Straw, I think it's the beginning of the change, isn't it? Because Jack Straw is more like Alex Chalk. He wasn't right at the top of the legal profession. He was more of an active practical politician who happened to have a legal background. Yeah. Yeah. But I think part of that, look, I can't remember we made a lot of changes, didn't we? Because of course, the Supreme Court was the biggest change. We always identified, I think, the Attorney General as the senior lawyer within government. And the Lord Chancellor had a different kind of role. But I do think there's no doubt that there's been politicization of it. And of course, in common with virtually every cabinet position, I mean, honestly, I'm just looking at the list. So the choice here it goes, Ken Clark, Chris Grayley, Michael Gove, let's trust David Livington, David Gork, Robert Buckland, Dominic Raab, Brandon Lewis, Dominic Raab again, and now Alex Chalk. So I think there's been a sort of fairly chaotic turnaround. By the way, I got a message the other day, Roy, this is totally a purport of nothing. Somebody who probably would get fired if anybody found out that they're in contact with me, who works in the Attorney General's office, said that the Attorney General, they have a regular quiz night. And there was a quiz question about our podcast the other night. Very good. Well,

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I hope the Attorney General was able to win the podcast for the correct answer. I don't know. So but I do think on this, just to sort of be serious about this, I do really think that Alex Chalk, who's the current Justice Secretary, should say something. And I actually think Rishi Sunak should say something because you say this is about central office. I think this is all part of the way Rishi Sunak intends to campaign. And I think he should say, if that is how central office thinks that we're going to run this campaign, we're not, you cannot do this without chipping away at the rule of law and the role of lawyers within it. I also think that Keir Starmer should say the same, because he is a lawyer. They are doing it because he's a lawyer. So why isn't he? I don't know, because I think he probably thinks it would take him away from the things that he thinks he should be campaigning on. But I think standards and decency in public life are a big part of where the country is fed up with politics. And you don't think it is that he actually senses that he's worried that if he defends the lawyers, he begins to be associated with them? Possibly. But listen, he's going to be associated with them in ways that he's not able to define. Lefty lawyer. I think anybody who cares about the legal system, cares about the rule of law, should actually be out there the whole time saying there's no such thing as lefty lawyer or righty lawyer. As you said earlier, there is a group, there was a fantastic example, there's a very good substack written by Joshua Rosenberg, writes about the law, but he had this wonderful, we talked before about Lord Panic, who defended Johnson in the party gate stuff. And he made the point that Lord Panic has defended a series of home secretaries who face legal challenges to their policies on Rwanda, whilst simultaneously opposing government legislation in the House of Lords. Now, likewise, you've got conservative lawyers, you've got Labour lawyers.

I think we violently agree on this. I think it's very, very worrying. I also think that it's worrying that Keir Starmer's not coming out. And I think it's also worrying that the general case for liberal democracy is not being made strongly enough by either party. I'm also horrified by the way that Starmer isn't challenging some of the moves that the government now seems to be making for stronger sentences. I mean, and this has been something that's been going wrong since the mid-1990s. New Labour doubled the number of people in prison. And now we have a conservative government that's continuing on this path, imposing longer and longer sentences, putting more and more people in jail when our prisons are already completely overcrowded, where all the evidence suggests that it actually does no good and leads to reoffending. And Keir Starmer, who I would have hoped, having been director of public prosecutions, see the madness of this, is instead seems to be joining in this general arms race of making Britain a real outlier in Europe now on the number of people it sends to prison. Well, I know you're very keen to make it about Labour, and I have criticised Labour on this, but I just want to come back finally to Alex Chalk again, because I agree with you. I remember I did some stuff with him during the People's Vote campaign. I think he's a very smart guy and what have you. But I think sometimes you've got to kind of dig pretty deep and find your principles on this stuff. So he was interviewed on the Today programme about this whole lefty lawyer's thing. And he said, quote, I think it's fair to point out that there has been a growing and I think regrettable trend for lawyers to actively parade their politics and to identify more with their clients. And then that I'm quoting here from Joshua Rosenberg's substack, Joshua Rosenberg then goes on said, Chalk has produced no evidence to support his

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thesis. I have not noticed any such change myself over the past 10 years. And he pointed out that lots of lawyers work for the trade unions, Challenge Margaret Thatcher. And I think this is a deliberate attempt to undermine the role of lawyers as not being to support their clients, but somehow to support the government when it's going through difficulties with its controversial policies. And that's just fundamentally wrong. Can we violently agree on that as well? We do violently agree on this issue. Absolutely.

Good. Good. Okay. I'm pleased. Let's take a break on that point of violent agreement.

Welcome back to the Restless Politics with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell. And Rory, did you watch the World Cup Final?

I did not, but maybe you can tell us about it. So it's all about the lionesses and Spanish.

Well, I watched the game. I have to say, I thought the better team won.

And I think it's just this incredible, I don't know if you follow this story about the captain of the Spanish team who scored the winning goal. She played without knowing that her father had died on Friday. And her mom kept it from her and the Spanish coach kept it from her. So she found out after this most amazing moment where she scored the winning goal in the Cup Final, she found her father had died, which I just think is one of those sort of stories that I don't know. Would you want that? Would you want people to hold back something like that from you? Do you think people have a right to conceal that from you?

I think on that one, you leave it to the mother. I think the only person entitled to make a judgment on that is the mother and the siblings. And that's the judgment that they took.

Yeah. I'd be very, very angry if somebody concealed something like that from me.

Very, very angry. I'd feel very deeply, deeply betrayed.

Well, one person who was celebrating the victory was Miriam Gonzalez Dorantes, who was our first Spanish interviewee or leading. And he's going, I'm getting some wonderful messages about her today. I think she's a formidable woman. She's created these two very interesting organisations that we talk about in the podcast. And she had a lot of ringside stories to tell about life in the coalition and elsewhere. And Rory, I think it's fair to say you came away as a bit of a fan. Definitely a fan. She joins that slightly eccentric group of people that I've really come to admire through the podcast. She's sort of somehow there in the trio with Alan Milburn and Bernie Sanders. So she's quite, it's quite a complicated trio emerging.

And indeed, with the Clegg, who's booked you of promoting almost as often as you can write your own. Given my often statements of love, I'm not quite sure whether you haven't had him on the podcast yet. No, we've got to get him on. We've got to get him on, especially now that his wife has been on and, you know, been far more interesting than he would. Anyway, so Miriam has gone down very, very well. I thought she had some wonderful things to say about Brexit. My favourite phrase of the whole thing was when she talked about the people in Silicon Valley as German engineers who speak English. I do think that sort of sums up these rather nerdy, geeky people that are currently running the world. But if people haven't heard our interview with Miriam Gonzalez-Dranter, it's on leading now. I wanted to just quickly understand this question around slow news. So it is horrifying what we're learning about the killing of babies in hospitals. And there has been this issue around lefty lawyers. But there's also this strange sense in August, as though the British media behave as though nothing's happening in the world. And of course, incredible things are happening in the world all the time. You know, Niger is in a mess, the

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Ukrainian assault is failing, there are extraordinary kind of reorganisation of the Chinese economy going on. But somehow the convention, I remember this even when I was a politician, is that in August, there's sort of nothing in the newspapers. Why is this? What is this whole thing? Is it just a kind of made up convention that all the politicians and journalists pretend there's nothing's going on? What happens? No, it's called the silly season because the main institutions such as parliament and government just sort of wind down a bit. I actually think Rishi Sunak has tried to be very, very busy. I have a sense of real sort of, you know, activity the whole time. So I think the silly season has been less silly. I think you're making a bigger point about the extent to which a lot of stuff that you and I might find very interesting on the international agenda in particular gets less attention in the UK media, either than it used to, or than it does elsewhere, which is why both of us, in so far as we do follow the news, tend to do it via foreign outlets. You've come back from America obsessed with news, Rory. We should, of course, America is very obsessed with news. There's a good article in the FT for people who subscribe to our feed, but it's about the way that Rhonda Santis is dropping down against Donald Trump in the polls and Vivek Ramaswamy is coming through and Tim Scott looking like a possible contender, the point of the Republicans being that their only hope of taking down Donald Trump is getting one candidate. The way that he made it last time is because he had this very divided field. So maybe something for people to look at. And I think another really good article in the FT of people interested to pay tribute to one British newspaper anyway, which we also need to tackle more in detail is the gloom in the German economy. I mean, the British economy is terrifying, but the German economy is, if anything, worse at the moment, underperforming the EU and the US by a very, very long margin. And I think, obviously, we don't have time to do that now, but I'd love to talk about that a bit more when a couple of weeks time. Yeah, I'm already feeding into the thing we talked about last week, which was the rather alarming rise of the far right, where there's this huge row going on now about whether, virtually, whether the FT should be banned. But anyway, let's talk to the listeners about what we said we were going to talk about, Rory. So Bricks, Brazil, Russia, India, and China, that was the original four. And then South Africa was added, which was very convenient, because it meant that we could call Bricks. So it's a term coined by somebody we both know called Jim O'Neill, who was a chief economist at Goldman Sachs, and who then went on to be actually a Treasury Minister in David Cameron's government. And it was adopted by these countries, and they represent 26% of the land surface, the world, and over 40% of the global population, and about a third of global GDP, depending on how you measure it. In some measurements, purchasing power parity, their economies are almost the same size as those of the G7. And there has now been a big push to expand them, as well as a push to do something called de-dollarization. And the reason we're talking about it this week is that they're having their big annual meeting in South Africa over to you. In Johannesburg, in the Santon Convention Center, which is where I once went for a chogum, the Commonwealth Heads of Government, so it's obviously the big place in there. So yeah, de-dollarization essentially is trying to work out whether there's a way of weakening the role of America and the American dollar in our financial systems. I think it's worth just reminding people, because Pearl Jim O'Neill, who I think is a very bright chap, I think what he, when he coined BRICS, or when he coined the phrase the BRICS,

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I think that he's been misunderstood what he was saying, because it's become a sort of given that what this was about was Goldman Sachs we worked for spotting a really massive kind of investment marketing opportunity. But actually, he was talking about the fact that these four emerging economies, the big emerging economies, would eventually force the world to have to change global governance arrangements. And I think that the BRICS themselves are now trying to push

in that direction. But if you think about it, if you go through these economies, South Africa is not done well at all. Brazil is not done very well. India, not bad. China has done way better than anybody expected to, but now has got all sorts of problems. I mean, of them all, probably India is currently looks like the one with the fastest growth in the brightest future. Yeah, but China is twice as big as the rest of them put together. And also, you've got this new thing, the new Development Bank, which I think was set up with all five of them putting in, I think it was \$10 billion. But actually, the Chinese Development Bank does way, way, way, way more than that. And I think what's interesting about the debate that's going on there now, there's a talk about whether there should be a common currency. Well, that was Lula's idea. You can see why he might be keen on that, but I don't think the rest of them are in South Africans as the hosts are already pushing back on that. The other thing that they're talking about is new members. They've had 24 more

applications or 22, I think it might be. 23 countries you're asking to join. Yeah.

Is it who formally applied and then 20 have applied in formally? No.

It seems to me the only one that's in the frame that might be able to shake things up significant actually to really have an impact would be Saudi Arabia. I mean, you're talking about the others, you're talking about Algeria, you're talking about Thailand, you're talking about much, much smaller economies. Yeah, possibly Indonesia, possibly Indonesia. Yeah. I mean, Indonesia would bring a big Southeast Asian state, but you're right, Saudi Arabia suddenly opens them all up to the gulf. The BRICS share of world GDP has increased from

8% in 2001 to 26% today. Over the same period, the G7 share has fallen from 65% to 43%. So it is true that it's been a very, very dramatic change since the early 2000s, but that largely, as you say, has been driven by the rise of China and India and China particularly. I think the de-dollarization thing is worth thinking about a little bit. A couple of dimensions that you're quite right, Lula's at the center of this. And it's a reminder that when you look at the BRICS, it's really only India that seems at the moment in the conversations of the BRICS to be resisting the push to try to make the BRICS into a kind of anti-Western force.

Russia obviously is very, very keen to do that and has been openly trying to embrace the BRICS and Russia. One of the speakers, the Duma, came out in favor of Lula Zaireng, a new BRICS currency.

China obviously has an agenda of balancing the West. The changes in South Africa and in Brazil have not really benefited the United States in the way that people would have hoped.

So, Cyril Ramaphosa, there was optimism about him coming in as president of South Africa because he seemed a great improvement on Jacob Zuma, who was a famously corrupt, difficult figure. And again, great relief that Bolsonaro left in Brazil. But Lula has come back and he's not just pushing for saying, every night I ask, why do we use the dollar? But he's also trying to get Venezuela

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into the BRICS, pushing for UAE to join the BRICS, which is a symbol that Lula, who obviously comes from the left, is... And he did this too. I think we touched on it briefly. It's also been very reluctant to get involved in European Union trade deals and Ukraine and has been positioning himself very much as a champion of a slightly more on the Russian and Chinese side of balancing the United States. And that, of course, is also quite a showman. And this is going to be a big event, particularly for those countries taking part. And there are 40-odd African countries that have also been invited. Putin, of course, won't be there because he's indicted by the International Criminal Court. And even though the South Africans have said that they wouldn't arrest him, he's taken the sensible view, probably, to join online. So Xi will be... President Xi will be the undisputed kind of standout leader who's there. But Lula will not forego the opportunity to really to sort of, you know, to step up in terms of the big arguments he's going to make. And the point about the currency, the Chinese have been criticizing Washington. They talk about the Americans weaponizing the American dollar. And I think we sometimes like to think that China is kind of frowning upon Russia over Ukraine, even though they don't say or do very much. But actually recently, they said that Western sanctions against Russia, because of the invasion back in 2022, were part of that weaponization, similarly kicking it out of the Swift global payment system. And so that's all part of this de-dollarization thing. And I didn't know until I read somewhere the other day that Argentina, who have in an absolute sort of economic, you know, basket case at the moment, but they have recently paid international monetary fund debt in Chinese currency, which they gained through a bilateral currency swap plan. We should talk more about the domination of the dollar. So 85% roughly of cross-border trade in the world is done in dollars compared to about 4.5% Chinese yuan. So America is absolutely dominant. And it allows it to do many, many things like borrow extraordinary sums of money. And one of the reasons why Biden can do industrial policies, which Rishi Sunak or Keir Starmer couldn't do in Britain, is because the dollar is a world's reserve currency. The argument, though, for why in theory, there's a good article in foreign policy, which we can share in the newsletter, on why in theory a BRICS currency could actually be more of a challenge to the dollar, is that unlike the euro, the BRICS are running a \$387 billion trade surplus. Europe runs a \$467 billion trade deficit, to put it in context. And theoretically, a BRICS currency could be an asset which people invest in, it would pay interest, these countries could incentivize households and businesses to use it, and they could use it for their own trade. And by doing so, they would be able to take back more control of their economic destiny as long as the dollar remains the world reserve currency. The US has the most extraordinary influence over the world, expressed particularly through things like sanctions. But so I think it was something that will keep coming up. And people who want to follow it in detail, this foreign policy article can do it much better than I can. Just to go back to Jim O'Neill's point about the way this whole thing started out, I guess this is what fuels the frustration of these countries. So they have, let's say, roughly a third share of the global GDP. But they have a very fraction of that in terms of the influence on the major financial institutions. Institutions like the IMF are still very much seen as kind of American driven. And this is all about them trying to de-Americanize or weaken the American hold over the financial institutions,

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which run the world economy or try to run the world economy and try to regulate and police the world economy. An added to which, of course, it's all about China's further showing that they have real strength within the world economically and diplomatically. I think that's what this is all about, getting all these 49 heads of African nations to this summit as well as the usual attendees. So it's obviously central for Xi Jinping because this is only the second trip he's done abroad this year. I mean, his first trip, I think, was March in Russia. So he's only done two trips, two foreign trips this year, and he chose to do Russia and South Africa for the BRICS. I also wonder, I mean, there are big problems in the Chinese economy, which we have touched on. We can talk about much more. It's the housing bubble. It's the banking sector. It's a loss of what turns out to be ridiculous over capital investment, which is beginning to go wrong. It's demography. So there's an interesting question of whether China is going to begin losing some of its clout as its economy loses some of its momentum. I mean, it's going to remain enormous. It's going to remain the second largest economy in the world for a very, very long time to come. But its growth rate is likely to drop below that of the United States over the next few years. And I wonder whether that will begin to affect people's willingness to line up behind it? Morocco, maybe my final point, and this just illustrates what you just said, it's not all one way. Morocco, there was a report put out, I don't know by who, maybe the South Africans, maybe the Russians, that Morocco was planning to join. And Morocco put out a statement saying, not only we're not planning to join, we're not planning to attend the meeting. Right. So it's not all going their way. No, no. And Joe Biden's wife was in Morocco, just five weeks ago. And the king of Morocco, who's been absent, he's been hanging out with a famous martial arts, an ultimate martial artist, who he disappeared with for a year. Careful what you say. Careful what you say. He's now returned and is now taking on a very active program of public engagements. Right. Now, you want to talk about AUKUS. Tell us about AUKUS. So AUKUS, just quickly before we go to you in the conference, is of course, the agreement between the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, trilateral pact signed 15 September 21. And the core of it is the supplying of nuclear powered submarines to Australia. Over to you. Yeah. Yeah. And the Labour Party Conference in Australia, which has took place this week, it was a big part of it. And it's not often that the Prime Minister, whether it's in Australia or the UK or anywhere where we have this sort of party conference system, where the Prime Minister has to step into a debate, the Prime Minister is expected to do the big speech and do the big set piece and do all the glad handling that goes on with it. But he actually had to step in and speak in the debate because there was a lot of criticism of this. And it's interesting. I hadn't really understood until now that this was as divisive in Australia and inside the Australian Labour Party as it seems to have been. And the Defence Minister, Richard Marles, he got sort of peckled a bit. And they ended up giving us a very long statement of detail. And Alban Asi went up and basically said that he presented this as a jobs thing. They're going to be 20,000 well paid unionised jobs. And this was a cause to try and get some of the unions calmed down a bit on it. So it will remain part of the platform for the Australian government going forward. But the other thing that was

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coming

through is that Labour members worried that this was tying Australia far too closely to America at a time when they're slightly looking over the shoulders at China. So I suppose they see the Americans kind of flat out gung-ho, they see China as the enemy, Taiwan's kind of hovering there. And then the other thing that came through, and I can remember this from days back in the Labour Party when you just had to mention the word nuclear to get a row going, the other thing the defence minister had to go up and say unequivocally, we will never base nuclear weapons on our shores.

Exactly. Just to remind listeners that the big change is that the Australians were about to buy something called the attack class submarine from the French, which was going to have 4000 jobs in France, you know, contract worth tens of billions of euros. And that was going to be for a conventional

powered submarine. So traditionally submarines in Australia are diesel powered and they have to keep popping up to get air and they have to be refueled frequently. The big change is suddenly without turning the French unilaterally, the Americans and the British decided to sell nuclear powered submarines to Australia. And these are nuclear powered, they don't have nuclear weapons on them, but they're powered by nuclear power, which means that they can keep going literally for years, even decades underwater, without having to come up for air or refuel, which gives them much,

much more powerful projection capacity. But it breaks the fact that Australia and New Zealand, all these countries have a very, very strong commitment to avoid proliferation of nuclear weapons. People are worried that their acquisition and actually Brazil's acquisition of nuclear powered

submarines potentially has a proliferation risk that someone could use the nuclear powered energy that powers the submarine to start building nuclear weapons. But I think it's also showing, as you say, this big cleavage about how much does Australia want to be part of America's new Cold War. And that's why they ended up using quite left-wing arguments. The prime minister talked about jobs, the defense industry minister guy called Pat Conroy, he talked about it. He said, if you're pro-human rights, you've got to be pro-Orcus. And he said that, you know, labor has always been proudly anti-war and Orcus will help us to deter war. So they really had to take this on from a kind of left-wing perspective. And it took Albanese, it took Albanese to go up there as the prime minister and basically say, listen, you know, back me on this. And, you know, they did, they did, you know, even figures on the right, Paul Keating, who's one of my favourite politicians ever, former prime minister, very strong on defense, sort of pretty, you know, seen as on the right of the Labour Party. Are we getting on the podcast? I think we should, we definitely should. Paul, if you're listening, can you come on, please? And also former foreign minister Bob Carr, seen on the right. And they've been pretty critical. And of course, one of the other things that, you know, the cost of this thing is pretty mind-blowing. I think we're talking over something like 360 billion Australian dollars. What was the other thing that was really interesting, Rory, within this debate? So it's Orcus, Australia, UK, US. Within this debate, the UK barely figured. And I find that a bit weird as well.

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I agree. I agree. It is a bit weird, isn't it?

Yeah, I mean, the French thing was unbelievable. The French

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so angry they actually withdrew their ambassador from the United States. It's the first time they've ever withdrawn their ambassador from the United States going all the way back to the American Revolution. Albanese and Macron had a big sort of kiss and make up over the football. I don't know if you I'm sure you didn't follow this, Rory, but I'll fill you in. Australia played France and the winner played England. And so they had a bet. They had a bet. And part of the bet was that whoever won, the other would agree to support that team against England.

Wasn't that whoever lost would have to pay 500 million euro and damages to the submarine?

There was nothing like that. So what it meant was that Albanese would have had to support France against England. Macron would have had to support Australia against England. And given that Australia won, it meant that Macron had the... I don't think he would have found it too hard, but Macron supported Australia over England. Very good. Let's end on the work. And thank you, Alistair, very much. And thank you for bringing us into the centre of that debate.

It's fascinating, as you say, the way that political communication works, that a nuclear submarine can be presented in terms of peace and human rights.

It's an interesting way to end this week's pod. Thank you.