

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 167. Question Time: How to rig an election, Scotland's golden goose, and the least impressive president of all time

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

And with me, Rory Stewart.

We should kick off with, pardon the pun, we should kick off with Louise Rubiales, because we said we were going to do it in the main podcast, but we got right down into the weeds of pregosion and Modi and your interview techniques.

Ailing, would he have kissed a male player on the lips?

What do you think?

I think this is the main point for me.

What a shame that this controversy has overshadowed the team's phenomenal achievement.

I'm assuming, Rory, that despite your antipathy to football, you are aware of this story.

Yeah.

This is the story about the fact that after the Spanish women's football team won the World Cup, one of their players was kissed on the lips, Jenny Hermosa.

And although the Spanish official has said that it was consensual, she has absolutely denied that it was consensual.

So, the question of sexual assault, obviously, has been brought forward because he has some non-consensually Bradro and Kester on the lips.

I mean, he's got a long track record of this guy.

He's been involved in all sorts of stories to do with using federation funds for orgies.

And it's not the first time that he's been in the centre of controversy in Spain.

But I think what's been really interesting about this, I mean, in Spain, I was talking to somebody in Spain the other night, it is absolutely all that anybody is talking about, because it feels a bit like the kind of whole Me Too thing again.

Now, you have some people who will be saying, oh, what's the fuss about, you know, so he kissed her on the lips, so what?

And I think that goes to, given that we are a political podcast, I think that's exacerbated when you think that we've had elected as president of America, somebody who said it's okay to grab a woman, you know, by her private parts.

We've had Boris Johnson, who doesn't even know how many children he's got.

Or if he does, can't say so publicly.

We've had Berlusconi with his bonga-bonga parties and all that sort of stuff.

And part of right-wing, hard right-wing populism is misogyny.

It is this feeling.

Now, I don't know if this guy, this guy apparently, Rubial, is actually quite close to the socialists.

This is something that's really interesting, because it's an uncomfortable story for progressives who love football.

This is the Spanish left-wing socialist party.

This is football.

So these are things that, you know, people want to like.

And the truth is that there's a lot of weird political nepotism, corruption, very, very poor governance.

It's a political appointment, and it raises questions, obviously, about socialist party.

It also raises huge questions about Spanish governance, and I guess will remind people

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like me who don't follow the stuff closely of the scandals around FIFA, a whole sense that the whole sport has a sort of weird connection with corruption, Gulf states spying inappropriate behavior, et cetera.

Well, also, the fact that there are very, very, I had to be fair to the FA, although it's had its own problems down the years, the FA in England, a lot of football associations attract some pretty dodgy people, and, you know, bribery, corruption in World Cup bids, in Olympic bids.

I mean, the politics of sport can be very, very, very murky, and the player had put out a statement saying it was fine.

It was just, you know, exuberance and celebration, and it turned out that she was sort of forced to do that, and I suspect she reflected on it, and she said, ultimately, she said she was sort of forced to put that out, and there was a horrible, see, when he first turned at Rubiales, went to the meeting, the emergency meeting of the football authorities, from which he's currently been suspended by FIFA, but at the first meeting where he said, I will not resign, I will not resign, I will not resign, you pan to this audience of mainly men, they're talking about the women's World Cup, this audience of mainly men, many of whom are clapping and cheering him, and I just think that that whole sense of misogyny in different cultures, it's got to be called out.

So I really look, I think he's, ultimately, I suspect he will go, Prime Minister said he's got to go, the federations have now asked him to, you know, to go.

His mother, I know you love your mother, Rory, would she go on hunger strike for you? Definitely.

Because Rubiales' mother has gone on hunger strike in a church because he's being persecuted. You'd definitely do that.

I'm sure your mother would have done the same.

Yeah, absolutely.

Now, one final point, Rory, because I know how utterly obsessed you are about Scottish football because you're a Scot and you love football so much.

Of absolutely, yeah.

Yeah.

I don't think enough players be made in the British media of the fact there's a Scottish angle to Mr. Rubiales.

Do you know what it is?

No.

He was a professional footballer and he ended his career at Hamilton Academical.

No goodness.

And were you aware of him before this?

Were you aware of his playing career?

No, not at all.

No.

Okay.

No, not a big star.

Right.

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Now, Zimbabwe.

So we talked a great deal about the Zimbabwe election in the lead up to the election.

And as you predicted, Emerson Manangagua has won the election.

And whereas last time he did the election, he was in a commanding position and didn't need to cheat to win.

This time he desperately needed to cheat to win and boy, did he do a lot of cheating.

But it's an interesting example, so we got a question from Numeria.

Zimbabwe's Emerson Manangagua has been reelected as president in a high-definition election.

How should Britain and the Commonwealth's relationship with Zimbabwe proceed hence forth, given the fact that Zanu PF, which is his party, has quite openly yet again rigged its way back in a path?

Just a little bit on how they did this.

I have friends in Zimbabwe who have been in contact with me throughout the election.

And it's very striking the way in which people, it's true probably in Putin's Russia too, how they continue to try to keep some of the surface pretense of an election going.

So the way in which they did it was they refused to release the updated electoral role to the opposition party.

They included dead people on the electoral role.

They shifted voter groups from different polling stations.

They had very, very intimidating presence of polling stations of desks from Zanu PF, demanding people registered.

They issued false leaflets claiming to be from the opposition party, telling people not to vote.

They bribed the judiciary not to uphold claims.

There were riots in which CCE activists were killed, journalists were deported, various candidates were disbarred from running.

But it was not a question of wholesale, this is a coup.

It was a question of 20 or 30 different types of often quite small methods to just push them up to the 55% they wanted to win.

What's interesting though this time is that the international observers who were there appear to be much, much more outspoken, including from the United States.

Now, of course, this is why it's so wretched the whole sort of Trump saga, because if you've got the United States having an election where the defeated candidate claims that the whole thing is rigged, I think it doesn't make people feel empowered to go deeper into some of these tactics that we all know can be done and have been done.

And so we now have this situation where Chimisa almost certainly did win.

Menengagwa declares himself the winner, lots and lots and lots of confusion about the credibility of the result.

And I suspect what will happen, there'll be a lot of human cry, there'll be a lot of people putting pressure on it, eventually he'll take the office.

So the question though, Rory, the question was what does the Commonwealth do?

And of course Zimbabwe's been kicked out of the Commonwealth.

So limited to what it can do, but how does it build or help to build political pressure

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that either, I don't know, gets a rerun, gets some sort of proper inquiry?

I don't know.

I suppose the carrot has always been the hope that they could rejoin.

And of course, every African member of the Commonwealth has been lobbying for Zimbabwe to rejoin.

But I think this is the nail on the coffin into that.

And the sad truth, of course, is this just pushes Zimbabwe closer and closer into the hands of Russia and China.

And Zambia, which of course was very closely connected to Zimbabwe during colonial rule in Rhodesia, has now had the election of HH, who is a much more pro-western opposition leader.

And I think that's worrying Russia and China.

So I think we've got to watch this space on Zimbabwe.

OK, Rory, this question comes from David Manning.

And I don't think that will be David Manning, who was the foreign policy adviser in the buildup to the Iraq War.

The question is as follows.

And it's for you, Rory.

Oh, yes.

Gordon Brown did a great conference speech listing Labour's achievements in government.

Rory, what is the Tory version after the last 13 years?

Well, I think that it won't be as long.

No, no, I think the fundamental analysis must be that we did not learn the lessons of the 2000s, that we operated much too much in an old world that had really died by about 2010.

So David Cameron, and I think like Ed Miliband and Ed Balls, who were his rivals in 2015, were all parts of this generation that grew up in the 90s.

And so they were pushing ahead with economic policy, which should have been discredited with the 2008 financial crash.

They had assumptions.

I'm not hearing a good conference speech here, Rory.

Gordon, let me flip it around then.

So on the record, I think the lamentable failure, of course, has been to sort out productivity in the British economy.

British growth has been very, very poor.

The deficit's grown.

Tax has grown.

We're not managing to fund public services.

I, incidentally, for the record, I can't see much sense that Labour has an economic policy to turn any of that around either.

But if you really want me to try, I'll give my best stab at what you'd have to say if you were trying to win the selection.

No, I do.

Best stab would be inherited a catastrophic situation, 2008, needed to turn it around

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and try to get the economy under control, managed to do very well on employment figures when the rest of Europe were really struggling with employment, made Britain a leader in renewable energy, made huge progress on pushing towards carbon neutral ahead of most other European countries, has become an increasingly important part of the coalition on Ukraine, got through.

Okay, I'm going to stop here.

It's pretty lamentable.

I agree with you.

One of the reasons I'm not a Tory is that I think it's pretty difficult to defend them at the moment.

Yeah.

That was not bad considering, but I think maybe we should put it in the newsletter.

I don't think it was a conference speech.

I think it was in Manchester in the later stages of the Gordon's election campaign against Cameron.

But anyway, it was a brilliant, brilliant, brilliant speech, and maybe he did do it in the conference as well.

But anyway, I think you put up a fairly brave fight there, not great.

Not looking great.

Yes, I mean, obviously, I'm still sort of reeling from your allegation that you claim to wear the kilt better than me, but for that reason, I'm going to throw a Scottish question at you.

Heather Hyams, what on earth is going on in Loch Ness?

What is going on in Loch Ness or around and in and around Loch Ness is that one of the biggest research search parties ever was assembled over the weekend, directed by a man in a splendid

yellow jacket that I saw being interviewed on many, many television channels.

And they were bringing in all these drones and underwater sonar systems with people there from all over the world.

I saw an interview with an American woman who was convinced that this was going to be the moment where we found beyond per adventure that there was or had been a monster that lived in Loch Ness.

And I've got to tell you, Loch Ness, Scotland's Scottish tourism is really, really, really well out of this myth.

It's incredible, isn't it?

So in Loch Ness, it's a very beautiful lock, but boy, oh boy, you would not get the visitor numbers.

So it was a hoax photograph of the 1930s of what looks faintly like a sort of dinosaur floating through the water.

And I remember as a child having a book on mysteries of the world where the Loch Ness monster was there along with aliens building the pyramids and various other stuff that I as a seven-year-old took very seriously and definitely want to go and see the Loch Ness monster.

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It's very sad that it has been proven to be a hoax because I and many other people like me were convinced that maybe it was the last surviving dinosaur, a pleosaurus, would that make sense?

Pleosaurus at Ring of Belly?

Why are you spoiling the funny?

You might have all just announced that Santa Claus is dead, and you said it's been proven.

It's not been proven.

How do you prove a negative that or you can say that they didn't find it this weekend?

It doesn't mean that it's not there.

I must tell you that this whole thing about the power of mythology, though, I did this biathlon triathlon thing for the first group a few years ago.

And to get publicity for it, we put out a story that all of the swimmers taking part in this had to take out special insurance against being attacked by the Loch Ness monster. And honestly, for the cost of the insurance, which was a few quid, the coverage it generated around the world.

I mean, Loch Ness is up there with Scotch whiskey, I'd say, in terms of sort of, you know, people around the world knowing there is this monster.

So yeah, I thought it was a very, very good stunt and whoever dreamt it up in the first place should be getting Scotland's highest honor, whatever that may be.

Now, Rory, I had a question about your book, which I know you're always happy for me to plug.

Patrick Taylor, what is the location on the front cover of the book where you were doing that rather funny pose?

So politics on the edge coming out a couple of weeks.

And on the front cover is a photograph of me stepping between two rocks.

And it's a Penrith castle.

It's a beautiful photograph taken by a really great Cumbering photographer and taken about 10 years ago.

And I love it because it's the sense, the sort of bewildering instability of politics as I teeter over this crevasse between two rocks.

Yeah, it's a good picture.

Go on, question for you then.

Brendan Cruz, dream book characters.

You both do an awful lot of reading.

So what character in a book that you've read would you like to be?

That's a good question, isn't it?

Oh, my Lord.

Who would you like to be in a book?

Shall I give a go while you think about it?

Yeah, go on.

So I always was besotted with Prince Andre in War and Peace.

I'm nothing like him, which is probably why I projected on him.

It's very sort of dignified, understated, aristocratic Russian officer who is sort of

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unfairly overlooked in promotion because he's too honorable to bend to the political requirements at the time and ends up being killed hierarchically or wounded and then died in battle.

So I always loved the figure of Prince Andre.

Certainly because I'm much more like Pierre Bazouhoff, who's the sort of slightly comical floundering figure who goes around the battlefield behind him.

Anyway, over to you.

Can I say Faust?

Faust, my Lord.

Wow.

Faust.

Gosh.

Sorry.

So Gersa's Faust.

I think that would be really interesting, yeah.

You see yourself as some amazing alchemical wise man who sold his soul in order to attain all he wanted.

I don't see myself as that, but I think if you're thinking about human experiences as having to test all choices that you have to make, then I think that would be not a bad one to be.

Blimey.

That's quite edgy.

Selling your soul to the devil is quite an edgy, edgy thing to consider.

Yeah, but that's probably because I've never done it real easy.

That's right.

There we are.

So I'm interested in doing it.

Who else?

I don't know.

I'd like to be...

There's a wonderful...

When our kids were growing up, you can write off to have yourself written in as the hero of a book.

Oh, gosh.

For Children's Book.

So my son, the real Rory in my life, before he defected to Manchester United, was a big Burnley fan.

So we got this Children's Book made where he scored the winning goal in the Cup final for Burnley.

I'd quite like that one as well.

But I felt to write it off as a 60-odd-year-old to say I'd like to write myself it as the score of the winning goal in the Cup final, probably a bit to true.

I think that's a bit much, isn't it?

Now, we've got a question I thought might be quite interesting for you.

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So Tom Watson, presumably not THE Tom Watson, Lord Watson, the slightly controversial Labour Peer, but someone else, did your guys follow the career of more united, the non-party group position on certain issues, brackets, Brexit environment, and far more important than party membership, which becomes frankly meaningless.

So the idea to me seemed a good one, alas it seems to have died, so it's a quick reminder on more united.

Set up in July 2016, received support from people like Paddy Ashton and decided it was going to get behind different members who accepted opportunity, tolerance, democracy, environment, openness.

Faded slightly, but there have been other versions of it.

Gina Miller set up something called the true and fair party, which I had some conversations with them because I was an independent candidate and often these parties reach out to see whether they'd be interested in running.

What do you think about these sort of parties?

I think that the more united group was in part inspired by the group that emerged from Joe Cox murder and the Joe Cox Foundation and the work that they do.

And of course, that has continued in all sorts of different ways.

So Joe Cox, her quote, we're far more united, are far more in common than that which divides us, which became, which I think is now on a plaque in the House of Commons.

Yes.

I think it emerged and then has morphed into different things.

But of course, you're right that these groups do, there are lots of groups like this that come and go.

I'm under pressure at the moment from a guy who's bombarding me with messages.

I'm not complaining by the way, because he wants you to support something that he's setting up as a wants to set up as a new party.

But I've just been very frank in saying that at the moment, I think anything that emerges as a new party between now and a general election, all it does is help the Conservatives because it will take votes from Labour and the Lib Dems and the other parties that might be able to get rid of the Tories.

So I think the thinking behind it was great.

I don't know what's happened to it, whether it's still part of the Joe Cox Foundation work.

I don't know.

But it just shows there are lots of different ways that people want to get involved, trying to get involved and can get involved.

The problem, of course, is the first pass-by system.

So I've been, as you can imagine, a number of people have come forward, tried to convince me to run again as an independent to be Mayor of London.

And their argument is you've got a huge opportunity.

Sadiq Khan maybe isn't as popular as he used to be.

The Conservative candidate isn't very strong.

This is your chance, Rory.

You can run to be Mayor of London.

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But actually what's gone wrong there is that the old electoral system, which was like the French presidential system, which had a two-round system.

So I could have come second maybe to Sadiq Khan in the first round and beaten him in the second round, has been taken out to a first pass-by post system.

And I think it's almost unimaginable now, even with all the energy of our podcast for an independent candidate to really come through and beat the big parties.

Yeah, although, well, let me just give you a couple of questions that flow from both of those things.

So Jeff Spink, surely Mid-Bedfordshire by-elections is a golden opportunity for a single progressive Alliance candidate as the first one.

Christopher Gibbs, the podcast is excellent.

Thank you very much indeed.

But is enlightening and informing achieving enough?

Should there not be more of a call to action from you?

Well, I think that is a good idea.

And I think we could begin getting into that a bit more, talking a little bit more about policy, you know, we have one of our slightly more tense interactions about migration policy. But I think we could be talking much more about economics, international development policy.

And I think that there's a real sense, I mean, even if we're not running for election, I do think that we're in a very lucky position sometimes to be able to set some agendas, raise some issues, and maybe we should be doing a bit more of that.

Okay, what about Mid-Beds?

You know, golden opportunity for a single progressive Alliance candidate.

I mean, we've got Davey, the Liberal Democrat leader coming up in the podcast on leading, I think next week.

Peter Kyle has been campaigning in Mid-Bethicher ever since the Dean Doherty's said that she was standing down.

I can't see Labour and Lib Dems pulling out of this one because I think they both think they're in with a chance.

But the truth is, as Jeff's question implies, the chances are that if the Tories hold on, it will be a cost of a split vote between the opposition parties.

And then of course, a reminder of why we might want to rethink our electoral system.

Well, Elsa, I think on that fine note, perhaps we should take a break.

Tim, many of the raw materials needed to build EV batteries come exclusively from politically volatile places, electric vehicle batteries.

If the International 2035 zero emissions from cars objective is achieved, who will become more powerful?

Who less?

And how will that affect our politics?

Economics in fact, so many countries signed up to the idea that by 2035, only electric vehicles will be sold.

That won't mean that there won't be some legacy combustion engines out there.

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But as we've discussed, the two big dimensions here are Africa, which produces many of the raw materials, so Cobalt and Lithium coming strongly from places like Congo.

It's also important for places like Zimbabwe and China, because China absolutely dominates 85-90% of the rare earths and critical minerals and is dominating the production of electric vehicles.

We talked about the fact that China's hopped from producing half a million electric vehicles a year to two and a half million in just three years.

And the energy transition, which is all about these minerals and all about renewable energy, China is in a very, very strong pole position on solar, on wind turbines, and on electric vehicles. So it will have geopolitical impacts.

And it's one reason the German economy is now in trouble.

It's because it's so dependent on the combustion engine.

And it's one of the reasons why the United States have put all sorts of limits on what the Chinese can and can't do or what they can and can't get.

And it's also one of the reasons why, in the main podcast we talked about Wagner, their kind of entire economic model is partly political, but it's also partly economic, going round to those places where they get some of the minerals that we need for the industries of the future.

So it is going to change the power structures of the world.

I guess the other thing that we should maybe just mention is that some of the poorer countries in the world where these resources exist, that's a great blessing in some ways, but also they've just got to watch out for the extent to which the bigger powers in the world and also corporations are always on the lookout to exploit them.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Lex Miller wants to know, what's our favourite town or city outside the UK?

I love Sugovia in Spain.

I was just there.

It's just outside Madrid if people are looking for a brief trip from Madrid.

Instead of going to Toledo, go to Sugovia.

It's such a charming small place.

I mean, don't go there for big drama, but it's got just a perfect combination of a beautiful Roman aqueduct, a great old Gothic fortress, town square where people are sitting out in chairs and tables till 2, 3 in the morning.

And if you want a bigger excitement, my friend John Hatt recommended to me and I couldn't agree more, Naples, where in Naples, the key is not so much the architecture or the pizza, but it's just getting out on the streets during the festivals and the religious processions and just soaking up the atmosphere is something that's so different.

Over to you.

I have very fond memories of Naples because when I was a journalist on the Daily Mirror, I covered the wedding of one of the, is it Roger Taylor of Duran Duran?

Gosh.

And I had a great time and Naples was, yeah, I agree with you about Naples.

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I love Marseille.

I love Melbourne.

Tell us a bit about Marseille.

I mean, it's got a bit of a reputation for crime and poverty.

Yeah, it's got all that.

It's got a reputation for drugs and violence and what have you, but it's just got a bit like Naples.

It's just got a fantastic energy.

I think a lot of these great poor cities do, you know, Liverpool has got a kind of energy to it that is special.

So Marseille is beautiful setting.

There is a kind of class thing going on that a lot of the, there's a wonderful TV documentary I recommend, a TV series I recommend called Back Nor, which is about the police in Marseille and some of these really difficult estates.

The football team has been a bit like Birdley.

The ground is right bang in the centre of the town, fundamental to the success of the place.

But it's just got buzz about it.

It's really, really, really nice.

It's quite a few years since I've been there, but I do remember the first time I went to Shanghai thinking, oh my God, this place is just incredible.

Absolutely incredible.

Again, energy.

Bangalore in India, another one.

Remember the first time in Bangalore, I just think you energy.

And at the other end of the energy scale, one of my favourite places, which I recommend to anybody, particularly as they're sort of maybe getting on a bit.

Barden, Barden.

Barden, Barden.

Oh, if you want to see beautiful trees everywhere you look, Rory, Barden, Barden and the forests around it and fantastic.

I'd like to put a final plug now that I'm thinking about the presence of these wonderful islands with a Muslim party Omani heritage off the coast of Kenya, of which Lamu is probably the most famous example, but there are incredible islands with wonderful old towns and bazaars and soaps and narrow streets and an insight into a culture that people don't know very much about.

I think we should probably apologise to anybody who's listening to this podcast while sitting in an airport waiting for the air traffic control mess to get sorted.

I mean, Rory, this has been pretty lucky to think that the one week when you appear, not to be getting on an airplane to some far flung part of the world, is when the air traffic control system collapses.

Yep.

Yep.

I think I'm extremely lucky and I'm hoping, I mean, partly driven by you and pressure

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from listeners and partly driven just by the sheer fact that I've often been away, you know, two weeks a month away from my family, not seeing my kids, trying to keep up the travel schedule, which has been pretty shattering. I'm hoping to be able to rein that in a bit because I'm beginning to feel that I'm wrecking my health.

Now, we've got a lot of questions, Rory, talking of not flying somewhere about Rishi Sunak seemingly not going to the United Nations General Assembly.

Tim in North Ants.

If Rishi Sunak does not attend UNGA, what can he legitimately have in the diary that goes ahead of it? And another question is saying, if he's sort of boycotting UNGA, Steve Jones, if he's boycotting UNGA, and we've had Johnson sort of undermining our strength within NATO and through Brexit in Europe, is it time to take away our permanent five seat at the United Nations? I think it would be deeply eccentric not to go to UNGA.

I mean, Britain is very lucky to still be a permanent member of the Security Council, given our economic size and weight.

And it's vital that we continue to attend.

I mean, as you'll know, I used to go to the UN General Assembly and I used to sit there next to the Secretary General chairing meetings on South Sudan and Somalia.

And it has to be said that obviously these international conferences can be a bit of talking shops.

And I'm a little bit skeptical how much value I really delivered to the world by sitting at UNGA and chairing these grand meetings.

But it is vital symbolically that Britain is involved.

It's vital that we show our support for the UN at a time when global structures are eroding.

So I very much hope that that isn't true and that Rishi Sunak is there.

It's also the place where you can knock off like, you know, a dozen, two dozen bilateral meetings with people that, you know, the phone calls are fine and telegrams from ambassadors are fine, but it's so important.

100%. I remember the last UNGA that I did for the British government.

I was able to see a very large number of African leaders for one-to-one meetings in the British delegation.

And it's unique and save me having to fly half way to the north.

I'll actually talk about flying.

I'll be back at UNGA again in September, particularly focused on some of the climate work and some of the poverty work there.

But I think, you know, Rishi Sunak should definitely get there.

My final question, Edward Goetje, with Theresa May's memoir on the horizon, what in your view makes a good political memoir and who's the best that you've read? Blimey.

I think a good political memoir, back to what I said about Al Gore saying, don't use it to settle scores, I think is one where a politician is genuinely reflective, as opposed to thinking they have to revisit every decision they made.

I thought, for example, David Cameron's autobiography, the fact that he says in,

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I think he says four times in the first three pages that he would write about something.
He did the right thing on Brexit.
He did the right thing on the coalition.
I just think it needs to be more reflective than that.
I think I may have said to you before, one of the memoirs I was surprised to enjoy as much as I did was George W. Bush.
He wrote a book called Decision Points, and he didn't write a traditional member.
He took 10 decisions that he made in his life and explained why he made them.
And they weren't just political.
Why did he marry Laura?
Why did he buy a football team?
And then of course, you know, why did he go into politics?
Why did he invade Iraq?
And he went through the big decisions as well.
But it was just an interesting way of doing it.
I actually thought Tony Blair's book was good, a journey, because I think he was genuinely reflective.
Maybe somebody was telling me the weekend they said,
I wish that Tony Blair was as reflective on Iraq as you were when you did your two hours with Rory Stewart on the podcast.
But I thought, you know, I think that to me is a book where you get genuine reflection and a genuine insight into the decisions they've made.
Well, I've been thinking a lot about this because politics on the edge is a memoir, and that meant that I had to read a lot of other people's political memoirs to get a sense of what works and what didn't.
I liked all of those books you mentioned.
I liked John Major's political memoir.
But I think what I felt they all lacked often is a real honesty about the actual lived experience of being a politician, particularly of being a backbencher and a more junior politician.
The problem is that memoirs are usually written, and this is what I tried to change in writing my own.
They're usually written by people who either want to vindicate their record or they're planning a comeback.
So they usually try to be pretty confident, clear, portray themselves as leaders all the way through.
And I wanted to write a memoir where I could talk about the daily life.
I'd want it to be more like a book about a doctor working in the NHS.
Tell you about the bureaucracy, about the gossip in the tea rooms, the madness of it, the whips, the humiliations, the failures.
Try to bring alive, because I think this is actually what we miss in democracy.
We talk about it in a very theoretical way.
We're not bringing alive enough how it actually works day to day.
Rory, if we sent the clip of the last minute to Janice Turner of The Times and said,

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if Rory had said something like this with the energy he just said it, do you think you might have written a slightly different interview?

See, that's the sort of thing you've got to say in interviews about your book.

Thank you very much.

Okay, here's my final question for you then.

James, which world leaders that you have met, did you find the most unimpressive and made you wonder how they ended up where they did?

Well, the very, very first time we met Juncker, I had that feeling.

But then the more you watched him, he's just such a survivor and actually a lot smarter than maybe he gave the impression of.

I find Romano Prodi, the Italian prime minister, but that was because he was so quiet.

You expect, particularly after Berlusconi, you expect, sometimes you literally have to say to him, can you speak a bit louder?

I can't hear what you're saying.

We talked about Modi on the main podcast, Muvaj Pai.

On first impressions, I thought, my God, I can't believe this guy has become the leader of one of the biggest countries in the world.

But then the more you got to hear him speak, he was one of those people who didn't think it was any point speaking unless you had a point to make.

But yeah, no, I think most people who get to the very, very, very top have to have something about them.

I think Truss and Johnson are big exceptions.

There's paradoxes.

Sometimes the people who seem quite unimpressive, slightly lacking charisma, often turn out to be very, very good leaders.

I mean, India was turned around, totally turned around by PV Narasimha Rao, who brought through the incredible reforms in the early 90s, which turned India into this amazing economic success story.

He was often seen as a slightly sort of grey bureaucrat who people were surprised had come into office and was seen as very cautious and proved to be very bold when he got in.

I think the man, it's a little unfair to him, but the man that most surprised me becoming a political leader, when I went to Libya, so just after the day that Gaddafi fell, I arrived in Tripoli along with other war correspondents.

I was staying with Mary Colvin, who was later killed in Syria, very, very great war reporter who people will remember maybe because she had an eye patch and I'd known her from Afghanistan and elsewhere. But when you go outside your hotel in the middle of your, you're there in a conflict, doesn't matter whether you're in Iraq or Afghanistan or Libya, there are always these fixtures outside the hotel's offering lifts.

21, so I went outside and this guy came up to me and he became my sort of taxi driver for two, three days. He'd been a former municipal water engineer in the United States, he'd come back to Libya and drove me around. And I was astonished when I returned to the hotel to find that Mary Colvin had really struck up a real friendship with him.

And I quite liked him, but I couldn't quite understand what was going on.

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Three months later, Mary sent me a very cheeky text saying, you do realize that your taxi driver has just become the president of Libya. And it was a sense in which Mary, I mean, really demonstrated not just that she could talk to anyone and that she was interested in, but that the genius of a journalist to spot that this man was a future political leader. He only lasted for a few months, but I think that was my best story about the genius of Mary Colvin and political leaders. And you were surprised that he made it to the top? I was slightly surprised he made it to the top, but you know, of the many, many reasons to lament Mary who was killed in a bomb attack in Syria, I think, I mean, you must have that with some journalists, but just the sense they have that kind of amazing BD intuition for stories and people that normal people miss. I know I'm going to spend the rest of the day thinking, damn, I forgot about so-and-so, because of course, the ones that you really think are not impressive are the ones that you realize are forgotten. Well, we'll come back to that. Maybe if James will let us, we'll come back to that. That's a great subject. Good. Well, listen, that was a good run around the block. And we'll speak again soon with Mustafa Suleiman out on Leading Now, Ed Davion next week. And we'll be back with our usual podcasts a week from now. Look forward to it. Bye-bye. Hello, Reuters 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, thinking the way he's thinking. Yes. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Sergey 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. There are all two 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.