

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 170. Prison escape, a test for Australian democracy, and spooks in Westminster?

Welcome to the Restless Politics with me, Alistair Campbell, and with me, Rory Stewart. And Rory, given that the news last week was dominated by a guy seemingly escaping somewhere easily, it would seem from one's with prison. We should talk about your time as prison's minister, I think. I think we should also have a little run around the block about Chinese espionage with this guy getting arrested allegedly for smiling for the Chinese in parliament. We've had the G20, pretty unsatisfactory outcome on all sorts of levels, I would say. We've also got a meeting with Putin and Kim Jong-un today, so a bit of foreign on that. And I'm really keen to talk about the voice referendum in Australia, which I was really hopeful was going to be a sort of positive, uplifting, historically significant event in Australia's history. But it feels like it's going the wrong way. We can talk about that a bit later, but should we kick off with prisons? Absolutely, yeah. So, I mean, international listeners should have picked up, but maybe not a guy called Daniel Halife, who was being held on espionage allegations. He was a man who had been a British soldier, British Signals soldier. And he is accused of having made an improvised dummy bomb and of having passed information to the Iranian intelligence agency, seems to be the implication. He escaped from Wandsworth Prison, where he was working in the kitchens by attaching himself to the bottom of a vehicle, bottom of a bakery truck, rolled out of the prison, and the police set off on a manhunt that lasted two or three days, and then he was finally recaptured. But it produced an extraordinary flurry of interest again in the British prison system. What did you make of it all?

Well, I think it did go very quickly to the issue of staffing levels, cuts, our old friend austerity. There was a report, in fact, I think it was Rosina Alan Khan, who's the local MP, said that she'd already raised with ministers the fact that she'd been told that within the prison one night, there were seven, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven prison guards looking after the entire prison. If that's true, then we're talking ridiculously low levels. But still, look, you know lots about prisons. I've been inside lots of prisons as a visitor, I hasten to add, that they are really, really, really on the edge. And I think that the escape happened, massive interest in it, the guy gets caught, and we then sort of all move on. But the fundamentals about what's happening in our prison system just, it seems to me, aren't being addressed. And I think people should have a little bit of sympathy for the people who are actually working in the prisons. The absenteeism rates at the moment are off the scale. Now, you could say, well, that's people swinging the lead. But it's more the fact that morale is so low, that the conditions are so bad, and that attacks on prison officers are going up. And Rishi Sunay said something, which I just, I can't, his line of defense was, there were 10 times more escapes under labor than the Tories. Now, I have no idea whether that is borne out by statistics. I think it is true, the statistics show a big reduction in number of escapes. I think prison security's improved. But so anyway, but I just thought that to sort of turn that into a kind of, you know, I can't remember any major prison escapes. He used to send me a message saying, were there any in my time? I'm sure there were. But I don't remember anything quite as dramatic as this. Of course, in the past, Ronnie Biggs was the most one of the most famous prison escapes. There was the maze, there were, you know, some terrorists who escaped from the maze at one point. But I don't remember any really massive high profile prison escapes like this one. I did feel a little bit for a viewer friend, Alex Chor. But what's your sense of what actually happens inside

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government when something like this happens and people start thinking, how the hell has that happened? Two things. I mean, firstly, just to reinforce the fact that our prisons are a horrifying mess. And our prison officers are doing very, very difficult jobs and a very poorly paid, I think, given the job that they're doing. They are being expected to be a combination of teachers, social workers, police officers, counselors. When I was a prison minister, there were 10,000 assaults on prison officers a year, people getting their eyes gouged out. It is a very, very difficult job. And many people do it out of a real sense of pride and vocation. I mean, it's a real 24 hour a day job. Some people find it really wonderful. And there are people both on the landings and senior officers and governors who take a real pride in their work. And I think you can see why, because they really care about making prisons places which are safe where you can do rehabilitation and where you can run an orderly ship. But it's really tough. So I think that that's the first thing. And I'd love us at some point to get into the question of whether we're ever going to get to a situation that any party deals with the fundamental problem, which is that there are too many people in prison. And this is where I've been very disappointed by Kirsten Amme. The predictions for the prison population, they go higher and higher and higher. So you have these jails that were made, some of them built in the Victorian era, on the idea that one person per cell, now having two people per cell, some of them locked up for 23 hours a day. And we had a question this week from Pierre Sinier, who's the CEO of the Prison Reform Trust, asking whether the values of courage and bravery in politics are now superfluous because

of populism. And it is one of those issues that is just very, very hard to tackle because of what the public are generally think about prisoners and issues of crime and justice and politicians who just won't constantly be saying they're tough on crime. But we are heading for six figure prison population. How do we cope? How does the prison estate even begin to cope with that? It can't. It can't. And you would have heard Alex Shorke talking about building new prisons, but they can't begin to keep up. So if you look at the graph, prison population went up steeply under new labor. It then flattened, but it didn't come down. And the only way to really bring it down is to send fewer people to prison and to send them for less time. So David Gore and I tried to introduce a legislation to get rid of short term prisons. So I met a man in Bedford who'd been in nine times in a year. And Durham prison, I think the average length of the stay was seven days. So you could make the estates much better if you got rid of people being sent to prison for minor nonviolent offenses. There's still people being sent to prison for not paying their TV licenses, not paying their council tax. But it's also about the sentence length. And this is a real problem because under Boris Johnson, the Conservative Party took a right with lurch and started signing up to more and more draconian punishments. And you'll see these things, which I think we've talked about, where you often have a law branded around a particular individual, you know, Tim's law or Mary's law, which will often be a constituent who suffered a horrible, you know, been a victim of a horrible crime. And there's pressure then from MPs to increase the sentence for it. The sad thing, though, is that the person who really understands this better than anyone else in parliament is, of course, Keir Starmer, who was the director of public prosecutions. And he really knows the burden on the prison estate. But instead of doing what I was hoping, which is to get in behind the kind of policies that David Gorkin and I were trying to push forward to reduce the number of prisoners, he's pushing in the other direction, he's trying

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to out-compete the Tories. So he's had statements out implying that he'd send another 1,500 people a year to prison for assaulting children and that Rishi Sunak's being soft on crime, etc. So it's just going to get worse and worse and worse. As you say, they're heading for 100,000 if they keep going like this. We're going to have, you know, we already have behind the United States a very, very high prison population compared to Europe and it's just going to get higher. Yeah. Look, you've raised Keir Starmer, Mori, and in the relentless promotion of your book, I'm not complaining about that. I do the same myself. You've been landing in some very strange places for your interviews. GB News, the odd I thought, as well as our listeners said, what do you get out of that? Do you think you shifted that many books from going on to GB News, or did you give them a bit of credibility? Don't know. But then I was out at this debate last night with Gary Neville and a debate mate, it's called, where young people come together and debate issues. And Gary Neville was very, very good, I have to say. Anyway, I turned my phone on to a rash of messages like WTF is Rory Stewart on about. You called Keir Starmer mad. Just to explain, this was my other move. This was Novara Media. So GB News is on the right, Novara Media is on the left. I was about to explain that. You did Novara Media, and you said, and I look, I'm trying to coach you in how to do media properly, Rory, and I think you've been learning very, very well, and that's a very good interviews. I thoroughly enjoyed your constant weaving of the title of your book, Politics on the Edge, and your interview with Trevor Phillips on Sky. But you said things to Novara Media, which I've never heard you say before. You said that what Keir Starmer is spelling in Jeremy Corbyn was mad. It was disgusting. You painted a picture of Jeremy Corbyn as some sort of amazing kind of, you know, Gandhi Abraham Lincoln type figure, this giant of political history. And I just wonder, Rory, if you did that because you thought that's what they wanted to hear as opposed to what you really, really believe. I think you'll find in polite language that I've been making the same case on this podcast consistently. I see expelling Jeremy Corbyn as being a really bad sign. And it's the equivalent, I think, of Boris Johnson throwing out 21 members of the Conservative Party, throwing out Ken Clark and six cabinet ministers. You don't do that. Mrs. Thatcher didn't do that. You didn't do that when you were in office. This guy was the leader of the Labour Party. He was also actually an MP under you guys, and you didn't throw him out. It's a sign, I'm afraid, of lack of confidence from Keir Starmer. He's running the Labour Party with a cabal of three or four people. He isn't really allowing a broad spectrum. Whatever you think of Jeremy Corbyn, and I absolutely agree that there are deep questions from to answer around antisemitism. At the same time, he was leader of the Labour Party. He represents a huge spectrum of Labour opinion and Labour support. He represents a big part of Labour tradition. And I think it's very, very sad that he was thrown out. Yeah, okay. And I'm just making the point. I think you maybe exaggerated that side of your argument. I've never heard you say that before on this podcast. We'll put the tape up. I've heard you say all sorts of things, but I do think though that what happens when people in position of leadership are no longer in position of leadership, there's a danger that we kind of slightly romanticize them. And the fact is that, you know, if I'd have been on Navarra media, I would have said that I do think that the politics that they pursue, they Navarra media pursue in this sort of relentless anti-Kirstar, anti-Labor leadership, Jeremy Corbyn, some kind

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of messiah, is that they overlook the fact that Jeremy Corbyn, you have said this before, partly responsible for Brexit, no doubt about that at all. And also, yes, you can admire him as a kind of, you know, a figure who's been around Parliament for a long time and so forth. But, you know, he didn't lead the Labour Party in a way that took it anywhere in the right direction in terms of actually winning power. And the reason for that is I don't think that's what Ava really wanted. Yeah. Do you want to get back to prisons?

Yes. Well, so they're bringing it back to prisons. So, I was just reflecting on the prison. So, as you say, there were prison escapes under Labour government and prison escapes when I was prison

minister. And they are absolutely staggering. On my first day, I think in office, somebody got out of bricks in prison, they literally climbed over the wall. And I remember my private secretary coming in and saying, Minister, you know, this happened. And I said, Oh, my goodness, what happened?

And I was expecting him because obviously, you know, civil servants tend to try to put the best face on things and defend. He was like, Oh, it's a complete disgrace. The guy climbed over the wall in full view of the entire yard. And as far as he was concerned, all that needed to happen was grabbing onto his ankles and pulling him down. And then later in my time towards the end of my time as prison officer, there was another escape. And I thought, Okay, I really need to get into the details of this. And in this particular case, the prisoner who was not meant to leave his wing managed to convince one officer at the gate that he was on his way to an activity at the west end of the prison, walked out, immediately turned to the east end of the prison, started walking towards that convinced another prison officer that he was supposed to be in some form of educational activity that he wasn't in, then didn't walk into the classroom, but instead walked straight out into the yard and then climbed right over the fence in full view of people to awaiting car and got away. Now, this is because I think it's not because the prison officers, as you said, they are often doing amazing things. And I think one of the best things that could be done by any government, liberal conservatives is really getting behind prison officers, rebuilding the morale of the prison service, making them feel that they are respected and admired. But it is because these things are completely creaking. And if anybody is serious about addressing it, we've got to get the population down. I've not seen this in Wandsworth, but I've been in other similar prisons, watching deliveries. Do you think for this to have happened, there must

have been a breakdown in the system? I remember, I can't remember which prison it was, but I remember

watching where Laurie came in and it gets stopped and it gets searched and they put the mirrors underneath and then they go into this sort of this bubble where it's kind of gone over again and then it goes through and then it and then the same process is meant to happen as the as the thing comes out. Now, in your experience, could this have happened without either those basic things not happening or them happening? But Daniel Khalif was getting support from the inside. Couldn't have happened. You're absolutely right. If the vehicle had been properly searched underneath,

there's no way that he could have got out. So either there was collusion or there was incompetence. Right. Right. And the incompetence, the only justification for the incompetence if that's

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what's happened is the fact of them not having the bodies to to look.

So what I mean, this is something that I push out a lot because I was trying to reduce the number of drugs in prison. And drugs like a human can only get into a prison or out of a prison, either over the wall or through the gate. So you can stop that, you can stop it by netting the yards, you can stop it by having much more careful searches at the gate. But it's very, very time consuming. It's very labor intensive to do that. And you often have to redesign the entrances and you have to buy fancy scanning equipment. So it is often simply a question of the priority you put on it and how many staff you put on it. The other thing that's happened in recent years is the use of drones to be getting in mobile phones and drugs. How again, I think people find it hard to work out why that isn't easy to deal with. Why is that so difficult? It isn't. Again, a drone really only works if you've got a broken window. If you fix the windows and windows in prisons are locked windows, they're not things that you can open. So prisons often smash the glass. If you smash the glass, you can stick your hands out, take the drug off the drone. But if you haven't smashed the glass, and if you're properly punished for smashing the glass and windows fixed, the drone doesn't really work. But surely as well, even if they can stop the drones, they could see the drones.

So they know where the drones are going. They know which windows the drones are going to. Exactly. And more than that, I mean, also things are thrown over with tennis balls, drugs are put inside tennis balls, they're fired over with catapults, and the prison officers will see those drugs landing in the yard. It's a question of, again, staffing and prioritization. I think the problem is that these places are so overwhelmed. I mean, we were looking at local prisons, and these are prisons like ones worth Victorian prisons, where the inspectors were picking up almost half the population were showing drugs in their bloodstream. So the quantities coming in were absolutely unbelievable. And what are these kind of the newer prisons, some of which are effectively contracted out to outside sources? Are they any better? Are they worse? What was your experience of the private prisons? Usually what I found with private prisons is that in Liverpool, the private prison, which was a new building, relatively new building, 25 years old, I guess it was built under you guys, was being very well run, had good results, good prisoners. But the same company, same private company running Birmingham prison, which was an old crumbling Victorian prison, was an absolute catastrophe. There was, you know, blood on the landings. There was a strong smell of drugs when you walked in. We had to renationalize, we had to take it out of that private company's hands. So the buildings seemed, in my experience, the buildings and the leadership seemed to make more difference to whether it was private or public.

Can you imagine, though, being Rishi Sunak, Suala Braverman, Keir Star, Maruette Cooper, can you imagine going into the next election saying we are going to spend lots and lots of money limited in resources? We are to have a massive expansion of the prison estate or a massive refurbishment of the old prisons. Because the truth is, these prisoners, prisoners like Pentonville, like Brixton, like Wandsworth, like Strangeways, they, frankly, should be knocked down. Would you agree with that?

Absolutely. They're not suitable for putting people down.

But to do that and then to replace them with something?

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It could cost billions upon billions, because it turns out that even things like Wormwood Scrubs, which we thought the land would be valuable because it's in a fancy part of, relatively fancy part of London, you could sell the land for £300-400 million, but it would cost you a billion to build a new prison. So it's very, very hard.

It's very hard unless you bring the prison population down. If you are prepared to reduce sentences and not send people to prison for minor offenses, the whole system works much better. Those prisons are not unmanageable if you have one person in a cell. They're unmanageable when you overcrowd them. They're still pretty unlivable.

They're still pretty horrible, but you can manage them. It's the overcrowding, I think, the cause of the problem.

Now, somebody who might be thinking that the allegations against him are true might be thinking about when he might spend time in prison. He's denied the allegations. Is this young researcher, Mr. Cash, who's suddenly been thrust into the public eye as a result of allegations of spying on behalf of Beijing, what's your guess as to how many he's denied it? Let's make that clear right at the outset. I just wonder how many people there are who are wandering around parliament, who are either useful idiots, people who unnecessarily spies, but who are being targeted by very professional agents from foreign powers, or who are actually actively in the service of China, Russia, Iran, whatever it might be.

Yes. So, I think a couple of things. One is that China has this enormous... So, just to explain the story again, for people who have not picked it up, a parliamentary researcher was arrested in March, and he was a parliamentary researcher who studied in China. He ran a lot of these all-party groups that meet on subjects in parliament. He was focusing on the China groups. He'd worked for Alicia Kearns, who's the chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

He had had a lot of contact with Tom Tugendhardt before he was security minister, and he's been arrested on grounds that he was acting for China. Now, I think a couple of things.

Firstly, China has the largest intelligence agency in the world. Probably got well over 100,000 employed professionals working. There's a very, very good report that we discussed. If people want to get into it a bit more, but we discussed a few weeks ago, and we'll send a link on the Intelligence and Security Committee report on what China is doing in Britain, and that's the absolute... I think it's the gold standard attempt to analyze it.

It seems that the UK is not China's number one priority. China is much more concerned about Taiwan. It's much more concerned about Tibet, much more concerned about Xinjiang, much more concerned about... Actually, this group called Falun Gong, which is these religious sects that you often see protesting. Obviously, if they're targeting a country, they're focusing much more on the US. They've done extraordinary, really big operations in the US. But if you've got over 100,000 people sitting around looking for things to do, one of the things they do is start recruiting agents all over the place, and the British intelligence agencies do it, the American intelligence agencies do it, and in this case, the allegation is that they got this parliamentary researcher on site. One of the things I'd like to understand, though, is what kind of agent he was. There's two different types of agent that he could be. He could be an agent gathering intelligence, or he could be what they'd call an influence agent whose job isn't actually to get information, but to change people's opinions and views. I think the case may be more the latter, because there is very little classified information that MPs get their hands on. It's not a very good

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way of targeting people. There were allegations against a Lib Dem MP called Mike Hancock who'd employed a Russian who MI5 was following and investigating when he was on the Defense Committee, and there were big stories about how she was accessing confidential stuff from the Defense Committee. I was chair of the Defense Committee. I can assure you, we did not have top secret information that they would be able to access. I think sometimes people think about that the spying is all about getting your hands on things that people are not meant to know, but a lot of the work of people who work in the security services is simply providing analysis. Your views as chairman of the Defense Select Committee, including your publicly stated views, properly analyzed would have been of interest. Therefore, if you have somebody, and by the way, we should say again that this guy has absolutely... Let's just give people his statement, because I think it's important we put this on the record. This is what Cash has said. Given what's being reported, it's vital that it's known that I'm completely innocent. I've spent my career to date trying to educate others about the challenge and threats presented by the Chinese Communist Party. Here's another one who put on the record. I'm just going to read it because you've got to be careful on libel allegations, but this is the headline coming from Sky News. Christine Lee, Labour MP Barry Gardner, says Chinese agent gained no political advantage from him. In an exclusive interview, Brent North MP Barry Gardner denies he feels a fool following the revelation that Christine Lee, who donated hundreds of thousands of pounds to him, have been engaged in Chinese political interference activities. This is the woman that the security services warned MPs about, which is why that became quite high profile as well. Let me give you another example. Last week, I had dinner at an European embassy. Security services should be following you into that. Some of them were there. My point is, why do they want something like me to go along and have a chat? Why do I want to go along? Because it's quite interesting and you're keeping tabs on people and so forth. Then they start to ask you questions about what do you think about this? What do you think about that? What would Labour's foreign policy be? What do you think about the foreign secretary? Blah, blah, blah, blah. As you know from telegrams that you've read when you were at the foreign office, there's every possibility that something gets fired back saying I had a very useful meeting with Alistair Campbell. Thinking seems to be that dah, dah, dah, dah, dah.

Now, I'm always very, very careful because I was educated to be careful and how to handle some of those things. But that, I think, is where we've got to be careful about thinking that every conversation that everybody has can be useful. Look, I don't know this guy. I'd never heard of him till the other day. He's only 28. The Tories that he seems to have been closely linked to, although they're both distancing themselves at the moment, Tom Tug and that, who's now quite a significant minister. And Alistair Kearns, as you say, is the chairwoman of the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee. So there perhaps isn't enough understanding of how this stuff works for people genuinely to make a judgment. But I'm assuming for him to have been arrested that there has been at least an assessment that there's the possibility of damage done. And I think what's also driving a lot of this story is the politics, partly within the Conservative Party where people like Ian Duncan Smith, who's on the right of the party, has been pushing for a much harder line attitude towards China. And a lot of the opposition is so has Liz Truss, and part of the ways in which they're trying to kick Rishi Sunak, who they don't like.

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So this is part of the rebellion of the kind of more pro Boris, pro Boris Johnson, pro Liz Truss faction of the party is to push for a much more aggressive policy towards China.

This is the Ian Duncan Smith, who of course was very wise on Brexit, now very, very wise on net zero. And can I make a point about Ian Duncan Smith? How on earth can he get away with saying that he's happy about these you less cameras being being smashed side point and side point on Liz Truss? Are you very, very excited about her book? It's absolutely staggering, isn't it? She's writing a book about the threats of the next decade, 10 years to save the world, 10 years to save the world. Yeah. And I don't think that's going to be much about, I imagine not much about net zero. It's probably going to be largely about banging China, but we'll see. Maybe I'm going to take a very unpopular view on this. Look, I agree our official Secrets Act is out of date, needs to be updated. I agree that China poses a very significant threat to us. They've got an enormous intelligence

agency. And a lot of what they're doing isn't actually espionage. They're huge influence through funding universities, investing in companies. A lot of it is pure economic heft and weight that they have. And that was true for Russia too. On the other hand, I don't think we should be too pious about this and too surprised. It's the job of intelligence agencies around the world to recruit agents in things like parliaments and in governments to find out information. And it's not something where you suddenly express total moral outrage and panic, because of course we would be trying to do the same thing in the other direction.

Yeah. And of course, it's also, in a way, it's easier for them. It's easier for China. It's easier for Russia because they're operating in countries like the UK or the US that are, as it were, genuine democracies. They can get access to places. They can, as you say, access universities, whereas it's a lot harder working the other way. But no, we shouldn't be too pious because the truth is everybody does it to everybody. But the question is how effective they are. And of course, the numbers do help. And we've talked before about the defunding of our defence and our security. And I think this is a real problem. I think the intelligence services will say that they've been pretty well funded, been able to adapt. But given the global reputation of our security services, I think you could argue now that we're being left behind by some of the others. Exactly. And the big challenge for them is that since 9-11, they move from doing almost nothing on counterterrorism to being almost 90% focused on counterterrorism and lost the traditional focus that they had on political intelligence and having a big global network focusing on that kind of thing. So there's a big process. It's not just about budgets, it's rebuilding the strategic priorities and thinking about what Britain's trying to do in the world. But maybe on that a break. Take a break.

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

And me, Alistair Campbell.

And Alistair, one of the things that I think has been great this week is you brought on your friend Cathy Ashton, who was effectively the European Union Foreign Minister. We had an amazing conversation with her. I thought, she's a quiet person, but in a really good way. I mean, she reminds me of some of my other heroes in politics who tend not to be...

Jeremy Corbyn.

No, she's more like, she has some of the positive qualities, a very different person of people I might like, Theresa May or David Gawke. What did she think at the end of the year?

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I think it was good. People can find it on leading now. I think it was, we got very good feedback. I think people enjoy these kind of run around the block that we have with people who've got a lot of direct experience of foreign policy and foreign affairs. I think it's interesting, I was looking recently at the listening figures of the leading episodes. The one that we did with Fiona Hill was incredibly popular. The one that we did with Jonathan Powell. I think people who've worked at the kind of coal face, not just... Because clearly, Cathy Ashton was a significant political figure, but not an elected politician. She was like an official, a very senior official. And you had this phrase, radical humility, which I'll be thinking about that a lot. It's an interesting approach. And the other thing, I got a very nice message from some of the former Hashem

Thachi team. Because we talked about Thachi, who's currently in the International Criminal Court in The Hague on awaiting war crimes trial. And I got another message from a French journalist who said

they found her description of the scene where she got the leaders of Kosovo and Serbia together in the room for the first time. She said, this is like listening to somebody describe the scene out of a film. So I think she just brought that sort of ringside view of some of these people that the world talks about it all the time. I think the humility is very important because when people listen to the interview, what they'll see is that when she brings them into the room, she's not parading herself in the way that sometimes US politicians do in the situation room, doing it all themselves, forcing it through. What she's really talking about is stepping back, listening and letting those leaders find their way to their own agreement.

And she's very, very good about that. She's not boosting her own ego. I thought it was a really fascinating example of probably not just how to do diplomacy well, but probably the only way that we're going to be able to do it in the future. And also underlines the need for people who are not constantly worrying about the next election for themselves, but actually are able to kind of, as she talked about, step back a little bit. But no, so I think the people who listened to it seem to have really enjoyed it. And those who haven't, I think they'd find it very, very interesting. Great. So Alasdair, I think you wanted to bring us on to the G20, which I think, am I right in saying is something that actually was founded when you, Tony Blair, Alasdair Campbell, when you were in government together in 1999, is that right? Tell us a little bit about the G20 and then we'll talk about what's been happening in India. Well, I think it was a response to one of the several world economic crises and it was essentially bringing together major economies. I think actually it really got a lift during the kind of Obama-Gordon Brown period. This one, which has just happened in India, noticeable for all sorts of things. First is the fact that Xi Jinping didn't turn up. Interesting. Putin obviously not there because of worries of being arrested for war crimes if he leaves his own country. And on that, sorry, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I think one of the things that Gordon Brown and others and you guys were trying to do with the G20 was deal with the fact that the G7 excluded China and was perceived as being a sort of Western facade and the G20 was trying to be more realistic about the new shape of the world. It was bringing in the BRICS. It was more representative of the global economy and it wasn't seen as a kind of West against the rest setup. Is that right? Yeah. Well, don't forget that for a period, the G7 was the G8 because Russia was part of it and

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the G20 was a way of bringing in China, also some of the Gulf states to where a lot of the power and the money was flowing. And now one of the big things that happened at this one was the addition now of the African Union. And I think maybe a reflection, not just of the fact that the G7, well, the G7 was very much the voice of the West. It was America, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the European Union. So it was very much in Canada, sorry, very much a Western thing. So you see at the G20, you've got Singapore, you've got Australia, you've got, as I say, some of the Gulf states. But I think this one was very much fitting into the broader, we talked about Modi recently. And for me, one of the most interesting things was the fact that Modi sat there at his desk in the summit and India had been replaced by Bharat. And we talked about the indification of the country. And of course, the opposition in India are coming together a bit like they tried with Erdogan, oppositions coming together. And they're calling themselves India based upon the initials of the movement that they've formed and up pops Modi to say that actually, no, we're not called India anymore, we're called Bharat. I don't think this summit will be remembered

much other than for this kind of Modi using it to further reposition himself. And on Ukraine, I mean, both Sunak and some of the other leaders of the kind of anti-Russia alliance at the moment coming out saying very strong language, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. The section on Ukraine didn't

even mention Russia, let alone call it an invasion. I guess this is the diplomatic problems. And so we've talked a lot because we covered the G7 when I was in Japan and the G7 met in Japan. And then we covered the BRICS meeting in South Africa, and the new members have been

joining. And we talked about the way in which the G7, which was 70% of the world's economy in the 1970s, has shrunk down to less than 40% of the world's economy. And how Brazil, Russia, India, China, these BRICS and now the new countries that are joining are roughly equal in size. So the G20 is very, very interesting. I mean, it's almost a sort of example of what an expanded UN Security Council could look like because it's bringing the BRICS and the G7 together. But what we're seeing as that tries to happen is we're getting a glimpse into what would happen if India, Brazil, South Africa and others were on the Security Council because they have a much more ambivalent attitude towards Russia and Ukraine than the West. And it's something that's extremely uncomfortable for America, Britain and its allies to process. And I think you would also find they have a much more ambivalent attitude towards the US-China confrontation than the US would like. Absolutely. And you've seen Lula at the summit saying he would not exercise the arrest warrant against Putin. India's been benefiting enormously as has China from cheap Russian oil and energy through this whole process. So in a way, this was a summit where people like Narendra Modi of India

and Lula of Brazil really emerged as the dominant figures. And Janet Yellen of the US and others were having to try to put a bit of a brave face on something that felt very different to the kind of G20 resolutions that you had in the 2008. I mean, G20 2008 was real kind of height of liberal global order. That's where Gordon Brown led the big drive to forgive debt. I think that was Glenn Eagles, wasn't it? And it was all about a very optimistic liberal version of the world addressing global poverty, promoting democracy, human rights. And it's now beginning to feel, and maybe this is just a sign of the world, like a pretty old-fashioned rail

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politic, let's not step on anyone's toes type organization.

I mean, you can see why it's hard for the G20 to agree. So the language around Ukraine, you've got Lavrov, Putin couldn't go for the reasons we've said. So Sergey Lavrov, the foreign minister is there representing Russia. So there's no way that Russia are going to put their name to something that as it were condemns Russia. But what it meant was that when it came to the language on Ukraine, inevitably, it was watered down from even from a year ago. And I think that has been because of this, you call it ambivalence, but I'd say with India, it's even more than that. I think they'd be pushing in a direction against some of the key policy positions of the US and the UK and others. Modi is a fascinating character. But he used that summit very effectively, I think, for his own ends domestically, and also to show how powerful he was and could be. And I think it was difficult for the Western leaders to know how to adapt. I mean, Rishi Sunak, you know, he on the plane out there, he was playing down the idea of getting the great trade deal that was being promised. And then when he landed, there was the expectation he was going to be having this great head-to-head shindig with Modi at his home. And Modi canceled and said, no, because he was having dinner with Biden. And Sunak was sort of apparently left in his hotel having dinner with his wife. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with having dinner with his wife, but you don't have much time at these summits. But relieved to have dinner with your wife. It probably is. But my point is that I think they were all just very wary of how Modi was playing them. And we've talked before about the United Nations Security Council because of the inbuilt veto power of all of them is fundamentally divided. The G7 is obviously easier to unite, but it's a more narrow view. But the more you broaden these international institutions, the less easy it is to get them to agree on the big stuff. G20, though, I mean, I'm wondering maybe this is overly optimistic, but I wonder whether the G20, nonetheless, isn't closest to being a body which you might want to lean into. Given that the UN system feels very, very broken at the moment, the Security Council fatally divided and pretty narrow in its membership, the G7, smaller than it's been in the past, given how much we have to do in terms of climate, AI, poverty, in terms of international governance and regulation, I wonder whether, as a little pitch to your future Labour government coming in, whether actually the G20 isn't really the place to focus. Well, you could only do that if you were actually to admit openly that you felt the United Nations were broken. And that's a very difficult thing to do, particularly if we're one of the five permanent members of the Security Council. But yeah, in practical terms, I think you're right. Very interesting election going on last week, by the way, in the Maldives. I know the Maldives is not one of the biggest countries in the world, far from it. But the election is literally being seen as a battle between India and China. One of the candidates is pro-China, one of them pro-India, and it's almost like it's playing out as a proxy battle of the bigger geo-strategic picture. And it's the same as the French system, you have, I think there were eight candidates, nobody got over 50%. The challenge is on 46, the incumbents on 39, and it's now going to run off. But it's interesting, you think of a place like that at the Maldives, and we're all being drawn into these bigger battles between bigger powers. It's amazing, isn't it? I think it's getting worse and worse in Maldivian politics, isn't it? Right there in the middle of the Indian Ocean. So, there was a president, I think, from 2013 to 2018, who was very, very critical of India and very pro-China. And then

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Beijing brought in a lot of money, lent the money, built infrastructure projects, and didn't criticize him. Then solely came back in and launched back into a sort of more pro-Indian stance. I mean, you're right, we're going to be seeing this again and again, particularly in areas that are on the boundary through the Indian Ocean, through the South China Sea. Yeah. Now, shall we close off with the voice in Australia? Have you managed to catch up a bit with what's going on there? Yeah. So, this is something that, I mean, I think you've got much more to say about me. So, I'll just give my sort of 20-second attempt to summarize. So, in Australia, there is a very deep, very dark story of the relationship between Indigenous Australians, Aboriginal peoples, First Nation peoples, and the people who've moved to Australia basically invaded and occupied and colonized Australia since the late 18th century, early 19th century. It's actually very interesting just as I say invaded as to thinking about it, how difficult language is on this stuff. And of course, it's not my country. And I can imagine there'll be a lot of Australians listening, thinking, all this language of invasion and colonization sounds like I'm playing into a particular narrative that will resonate with them in a way that it doesn't with me. But anyway, it seems fair enough to me to say that this was a country a little bit, you know, like many, many other countries around the world, the United States, New Zealand, where there was an Indigenous population that was basically overwhelmed by white colonial powers, in this case, Britain. So, the difference between New Zealand, which we're about to interview the New Zealand Prime Minister and Australia, is that in New Zealand, that the Maori population is quite large. You know, the Maori population in New Zealand is about 17% of the population. In Australia, it's 3%, big, big difference. And of course, their indicators on many things, life expectancy, poverty, health outcomes are much, much worse than those of other Australians. And so, there is a big strong move from initially driven by the Labour Party to give Indigenous communities a proper voice. And it's going to a referendum because this will be a formal legal voice in the Constitution. And this will be something that would be illegal in the United States. The Supreme Court in the United States would, I think, knock this down on grounds that it challenges the equality of citizens. And it's into the middle of this that you've been lodged. And I think, my sense is you're very sympathetic towards this referendum. Over to you. I did an interview the other day where I was asked the question, what's the book you wished you'd written? And I found myself saying a book called *The Fatal Shore* by somebody called Robert Hughes. And it's essentially the history of Australia, but through the eyes of the convicts who were sent from here. And it's just amazingly written, an incredibly well researched book. And Australia, as you say, does have a, you know, for a relatively young country in historical terms, has a pretty difficult history. And the gap that you're talking about successive generations have talked about trying to close the gap. The gap is still very, very, very, very wide. And I just think the sadness of what's happening at the moment is that a referendum, which is being led by the Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, well, he's, there are lots and lots of different groups like any referendum. He obviously is the Prime Minister's legislative for this. It's happening on October the 14th. And I think that a bit like the Brexit referendum, a bit like lots of other

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referendums in different parts of the world, it's becoming about other things. And that's making it very, very, very difficult to win. I see it as a genuine attempt to give people a voice that at the moment they feel they're not heard. And it's not giving them that much power. But the problem is that it's being attacked now for being too weak. It's being attacked for being too strong. That's usually a sign. It's probably in the right place if it's being attacked from those two directions. Well, because the thing is that there are three parts to this process. There's the voice, which is what's being voted on now. Then there's the issue of treaty. And then there's the issue of truth and reconciliation, call it what you will. And of course, what the opponents of the referendum are doing are they're able to move it to somewhere else and say, oh, this isn't really about just giving the voice. This is about giving, having a treaty further down the track where we're going to end up paying reparations or we're going to end up having land tax. And, you know, we've talked a lot about how social media and technological changes changing the nature of these campaigns. I mean, I won't go through them now. But if you just Google conspiracy theories in the voice referendum debate, I mean, there's tons of them that are doing the round. So interesting, isn't it? That in the US, Native American politics, Native American interests are not a very major part of politics. But they are very, very strongly in New Zealand. Maori politics really matters, partly because it's a very large chunk of the population. We interviewed Michael Ignatieff, who was the leader of the Liberal Party in Canada. And in Canada, First Nation communities are enshrined in the Article 35 of the Canadian Constitution. They're recognized as independent groups. They're given very specific rights. Australia is a sort of a case in between because the population is smaller. But it is something that in the past, you know, has been very politically contentious, a left-right division, where I think, I mean, maybe this is unfair, but an imaginary Australian list has come and challenged me. But it's difficult not to feel that there may be bits of the Australian right who feel very threatened by trying to give too much recognition to Aboriginal communities. Yeah, sure. And that is what fuels some of the really horrific racism that's online at the moment. No, there's a little bit of the whole great replacement theory going on, which, you know, when you think of the, which is somewhat ironic, given who was replacing who. Well, the Aboriginal community has been there 60,000 years. I mean, it's a very, I mean, it's actually, it's really fascinating. I mean, the DNA studies and the studies of how human movement happened, how very, very early those communities got to Australia much earlier, actually, than Native Americans got to the United States. The other issue we should just explain for the real sort of voting nerds, which I know we have quite a few who list is that the other thing that makes it a very, very big challenge is that to be successful, you have to have what's called a double majority. And that means that you have to have more than half of the total vote. Okay. But you also have to have more than half of the voters in at least four of the six states. And at the moment, I think the, the yes campaign is pretty confident that they'll win in Victoria. And they'll probably win in New South Wales. Not at all confident about winning in Queensland. I think they've pretty much written that off. And Western Australia also very difficult. So that means that the smaller states in a way, Tasmania, South Australia, they are going to be the two that will probably decide the outcome. The yes campaign was launched in Adelaide in South Australia. And it also means this is the difference with, with the first past post elections. It doesn't genuinely mean that even in areas where

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you're very, very, very, very strong, you have to get the vote up. So you can't just focus on those states where you think is it where the swing states are. Just to try to sort of finish, I mean, and maybe this is going well beyond our era of expertise. But I love some thoughts on why this issue is so much more raw in Australia than it is in the United States, because the Native American population in the US is not much below. It's about 2.6% compared to maybe 3.1% in Australia. Both countries lower than Canada, significantly lower than New Zealand. Why do you think that it's so much more raw in Australia than it is in the US, despite the fact that if you go to South Dakota and look at the Lakota community and the reservations there, their health indicators are terrible, you know, the poverty in some of the Native American communities that are beyond imagining. Why is it a much more live issue in Australia than it is in the US?

Look, the short answer is I don't know. But I wonder whether it's precisely because they have at least

had a voice or they've at least felt that they've had a voice. Whereas I think the, a lot of the Aboriginal community feel utterly marginalized, utterly excluded. But I don't know, we should maybe, we should get somebody on perhaps who actually knows the answer to that question. I'd be very interested in maybe interviewing a leader of one of these communities from, and maybe actually be interesting, maybe we could do it with a leader of movement in the US and a leader that's moving in Australia and see if we can, you know, work through these issues together. The other, of course, thing that's confusing, not confusing, because I guess you could expect this, but some of the most prominent voices against it are from the, from politicians within the Indigenous community. And of course, they have, I guess, an added power and locus within

the debate. And their criticisms, again, they vary. Some of them, it's because, as I said earlier, it's just not doing enough. Others, it's because they don't think it can be properly explained. And it's, it's a very difficult thing this because the vote is to have the voice, which is just 20, you know, that's basically just the Indigenous people choosing 24 representatives who can have their voice heard. They're not making the law, they're not overturning the law of the Canberra Parliament. I would argue it's actually quite measured and quite, quite rational, but it's being taken to a different place. And of course, now, with populism, with the hard right, it's so easy to kind of turn anything into a pretty divisive wedge issue. So I was talking to somebody in the S campaign the other day who said, look, you know, it's still to play for, it's a real struggle, because they feel that they're spending their whole time saying what it's not, as opposed to, this is what it is. And that's, that's not a great place to be in a campaign. Right. Well, thank you. Thank you for raising that and look forward to seeing you very soon. Speak soon.