

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 168. Crumbling Britain, a ruthless reshuffle, and Jeremy Corbyn's 'beautiful ears'

Hello, welcome to another episode of The Rest is Politics with me, Alistair Campbell.

And me, Rory Stewart.

Now, Rory, you've been very, very busy promoting your book, but meanwhile, you may know that some of these things have been happening.

Schools crumbling, we'll talk about that.

We'll talk about one of the most bizarre, thick of it moments involving the woman that you not long ago said ought to be Prime Minister, Gillian Keegan.

We shall talk about the old political merry-go-round.

We've had a small change in the cabinet, with Grant Shaps getting his fifth job in the year.

And Keir Starmer has reshuffled his team as well in quite an interesting way.

I also do think, Rory, we get some criticism for relentlessly plugging our books, but I do think actually it's worth not least in the context of what's happening at the moment talking about some of the themes in your book, which is out this week and is doing very, very well in the charts I see.

But actually, in a very Tory kind of way, I re-read it over the weekend, having read a proofs a few months ago.

And I do think actually there are some themes in there that are very, very relevant to what's going on to some of the things that we talk about a lot.

And I think also we need to touch on Gabon, yet another coup, very different to some of the previous coups, but definitely not getting nearly enough attention in the UK media.

So are you happy with that?

Very good.

Very happy with all of that.

Thank you.

So would you want to do one of your famous explalers on Rack?

Yes.

So Rack is reinforced, autoclaved, aerated concrete.

That's the one.

So it was developed in the 1920s.

And as you know, normally sand, lime and cement go into making concrete.

But in this case, they worked out that if you added aluminium powder, you could generate a chemical reaction, which would produce hydrogen gas, which would create little air pockets inside the cement.

This meant that it was good for insulation, it was lighter weight, and you could install it easily as fixed panels.

And so particularly in Britain in the 70s, it became a popular thing to do.

A lot of it went into those kind of 1970s buildings, public buildings, particularly schools, courthouses, etc.

And then stories started emerging in 97 that there was a potential problem with this stuff.

They began to see that it deteriorated.

It deteriorates partly because of a chemical process with carbon dioxide.

And as it deteriorates, different problems happen.

It looks the concrete itself can get into trouble and the reinforced metal inside can

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get into trouble as well.

This continued, so little reports coming out during your era.

I'd be interested to see whether any of these have across your desk.

And then 2007, more reports.

But they're still saying that this is a problem and this is reaching its shelf life.

So they're saying that it's only got 30 years shelf life built in the 1970s.

But people are not really expecting a sudden collapse.

Then in July 2018, one of these buildings collapses, a roof collapses, fortunately during the school holidays.

We then go into the pandemic.

But in March of 2022, a survey is announced by Department of Education, asking schools to check where they got this stuff.

Only about half of them come back.

There's a report in December and then over this school holidays, so over the last few weeks, there's been another sudden collapse, which has now led the Education Secretary Jillian Keegan to announce just before the opening of the school term that they're going to not allow children back into a number of schools, which has caused a real anger, of course, amongst parents.

They want to know why there wasn't more warning and, of course, has raised questions about investment.

Over to you.

Yeah, I thought it was very good.

I mean, I think away from the science to the politics, as it were, this does feel to me like very, very, very difficult for the government and very difficult for Rishi Sunak, because I think he was put right into it yesterday in an interview with Jonathan Slater, former senior official permanent secretary of the Department of Education, who talked listeners through the process, the spending process, which led to Rishi Sunak as chancellor, cutting the number of schools that were to be refurbished or rebuilt.

And when he was trying to defend himself yesterday, he talked about this sort of great new program that he brought in.

But the truth is, and if I may, I said we were going to talk about your book, but one bit I heavily underlined, page 122, I was uneasy with the fervor with which Cameron and Osborne embraced spending reductions and their insistence that Labour had grossly mismanaged the economy.

I think that the Building Schools for the Future program, which we had put in place, was a serious attempt to transform the school's estate in a way that the National Audit Office have recently said has been reversed.

And that reversal was a direct consequence, I think, of the start of austerity.

Michael Gove, I think, did it partly for ideological reasons.

He wanted to say he could do things better.

And the truth is, I don't know how many ped teachers and teachers you talk to, but it's very rare these days you talk to a head teacher and teacher who doesn't say the school buildings are getting worse and worse, unless you're lucky enough to be in one of those new schools.

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And so I just feel, and then added on to it yesterday, I mentioned the Chilean-Kegan interview, and I'd be interested in your take on it because we had a lot of response last week to our discussion of your interview with Janice Turner, which essentially was about the kind of rules of engagement between media and politics.

So yesterday, Chilean-Kegan Education Secretary is being interviewed by Dan Hewitt of ITV. Now, Dan Hewitt, I think, is an exceptional journalist who is a political reporter, but he really writes, he covers the real world.

He does go into schools.

He does poverty.

He's done some amazing stuff on housing in recent years.

And she did her sort of usual political defending herself, which I'm not criticizing for.

That's what she was sent out to do.

And at the end of it, have you seen the clip?

Yeah, yeah, amazing.

Yeah.

That's amazing.

Classic.

I don't like swearing as you don't worry.

Why don't you describe the clip?

So Janice's done an interview.

She got very patient, you know, statesman-like answers.

And then she stands up, camera's still running, mic's still live, and she says, presumably talking to her press survivor, does anyone ever say you've done a fucking good job while everyone else has been sitting around on their arses and doing nothing?

It's a really sort of interesting, so I think, I mean, I think it's, it's a, well, first he's gone to tell us a little bit about how you think the public responds to watching the minister suddenly saying something like that.

I mean, people love stories where microphones are left running, but the most famous one, Gordon Brown in the car, calling Gillian Duffy a bigger, that was where the cameras had gone.

The rules of engagement there are meant to be when you're off camera, if you've got a pulled microphone on, you're off sound as well.

So basically, Gordon got stitched up.

Now that happens, and particularly in the heat of election campaign.

But with Gillian Keegan, it's sort of, it's much worse than that because the camera, as you say, is still running.

The microphone is still on her.

The interviewer is still standing there, having given her quite a hard time, which frankly is his job when you've got schools crumbling on kids.

And she might have been start talking at the start to the advisor, but it's the fact she turned to the journalist and said, you know, do you have any chance of that happening?

As if the idea should be that the interview ought to have been, can you mark your own own work, Mrs Keegan, and tell us just how good you are at your job?

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And of course, then, I mean, it was classic.
You were busy yesterday, right?
But it was classic thick of it.
She does that interview, and then an hour later, she apologizes for using choice language.
No, it was, it was, it was terrible.
It was terrible.
Let me try to.
No, let me just make a final point why I think it was terrible.
It's the fact of them thinking it's about them.
And it's about, you know, what they do as ministers and why aren't we, I remember, you know, Bill Clinton saying, the job is the blue ribbon.
You don't get a blue ribbon for doing your job.
And you especially don't get a blue ribbon if you're doing your job badly.
Yeah.
So it's just a little whinging entitlement.
So I think the, to defend politicians in general, and I think it'd be true of Labour politicians as well, look, I mean, obviously, politicians have ego, well, they don't go into it.
Most of us got ego.
Most of us are pretty vain.
Most of us feel a bit hard done by if we're being criticized when we think we're working hard, even when we screwed up.
And I think what you're seeing there is the human side.
I don't think it's a sign of sort of insane entitlement.
I think it's very, very normal.
It's a very odd job.
She probably has been spending a lot of the summer holiday doing stuff on different stuff, I guess.
I mean, if I can think about what it was like when I was a minister, she would have been dealing with strikes.
She would have been dealing with getting new schools open.
She would have been worrying about pre-pandemic grading.
And she would have had to make a very difficult decision to close these schools just before they opened.
There would have been a lot of people in the department saying, oh, don't do this.
We'll be fine.
The roofs will probably hold up.
Let's open the schools.
We can't do this a week before everybody returns to school.
And she would have had to make this call, which will be very unpopular, I guess, with number 10 and the comms department.
And stepping back one stage, I mean, I think the issue is something that government gets wrong again and again and again.

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In this case, it's cladding in schools.

But it's the basic question when you're a minister with a budget.

Do you do the boring, expensive stuff like fixing roofs, fixing wiring, and British museums going through at the moment, do you spend a billion dollars fixing the pipes in the British museum?

Or do you put on some fancy new exhibition, which everyone's going to come and see?

And I had it all the time.

I mean, one of the most painful things in the Ministry of Justice was people turning up saying, I'm sorry, minister, there's no money to do anything because we're going to have to spend one and a half billion pounds on redoing 1970s buildings.

And like some country house saying, you're going to have to spend God knows what rewiring your house.

And the temptation is always to be like, really, do we have to do it this year?

How much of a danger really is it?

So I guess that's why the whole thing gets pushed down and eventually she makes the decision too late.

But that's why the building schools for the future program was a very, very good thing, which the government should have tried to carry on.

And I think where Sunak's in difficulty, he was defending himself on the basis that, okay, the Department of Education wanted to, I think they started out at doing the classic sort of public spending round thing of saying, right, we need the funding to rebuild or refurbish 200 schools.

The Treasury saying that's too much, okay, we'll go for 100 and Sunak settles on 50. 50 schools is tiny in the scheme of things.

And I think the other thing with Ben Bradshaw got heckled by the Tories yesterday when he said it, but I think he made a very, very fair point.

Does Rishi Sunak really understand what life is like in state schools at the moment?

Would he ever allow his children to go to a school where there would be beams held up by metal poles?

Would he ever allow them to go to a school where it was acceptable for them to be on the day that school was going back?

They're suddenly being decamped into a port of cabin provided that they can find a port of cabin company.

And I think it's that difference between what they expect for their own children and what they're defending as tolerable for the children on whose behalf they're meant to govern.

I think that's why it's politically toxic.

So it's a very, very interesting graph that you shared with us yesterday from the FT, looking at total government spending as a percentage of GDP and looking at something called public sector fixed investment.

Stuff like the schools program.

And it's essentially a sort of like a Mount Fuji peak.

It rises from a very low base under the Tories in 95.

You kept the spending pretty low during the early days of Blair began to rise towards

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2005.

And then there is a steep jump basically under Gordon Brown where he increases spending for this percentage of GDP.

And this continues through the financial crisis from 40 to 50% of GDP.

And in terms of the percentage that you spend on public sector fixed investment goes from about 2.2% shoots up to 3%.

And then it comes down again under the Tories.

So under the Tories, most of these things now look as though they're back at the kind of levels they were at 2005.

The question is, is what Gordon Brown did sustainable?

Was it affordable?

And the reason that's an important question is that Keir Starmer's going to take over and there is going to be a huge amount of expectation on him.

So I will be saying to you in a year's time when Keir Starmer's in office, how many schools has he committed to do up?

Is it 50?

Is it 100?

Is it 200?

And I'm going to say that's a pathetic number.

And you're going to say to me, Rory, the Tories handed over to us a broken economy, a rubbish budget.

Rory, are you suggesting that I do nothing more than parrots later party talking points?

I think this is grossly unfair.

And part of the reason why, no, I look, I think that I think you're slightly misreading that.

I think I've got the graph in front of me now.

I mean, it is true that part of the massive spending uptick under Gordon was in relation to, you know, bailing out the banks and all that stuff.

But there's a very, very, very steady rise up through the Blair years, very, very steady.

Then there's then that big uptick.

Then there are the cuts.

But what's interesting, if you look at the graph, the thing that I was most interested in was the thing tracking other countries, similar countries, where we are falling behind.

And I just think that in terms of our infrastructure, in terms of this, as you call it, the sort of, you know, the boring kind of grind of government of just keeping things properly ticking over.

I do think another element of the sort of politics that we've had in the last few years, particularly since Brexit and Johnson, is that that stuff just isn't seen as being terribly important.

And it's tragic.

And I actually think, as you know, you said there when Keir Starmer is prime minister, and as you know, I've always hesitant about saying that, and I've been hesitant.

But I do sort of think there's something about this week of the very, very basic thing of

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kids going back to school, and it's surrounded by this utter chaos and utter mess.

I think it's very, very hard to get back.

Well, we should return to it.

And your answer is something very, very important, which is that Britain spends much, much less actually under Labour and Conservative governments than the average of developed countries, both in terms of the percentage of GDP and the amount it spends on public sector net investment.

And I think one of the really interesting questions is going to be, is a new economic policy?

I think I'm on your side here, that one of the exciting things that a new party could do, a new party in the centre, is to say, we're going to spend far more on public sector net investment.

We're going to increase the government spending in GDP, and we're going to work at how to do it in a non-wasteful way.

So I think that's a huge issue for us to talk about.

I also thought we should maybe go on to the ministerial changes and the shadow cabinet changes.

One of the most interesting appointments in Labour's reshuffle was Peter Kyle being moved from Northern Ireland to a job in charge of science, technology and innovation.

We love Peter Kyle.

Well, also, but we love the idea that actually we've got to start thinking about a new sort of economy.

The added bonus of that was because Northern Ireland, in opposition, is a very tough job. It's quite a difficult job to do.

Northern Ireland government is incredibly important, and I think to have Hillary Ben back in the shadow cabinet in a really important job, I think that's another bonus.

But do you want to tell us a little bit about, because Grant Chaps, he's one of your political heroes, isn't he?

Yeah.

By the way, just before we leave, Julia Keegan, do you still think that she should be Prime Minister?

I'm still very, very fond and respectful, and I'm looking forward to us interviewing her.

Obviously, give our listeners a chance to see what they think of Julia Keegan.

Okay.

So that's not a no, and it's not a yes.

Okay.

Fair enough.

So, Grant Chaps.

So, Grant Chaps, not one of my political heroes, but a quick part of the career of Grant Chaps, he came in MP in 2005, and he rapidly established himself as a very, very energetic political MP.

So, he fought very hard to win his seat, so he had a big reputation for being a great man for pounding the streets with leaflets.

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David Cameron came and made him a housing minister in 2010, and in the early days, 2010, 2012, weirdly, he and a man called Chris Grayling, who some listeners may remember, was seen as the two sort of star junior ministers.

They were both ministers of state, and they used to do these sort of salons where they would invite other MPs around, and they very much gave the impression they were going to be the next people in the cabinet.

2012 comes along, and he's made chairman of the Conservative Party, and the Conservative Party in 2015, to everybody's surprise, basically, win an overall majority.

So, you would have thought that he would, and he was expecting to be congratulated and promoted the cabinet, but things began to go wrong in his career.

Two things, one of them, actually three things.

One of them was an investigation that showed that he had set up sock puppets.

The suggestion was that he was using assumed identities, conceding his identity to edit his own and other colleagues' Wikipedia pages.

It was a very interesting thing, almost everybody who seemed to be a rival to him in the leadership, their pages seemed to be re-edited, and I picked up that this was a bit of an obsession with Grant Shaps, because every time I stood, I'm also often in S, so we stand on the same line to vote in the House of Commons, and he would always come up to me and say, Rory, I see that you're 16 to 1 to be the next Conservative Prime Minister.

Why is that?

I'd say, Grant, I don't know, my mother must be betting on me, and he'd sort of laugh and look a bit unconvinced, and then three months later, he'd be like, Rory, I notice, you're now 20 to 1 ahead of me to be Conservative Prime Minister, and I'd say again, my mother must be betting on me, but after about the eighth time, I began to wonder what on earth was going on.

Then two more things happened.

He was revealed as running a series of companies, and the Guardian in its report says it's very difficult not to see one of these companies as a pyramid scheme.

After you sign up to make £20,000 by signing up for a newsletter and a training package, the newsletter and training package basically tells you to sell the same newsletter and training package to another 100 people, and that's how you're going to get your money back in.

He used assumed names, including the name Michael Green, a lot of people in the House of Commons referred to him as Michael Green for this reason.

Then there were allegations of horrible bullying, which had happened amongst young people and the Conservative Battle Buses campaigning when he was chairman.

He was demoted 2015, and then six months later lost his job, went into the wilderness basically for nearly four years, plotted ferociously against Theresa May to try to bring her down, set up a spreadsheet, attached himself to Boris Johnson, and then was made a minister by Boris Johnson, Secretary of State of Transport, then bet hard on Rishi Sunak against Liz Truss and work out for him for the brief period that Liz Truss was in, although she made him home sexually for six days, and now has been brought in, it seems, as a real Rishi Sunak lawyer list and has been moved around through a lot of jobs.

Over to you.

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Well, it sounds like a pretty dysfunctional sort of setup.

I was on Sky News on Sunday morning, Trevor Phillips' new programme, and they had Jeremy Hunt on, and they showed him a couple of graphics, which we should also put in the newsletter along with the FT graphic on spending, and even I, who follows this sort of stuff quite closely, was really taken aback.

So since the 2019 general election, there have been seven children's ministers, seven housing ministers, seven Conservative Party chairs, six education secretaries, six business secretaries.

They're all getting payoffs every time they leave these jobs, by the way.

Six attorney generals, or is it attorneys general, five chancellors, five health secretaries, five justice secretaries, five culture secretaries, four Northern Ireland secretaries.

And I mean, I couldn't even begin to try to name them, but Nadine Zahawe, apparently, has had nine different jobs at the moment.

He has none.

Oliver Dowden, seven, Dominic Raab, six, Steve Barclay, six, Grant Shaps, five jobs since 2019.

I think he's had four in a year, Gove Keegan, Kofi and Chris Eaton Harris, four jobs.

I mean, there is no other organization in the world that if you were a management consultant or a shareholder or whatever at my board, looking at that, there's no way you're looking at that and thinking that is a functional organization.

It's completely, completely insane.

And I think one of the things that would be good to think about is how you actually change that.

So I went through this myself.

I had at least five different ministerial portfolios in four years and it's mad, completely insane.

I mean, you arrive, I'm trying to write the 25-year environment plan.

I think I'm just about to finish it and I moved to be the Middle East Asia minister.

I spent a lot of time meeting the presidents of different countries, traveling, doing state visits and then I go in to see Boris Johnson, who was the foreign secretary and he says to me, how about Africa?

And I say, literally, honestly, foreign secretary, I know nothing about Africa.

I've just spent more than a year really focusing on Middle East Asia.

I speak three Asian languages, I've written books about it.

I've been working on it for 15 years and he says, what's the capital of Uganda?

And I said, I don't know.

And he says, you're Africa minister.

Then just as I finished my Africa strategy, I moved on to be the prisons minister with no background in prisons.

And Philip Lee pointed out, Philip Lee was an MP who was a doctor, pointed out he'd been trying to get into the Department of Health for seven years and the first job he's given is in prisons, whereas a lawyer is moved straight into hospitals.

And then just as I'm trying to get on with reducing violence in prisons, I moved into

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the cabinet to be Secretary of State for International Development.

So...

I should tell you, Roy, on the Sky program I mentioned, one of the other guests was Jonathan Aitken, formatory MP, went to jail for corruption, came out redemption.

He's now a priest.

He's 81, I couldn't believe it.

He did say to me in the green room, I should tell you, he said that Rory Stewart was the only good prisons minister we've had because he now does a lot of work in prisons.

Oh, thank you.

So there you are.

At least somebody recognized what you did there.

But I do take your point.

But listen, there are two things.

You mentioned Africa.

So you spend all that time trying to sort of get on with people.

Other countries, so James Cleveley is the current Foreign Secretary, but we've had...

He's been in five jobs.

So as he travels the world, you're talking to other leaders, they're probably thinking, well, he's not going to be here very long, regardless of an election.

They're thinking this is a government that just sort of changes things.

And the other thing that happens is the civil service.

I love the...

We'll talk about your book later, but I love the exchange where one of your jobs where you arrived, you were desperately trying to get the civil servants to sort of give you ideas and energy and so forth, and they're just sort of sitting there saying nothing. But the civil service, if they're thinking, we don't think this guy's going to be here very long.

It gives them far more power over you.

That's the first thing.

It lowers your reputation even before you've got that.

And I do think that one of David Cameron, to say something positive about him for a fairly really, I think he made a very good decision early on by making clear, I don't intend to have lots of reshuffles.

We tended only to have reshuffles, big reshuffles, when they were forced upon us or when there was a genuine desire to try and get a bit of a reboot.

And I think it may be it's worth talking about Keir Starmer's reshuffle.

One of the points I made on the Sky program, and I've said it to you before here, was this sense in our politics that the government's behaving like an opposition and the opposition's behaving like a government, I did think there was a touch of steel and ruthlessness about that reshuffle yesterday by Keir Starmer.

Yeah, but these reshuffles are always tough, aren't they?

I mean, the person I was feeling, you know, for strongly in that is Nick Thomas Simmons.

So he's a guy who's, Labour MP, super smart lawyer, understands a lot about international

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relations.

He'd got the international trade brief, and I actually was talking to him last week.

I was really struck by how thoughtful he was being.

He'd met a lot of ambassadors, he'd begun to travel, he was having some very detailed conversations with me about what the new trade deal could be with the Gulf.

He was developing all these relationships.

And suddenly now he's out of a job.

No, he's not.

He's got...

He's been demoted down to a cabinet office, so he's lost the trade job, and it's very sad because, you know, it's a mini example of the same thing.

Yeah.

Lisa Nandi, you know, was shadow foreign secretary.

Then she was levelling up secretary.

Now she's been put into another three jobs since 2020, I mean, even the shadow ministers.

How are they supposed to develop expertise if they keep being moved around like this?

The only thing I'd say is that he's kept in the top jobs, Treasury, Home Office, Foreign Office, Education, Health, he's kept pretty much the same people.

And I think that...

I think what's happening with Nick Thomas Simmons...

Just on that, Lisa and Nick were the foreign and home secretaries, weren't they originally when he began?

No, originally.

But I'm talking about the team that he changed yesterday.

I'll come on to Lisa Nandi in a moment.

But I think with Nick Thomas Simmons, I think you might be misreading that.

I think what's happening there is that he's taking Pat McFadden, who's now the National Campaign Coordinator, Jonathan Ashworth, and Nick Thomas Simmons are basically becoming figures at the centre.

I think that's what's happening.

And also, one of the reasons, isn't it the fact that the department that Nick Thomas Simmons was shadowing...

Was merged.

Yeah.

Was merged.

And then I think the...

I do agree.

I think Lisa Nandi will be feeling pretty hurt because, as you say, she was shadowed as foreign secretary then levelling up, she's been moved aside because Angela Rayner clearly wanted a departmental job as well as being deputy leader.

But I actually think, though, that that's quite an interesting place for her to be because we talked to Kiyostama.

He committed to reinstating the department of DFID and 0.7%, et cetera.

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And I may have moved away from that.

But I think if she gets really stuck into that brief, she can hopefully be the leader of that fight.

That would be great.

Well, that makes me keen to see if we can have her on the show and really get her to talk about that.

So very finely then on this, I mean, I wondered whether we couldn't think if we were doing some sort of manifesto to get governments to commit to say that we will do our best to ensure that ministers stay in their role for a minimum of two years and less as exceptional circumstances and that each one of them will do, again, less as exceptional circumstances, a three-week training program before they take over with some kind of handover from their predecessor.

I do honestly think that the whole sort of training thing is just completely overlooked.

And again, in any other organization, if you're suddenly moved from being in charge of presidents to being in charge of half of a continent, the idea that you don't need some formal grounding as opposed to you go in day one, you're expected to make a speech day two to say what your vision is going to be for the job.

One thing we did do, and I don't know whether the current government of this, because another mistake David Cameron made, I think, was getting rid of the delivery unit.

We had contracts between the centre and the senior cabinet ministers.

These were pieces of paper written down.

These are your main objectives.

These are the key issues that you've got to focus on and we'll review them very, very regularly.

Now, I don't get the feeling that happens at all.

Yeah, that certainly was not the case when I was in government that at all.

So I think that's sort of a more systemic approach to management, I agree with you.

But I do think that was, I just felt it was a serious reshuffle of Keir Starmer's.

I thought he's, you know, it's being judged as a more Blair Ice, Liz Kendall, Pat McFadden at the centre, blah, blah, blah.

I don't read it like that at all.

I mean, it's definitely a big divorce from the days of Corbyn, no doubt about that at all.

And it's a big change from, as you say, from his first shadow cabinet.

But I just think you're looking at that and you're thinking, you know, whether people like them as individuals or not, do people look at Keir Starmer and think the guy could be promised that, yeah, do the look at racial reason, think she could be chance, yeah, she's now got that Darren Jones as Chief Secretary.

He is a very impressive guy.

He's brilliant on that.

He's been brilliant on the business select committee.

And then you go through, I heard West Street on the radio this morning and he just sounded much so much more convincing about the health service than Steve Barkley.

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I thought Bridget Phillips, and she was on the programme, was on on Sunday.

I think she's really starting to to motor in terms of how she projects herself.

Yeah.

I think this is thus far been a very, very, very good week for Labour without him doing too much.

Shout out also to Hilary Ben, who I think is somebody who I think is amazing and I like to see him in an even, even more senior position.

Right.

Maybe time for a break though.

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

And with me, Alistair Campbell.

And we just did an interview which I think listeners will enjoy with Ed Davy.

I think they are enjoying, we were looking at the feedback yesterday, I think they are enjoying it.

Yeah.

Head of the Lib Dems.

And famously, both you and I have voted Lib Dem in the past.

So, you know, that was that was us looking at our potential leader.

I know, but no, you're suggesting you might be a Lib Dem again, I'm not going to be a Lib Dem again.

And I thought, I actually thought one of the most interesting things was his claim as to what being a Liberal meant as opposed to what I believe in.

I actually think I believe a lot of the things he does.

And he was saying it's we believe in sort of state control, which I don't believe in at all.

But I do think he's got a real thing about the Nanny State.

And even though he defended that very minor change on the smoking legislation, I think it's about, you know, it's why they would presumably still be massively against identity cards, even though we're giving our identity away in our bloody time with phones and the internet and all the rest of it.

No, I thought the other thing I'd say is you picked up in our discussion afterwards that when it came to the sort of, you know, tell us your vision, tell us your policy program in a minute, he kind of struggled.

But I think the feedback I've had has mainly been about him talking about his childhood and his son.

There was a naturalness to the way he spoke about that, that he didn't sound like a politician to kind of trying to make something of his life.

No, no, no, no.

He just sounded like a human being talking like a human being.

He was totally authentic.

Well, he was being completely through the ringer, and I think he was totally authentic about that.

Now, Rory, your book.

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Yes.

It's called, we're not going to turn this into a sort of, you know, two-hour session on Iraq where you sort of put me through the ringer.

But I think we should let me lead the questioning and the discussion on this one, if that's okay.

Pretty good.

I'm starting by.

Now, I read it as you sent it to me months ago, sort of, you know, taken my thoughts, very few of which appear to have made the final edition, but never mind, I'll come to what you say about me.

But it read second time around, to me, even more desperate than I read it first time around in terms of your assessment of the state of politics, and which, even though I agree with a lot of it, it sort of worries me that you, who, as Nick Robinson said on the today program yesterday, have become a very popular political figure, that your basic message is kind of, politics is all terrible.

Well, I do believe that in order to change, you have to begin by really delving into the problems.

You've got to really expose where the rottenness is.

You've got to get into that cladding before you replace it.

So I think that we have had a sort of mafia code of silence around parliament for a long time.

And the reason for that is that the lobby has a vested interest in sort of talking up politics.

That's the lobby journalists.

And I think the politicians have a vested interest in making themselves seem serious and dignified.

And most memoirs are written by people who want to vindicate their careers or plan a comeback. So we haven't really had an opportunity for someone to actually say, this is what it's really like.

And I was talking to Gloria Del Piero yesterday as an ex-labour MP who joined with me in 2010. I was pleased that she said, Rory, you're absolutely on the nail.

This is completely my experience of parliament.

This was completely my experience of the Labour Party and I'm pleased that someone's actually said it.

Yeah.

No, listen, there's so much in it that I can relate to and you said when we were talking to Mustafa Suleiman about artificial intelligence and leading and you said his book, he says how terrible it is and he feels he has to come up with a 10 point plan to make it better.

You don't do that, which I think is fine, makes it more raw.

But it just means it's at times, it's very funny at times, but it's also at times quite depressing.

I guess your main point, if I can go towards the end of the book, you say that what shocked you most was the lack of seriousness.

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I'd begun by noticing how grotesquely unqualified so many of us were for the offices we were given.

That's what we've just been talking about.

I found working for Liz Truss, that was when she was your Secretary of State, a culture that prized campaigning over governing, opinion polls over policy, announcements over implementation.

You make that point the whole way through.

Your character portrayal of Truss is really quite alarming, I think, that she became Prime Minister.

Yeah.

So I write a lot about Liz Truss and I think people will have picked up when they saw as Prime Minister a very, very eccentric person.

One of the things obviously that you see a lot in profiles is they're always saying that whichever MP they're interviewing is odd and I guess we're all odd.

But her particular mind is to throw out ideas really as provocations and then change them very quickly.

So one of the episodes I write about is in Politics on the Edge, says he, learning from Alistair and putting the title of his book into the plan, is I'm not quite able to do it as smoothly as you can.

So one of the stories is that I was the National Parks Minister and she was, I was very lucky with my bosses.

I had Liz Truss, Priti Patel and Boris Johnson in sequence as my bosses say, Liz Truss, my first.

And going to see her and she says, Rory, I think you're going, I'm going to ask you to cut the budgets of the National Parks by 20%.

And I say, Secretary of State, I think that's going to be really damaging.

Their budgets are very small.

It's going to cause chaos.

And she says, all right, for you, Rory, 5%.

And I go, well, Secretary of State, if you're just cutting them by 5%, it's probably best not to cut them at all.

It's a huge public uproar.

And so she says, okay, Rory, for you, we're not going to cut them at all.

And then kind of pirouettes out of the room.

I sort of wondered at that moment when she was Prime Minister and she and quasi-causing were kind of introducing these tax cuts and doing these radical things, whether it wasn't sort of like that, whether she wasn't just kind of throwing out provocations, which she could reverse in an instant.

You've not very flattering about David Cameron at all.

You essentially, I think, put a lot of the rot that we're now living with on him in terms of the lack of seriousness.

It's all a game.

It's all about the media, all that stuff.

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But in regards to the two of them, you say, David Cameron, I was beginning to realise had put in charge of environment, food and rural affairs, a Secretary of State who openly rejected the idea of rural affairs and who had little interest in landscape, farmers or the environment.

I was beginning to wonder whether you could have given her any role she was less suited to, apart perhaps from making her Foreign Secretary, which is what she went on to be.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Exactly.

So you said that her genius was in exaggerating simplicity.

Yes.

Exactly.

So something had obviously attracted number 10 about her and it would be interesting to know what it was.

I mean, when I, you know, obviously partly it's jealous that she joined at the same time as me and I was still lingering on the back benches when she was a Cabinet Minister.

So I remember saying to someone number 10, why have you put her in the Cabinet?

And they said because she's an incredibly effective media communicator.

And it's difficult to quite believe because when you see her perform, it's difficult to quite understand.

Have you any idea why number 10 would convince themselves that Liz Truss was a very effective media communicator?

I really don't get it.

They say the same about Grant Shaps and I can see that from a technical point of view.

Grant Shaps always has this ability to sound reasonable, look like he's under control, puts verbs in the right place, doesn't sound utterly ridiculous, even when sometimes he's saying ridiculous things.

I never found her impressive as a media performer.

I found her very, very grating.

I find her a whole style, a whole approach creating, but she clearly had something that made them feel that she was special.

Of course, you've said before that both she and Priti Patel were very, very good at cultivating the press to get them to say nice things about her.

There's two labor figures in the book, Roy, that I want to quote you on.

Jeremy Corbyn had beautiful, large ears.

Now what the hell, what is that about?

Jeremy Corbyn had beautiful, large ears.

Next time you're chatting to Jeremy, how do I look at his ears?

What is it about Jeremy's ears that you've found so beautiful?

They're very dignified.

Extraordinary.

And then you also mentioned a chat by the name of Alistair Campbell.

For my chief of staff, you're right, for one of your jobs, I took Lizzie Loudon.

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She'd been Theresa May's press spokesperson.

Lizzie was tiny, war trainers and jeans to most formal meetings, spoke quietly and not in Latin.

She'd worked in the Downey Street culture formed by the legend of Alistair Campbell, which put, I now quote, an overweening communications director at the heart of every policy meeting,

frequently suggesting the policy itself and then using threats, obscenities and witchcraft to win the narrative.

I don't know whether you'll be hearing from my lawyers, but doesn't sound to be like Holy Faire.

Read the next sentence.

No, I'm taking it out of context.

In the next sentence, I point out that this was not actually how Alistair behaved but how they believed he behaved.

Yeah, you might be right about that.

But it's sort of, every time you go through one of these different ministerial appointments, it feels every time you're scrabbling, you're scrabbling to kind of find out what you're meant to be doing, how you're meant to do it, and you don't feel terribly well supported either by the centre or by the machine.

Is that right?

Yeah.

So just quickly, I mean, a couple of things.

I mean, yes, there are villains in the book, but there are also real heroes.

One of my big political heroes, obviously, is David Gork, and I write a lot about why he was the most exceptional sexual estate.

I also feel that hopefully, once you've laid out the problems in the book and sometimes in a funny way and brought people into the depths of parliament, we can begin to see what some of the solutions might be and as a starter for 10, proportional representation to shake up these old parties because I think they're sclerotic beasts who are completely unsuited to the modern world and it'd be good to bring some fresh blood.

I think sorting out these ministerial reshuffles and having definitely rules of thumb, public rules of thumb in place, that people should be trained and stay in office for longer.

And I'd also like to look at citizens' assemblies.

I'd like to look at very different ways of thinking about economic policy, but we can go on to talk about that in the weeks to come, but I'm hoping the book at least explains to people what the problems are and we can then work together on some of the solutions.

Yeah.

You've got one football reference.

Do you know what it is?

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, but does it work because you actually understand football?

It does work.

Yeah.

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Do you want to tell the listeners what it is?

Yeah, so I'm in the final, my final leadership debate against Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, Sajid Javed and Jeremy Hunt and they're talking about how they're going to deliver Brexit by the 31st of October and they're completely refusing to get into the details, the fact that the thing they're talking about is going to throw up borders under mine security in Northern Ireland, damage to British economy.

And I get the impression that they are like a team just passing the ball back and forth trying to run the clock down so that they don't provide the space or the opportunity for me to try to land a goal on the details.

I was actually thinking about when you said that you felt like you were a book club going into battle against Millwall.

I'd forgotten that one.

You see, I, well, I'd forgotten the other one.

Yeah.

I have two football references, unless you meant Millwall the place rather than Millwall the football team whose fans have a fearsome reputation.

Anyway, Roy, I enjoyed it.

I do think it's an important book.

Yours and mine do kind of go well together because we're coming at the same problem from completely different angles.

I'm sort of coming it from a, honestly, it's not as bad as everybody says, you can still make a difference.

And you're sort of saying it really is as bad as everybody says and you should be very, but both are saying we have to change.

That's the most important thing.

And I think we've talked about it enough now because I just checked the Amazon ranking. You're at number three and the two above you are both, they're not in the same category of nonfiction.

So I think we can confidently predict that you will have number one bestseller on the paperback.

Well, that'd be wonderful.

I'm still behind the air fryer though.

I think healthy meals with air fryer is always beating.

I'm not sure that cookery books go into the same charts as nonfiction.

I look to have is behind the air fryer.

So you're behind the air fryer at Amazon, but this lead me to worry by Sunday this week or next week, you'll be number one.

I'm sure of it.

Very good.

Now, shall we talk about Gabon?

Yes.

So Gabon, I mean, so one of the people I was going to recommend for leading because he's one of the world leaders that I knew was President Ali Bongo, who was the president

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of Gabon, but no longer because he's got lost.

He's under house arrest.

So as long as he's got Wi-Fi, we could do it.

It should be absolutely fine.

Yeah.

So that's why they're allowing him to do interviews with the outside world.

Because this week there was a coup d'etat and it's very shocking.

We of course have been talking a lot about the coup d'etats, this epidemic of coup d'etats that spread across the Sahel so that you can now literally get all the way from the west coast to the east coast of Africa in a chain of countries that have had military coups.

But those countries had many, many things in common.

They tended to be countries which were facing extreme climate change and on the edge of the Sahara Desert, they were countries with a big threat from Boko Haram or ISIS, these Islamist groups, and conflict between nomadic herders and settled peoples.

What has now happened is the coup has now jumped a long way down.

It's jumped down from the Sahel down to Central West Africa into a much smaller country, a much wealthier country.

Govon's one of the richer countries in Africa and a country that doesn't have any of those other kind of problems.

And once you start seeing coups breaking out there, you're in a very, very dangerous situation because it feels as though many other countries in Africa could now be vulnerable to coups.

Do you not think though that the, I think we've got to be careful not to see all these coups as you say in the same light, but I think with this one.

So if you go back, Alibongo's father had been in power for over four decades.

And when he died, it was a given amongst the political establishment that his son Alibongo would take over.

And this is the third attempted coup.

And yes, it's true that the military are now in power, but you could make the case that the Bongo family have essentially been operating a different form of coup by doing what we condemn Donald Trump for trying to do.

So for example, the first, I think it was in 2016 when Alibongo won by a very, very, very narrow majority.

It was fewer than 6,000 votes over somebody called, somebody called Jean Ping.

And Ping won in a majority of the provinces and he won the overseas votes.

And they swung it, Alibongo swung it by winning in one region, his native region, where they claimed that the turnout was 99%, there's no compulsory voting, and he got 95% of those votes.

And the other guy essentially said, listen, the game's up, mate, you've lost, let me go.

And Alibongo just refused to go.

Yeah.

So on that one, you're right, many of these democracies are what, in our interview, people should look forward to, that's just coming, which we did with Cathy Ashton.

She said were shallow democracies and have deep roots in democracies.

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The problem, though, is that that is true for many, many democracies around the world. And that, of course, is what the military always says.

And it indeed, it's the script.

What they will say is, yeah, this person was democratically elected, but the reason we need a military government is that it was corrupt and dodgy.

And that is perfectly valid, of course.

And this is what militaries have said, not just in Africa, I mean, in Zimbabwe, but they will say it, in Egypt, in Pakistan, in Turkey, in Myanmar, in Thailand.

But it is a very, very disturbing trend, because what it means is that instead of working to try to deepen and strengthen the democracy, you resort back to people in camouflage fatigues with medals and peaked hats trying to run a country.

I agree with that.

And there was a piece we should put in the newsletter that I read in the Financial Times at the weekend by somebody called, you may know him, Chidi Anselm Odin Karlu, who is, he chairs the Truth, Justice and Peace Commission on Southeast Nigeria.

And let me just read you the last sentence of his piece.

If the world can learn to treat civilian coups in Africa with the same sense of alarm that reserves for military takeovers, it's likely to have greater success in seeing an end to both.

And I think one of the point that's come through very, very strongly, particularly in the French media, which has been covering this in far greater depth than our media has, is that part of the backdrop to this has been that the former colonial powers have kept pretty tight links to some extent pretty tight control, all sorts of corrupt arrangements involving the funding of political campaigns in France by the business people in these countries and the governments in these countries.

I mean, and Alibongo, you know, as well as mixing it with you, Rory, he was one of those guys, he liked to hang around with Prince Charles, with Lionel Messi, the footballer, with Michael Jackson, the singer.

And as you say, it's a very comparably a very wealthy country because they've got oil. But for such a small country with so much money, there is still a massive proportion of people living in abject poverty, and they were the ones I'm afraid we were out celebrating when the military took over.

Well, yeah.

So France is central to this, as you say, colonial powers, but all these coups or almost all of them are happening in Francophone Africa.

And a loss of this is not just a revolution against the civilian government, it's a revolution against the French.

A lot of the rhetoric always is anti-French.

And of course, the problem, as we've pointed out, is that when they lurch away from France, people tend to lurch towards Russia and China, because that's where they're going to get the support from pretty quickly.

And the reason also is an epidemic is that all these military officers know each other. They've all been to French military academy together.

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They've often studied in American military academies together.

They serve together because African armies go on UN operations together, they go on African Union operations together.

So once all the other young colonels are knocking off coups in other countries, you very quickly flip across.

And as the number increases, it becomes more and more difficult to do anything about it in the past.

10, 15 years ago, France would have intervened.

They would have put troops in on the ground and moved very, very quickly to try to reestablish the civilian government.

That's not happening.

And Nigeria, which was talking about getting involved in dealing with the coups in the Sahel, is now completely thrown off balance because as the number increases, it becomes unmanageable.

Well, there we are.

Another coup.

Let's hope there aren't too many more in the near future, although change of government here would be quite good.

Change of government, they're not a military coup.

I'm not calling for a military coup, I'm calling for a democratic transition.

Change of government here.

Okay.

Thank you, Alastair.

All right.

We'll see you soon.

See you soon.

Bye.

Bye.