

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 166. Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, and absolute populist power

Welcome to The Rest is Politics with me, Rory Stewart.

And with me, Alistair Campbell.

And we're about to talk about the extraordinary death of Yevgeny Prugoshin, who just got killed in a plane explosion, it seems.

We're going to talk about Narendra Modi in India.

We're going to talk about Nadine Doris.

And we're going to be touching on the more general question of how one deals with media management as a politician.

Why are we doing that, Rory?

We're doing that because I have been told off by Alistair for not successfully controlling a slightly lamentable interview that I did in the Times.

I'm also, for people who are watching, I am wearing a hoodie, which as people will imagine is something I regularly wear.

And Alistair is also wearing a hoodie, but this hoodie is a gift from Alistair.

And it says looping back on it, as well as the rest of politics on the back.

And the other one says 100%.

I think I should have gone for very good.

I think if we had our friend Mustafa Suleiman from the artificial intelligence world, these guys can find out how many times we say certain things.

And I reckon very good is your number one.

Some people try to count, don't they?

Anyway, this was a gift.

Alistair, who very kindly came to my birthday party in Scotland and played happy birthday on the pipes.

I did.

And I also, by the way, I think we should acknowledge, if I were to say to most of our listeners, Theresa May Dancing, they're probably going to say ABBA because of that time she came out at the party conference speech and she looked slightly kind of weird.

But I have to say, Rory, you and she were the first on the dance floor when the Kalia band started up.

And I thought you both knew your steps.

She was pretty good, wasn't she?

I really did think she was pretty good.

Yeah, I was impressed.

She says she'd been taught at school.

Ah, OK.

As indeed were you.

I mostly was trained in the army.

They put a lot, you know, in the army, they literally in the back watch, they would do, we do three hours a week.

The pipe major would put us through our steps.

It was a very, very serious training.

Wow.

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All the officers had to go through dancing training.

Yeah.

My Lord.

Isn't that a bit woke?

We can only dance with men, of course.

There were no women in the mess.

So we totally woke, totally woke.

This was my father's job during the Second World War.

So right in the middle of the war, my father was the officer commanding Scottish dancing in his battalion in the black watch.

So when they weren't training on how to fight the Germans, they were learning how to do the eights in real.

Very good.

We should also mention there were lots of interesting people at your 50th birthday party.

Quite a few of them went to your old school, quite a few pinky rings in the room.

I was pleased to say not that many politicians.

I mentioned Theresa May, Alex Chalk was there, the Justice Secretary, and I thought David Gork went even better than I did at getting the right present for you.

Yeah.

So David Gork gave me a picture of a footballer and, as you know, I'm a huge fan of football.

It wasn't just a picture, it was a framed, it was a huge framed thing.

Well, this is where, of course, where I turned.

So I had to text David and said, who on earth is this footballer?

And the answer, Alice, is Darren Bent.

Darren Bent.

There we are.

So I now have a huge picture of Darren Bent giving to me by David Gork, which will go in pride of place somewhere.

I'm not quite sure where.

Absolutely.

Hang it in the main room over the fireplace.

Well, listen, we had a very nice time, beautiful part of the world, and I came back via the Traquere Book Festival, which was very nice.

I was grilled by a couple of students.

School one was still at school, won a student.

Anyway, we'll come on to your book later, Rory, because you're right.

I don't think you went into that interview in the times with the aim of getting a headline that said, Rory Stewart on Alastair Campbell, it's a daddy thing, did you?

No.

And I think perhaps your advice would have been that the words politics on the edge, his new book would have been helpful in the otherwise 3,000 word article that they flew to Jordan to do.

Yeah, I think they would.

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Now should we go to Mr. Progosian now resting in peace somewhere, along with several of his senior Wagner group, right hand people, and a crew pilot, a copilot and the one woman who was on the flight, all dead.

I don't know what your initial reaction was, but I couldn't resist myself, couldn't stop myself tweeting a couple of things.

The first was, I guess it's beats falling out of a hotel window.

I can come on to name some of the ones you've done that.

But also, I did do a tweet saying, come on, Vlad, you know, you want to do a thoughts and prayers with the family at this difficult time tweet.

And lo and behold, shortly afterwards, he released a statement saying how sorry he was.

So it is absolutely unbelievable.

So just quick recap.

Progosian and anyone who wants more details on him, we did an interview with Richard Engel, which is on our main feed.

And Richard Engel is this extraordinary journalist who followed Progosian's story on the ground through Ukraine, Syria, Central African Republic.

And we interviewed him just after Progosian's mutiny.

So Progosian, man who was a criminal who spent many years in jail, very, very much connected to the gang, gangland world of St. Petersburg rose to be this great chef for Putin, set up a massive catering company, became a billionaire with government contracts, supplying schools and government offices, set up this mercenary group.

And it was important.

I mean, I played a small role anyway in the initial invasion of Crimea being critical in Africa, particularly in the Sahel, where increasingly governments who were reliant on the French and the United Nations, places like Mali, have expelled French troops and said they want to get rid of 13,000 United Nations troops and instead replace them with these Wagner group mercenaries who act as bodyguards and who pay themselves by taking minerals out of these countries.

And the Russian government initially said they had nothing to do with the Wagner group at all, declared it that they had no connections, and Progosian initially sued journalists who suggested he had any connection with the Wagner group, but that all flipped around with the Ukraine war where he began to appear openly with them in the front line.

Seems to have become quite a popular figure with the Wagner group mercenaries themselves, many of whom are ex-criminals, and got into a fight with the Russian military command saying they hadn't supported him properly because he'd been fighting on the front line in a place called Bakhmut. He was withdrawn from the front line in April. His troops were withdrawn.

He then launched basically a military mutiny and started marching up the main road towards Moscow, called it off at the last moment, reconciled. This was two months ago with Vladimir Putin who

promised him safe conduct. He appeared a little bit as we've discussed in the fringes of a meeting with African leaders. He went back to the Sahel where he was photographed again with his troops. Everything seemed to be stabilized, and he returned to Russia and then was on a plane, and on the plane with him was Utkin, who was the founder of the Wagner group and who was the

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man

whose call sign was originally Wagner, was on the plane with him, and also the head of his security detail, the three main people core of the Wagner group, and their plane blew up.

The other one who was on there was a guy called Valery Chakalov, who was the money man. He was the

guy who was in charge of non-military business interests, which were serious and profound and wide-ranging. By the way, we should say that of Utkin, the reason he chose the call sign Wagner was indeed because he was Hitler's favorite musician. Utkin, when they finally found, I don't know what state his body was in, but when they were doing the testing on it to establish that they were indeed the leaders of the Wagner group, they would have found on his body lots of neo-Nazi tattoos, because apparently his body was covered with them. We were coming on back through France when it happened, and we were in this, Fiona and I were staying in this hotel, and I was just channel hopping through all the news channels, and every single one was talking about this to the exclusion of virtually everything else. But in Russia, of course, it's not been that big a deal. Peskov, Putin's spokesman, has said it's a complete and total lie, which is usually code for, it's true, complete and total lie that they had any involvement whatsoever. Putin said he was very sorry to hear it. He was a very talented businessman who made some bad mistakes. But of course, the message it sends to everyone inside Russia is, you know, he may have been weakened by the mutiny, but if you step out of line, this is what's going to happen. To be clear, sort of read behind the code of what you're saying. I mean, there's no doubt at all that this is something that was ordered by Vladimir Putin, that was executed by his intelligence and security forces. We've got some quite interesting messages coming into us from people who are very, very well placed with sources. And although it's still evolving, they seem to be pretty clear this was not a GRU operation, not a military intelligence operation, but almost certainly an operation, the FSB, that there were certainly attempts, it seems, to persuade the flight attendant to carry a bag on board, or at least to put something in her bag. There were rumors that it had been hit by a missile surface to air or air to air, but it now seems increasingly clear that it was something probably planted in the black fuselage of the plane. The plane blew apart spectacularly on the two-month anniversary. And I think Putin, when he says he has nothing to do with it, this is very, very normal. The nods and winks and lies are very much the way that he operates. And actually, it's part of the general thing that you've talked about, which is the sense of a mafia state, because the old Soviet Union, with all its problems, would have probably tried somebody like this. It might even have been a show trial, but they certainly would have tried to use the rule of law. This man had clearly committed an act of treason. He mutinied against the Russian state.

And that's what Putin called it in the first stage, didn't he? He called it treachery.

Yeah. And so, nothing's more indicative of the fact that there is not even a pretense of rule of law, that he didn't attempt to use any of the normal legal methods, would have been very easy to get a prosecution, given what Prugoshin did, but instead to simply spectacularly murder him in the sky. And you've been talking about other ones, haven't you?

Well, there was... Yeah, I just had a little look at... You do slightly lose count. Of course, we know everybody in our part of the world will know, I would think, Alexander Litvinenko. And of course, one of our first interviewees on leading was his widow, Boris Berezovsky as well.

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And often spectacular, aren't they? Litvinenko obviously deliberately done with this rare, radioactive substance. Poisoned through drinking tea. Berezovsky found dead in his bath with a ligature around his neck, made to look like suicide. But the coroner recorded an open verdict because the coroner couldn't work out how Berezovsky could have done that to himself. Boris Nemtsov, who was one of the great white hopes back in the day with Chabayas. And I remember,

you know, I met him with Tony Blair a couple of times, really, really impressive guy.

He was literally shot in the back walking close to the Kremlin. Pavel Antoff, he was a tycoon who fell out of a window in India. The chairman of Luciole, Maganov, he was another one who fell out of a window. Dan Rappaport, a businessman in Washington, he kept criticizing Putin on social media. He got topped. Mikhail Lezin, he was murdered in a hotel room. He was the guy who founded RT, the English language Russian today, but then Russia today, but then turned a bit. Lots of journalists that were that were shot, one who was Natalia Estemirova, she wrote a lot about people who were abducted and taken away and shot in the woods, and she was taken away and shot in

the woods. I think people will remember also Annapolit Koskaya. Absolutely. Who was killed in 2008.

She wrote a book called Putin's Russia, basically saying Putin was turning Russia into a police state, and she was wiped out by a contract killer. Paul Klebnikov, Forbes Magazine, he was killed by a contract killer. And on and on, and it goes. And also on that, I mean, I think the element of making it dramatic and theatrical is central to this, isn't it? Because what was striking about the Skripal poisoning, the attempt to kill a former GRU officer in Salisbury, and also Litvinenko, is the deliberate use of very exotic substances, radioactive substances, which could only be created in a national military laboratory to do it, or in this case, blowing a plane out of the sky, that he's increasingly not doing things which anyone could possibly think was an accident. These are done in a very mafioso fashion to demonstrate power.

And also, it indicates that no matter how powerful you think you are, we talked before about how Prugoshin sort of considered himself on a par with Putin in terms of power and public appeal and so forth. And Prugoshin obviously made, I don't know whether he would view it as a mistake to sort of launch a coup and then abort it. But he clearly believed, or he seemed to believe that the deal that was brokered by Lukashenko in Belarus is, you know, one of the most propitius in people on the planet. He brokered the deal. Prugoshin then, as you said earlier, felt comfortable and confident enough to turn up at the summit with African leaders. And I'm assuming that the other people on the plane, there's a guy called Makarayan, Propustin, Totmin and Matusayev, I'm assuming they were security in bodyguards. He would go everywhere with bodyguards, I'm assuming he had at

least four. And yet none of them seem to bother to have done any sort of basic security on the plane. Well, I mean, it depends how they consider it. I mean, it is interesting. I mean, you're absolutely right. If it were, as people are suggesting, possibly in the bag, were flight attendants, they definitely should have caught it. If on the other hand, it was a complicated FSB operation where they actually hid something in the fuselage of the plane, I think that would be more difficult to pick up. But the basic point is what on us did they think they were doing? Cheerfully flying around in Russia. And that suggests

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that he trusted Putin. He believed Putin when Putin said that he was forgiven. Nobody in certainly seems, I mean, I've been watching AltaZera again, and they did quite a good section, which people can see on YouTube, which we'll send a link on in the show notes of people who subscribe to our feed. But they did quite good interviews with people in the streets in Moscow. And I think a couple of things are striking to me. One is to be reminded of the fact that despite all of this, Russians are still prepared to be pretty outspoken and clear. And you got three very different views. Nobody is certainly suggesting that Putin hadn't done it. So there was one lady saying, this was absolutely the right thing to do. It was a matter of honor. And man then saying, you know, this man is a national hero. We should absolutely mourn him. And you can see the sense that the at the Wagner group offices, people bring flowers. And then a third man saying, no, no, no, this is this is a matter of illusion. Progression wasn't on the plane. You know, he will have miraculously escaped the state media. They have played it right down. And in Sephora, one report that I saw was them effectively just sort of showing lots of headlines from Western newspapers saying this was Putin's revenge. And basically saying, look how they all get told what to say about these events, completely flipping the reality of what happens there, where they literally sit there waiting for the talking points as sent to them by Peskov so that they can then sort of regurgitate them. So I think there will be questions around Africa. The likelihood is that the Wagner group, I mean, it's obviously going to completely change. We've lost, as you've pointed out, all the senior leadership of the group has been wiped out, completely decapitated. This gives Putin the opportunity if he wants to take back much more control. It's less relevant to Ukraine. They're not a big feature in Ukraine now. So it will be about what continues to happen in Africa. And there probably the local leaders will come to their own accommodations with Russia. They certainly will continue working in CAR and Mali and Burkina Faso and Niger and the Central African Republic. So it will be a very, very different force. And I think, presumably, Vladimir Putin has learned a lesson, which is the danger of having mercenary forces with very independent outspoken charismatic leaders. We're not going to see much more of that. And meanwhile, the war sort of grinds on. Ukraine counteroffensive one step forward, one step back, some days feels it's going really well, next day feels less well. Quite a troubling report. I think it was in the New York Times the other day. There are no official figures of Ukrainian deaths. The Ukrainian government says they're a state secret. But American sources talking to the New York Times reckon about 70,000 dead Ukrainian soldiers, 120,000 injured. And another piece we should maybe put in the newsletter from Quentin Somerville, the BBC, an interview he did with a woman called Margo who's doing the administration in the military mortuary, including having seen her own partner come in dead. It was really very, very, very moving. And just a reminder that while we've all been focused on pre-Gosian, this on the ground, it's just grinding on. Yeah. So we also wanted to touch on India, which is a country that we must do more on. And we keep saying this. And I think we've got an opportunity. You were watching a speech by Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India. And I'm going to just give sort of very, very quick background. So Narendra Modi has been Prime Minister of India since 2014. He won the first

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parliamentary majorities for the BJP, the Hindu Nationalist Party, which he's the leader of. And he's very closely associated also with the paramilitary wing of the party, the RSS. He is a Hindu nationalist. He very much follows the populist playbook. A lot of his talk is about grassroots against the elite. He's taken a number of measures against Muslims, particularly a Citizenship Act, which means that if you're a Christian or a Hindu or a Buddhist or a Jain, you can be accelerated to get citizenship in India, but not if you're a Muslim. He often attacks the media, very, very sort of centralized, very charismatic rule associated with horror, with riots in Gujarat and anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat, particularly, but also most recently in Delhi. And he's presiding over the country, which is now probably the most populous country in the world. India's population has just got larger than that of China, 1.4 billion people, the fifth largest economy in the world. And you've been watching Modi's speech, so over to you. I have been watching it, but because he delivered it in, I'm assuming it was in Hindi, I also read it. But I did watch it, partly because of something that you've all know Harari said about Netanyahu, is that you have to understand that when they're speaking to their own people in their native tongue, sometimes they're saying slightly different things. So the speech was pretty remarkable to watch, big crowd at the Red Fort in New Delhi, a lot of first person stuff. Modi had the courage to do this, you trusted Modi to do this and he did it, really kind of talking himself up. And I then spoke to somebody who actually does speak his language and said there were one or two things that were really, really quite significant. So for example, I don't speak any Hindi, you maybe do speak any Hindi at all. A little Hindi, yeah. Well, something called amrit khal is an astrological term, which essentially means we're at the point of a new era. So he's talking about a new era. And remember, this was an independence day speech. And India became independent from Britain in 1947. But he was talking, his speech was about a millennium of slavery and subjugation. And of course, what that refers to is the period when they were ruled by Muslim dynasties. He's a great one for the triptych, I have to say. Which your friend Neil Kinnock was a great believer in. The triptych is a wonderful sort of device. He talked about how their great strengths were demography, democracy and diversity, okay, three D's rather than the three P's he actually uses. But he also talked about when he got onto his opponents and a lot of the speech was about his opponents. He talked about corruption, nepotism and appeasement. Now corruption, he has kind of made crony capitalism a huge thing in India. Nepotism, yeah, what he's basically is getting at the sort of the Nehru and the Gandhi dynasties there. But appeasement, according to my friend, who speaks the language, is a sort of, it's a way of speaking to those who prefer the minority. And what Modi has presided over, you mentioned when he was Prime Minister of Gujarat. I don't know if you remember this, but he was actually banned, he was the only person ever refused a visa to the United States under a particular piece of the law, which was about religion. And the Americans only lifted that ban after he became Prime Minister. Europe and the UK, they lifted the ban shortly before he became Prime Minister. But he never, he very, very rarely, if ever speaks out when there is violence by Hindus against Muslims and Christians. And there has been a lot of it recently.

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Well, I mean, the Gujarat case, I remember that one of the strongest allegations which seemed to be absolutely substantiated is that one of the Muslim lawmakers in Gujarat tried repeatedly to call Narendra Modi, who was then the Chief Minister, while the crowds were beginning

to gather around his house and over a number of hours pleaded with him to send the police. And all his calls were ignored and eventually he was murdered.

Almost 2,000 people got killed. And look, the RSS that you mentioned, which is like the kind of umbrella of which the BJP, his party is a part, it's not the other way around. And their roots are in fascism. When they were developing, they were pre-war, pro-Hitler, pro-Muslimy. And of course, they've been banned through terms, I think, by the Indian state. First, because of the assassination of Gandhi, because the former RSS member was the man that killed Gandhi, then the demolition of the Babri Masjid, which was a seminal moment in 1991, where this extraordinary monument of Islamic architecture, one of the most beautiful mosques in the world, was torn down by a Hindu nationalist crowd on the grounds that it had been built over the site and built 500 years ago over the site of a former Hindu temple. I mean, it was an extraordinary thing to do. It would be a bit like, I don't know, maybe some stupid analogy, but like tearing down Westminster Abbey because you came from religion

that said, you know, I don't know, the Roman temple was originally underneath it. Obviously, in this case, a living religion. But India holds 10% of the Muslim population in the world, 215 million people in India are Muslims, not obviously after partition. Many Muslims migrated to Pakistan and Bangladesh, and India remained the Hindu majority state. But there are still 215 million Muslims in India. And obviously, that's, you know, three times the population of the United Kingdom. The thing about the Independence Day speech is that it followed a period of considerable violence, which he claimed was being sorted out. But then since then, there's this gleaming new city called Gurugram, very, very complicated backstory. But essentially, there was a lot of violence going on. And the Muslims were being driven out. And, you know, there are people now who talk about it as a sort of form of ethnic cleansing.

Those sort of numbers that you talk about means that it's quite a terrifying thing were that to take root. But the point is that the minorities feeling that the people in power are not even speaking up for them when the assault is so clear, so that mob violence now seems to be tolerated hate speech seems to be seems to be tolerated. The other thing I checked out when there was the trouble in Leicester between people living in Leicester, Hindus and Muslims, quite a lot of violence. A lot of this driven on social media rumors made up stories. 80% of the social media traffic on it was coming out of India itself.

Goodness. And you shared some of it with me and it was very disturbing. So this is British electoral politics. And often what seems to be happening is that social media is suggesting that Hindus should be voting for the conservatives. Because, and I think in Leicester, it is a suggestion that labor is too associated with Muslims. In other contexts, there have been suggestions that the Sikhs are very closely connected. But essentially, these are different ways of translating sectarian politics over into British politics. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and his wife, who's of course the daughter of a very wealthy Indian businessman, incredibly successful Indian businessman, will be making a visit to India, partly to try to get this trade

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deal with India together. And many of the questions around Modi's government, around his closeness to the Indian diaspora, the fact that I think as he mentioned, he does these extraordinary speeches in France and the US, the UK, where he can fill stadiums like no one else, very close to Preeti Patel. I remember when I was working in with Preeti Patel closely, how much she leveraged that relationship with Modi. She'd often talked to David Cameron about the fact that she was the into Modi and even as a backbencher accompanied him on trips to India. So I think this will all come and become much more into focus if and when Rishi Sunak does this trip to India.

I think the chances of a trade deal are pretty slim. Also, although as you say, Rishi Sunak's father-in-law is an incredibly successful businessman, you have to be close to the power and to some extent, but I think he's seen as quite a liberal by comparison. By the way, Rishi Sunak's grandfather was a member of this RSS.

Good as well. Well, hopefully we don't all have to carry this sins of our grandfathers.

No, we don't. We don't have to carry the ball, Roy. But you know, there is a bit of the old yay into the Middle Ages. By the way, I met at both at your party and at the Traqueur festival, Willi Dal Rumpal. And of course, one of our sister podcast, Empire, which he hosts with Anita Anand. I mean, he knows more about Indian history than anybody I've ever met in my life. He was reminding me, by the way, that there is a country in the world which celebrates independence from Britain every six days, which is a reminder of how powerful we once were.

Great to see Willi Dal Rumpal out there dancing with us on Saturday night, dancing in a splendid fashion with Dal Rumpal's and Fraser's all allied with the stewards and not being too aggressive towards the Campbells. Actually, his family were very close to the Campbells, of course, so you'll be pleased with that. They organised the massacre of Glencoe, which you guys executed for them. You were like the Progosian and they were like the Putin at the time.

Thank you. Thank you so much for that comparison. Very, very nice. I once got asked to leave a pub in Glencoe. The only thing I'd say, Roy, is that you may not want to hear this, but you raised the whole sort of the Klan battles. There was a, I don't know how to describe it, but a member of your family who did say that of all of the people wearing a kilt, which included you and me, she thought I wore the kilt best. There we are. Oh my goodness. Now, that's probably just the, you were being charming in an excessive fashion, I can imagine. So, yes, Willi Dal Rumpal's Empire Pods got a great section on partition and he's now doing something on Russia and the Great Game, which I can't wait to see. I actually, for people who are really nerdy about this question of Russia and the Great Game, which was the standoff with Britain and the way in which Afghanistan was in the centre of world politics in the 19th century, I did a BBC documentary on it, which I discuss it with Willi Dal Rumpal that you can see, but I'd also encourage you to listen to their podcast, which is going to focus on Russia and Great Game in the future.

And I should also say that both he and Anita and Anne, we have a great team producing our podcast, but they were absolutely singing the praises of Callum, young Callum, who does for them what Dom and Nicole do for us. Thinking about Modi and watching him, and I do love watching people

because I think you can learn so much more, even if you can't understand what they're saying, but I think in some ways Modi is the politician that Trump would really love to be because he gets away with more. They've got the G20 coming up next month and where it is, where it's taking place, everywhere you go, now you're just seeing these massive posters of Modi welcoming what the

world leaders and Geo strategically, he's in a pretty smart place in a way because he doesn't sort of have to choose. There he was at BRICS with China and Brazil and Russia and South Africa, and then he'll be hosting the G20 and whereas China and Russia have seen very much on one side, he's very close to Putin, they get most of their arms now from Russia, India's actually bought more Russian oil since the invasion than before, and just at the same time, as you say, Soonak wanting the trade deal, Biden not wanting China to have all the kind of support that it's trying to get, he gets a pretty good relationship with a lot of Western countries as well.

I think it's something we've got to keep watching and we've also obviously got to acknowledge that he has brought through some impressive economic reforms that the Indian economy is booming, growing very fast. It's done incredible. I mean, it's gone from 60% of the Indian population living in extreme poverty in 1981 to only 10% today, so there's a lot to be said very positive on the economic miracle of India. Although they're really struggling with, I think they're really struggling with inflation at the moment as are many, many countries. I just, while you were talking that, I just remembered that I wrote about Modi in my book *Winners* because I thought his campaign,

the first campaign was one of the best campaigns I've ever seen. You know this thing, I go on about ABBA with the holograms, at the Abbotars. Modi was using holograms of himself to do speeches in India to vast crowds all over the country simultaneously. So he would come up in a truck with a big crowd and that would be him, real. And simultaneously, in different parts of India, there were trucks and the technology was portraying him. And he was getting bigger crowds for the hologram because people were so fascinated by it. So I wrote about that in the *Winners* book and then I got approached asking if I would go out to India and write his book. Oh my goodness, you were going to be his biographer? A biographer or write about the campaign. I can't remember anywhere. I was very, very, very, very tempted. And I'm sort of glad I didn't do it like given where the Modi story has gone. Couldn't agree more. But as you say, I mean, incredibly powerfully placed now. And in some ways, as China runs into economic headwinds, which we, again, is something we're going to have to get into a bit, India is going to be in a very interesting pole position. But on that, I think, let's take a break and see you in a minute.

Welcome back to the *Rest is Politics* with me, Alistair Campbell. And with me, Rory Stewart. But how's your artificial intelligence development going on?

Well, so we've been doing a lot on AI, as I think we should. And we've got an interview out both of us with Mustafa Suleiman on leading, which I'd encourage people to listen to. Mustafa Suleiman is unique. I mean, he's the only man who's now founded two of the most important AI companies in the world. He was the co-founder of Google DeepMind. He's a really interesting Brit from a working class background, half Syrian, who has become one of the central figures in the artificial intelligence revolution. And we had an interview with him on leading. What have you thought about it, reflecting? I mean, have people begun listening? Have you got any feedback? Yeah, good feedback. Driving back from your party, Fiona and I listened to it. And Fiona, her reaction was very, very interesting, because I think I was so sort of deep into the whole AI thing. A couple of points, she said, this guy ought to go into politics. He stands to me like he's got real values and principles. And I think the point that really struck her was when he was saying that politicians at the moment just don't have that kind of long-term vision, whereas perhaps it can emerge from his world. Another friend of mine got in touch with me and

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said that they found it absolutely fascinating, but felt there was always this tension with these AI guys. On the one hand, they're saying, this is really dangerous. This is really terrible. And on the other, they're saying, but it's my world, so I'm just going to keep going with it. But no, I think people will find it really, really interesting. And I'm with you. I want to try to understand this thing much, much, much better than I currently do.

Well, very good. So we've got a lot of stuff to talk about. There's just one quick thing that occurred to me as we went into the break, which I didn't mention. And maybe we could do a little bit more on Sunday. Modi is beginning to face challenge and defeat in Southern India. And state elections are incredibly important. It's a federal state. And in many ways, the chief ministers of individual Indian states, many of which are obviously much larger than the United Kingdom, are huge power figures. He lost Karnataka to Congress. Karnataka is right at the heart of the tech revolution. And Southern India is proving to be more progressive, more liberal, more anti-populous, more anti-Modi. So that's the story I think that maybe we can continue to watch. Yeah, although we talked recently about how sometimes the best way to deal with those challenges is to get your political opponents out of the way. And of course, Rahul Gandhi has been, he's been put out of the way through the legal process.

Through the legal process, again, yeah, which we're seeing again and again, these legal challenges. I mean, as you say, I mean, against populists, in the case of Trump, and done by populists generally, as a way of with Erdogan and Modi taking out their political opponents. Rahul Gandhi being, of course, the leader of the Congress party.

Shall we move to another giant figure in the world scene, which is Nadine Dorries?

I think Dorries, I think Dorries's contribution to Westminster in the last few months has been at least on a par with Nadine Dorries. And now she's, having said months ago, I think it was even before the the pregosian coup, that she was resigning in protest at the awful horrors that had been inflicted upon that saint, Boris Johnson. Finally, she has said she's going, taking the Chilton hundreds, one of those ridiculous quaint phrases that we still hang on to. And she was supposed to go with all the other by-elections. So she completely astonished her colleagues and the whips in number 10 by not having her by-election at the same time as Alex Prydzian and others, but holding off. But we now see why, because what she's actually doing is she's got a book coming out at the end of September. And she has timed the by-election and her resignation speech basically as a press release for her book. And the people, her voters, who've barely seen her in Parliament, now have to celebrate the fact that politics has finally become PR in the most extreme sense possible, that their entire democratic future is in the hands of the schedule of her book publication. Can I say something else, all right? Just to cheer, this should really cheer you up, okay? Yesterday, I had a little look at Amazon to see how politics on the edge was doing. And it was at number two in democracy. Oh, that's very good. You know, they have all these different categories, right?

And it's not been published yet. That's good. I know, exactly. And guess what was number one? Oh, no. Could it be, but what can I do? No, no, no, no. I was four or five. I've already been number one. I'm now trying to help you, okay? Okay, now what's number one? Well, number one, yesterday was The Plot by Nadine Dorries. Oh, no, you're kidding me. But I thought, oh, God, I'm always going to be really upset about that. So I looked again this morning and, hey, presto, this may have been the result of the interview you did at the weekend, or I don't know what. But

anyway, you have now ousted her from that top spot in the democracy section. Well, it's going to be pretty intense September because my book is coming up exactly the same time as Theresa May's and exactly the same time as Nadine Dorris. So hopefully we're appealing to different parts of the British readership, but we're all going to be in trouble, aren't we? Now, by the way, I made the mistake there of mentioning the Chiltern Hundreds, which is what you apply for to call a by-election. And it seems that some of our listeners want to know the background to this phrase. Under a resolution of the House of the 2nd of March, 1624, members of parliament cannot directly resign their seat. Death, disqualification and expulsion are the only means by which a member's seat may be vacated during the lifetime of a parliament. There are two such offices that are used for disqualification, Crown Steward and Bayliff of the Chiltern Hundreds and of the Manor of Northstead. So basically, you have to apply for an office that doesn't really exist, rather than nonsense. So I think the point is that you're not allowed to have something called an office of profit under the Crown at the same time as you're in MPs. And the Steward of the Chiltern Hundreds is one of these offices of profit. So it's a legal fiction first introduced by a man called John Pitt, 1750s, that the elegant way out because you apparently, I think, yeah, as you say, you can't resign, but you can disqualify yourself by taking an office of profit under the Crown. Really interesting thing also, there's been some good studies on by-elections. There used to be prodigious numbers of by-elections. I think over 80 in a parliament were normal at the beginning of the century because members of parliament then were not paid. And they were older.

And they were older. So many of them died, but many of them would just resign. I mean, they'd move on

to other things. And it reduced very, very dramatically as parties became more professional, as we got professional politicians, people tended not to leave between by-elections. You can see this very, very steep, steep decline. So it's a big change in British politics. People would have been applying for the Chiltern Hundreds again and again and again if we'd been back in 1900s. I think Nadine Dorey's was a first because I think this is the first time there's ever been a resignation letter to the Prime Minister that wasn't actually sent to the Prime Minister. And what was it sent to? It was sent to the Daily Mail. So it was published in the Daily Mail. So I don't know whether Rishi Sunak has time to read the Daily Mail, but that's how people found out about it. It was a completely astonishing speech. I mean, essentially the resignation letter is the most outrageous resignation letter you've ever read. I mean, normally, you leave with a pretty short statement. Give us a sense, Alistair, of what the normal standard resignation letter would be. It'd be about a page long and what points would it hit? What's a normal resignation letter? I'd say a normal resignation letter would be a fact of resignation reason followed by brief assessment of contribution to political and public life, followed by nice words about the Prime Minister if you're leaving nicely and not very nice words, a bit neutral if you're feeling you've been booted out unfairly. And generally speaking, not brutal towards the Prime Minister. So you can hint at it with a bit of, you know, we've had our policy differences, but I remain loyal to the party and my constituents and all this kind of stuff. Yeah, although I guess, I mean, it's ludicrous to put Jeffrey Howe, who was at least a serious figure in the same breath as Nadine Dorey's, but people were comparing her letter, not to his resignation letter, but his resignation statement in the Commons

really was devastating against Margaret Thatcher. I think Nadine Dorey's made some pretty powerful

points. But I remember when I did my first volume of diaries, and I was doing an interview with Al Gore in the process while I was editing them. And I was, we were talking about it, and he'd done some really good books and mainly about the environment. But, and I remember he said this thing to me, he said, you know, the most important thing about a political memoir, don't use it to settle scores. And I think that's quite a good piece of advice, you know, don't explain things, but don't use it to settle scores. And the trouble with her letter is that clearly, as you say, relates to her book, it's all about settling scores. And it's all about feeding this mythology that somehow people like Johnson and her are victims of some terror, even the title of the book, The Plot. No, it's incredible. So one of her central claims is that there is a shadowy elite that is running a conspiracy. So she says, why is it that we've had five British prime ministers without an election answer, a shadowy elite is undermining them? It's completely mad, right? I mean, the reason we've had five British prime ministers is David Cameron lost the Brexit election. Theresa May couldn't get her deal through. And indeed, Nadine Doris was one of the people who brought her down. Liz Truss bankrupted the economy and Boris Johnson got involved in a scandal. So the idea that the reason they're not there is because a shadowy elite is somehow kind of pulling the strings, instead of which what we have is very, very open politics in which you can see members of parliament who are obviously elected members of parliament going through voting procedures to get rid of their leaders for quite different reasons. All the leaders are resigning, but and Nadine Doris has been involved in bringing down some of these people. So it's completely weird, but no, sorry, more than weird. I think it's actually, sorry, I'll go further than that. I think it's disgusting. And I think it's deeply dangerous. I think in the modern landscape, to go around claiming there is a conspiracy of shadowy elites underlining our democracy is not just populist nonsense. It's deeply, deeply damaging to our whole state. And she should be very, very careful doing that. The other thing to say is that the idea that any other prime minister in our history would have put Nadine Doris in the cabinet is absurd. I remember

once being on Robert Peston show with her, you can probably find it all live, because I think there's a one point where I've literally always banging my head on the desk, because I'm realized I'm with somebody who literally just, and I say that one point, you literally are just talking utter nonsense. It was about Brexit, but she was talking absolute factual gibberish.

I think she's got a certain, she's not stupid. She's got a wisdom, she's got a sort of street wisdom about her, I think. She's obviously very good at manipulating people like Paul Dager to get him to sort of, you know, treat her like a serious politician. She's now got this TV show. She's obviously a very successful novelist and all that stuff. But I just thought in terms of politics, this is just a sign of how low our politics has fallen, that she was in charge of our culture. And do you remember that, you know, the other thing we should put in the newsletter, that clip of her at a select committee, when she's having an exchange about the governance and the financial standing of Channel 4, and it's perfectly clear, that's one of her big responsibilities, they've got this big plan to privatise it. She doesn't know how it is meant to operate, big part of her brief. She's making radical policies and doesn't understand it. Anyway, I do think it's completely disgusting to have delayed the date of her by-election purely

in order to do publicity around her book. It's completely horrible and bizarre. Now, meanwhile, I am obviously touched to me because I'm also publishing a book. So you're not. I am. I am politics on the edge, apparently. Yeah. The reason I've been thinking about it is I just, for the first time in many, many months, did a big interview. And it's something that obviously I was much more used to doing when I was a politician. Now I'm not a politician. I find myself really out of the habit of it. And I was reminded of how bizarre it feels to suddenly wake up to a whole series of WhatsApps from friends and former colleagues, talking about an interview and then read it and realise the way in which you're being presented to the world. So just to quick contest, Janice Turner, who's a Times journalist, travelled to Jordan to interview me, which is pretty surprising. The Times still has the budget to send people to Jordan to interview someone. And on the basis of, I guess, she spent probably an hour and a half with me, produces a complete psychological analysis of me, of my daddy complexes, of my relationship with women, of, you know, and I sort of, I want to start with that and say, for you as a journalist, do you guys not feel sometimes that maybe spending an hour and a half with someone doesn't really qualify you to give a full psychological analysis of their character? I don't consider myself to be a journalist. I consider myself to be a former journalist who now does a bit of journalism. The interviews I do for, well, the interviews I do with leading people will know about, I do those with you. The interviews I do, for example, for GQ and No Men's Health, I do them as Q&A. And I'm genuinely interested in what they have to say as opposed to necessarily what I have to say. I've got to be honest, I read it and I didn't think it was bad. I thought the headline was bad. The headline was that I have a daddy thing about you. Yeah, yeah. And I've got, Rory, when you were sitting there with your publicist for the book, right? You did this interview because you got a book to sell. That's a perfectly noble thing to do. I've done many interviews to try to sell books, my 18 books, I've just finished my 19th, but you have to really plan them and be careful about how you land it. And sometimes it means going over the top. Sometimes it means that you want to get to a point where the interviewer is saying, oh, God, and he mentioned his bloody book for the 15th time, big theme, et cetera. By the way, you did a fairly big interview. We did an interview together for the Observer ahead of our Harrogate show. And I thought that came out really, really well. But that's probably because I was driving the strategic message and you were just dipping it in there. Exactly, exactly. No, no, my problem is that I find it very difficult to avoid fully answering the questions. And now that I'm not a politician, I'm even more embarrassed about trying to get back on message. So, and I think the lesson I've taken from it, sadly, is that you can't be naive and that you have to accept that these are artificial structured things. You're doing it for a reason and you've got to approach it quite cautiously and not think that you can completely lay back and just chat in the way that you can to a friend. I mean, it's a stupid thing to say, but the public should be aware of this. I don't think it came out that badly. And I think what happens a lot often with these interviews is that your wife reads it, your mum reads it, your friends read it. And they'll sort of highlight one or two things and say, well, that was wrong. People get really offended if something's factually wrong. So, for example, there was a bit where he talked about me at the Alba Hall and I turned to you and said, that's where I nearly killed myself, right? And she said it was at Phil Collins. Right. Now, in fact, he was Eric Clapton. Right. So when my daughter, Grace, read it,

she read it, and she was sort of sitting on the sofa reading it. She sort of laughed a couple times. But actually, the thing that she really stuck with her, why did they get that role? Right. So that's how people react if they know. And then my mother's not that happy to have her husband portrayed that the reason he died at 92 is that he was a heavy drinker and a smoker. I mean,

as she points out, he made it to 92 and actually he wasn't particularly heavy smoker. He had a cigarette catch. But here's the thing, Rory, did a person who doesn't know you, but who might buy a book and might be interested in politics and might be interested in what you have to say about the world, did the piece as a whole give a sense that you were quite interesting? The answer to that is yes. So it's fine. One of the things that I noticed is that the first thing that you realize that something odd is going on is that all my former political colleagues, including current members of the House of Commons, immediately WhatsApp you saying, great interview, well done, really great.

And then you begin, you know, meeting ladies in the street in Creefield. Like, I was horrified by that. Rory, because they are still in that mode that you confessed recently you got into when you texted David Cameron to say great speech. And the best thing to do is ignore all of it and think that here's the thing, Rory, the only thing you can control in life are what you do and what you say about what you do. That's it. So focus on that. And I suspect what happened, you were quite pleased and flattered that they bothered to put somebody on a plane to come out to Jordan, you were probably quite relaxed because you knew you were coming home. And I think people like the fact that you just answer the question. But sometimes as the question is asked, a little part of your mind needs to think, why is she asking this? And how do I get this back onto something that I want to talk about? And I guess the only final thing that's my problem and we'll move on to this more interesting subject. But it's just that is the I think the thing that threw me most back is that she said Rory doesn't like women and that she'd had friends who'd sat next to me at dinner and I hadn't asked them any questions. And I thought that's a bit of a cheek. I mean, I'm not sure that I fully understand people on the basis of meeting them briefly. Who knows why she thought that. But I don't think that's fair.

In your defense, I met somebody, a woman from who works for The Times, who said to me that she knows you quite well and really found that line quite strange. Look, I think interviews like to make interesting observations, but I just wouldn't take it too seriously. Just enjoy the fact that at the end it said, if you want to buy the book, this is where you go.

Because that was the only reason you would do the interview.

Very good. Oh, by the way, before we go, before we go, before we go, before we go. And I think as we've gone on so long about Progosian and Modi and now your bloody interviews, right?

I think we should do Rubialis as the number one question because we've got lots of questions in question time. But what did you mean in the interview when you said that you didn't think that the podcast would survive a Labour government? Because I have to say, Rory, I have to say, Rory, I got lots of WhatsApp messages about that from Tory MP saying, by the way, if Stuart decides he can't do it in a Labour government, I'm available.

So that's a great question. No, so obviously, I'm worried that your tribalism will become so intense that every single conversation will become really, really fractious because the point at the moment is you lay into Rishi Sunak and I slightly half-heartedly defend him and we sort of move

on. But I think by the time Labour is in power, as soon as I raise every week something that's going wrong with what Kirstam has done, I think you're going to jump down my throat like a Rottweiler. No, I won't. I think you are finding it quite difficult to criticise Sunak in a way that I think you should. Look, for me, you may think I'm tribal, but I'm very critical of Labour compared to what I used to be with regard to Brexit, with regard to not being bold enough, with regard to my dislike of the Mingva strategy. And I think in government, don't forget, in government, you've been, you've worked inside a Conservative government, I've worked inside a Labour government, I think I'll be able to give a perspective that is interesting insight for with a bit of experience. And also, don't forget, Roy, maybe one of the reasons why I sometimes I'm a little bit cautious is because I am very, very, very friendly with some of the people who would be part of the government. Anyway, listen, David Gorg, Johnny Mercer, William Ake, Andrew Mitchell,

there's lots of stories out there we could get. Don't worry, Roy, if you feel you can't hack it, it's fine. I'm going to quote back to you. So I'm just going to say that, you know, you said, sometimes I'm a little bit more defensive about Rishi Sunak than I should be. So I'm going to remember that when we're doing, when Labour's in power, just see whether I can occasionally say you're maybe a little bit more defensive of Keir Starman should be. That's fine. Absolutely fine. So David Gorg, if you're listening, I really enjoyed the chat we had the other night.

Hey, I've got an idea. Listen, one of the things I thought is we could occasionally bring in a third person in our conversation, and we could have a, we could have a sort of conversation on who it could be. We'd have a guest trilogy from time to time. Well, I was, I did an interview the other day and one of the questions I was asked was, on leading, who was your dream interview EB? And I chose, you'll be very pleased. I said, I ended up with three. I said, King Charles, because then I could take the mickey out of Rory's obsequiousness. Angela Merkel, I'd love to do Angela Merkel, which is why I ping off a message at least once a month. And the third one, and this was born by listening on the long drive up to Scotland to a 10-part podcast series about Banksy on the BBC. I'd love to interview Banksy. Very good. Well, let's put him in behind Darren Bent. Right. Question time will follow. We'll do Mr. Rubialis in that. Lovely to talk to you, Rory. Speak soon. Thank you. Bye-bye.

Hello, Restors Politics listeners. It's Anita Arnand from the Empire podcast, which I host with me, William Dalrymple. And we are here to tell you about our brand new series of the Russian Empire

and The Great Game. With Russia dominating the news at the moment, we wanted to look into its history and see if there are any answers as to why Putin is doing the things he's doing, the way he's thinking. Yes. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Sergei Lavrov, the foreign minister, joked that Putin had only three advisors that he listened to. They were Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great and Catherine the Great. And we've got episodes on all three. That's right. And this week, we're telling the story of Putin's last advisor, Catherine the Great, the most powerful woman in history. It was under her reign that Russia took control of huge areas of modern Ukraine, annex Crimea and built the frontline towns like Kherson and Sevastopol. They're all too familiar to us from news bulletins at the moment. So if you want to see how Russia became the world power it is today and look at how Putin is influenced by said Russian Empire, you could do worse than listen to Empire wherever you get your podcasts.