

**[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 169. Question Time: Imagining Labour's first 100 days in power, Australia's Indigenous Voice referendum, and compulsory politics in schools**

Welcome to the Restless Politics Question Time with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

And Rory, I think we should start with this one, but fairly briefly, Adina Place, please can you talk about the voice referendum in Australia?

I think we should talk about the voice referendum in Australia a fair bit in the coming weeks because the campaign has just kicked off.

Yeah.

Well, tell us a bit about it.

You've been following it more closely than me.

So this is a referendum that's been promised, I'll just read the question, to alter the constitution to recognise the first peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice.

Do you approve this proposed alteration?

In other words, it's giving a proper voice within the constitution to the Indigenous people of Australia.

And I would have thought that would be a kind of slam dunk because Australia has had a very troubled history.

They've made massive progress.

You have the famous apology from when Kevin Rudd was Prime Minister.

And this, it seems to me, is a logical next step.

But I think it's going to be very, very difficult and I've just been looking at the polls.

The campaign started now and so therefore things can turn around, but I think it's fair to say that the no campaign has been getting momentum.

When this thing first started, August 22, yes, was standing at 68%-ish and the no campaign low 30s and it's now sort of looking like 55-45 in the polls, now that can be turned around in six weeks.

And it's like all of these things, it's like, you know, when Merkel and Hollande said to camera and for God's sake, don't have a referendum, it always becomes about other things.

There's a lot of sort of, you know, there's horrible stuff online that is racist.

There's some terrible conspiracy theories that are doing the round online.

And the opposition, the official opposition, who probably just want the government to lose, they've undernourished about whether to back it, whether not to back it, they've decided now not to back it and they're running this line, if you don't know, vote no.

In other words, if you've got any doubts about it, just sort of kick it out.

I think it would be a terrible, terrible shame if it doesn't go through.

Let's talk about it.

I guess the principle is about whether you should be recognizing separate categories of citizens in the Constitution and what that will mean and how that plays through.

But really great subject to do more of.

Now, you wanted also, I think, Alistair to talk a bit about mental health this week.

I do.

In fact, tomorrow I am going one of my rare visits into Parliament because rethink mental illness are publishing a survey and a report, which I think politicians should heed.

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One of the disappointing things, I think, I was very, you know, full of praise for Keir Starmer's reshuffle, but actually, I think downgrading mental health, it was a shatter cabinet position.

Now it's not.

I'd rather wish they hadn't done that, but more in common, I've done a series of polls and it shows that mental health is far higher up the political agenda as far as the public is concerned that we might think.

It's actually for people under 40, they list it as the fourth most important issue.

For the general population, they list it as the sixth most important issue, so it's behind things like the cost of living in NHS, but they've got it ahead of crime education, ahead of Brexit.

And the thing that should interest Labour, because they're sort of focused obsessively on this, you know, red wall type voter as they see it, this polling is quite interesting.

We can put the report in the newsletter, it's quite long, but it's done by a group called More in Common that you will know, and it's segmented polling.

They're not looking at the population as a whole, they're not, they segment people into these categories.

Progressive activists, I think that would be you and me, civic pragmatists, disengaged battlers, established liberals, loyal nationals, disengaged traditionalists and backbone conservatives. If we put the report out, people can sort of read it in more detail.

But what's interesting is that the loyal nationals, who are the ones that you would say were former working class Labour, switched to Brexit, back Johnson, et cetera, et cetera, for them, actually they, only the progressive activists, are more concerned about mental health.

And I think that's probably because so many of those people will know people who've got mental health conditions, who are really struggling to get heard.

Well, we've had many questions about this.

We had a question from Andrew Douglas, who's strategic development officer for health and social care partnership in Scotland, talking about this and talking about the effects on MPs, which is interesting.

I mean, when I was in Parliament, I write a little bit about this in the book, the number of MPs who went through very extreme situations.

I don't want to name them because it's very personal, but there were MPs who tried to kill themselves in very, very dramatic public ways.

There were MPs who had very public breakdowns in very ways that I think they found very difficult, very embarrassing.

And I think MPs are getting a bit better about talking about it.

Did you feel, I mean, when did you start really talking openly about mental health?

Was that a difficult thing for you when you began?

I started talking openly in terms of my own circle after my breakdown in the 80s because I had no choice.

I'd had a breakdown.

Everybody knew that I'd had a breakdown.

I went to work.

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All sorts of stories were doing the rounds about what had happened.

So I just decided to tell everybody very openly what had happened.

In terms of campaigning more openly, that was a lot later.

But I've always felt better for being open about it, and that's what I always say to people.

It's a very personal choice for people.

And I know lots of MPs who, including from your old party, who phoned me up and say, actually, there are a few people that I was talking to before the last election, one of whom was suicidal, I think, and couldn't face the campaign.

Now, to be fair, did it and won and is still there and does now get professional help.

But I think we'd be very reluctant to talk about it.

I've certainly never heard him talk about it publicly, but we'd be very reluctant for me to say his name so I won't.

Because we've talked about Charles Kennedy before, I think Charles would have benefited from being open.

And I think he'd have found the public and parliament much more supportive, but he was very, very scared about that.

So it's interesting, this thing is going to be held in parliament, hopefully there will be lots of MPs and peers there.

What rethink are trying to do is to say to the politicians, listen, you are missing a trick here by not focusing more than you do on mental health.

You're not addressing the needs of the people, but actually, politically, you're in a bad place on this.

Question from Donna Mooney.

I wondered if you might be able to discuss on the show the recent UN statement about IPP.

These are these indeterminate sentences for public protection.

It stopped, David Cameron stops it, but it was introduced by David Blunkett.

And in the past, during that period, you could be given an indeterminate sentence, a sentence which could continue until people thought you were safe to release.

And it could often be that you committed quite a minor crime and that you were given one of these sentences and people have been stuck for years and years and years.

And there's been a UN report that's just come out.

Donna Mooney's own brother died while on an IPP sentence.

A recent UN report has come out saying, basically, this is cruel, inhumane, it's degrading.

The report points out that 65 IPP prisoners have died by suicide and that the rates of self-harm, suicide attempts are incredibly high, two and a half times more likely than the general prison population.

And the general prison population is much, much more likely than the general public to be doing suicide attempts and thinking about suicide.

So it's awful.

And I do hope that one of the things Kirstama could do and have the courage to do when he comes in is to say it's not enough just to abolish these sentences, but to listen to

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the fact that the UN is now calling on this and release these prisoners.

Now, here's one that probably you've done more of this than I have.

I've done a bit of this in my time.

Is door knocking effective, James OB?

Is knocking the doors of constituents proved to be effective in winning elections?

Well, we don't really know.

I mean, it's something that we do a lot of.

It's like a huge ritual and it's a sort of rite of passage for MPs.

You prove to your local association that you're a good MP by knocking on a lot of doors.

And a lot of the skills that MPs develop for years before they become MPs.

Remember most MPs don't get in the first time.

Not like you, Rory.

No.

Most of them stand in an unwinnable seat, fight to get a seat, have to prove themselves doing so.

Often seven, eight years of their lives before they become MPs are spent going around, plotting around doorsteps, sticking leaflets through with generally a couple of elderly volunteers, the local parties that deploy are pretty small usually.

A lot of this is about how you get your finger in and out of the letterbox without catching it on the metal.

How you stop yourself being bitten.

Yeah.

One of my most ardent campaigners who was a veteran, he was a colonel, he'd served in Iraq and Afghanistan, managed to get so badly savaged that he stopped leafletting for me entirely.

You know, essentially in recent by-elections, who was I talking to, was involved in one of the campaigns recently, who said that they were seeing fewer and fewer and fewer Tories on the ground delivering leaflets.

And that might be because they had fewer activists out, but I suspect it's because far more resources now are going into direct online campaigning.

I think a lot of it, he asked what the value of it is.

Of course, you can reach more people more quickly on social media and through posting leaflets, but it is, if nothing else, so important for the MP to be out meeting 100 people and hearing from it gives you a pulse on the constituency every week.

And you shouldn't, there's a drive, obviously, to try to do it as efficiently as possible.

Get the leaflet through, work out whether they're going to vote for you or not, get off the doorstep, move on.

I think that's completely wrong.

Are you one of those candidates who, if they say, would you like to come in for a cup of tea, you're straight in there and eating cake?

Well, definitely.

And I think, you know, Mrs. Thatcher was famously irritate people like this.

She'd turn up at a door and it would say, I'm voting Labour.

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And normally the advice is get out of there, get onto the next door.

But she would stand there for 45 minutes trying to convince the person that they were wrong.

And there's something positive about that.

A politician who cares enough to want to actually get into the argument with the constituent rather than being like, ah, I never convinced am I going to go on?

I think we can all agree that she liked an argument.

She liked an argument.

On that, though, I must say, I found it incredibly refreshing this week hearing Sadiq Khan out and about doing interviews, defending the Ooless policy, which is getting so much flack.

I think people respect that sort of approach.

People shout out to him as well.

I noticed Regent Street.

Oh, I saw you tweeted it.

Yeah, well, when I was running against him to be Mayor of London, one of my things was I was obsessed with the fact that he promised to plant all these trees and there were no trees on Regent Street.

And I now discover there are trees on Regent Street, so shout out to Sadiq Khan.

Okay, Rory, lots more questions to come.

Let's have a quick break.

Right, question for you coming in.

Labour's first 100 days, Caroline Kay.

You've been told by Stalmers, no wealth tax, no income tax increase, no promises from Labour have asked new expenditure either.

So what, in honest from Rory's use, should be the first 100 days policy for any party hoping to win the next election?

What should Labour's first 100 days be?

I find the whole 100 days thing a completely false construct.

But I think the, you keep saying when he gets in, I'm going to stick to it, because I think it's important never to be complacent.

I think if he gets in, clearly the first thing is forming a government.

I think fairly early on, hopefully the first King's speech will flow very, very clearly from the campaign.

But it will depend on the outcome to be absolutely frank.

If we do end up with the coalition government, it will become a bit harder to be clear about that.

But I think he's got to do something to address the cost of living crisis very, very, very quickly.

Health service is going to need a kind of urgent radical plan straight away, Ditto schools.

I think a very, very focused, clear campaign on the public services is what I think people are going to be looking for.

And at the same time, we talked on the main podcast about this, you know, how do you generate growth, a big growth plan that sort of signals to people the economy is going to be done in a different way.

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I mean, they would be my first sort of first shot.

What about you?

Well, we've got a related one that maybe I could take, which is Audrey Pike.

What would be your five priorities if you were to win the next general election and were PM in order the most important?

Now, obviously being asked five priorities without having thought about it's a bit tough, but I would say that following on from you, the first thing is you need a very, very clear economic plan and policy that recognizes what went wrong in the 90s and 2000s, recognize what's gone wrong under the Conservatives.

And here's a starter.

I think it's going to involve industrial strategies, but it's industrial strategies where you don't make your investment only on the basis of financial return, but you look at the impact on environment, you look at the impact on social justice, and you do it in a way that doesn't return to the 1970s.

There's a real tendency to think, well, we can just go back to the trade and investment policy of the 70s, which were very rigid, very, very wasteful.

So they've got to be quicker and more flexible.

You need to think about public investment and how big that's going to be.

We talked about that in the last pod.

So set a figure for public net investment, get it up closer to the average of developed countries.

Another thing for me would be political reform, bring in proportional representation, make use of citizens' assemblies.

But he can't do that unless he's in the manifesto, can he?

And it's not going to be in the manifesto.

Well, he could, but he'd have struggled to get it through the House of Commons unless it was in the manifesto.

And you're right, there'd be a constitutional issue, a big constitutional issue doing that without having a referendum or putting in the manifesto, I agree.

I do hope that as part of the first pitch, once he gets in, because don't underestimate how much, even with a small majority, even with a coalition, you have a lot of power in those early days to shape things.

And I do hope that part of the campaign pitch is about saying our politics has got to change and we've got to lead that change.

And that can take even into all sorts of interesting areas.

So I do hope that happens in the first 100 days.

Then, I mean, just coming to the end, I mean, I think much more generous open foreign policy.

We need a much clearer sense of how Labour is going to engage with international development.

Think about what's happening in Africa now.

Think about what its partnership is with the US.

And then final thing, I think, is you need a narrative that brings that all together.

You need a connecting thread.

And I'd suggest the connecting thread is about decentralization.

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It's about getting power down to people.

I actually thought that was one of the most interesting parts of the discussion with Ed Davies, that the whole thing about empowerment, and maybe we should tell people, once we've done Kathy Ashton next week, we're then doing our first joint interview with two mayors, Andy Burnham and Andy Street.

And I do think the whole devolution agenda can be accelerated.

So I think there's a massive opportunity in political reform.

I get the feeling that Labour is so focused on economy, cost of living, health service schools, red wall.

I get all that.

But don't underestimate for the country as a whole how much people are feeling they want this country to change, and part of that has to be the political change.

And you do want to feel in those 100 days that there's a sense of energy direction.

Oh, yeah.

I mean, I remember ULOT coming in and how exciting it was.

I mean, almost immediately the first thing I remember was the announcement of the independence of the Bank of England.

Am I right in saying that was something that you'd held back?

Certainly, for me and the public, I wasn't aware of it until the announcement came after you came in.

It was like a surprise out of the back pocket.

I think we had a line in the manifesto that said we would do everything we could to encourage economic stability.

Right.

But it was very smart that because it was a sense of something really eye-catching, really dramatic and important coming out as soon as you came in.

You talked about foreign policy and, you know, Robin Cook, foreign secretary, made a very big speech about an ethical foreign policy.

Now, it gave himself all sorts of hostages to fortune, but it signalled real change.

You know, I said on Sky at the weekend, this thing about the government behaving like the opposition, the opposition behaving like the government.

As they go into the final year for this and up to the election campaign, Labour doesn't have to cross every T, dot every I.

They can signal direction, they can signal change.

And I think in these areas, particularly areas where it's not all about money, so soft power is not all about money.

Foreign policy is not all about money, it's about relationships, it's about diplomacy.

You I know, and I agree with you, would like the Foreign Office to get back some proper diplomatic representation around the world.

So that sort of area of politics, what we feel, how we are as a country, culture, that kind of stuff.

There's so much there that can be done.

Okay.

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Well, we're coming towards an end, but here's a question from undervalued broadcaster. The BBC is now signing its regionalising cuts to local radio.

What do you both think will be the consequence, especially for local democracy?

Well, we've talked about this a bit before, I think it's troubling, I think it's very alarming.

I think local radio is incredibly important to debate, I think it's very, very important to the sense of identity that a place has.

I get the financial pressures that they're under, but given the way the media landscape is changing so fast, the way local papers are disappearing, because the advertising models of the new media are kind of destroying them, I think we get rid of these local radio stations at our peril.

And maybe that's something else, obviously chairman of the BBC job up at the moment.

Do you want, is that what you're going for that one?

You know, that could be the one, couldn't it?

I think the next government also might want to look at the licence fee, because the terrible cuts to local radio and to the World Service have been driven by the government being very, very tight on the licence fee.

And I think that local radio and the World Service are classic examples of place where the BBC can do things that other commercial stations can't do and aren't doing.

Can't do and won't do, because, you know, often the commercial gain is not there.

No, I think that local radio is incredibly important, but you and I bang on about the World Service, rightly, I think, but I think local radio is in the same category.

My final question was from Aaron Spence.

Do you think government and politics should be taught as compulsory in schools?

And then he's added brackets GCSE.

I don't think everybody should have to do GCSE in government and politics.

I actually think we should teach about politics in primary schools, about how the country works, kings and queens, prime ministers, cabinets, parliaments, how it all works.

You know, I think there's a way of doing that that will interest and excite children.

And I think the levels of lack of awareness of our political process, and again, this is something I'm keen to talk to the two Andes about when we see them for leading, is that people don't necessarily know what the government does, what the mayor does, what the local council

does, what local government does, and I think it would help them if actually we had better understanding of how a political system works.

Simon Pereira-Shorey has asked a question related to this.

He says bad Tory government comes from low-quality Tory MPs, which come from poor selection by out of touch local party committees.

How does the Tory party get better quality candidates selected?

Very good question.

Same could apply to Labour.

I mean, these parties have a stranglehold on the way that candidates are selected.

It's very difficult for an ordinary person to come in.

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You can see it in the statistics.

Back in the early 80s, there were over 100 members of Parliament who came from blue collar manual Labour backgrounds, miners, steel workers, my friend Frank Roy, for example, actually Patrick McLaughlin, who was a Tory MP.

And that number has dropped very dramatically and been replaced by party professionals, people who've mostly been working as special advisors or working at central office.

And that's because it's very expensive.

You've got to move to a new place.

You leave your job, it affects your mortgage.

It's pretty humiliating.

It takes years of going around no hope seats.

And the party decides who these candidates are going to be.

And so the reason I wanted to finish with that question is it loops back to this question of how we teach politics.

One of the things I'm trying to do in the book, and I think you've tried to do in your book, is get into some of the details of this and get away from what I felt happened in schools, which is often when I walk around schools, there are big pictures of Martin Luther King or JFK or Gandhi, these kind of amazing, heroic black and white figures.

And you don't want to be teaching children.

The politics is somehow just about being some superhero.

They need to understand the business of it.

And I think one of the things I liked as an MP is sitting in schools answering questions and talking about how the thing actually worked, dealing with the fact that obviously, most children were very surprised that I wasn't in Cumbria all the time.

They didn't understand that I had to go to Westminster.

So, and I think that's a challenge also to teachers, which is that when you say politics, teachers will often want to make great kind of idealistic statements about changing the world.

But you've also got to give people a bit of the gritty business of the whole thing.

Well, I think, yeah, and we both try and do that in our own different ways.

But I think you're right.

The only thing I say is people do learn a lot of history through individual people, and it tends to be the people who, as it were, get to the top, become very famous, become very well known.

But I think within schools, for example, I go into loads of schools, and I'm quite shocked sometimes by the levels of, I try and find out whether they know who their local MP is.

And unless the MP has been there, often the answer will be no.

And yet a lot of MPs, I think, underestimate, maybe because they think, well, young people can't vote and younger people don't vote.

But I just think part of the job of an MP is actually to educate people about politics.

And that's why I would go with Aaron's suggestion that we teach politics very, very, very early on, even though you'd have the sort of, you know, the anti-woke rights saying this is all about trying to radicalise kids and blah, blah, blah.

It's actually trying to educate kids about how the country that they live in actually works.

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Okay.

Now, Rory, I've got you, Rory.

We started with the voice, I'll finish with the voice.

We should put in the newsletter two videos, which Julia Gillard has sent me.

One is the official ad campaign for the Voice Referendum Yes campaign, which is this wonderful song, You're the Voice, by John Farnham.

But also, I should warn you, and maybe this is something we could do in one of our live shows, she also sent me one with the bagpipe version.

And so I'm going to spend the weekend learning the voice anthem on the pipes.

Looking forward to hearing that.

I want to get you back in the pipes, by the way.

I think you've given up too easily.

I am such, such a bad musician.

You know, I think I'm a better footballer musician.

I'm happy to play football with you, actually.

I think you'd be surprised I'm better at balling my feet than I am with the bagpipes.

Really?

Yeah.

Okay.

Okay.

I'm a very dirty player, Rory.

Good, good, good.

Yeah.

Cool, very good.

Well, listen, good luck with the rest of your tour.

What are you doing today?

I am going off to do, straight from you, to do Radio 5.

I've just done, I did Barbican yesterday, 2,500 people.

Barbican the night before, 2,500.

Booker's ticket, I trust.

Yeah, Manchester, Lowry, 2,000 people.

So, it's a lot of this going on there next week.

I think we're doing Bath, Edinburgh together, aren't we?

Yeah, we are.

We are.

And I'm going out to Cambridge, and then I'm off to the States to do my book launch there.

So, a lot of different stuff going on.

There's a lot of balancing of different things going on at the same time.

Very good.

We'll enjoy it.

Thank you very much.

Bye-bye, guys.

All the best.

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Bye.