

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 176. Can the Tory Party be saved?

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

And me, Alistair Campbell.

Good. And Alistair, what are we on with this week?

We're going to have to talk about this wretched Conservative Party conference, which is doing my head in. You want to have a chat about what the centre right, the sort of moderate mainstream Conservative Party does in the face of the nonsense and madness that's going on. And then we want to talk about Kosovo, yet another huge story of international significance, which is getting next to no debating space in the UK media. But I guess we should start with the Tory Party conference, because I've been not good for my mental health, but I've been watching rather a loss of it.

So very quickly on party conferences, I have been to 10 of them. And let me just give you a little bit of a sense, because I think the public doesn't always see this how bizarre they are. The Conservatives alternate in my time between Birmingham and Manchester. So they used to do these seaside towns like Blackpool. But now they do these enormous conference centres in Birmingham and Manchester. And there are these very, very long security queues to get in and out and these passes you have to wear, which means it's actually pretty difficult to interact with the normal city around you. Every time you try to pop out for a drink, or if you're an MP with a relatively small salary is staying in a cheap hotel on the other end of town, there's a huge line of queues to try to get in and out through these security lines. You then get in. And in the middle of them, there are all these events happening. So there are the main events, which used to be popular, don't seem to be any more, but used to fight to try to get in and see the Prime Minister. There are endless stands of people trying to sell you if you're a Tory. I don't know what they sell at the Labour Party conferences, but I think Tory sells sort of sell you walking sticks and tweed caps and copies of Boris Johnson's book on the Roman Empire. And then there are these alternation between seeing your constituents where you have slightly overpriced sandwiches or a cocktail hour at a local hotel outside the conference with your constituents who've come down. But increasingly, they don't come down because they've become so expensive, it's hundreds of pounds to attend. So the old days in Blackpool in places where you'd have 20,000 delegates coming down have largely gone. So increasingly, you've got business people filling it rather than your own constituents. I would only have five or six people for my local association there. And then in the evenings, you have these terrifying parties. So you have, you know, sky news with the music going, you've got this horrible thing we've been seeing of, which we really never need to see again, but we'll put in the show notes anyway of pretty Patel dancing with Nigel Farage. You have the Scottish Party, which is always one that you've got to turn up to, then there'll be a party hosted by Israel, there'll be party hosted by Middle Eastern governments, there will be governments like Azerbaijan in the old days, always trying to get people in and persuading to go on an all caviar included trip to Azerbaijan. It's a pretty terrifying set of things. And of course, it's during the MP's holiday. So many of them are sitting there, they've got to pay out of their own pocket. They can't claim on expenses, this big ticket and their hotel bills. So many

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of them, I think, just stay away because they can't quite bear the thing.

I guess I've been to about 20 labor conferences. But of course, when I was a journalist, I used to go to the Tories and the Lib Dems and the TUC as well.

What was the difference between them when you went? What's roughly your cliché difference between the three conferences?

Lib Dems, you sort of spend most of the time thinking, what the hell am I doing here? I'm not going to get much of the paper for this. But quite nice people and quite interesting cases.

Quite earnest, quite idealistic.

Yeah, quite. There was a period, you mentioned the foundation of the SDP. There was a period when that whole kind of liberal Democrat space was much more exciting politically than maybe it is now.

Were you ever tempted when Shirley Williams and Roy Jenkins left? Was that a moment where you ever thought?

No, no, no, I didn't.

Did you see them as traitors? Were people like you very angry with them?

Traitor overstates it. I understood why they did it, but I did see them ultimately as people who in the short term were helping the Conservative Party. But maybe in the long term, I don't know whether you could argue that they made the Labour Party come back to a more sensible position by leaving.

Labor conferences, obviously where politically I feel much more at home, I think I probably was fair to say I probably had better memories of Labour conferences from my drinking days because of course there is a phenomenal amount of alcohol gets consumed at these conferences and that was never very good. Tory conferences, I always felt that I was sort of treated like I don't know, there was something about it they used to like to sort of, I think they knew that they could pick fights and I'd get very aerated and angry with them. But I think the Tory parties in the early days were much, much more stage managed than Labour. And I think maybe we then started to stage manage hours a bit more. But I've got to be honest, I didn't enjoy when I was working for the Labour Party, I didn't enjoy conference because of course, you know, it is a really work wise if you're on, if you're working with the leader, it's bloody hard work. He had to go out to all these wretched parties, you know, literally go out and do about 10, 14 parties in the evening, which on the Saturday, Sunday, Monday before the speech on the Tuesday, I would kind of say, right, well, you go out, I'm staying in there and I will honestly become incredibly antisocial. And I just, I would see the press twice a day, maybe I'd make a few phone calls, but otherwise I'd work in a hotel room on the speech with people like David Miliband and Philip Gordon and Peter Hyman. And we just, that's what I would do. And the speeches were really big deals. I mean, we'll get a chance to talk about Kirsten on the speech next week. But they were great set piece of occasions with huge amounts of expectation writing on them. Yeah. And also really big moments. And, you know, my first was that your close form, was that conference? That was the first late party conferences. Yeah. And my, I think my very first conference was Neil Kinnock's militant speech, which was probably to this day, the most single, most electrifying speech I've ever attended at a party conference that was in Bournemouth. I mean, we put so much work into those speeches. And I get the feeling these days with, with speeches, I mean, honestly, I've

watched some of the conservative speeches, they've been pretty, the quality has been dire. It really has. There's nobody there with a big argument. I thought James Cleverley, the foreign secretary, his was one of the funniest because there were about eight people in the room. And his whole speech was about how everybody listened to what Britain said in the world, which we, you and I know is no longer true, particularly since Brexit, but they weren't even listening at his own conference.

I mean, the first thing is the amazing dichotomy of different, different narratives coming out. So I'm very disturbed by some of the stuff that's coming out of the conference. And we'll get into that. And then just to wind me up, one of my former colleagues who's in the cabinet and who I like very much has just sent me an email saying, conference is very jolly and Rishi Sunak increasingly

reminds me of you, Rory. So there we are. That was a good way to sort of put me on the back foot just before I just before I begin complaining about the conference. No, it's been absolutely terrifying from my point of view. It's as though there is a concerted attempt to try to drive every last moderate out of the conservative party, just to give you three little clips of that. There's pretty Patel dancing with Nigel Farage.

Horrible.

And pretty Patel giving a speech saying that the Brexit hating, true suppressing, I think it was true suppressing was it was freedom denying BBC and so-called mainstream media.

Point being that she was to say that GB News was a wonderful TV station.

Yeah, this right wing news station is absolutely fantastic. They were all applauding. And then you had Liz Truss signing, would you believe it? Signing copies of her mini budget and speaking to a packed room. Now, admittedly, the room when I looked at it more closely looked as it was considerably smaller. She wasn't doing what Boris Johnson did, which is trying to fill a massive room. But anyway, she got a fair number of people turning up. And Jake Riesmog, my third thing that really offended me is, you know, we've been interviewing Manette Batters recently, the head of the National Farmers Union and interviewing her on leading. She's going to be coming up in the next few weeks. And she was talking about the incredible strains that the Australian trade deal is imposing on British farmers. And there's Jake Riesmog out there saying, I love Australian beef. I love hormones in my beef. It's horrifying. Shocking. What do you make of it all? All of that, all of the above and more. I mean, I think that in terms of the kind of debate around the, as far as there is a debate, that the issue that's had by far the most media coverage has been this, will they, won't they HS2 to Manchester? Well, it's perfectly obvious that they're not going to, and that soon that's going to announce that in his conference speech. But if I hear him one more time, say, speculation and the phrase, we've got spades in the ground. I mean, putting a spade in the ground doesn't necessarily mean that you actually build anything. But he has these sort of little phrases that he uses again and again and again and again.

Do you think that's why he reminds people of me?

Well, I hope not. I'll be honest with you. He does not remind me of you at all. And one thing I've noticed about you is that I think you share my absolute abhorrence. And I know that there are lots of people out there because of Iraq, and they think that we're a bunch of lies as well. And I actually am not. And I know that we didn't lie. And I actually find it quite difficult to lie. But I get the feeling that you are as offended as I am by this post-truth theory.

Well, on the post-truth theory, I have a big, big apology to make, which is in the podcast last

week, I said that the HS2 costs had risen to 300 billion. And they haven't. I've got that wrong by a massive factor of three. So they've gone risen to just over 100 billion.

On that theory, that's really interesting. Because when you said that, I thought that's wrong. But you sort of, this is how post-truth works. You start to think, Oh, maybe he's right, he's probably researched it. But we've had, we've had a few amazing examples recently. We've had Rishi Sunak with his seven bins. Okay, complete nonsense. I'm going to stop you having to have seven bins. Nobody was proposing it. And then the last 24 hours on the conference platform, we've had two members of the cabinet, the same things, which are just completely untrue. We should put in the, in the newsletter, a clip of the interview that Sophie Ridge on Sky News did with Claire Catinio, who is a member of the cabinet, where she said, as a fact, Keir Starmer is putting a tax on meat. This was a lie that Sunak launched. And honestly, Sophie Ridge tries to get her to just to admit that he's not, that Keir Starmer has not said that. And she sort of goes into this thing, well, people are concerned, people are concerned that people might think about it.

I think it's a, it's a point about the sort of anxiety of politicians to admit that they've been wrong, or they've said something that's not true, and acknowledge it straight out. What I'd hope that we do at the beginning of that thing is to say, you're completely right, I should never have said that I was totally wrong. I don't know where that came from. And presumably what she's doing, I guess, is repeating what she's heard the prime ministers say without thinking about it. This is what makes me worry that this is some kind of weird strategy going on. The whole thing about Donald Trump is alternative facts that you just, you make people so confused, they don't know what to believe anymore. Well, and this, this, this was Dominic Cummings, wasn't it? Which was the, the number on the bus, which I think he did deliberately knowing that it wasn't true, hoping that that would outrage the media into reporting the fact it wasn't true and get more coverage for his lie than he would have got for the truth. Yeah, exactly. And a lot of people want to believe that all politicians are liars, and they want to believe that they're all playing the same games. But it seems to me that this, this is just reaching the levels of weirdness. So yesterday, you know, yesterday, you had Mark Harper, Transport Secretary, who literally, you know, with his mouth, words coming from his lips to the effect that because of this 15 minute cities thing, which we've talked about before, councils will tell you when you can and can't go to the shops. That's a fantasy. Can I just quickly explain what 15 minute city singers, we did talk about it on our podcast, but some months ago now. So 15 minute cities is something which has been championed by many progressive mayors around the world. And it's something I tried to champion when I was running to be Mayor of London, which is the idea of essentially creating

smaller, walking accessible communities, making sure that within 15 minutes of where you live, there's a proper mixed urban environment, shops, community centers, ideally libraries, all this sort of stuff. And what's happened is that conspiracy theory has developed, in which the idea is that instead of it being a positive thing, where you try to create proper mixed urban architecture, a sense for village, you know, London, maybe 700 villages, which is where I'd like to think about it. They're now trying to suggest that it's a plot, gone once more from Mark Harper, he's saying. He's saying that this, what he calls sinister, sinister is that councils will tell you when you can and can't go to the shops.

And what shops you can shop in? And what he means is by trying to encourage you to shop locally, he's now turned it into they're actually going to dictatorially insist that you can only go to

those shops and you can't go to the supermarket three miles down the road.

And as with Claire Coutinho, who I think, by the way, I think it's these people now, talk rubbish and lie and gaslight so incessantly, that they just don't think they're going to get picked up on it. And because we had, as a prime minister, Boris Johnson, and I think Soonak, frankly, is in some ways becoming just as bad in terms of his ability to say things that are complete nonsense. But because they weren't really picked up on it by the media, they just sort of think they can do it. So I actually think Claire Coutinho was just a bit taken aback, that Sophie Ridge decided to ask her 10 times, whatever it was.

Sophie Ridge took quite gently, didn't she? It wasn't a kind of Jeremy Paxman Gresspeth, thought it was quite good journalism. It's quite gentle. She waited, she let Claire Coutinho finish and then she'd just say again, but that isn't the meat tax, is it?

No, and also who kept saying to me, when did Keir Starmer ever say that? And then she said this thing, oh, well, you know, he's a vegetarian. He doesn't eat meat and Ed Miliband doesn't like meat because he got photographed with a bacon sandwich. The whole thing was utterly ridiculous. But then you had this thing about, you know, so that they're all ministers, they have to sort of, you know, collective responsibility and all that. So Andrew Bowie, who is a minister of who most of our listeners probably haven't heard, but he was on the radio yesterday, where he was being grilled about Mark Harper talking about the 15 minute cities and the councils. And he said, oh, no, he's got a point because people are very concerned about this. People are very concerned that this is where it might be going. Well, but it's not happening. Nobody's proposing it. Yes, but people are concerned. To which the interview was Evan Davis, he said, well, they're only concerned because you're trying to make them concerned about myths and fantasy.

Yeah. So one of the interesting things, which is a bit inside baseball, but to explain is that actually people like Andrew Bowie are on the moderate center left of the party. You know, they were my sort of friends who were more on the remain side. And what's happening, and I think this is what makes it sad, is that everybody's being dragged into this narrative or nor Clare Cattino. Clare Cattino is seen as a pretty sort of centrist moderate. So what's disturbing about it is that this sort of narrative, which I guess is in some briefing document. I mean, I don't know whether you did this when you were doing comms for labor, but certainly what happened

by the time I got in, is that you were given these talking points. This is what you have to hammer out a conference. And it would probably have included references to labor's environmental taxes or labor being soft on immigration or labor pushing for 15-minute cities.

And everybody, and this one of the things that's so sickly about being a politician is that even people from the center left who feel a bit queasy about it are being made to read out these talking points because it's what's number 10s told them to do. But do they never have the sort of sufficient intelligence and confidence in their own minds to say, I'm not going to talk complete and total rubbish? The problem is the culture. So the culture is all about loyalty and defending your colleagues. So even if Mark Harper makes the tit of himself, it's not possible for you to distance yourself too much. Well, that creates a new kind of headline. And then all your colleagues think that you're a monster and you've betrayed them. And number 10 comes after them. What's your suggestion if you were boot on the other foot? How would you, if you were somebody from central left party who didn't really approve of what Mark Harper had said and were being repeatedly asked to distance yourself from him? But he's a cabinet minister. What's the best way

of handling it? Probably by saying that I wouldn't describe the policy in those terms. Or I don't know. I think you can do with it quite easily. But they're all just doubling down. And I think we are into this world of alternative facts. I heard a wonderful line about SUNAC, by the way. I think you'll appreciate this as a writer and an academic, somebody who worked with him in the treasury. Civil servant said the thing about SUNAC is that he's all appendices and no forward.

I thought that was absolutely brilliant. It's the details, man.

Well, it's not, but it's more that he sort of bounces around. And the thing about the talking points, I saw him doing another interview where they've obviously been told this week is about cars and towns. So we've got the plan for motorists, which I think is a big risk for them, not just because of the environmental implications, but also, let's be honest, driving in Britain at the moment is a pretty horrible experience. So I think you've just got millions of people sitting in cars thinking, God, Rishi Sunak said he was on our side. And here we are stuck in yet another traffic jam or another road works where nothing's being done. And the other thing that he did today was he kept, he just kept saying the word towns. And so you're right. I think they get these kind of scripts, but he's the prime minister. And he's coming over to me as somebody just incredibly kind of piddling.

What is he doing talking about 20 mile an hour speed limit? Is that sort of junior transport minister's job? So let's go, let's maybe jump ahead a little bit and talk about something you mentioned at the beginning, which is what would it take to really save the Conservative Party and get it back into the centre ground? And I agree that there'll be a lot of lessons who don't care about that. But I think oddly, everybody should care about it. I don't think Britain was in a good place when Corbyn was running the Labour Party. And I don't think Britain will be in a good place if the opposition is run by a bunch of right wing populists, because we see that. I mean, there's a playbook around the world of how that works out. So just quickly to get into that, I think the first thing to understand is that already Liz Truss, Pretty Patel and others are behaving as though they're in opposition to the existing government. So the Conservative Party is really wrenching itself apart. And when the Conservatives lose the next election, there will be a leadership election. Are you now when or if? Oh, I'm when. And I think that's, I think that's also what's sad about what, I mean, and more than sad, very, very disappointing about what Rishi Sunak is doing on the environmental stuff. Because I think that he's desperately doing it in the hope that he can claw back a few points, but he's 20 points behind. And it would be better to do things which he genuinely believes and are in the long-term interest of the party. Now, I don't know. There was an article that I forwarded you. I don't know whether you looked at it. I did. Where somebody suggested that actually Peter Manelson advised Gordon Brown in 2008-2009 to conduct himself with dignity, except that he was going to lose, but make sure he didn't lose by too much. So the Labour Party has something to rebuild from. I don't know who wrote that. I didn't recognise that at all. And I guess the answer is you can never do that, right? Presumably no party can ever do that. Well, I think you can be realistic, you know, realistic expectations, but you have to fight as though you think you're going to win or you think you can win. And I think Sunak, a few weeks ago, might have had that mindset. I mean, to be fair to him, I think he's ridiculous on many levels, but, you know, he just get out of bed every day and kind of get out there and he's got a bit of energy and he's got a bit of oomph and so forth. But he just, I think, is coming over as increasingly ridiculous with these sort of bouncy interview. He did one today

saying how well everything is going. I mean, you've got to sort of be in the real world. I mean, that event you and I did this morning, when I said to them, you know, has anybody been watching, been following the Conservative Party conference? I mean, they all started laughing. So one of the most interesting things, so we did an event together this morning with an audience of, I guess, about 150 people. And you asked how many of them had thought about being, you know, politicians and I guess seven or eight put up their hand. I then asked how many of them were members of political parties and it was sort of two or three, right? So three times the number wanted to be politicians even prepared to join a political party. And that I think is, you know, to bring us back to this question of what's happening with the Conservative Party. When my mother was a member of the Conservative Party in her youth, there were 2.3 million members of the party. There are now just over 100,000. That means that in most constituencies, there are safe Tory seats will be 350, 400 Conservative Party members. And of those, only about 50 activists really count. So our democracy at the moment is being driven by 50 activists in each constituency who are much older than the general population, much more right wing, the general population. They're the ones that trust and Patel and Braverman and increasingly Farage, I think. I think the other thing I found extraordinary at this conference is the extent to which Liz Truss and Nigel Farage appear to me to be the kind of the rock stars of the week, the ones that are getting kind of, you know, heroes welcome as they go around the place. Liz Truss, who absolutely smashed the economy. And Nigel Farage, who probably has done more damage to the Tory party than any politician since Tony Blair, I'd have said. No, it's really, really disturbing. So part of the narrative that they're working on, just to deepen the problem for a second and then on to how the party can be saved is that they've convinced themselves, the party members, party faithful, that they were betrayed because they voted for Boris Johnson and then the MPs got rid of him without asking them. And then they voted for Liz Truss and the MPs basically forced out Liz Truss and they ended up with Rishi Sunak, who they didn't vote for. And the fundamental problem with Rishi Sunak's campaign, which feels like it's trying to tip towards the right, towards the populist right, feels like it's out of a playbook where we've got the culture secretary talking about statues. We've got the transport secretary talking about 15-minute cities. We've got all this talk from Sweb Bravman about multiculturalism as a working focus on stopping the boats. So it's anti-immigration, it's the culture wars, and now it's the environment stuff. It's let's push out the dates. We don't need to convert petrol and diesel vehicles. We don't need to bring in, bring in alternative energies quickly as we thought. So it feels like he thinks that he might be able to win by creating dividing lines between quite a hard populist right, the sort of 2019 coalition up in the northeast, in the same way as Boris Johnson did in 2019, but it's not going to work for them. It's not going to work because Boris Johnson had two advantages. He was running at a time when people were desperate to resolve the Brexit standoff and he was running against Jeremy Corbyn. Those two things are not true. These messages you're getting from people saying that Rishi Sunak reminds them of you, are they now saying to you that they think it's when, not if, that the Tories lose? Is that a mindset that you think is infecting the entire Conservative Party? I think there's a really interesting problem here, which is that a lot of people are very fond of Rishi Sunak. A lot of my friends who are from the center left of the party, and I think that's

partly because they were so traumatized by Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, it's partly because he's courteous, he does his work, he reads the details, he delegates, so if you're in the cabinet, you feel more respected than you did under Boris Johnson and Liz Truss.

He's very right-wing though, isn't it? Where his political compass lies, he's very right-wing, much more right-wing than Johnson in many ways.

Yeah, but nobody quite recognizes this. I think partly because he's much more courteous, much more softly spoken, he seems much more reasonable, but you're right, he's somebody who was an early committed Brexiteer. He clearly sometimes seems to talk as though he believes the Singapore on Thames stuff about the British economy. There's a gap, and I think the explanation for it is that the party is unbelievably loyal, and I think loyalty is at the key of the way these parties work. I also found it difficult to understand why people stayed with the Labour Party when Jeremy Corbyn were running it. I and colleagues of mine left the Conservative Party because we could not bear Boris Johnson being our boss. We didn't want to stand for him. We didn't want to campaign for him. Of course, many of my Labour colleagues stuck with Jeremy Corbyn and went into elections with his face on the manifesto's campaigning forum. That I think brings us to how these parties get rebuilt because probably the only way the Conservative Party will be rebuilt is not through people like me or Ken Clark who left in disgust. It will be by some of the moderates who held their nose, stayed loyal, put up with Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, and eventually, when the party has gone totally mad and decides it has to move back to the centre to win an election after Suela Bravman in four, five years' time, might rebuild it again. What do you reckon? Well, the only thing about that is that we didn't expel in the way that Boris Johnson did. You mentioned yourself and Ken Clark and many others. They were expelled, and it's very hard to get back

in once that's happened to you. There's a couple of things I'd say, though. The first is that I can remember in 1992, the day after Labour lost that election, doing an interview on the television, I was with Peter Jenkins, the then commentator on The Independent, and he said if Labour can't win in these circumstances, this is in 1992, I don't think they'll ever win again. Five years later, we're on our landslide. 2019, Jeremy Corbyn leads Labour to a pretty devastating defeat against Boris Johnson's Conservative Party, and here we are four years later, and the judgement is, including in that room where we're in this morning, and pretty much every audience who speak to at the moment, Labour are going to win. So things can turn around, but you need the people

in there to turn them around. So Keir Starmer, it's obvious to me, the Tories, one of the lines they're going to run at Keir Starmer is that, you know, how can you believe a word this guy says when he sat there alongside Jeremy Corbyn telling everybody he ought to be the Prime Minister. Now, I actually do believe that Keir Starmer, part of his thinking at that time, as he went into politics relatively late in life, was looking at Jeremy Corbyn, probably thinking this guy's not going to win. The Labour Party is going to have to rebuild after he goes, and maybe I can be in the position to do that job. To have got himself into that position, he had to stay as a leading figure in the party. But it's an interesting question, wasn't it? Because obviously, other people made different decisions. I guess Chuck Amuna left, trying to think of all the MPs who left at that time. Luciana Berger, Chris Leslie, there were people who left, and you could say, you know, where are they now? Yeah, and that's, of course, the same with me and the Tory party. And I think this is why politics is so difficult, because at some level,

to get to the top, obviously, you have to stay in the game. And that means compromising. If you are too uncompromising and say, I'm not going to put up with Jeremy Corbyn as my leader, I'm not going to fight for him in elections, I think he's awful, or the same with Boris Johnson, you don't get to stick around. Somebody pointed out that in a way, this was true in Labour, even back in the day, that part of the secret of Labour coming back from the madness of Michael Foote, or maybe madness is unfair, but the slightly unelectability of Michael Foote, was people like Jack Straw, who not the Roy Jenkinses, right, not the, so we're not going back in ancient history. So for younger people, what he's thinking, what happened to the Labour Party in the early 80s, is that Shirley Williams, Roy Jenkins, these were sort of monumental figures in the Labour Party, really couldn't bear the direction Labour was going in and left to set up the SDP, which was a sort of, at one point, this incredibly exciting centrist party that was dominating the opinion polls. And they seem to be the noble, charismatic people and people like Jack Straw, who'd been elected in 1979 and stuck around, looked as though he was slightly sort of shilly-shallying around and compromising. But in the end, of course, new Labour was built off the Jack Straws, it wasn't built off the Roy Jenkinses and Shirley Williamses.

Yeah, and it goes back to something we've talked about a lot, which is our electoral system and the difficulties of being, creating a new political force that challenges the hegemony of the big two. But you know, Neil Kinnock led the Labour Party through the period that he did, and incredibly well in terms of laying the foundations for what followed, then John Smith, then Tony Blair. And the other point I think is important for people to remember, this thing about how change can happen quickly these days, maybe much faster than it used to, is Kirsten was trying to do in one parliamentary term, what Neil John Tony did over several. Look, I don't know, I'm among those people who you mentioned at the start, who it really wouldn't bother me if the Conservative Party didn't rebuild. But I do agree with you that if you have an opposition in our system that is completely Trumpian, you know, dominated by people like Braverman and Patel and Lee Anderson and the populist voices of the hard right, I think that is a real problem for the country, not least because of the message that it sends beyond these shores as well. And it's going to get much worse because at the moment, they are slightly, you wouldn't believe it, but they are slightly pulling their punches because their own party is in government. As soon as Labour is in government, these guys are going to be appearing on GB News and going far more radical, you know, their statements on immigration and things are going to go out the window because they won't be remotely held back by the sense that they have some responsibility for the situation.

Another theme that you talk about in your book is the kind of death of shame.

Look, I'll be absolutely honest, if I was Liz Truss and I did to the economy what she did just over a year ago, I think I'd immigrate. I think I'd have plastic surgery. I'd change the way I look. I'd probably wear a wig. I'd go and live in a foreign country. I hope nobody would ever see me. You'd be like one of the great train robbers.

By the way, well, in fact, a very good parallel because of course the great trade robbers in their own way saw themselves as these kind of epic folk heroes. And then that phrase that Ben Elton said about Rishi Sunak that he's dripping with vanity, watching Liz Truss yesterday with her sort of these adoring young men all around her. It was horrific and she's posing for selfie. She's got no self-awareness, no apology. I think it's horrific.

Okay, let me then just to close this thing off. So there's a very interesting collection of essays

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 176. Can the Tory Party be saved?

brought together by David Gork, my political hero called The Case for the Center Right. Have you contributed at all? I have contributed.

I think you should declare an interest.

I'd declare an interest. Yeah, a contributing essay. Mine is not the most distinguished essay on that group, but it's a great group of people trying to make The Case for Restoring the Consent of Gravity. Okay, well, boil it down. Give me one sentence. If you have to sort of, where's the center of gravity in their argument?

Center of Gravity is that in the end, the smart electoral future for any party is in the center ground. And you've got to be able to win over younger, more educated voters around cities. And that the current path, the Conservative Party, which is appealing to older, less educated people in remote areas is not a sustainable electoral path.

So that's this central argument. But I think they also make some very good arguments for what a better conservatism could be. It could be proud of the union, really put the union first.

It could be fiscally conservative, responsible in the way that we think about borrowing and debt. It could be generous in international policy and international development. It could be steely-eyed, but determined and idealistic on climate.

But it's all the things that this Conservative Party is deliberately and willfully rejecting.

Yeah. And the path now to rebuild is difficult because of the people writing for it. People like me, David Gork and Amber Rudd are no longer in. So you've got to get moderate Conservatives back into the party. And that also means that we've got to rebuild the Conservative Party in the country. So if people are serious about this, we need 30,000 people joining the Conservative Party who are from the moderate Liberal Center to actually change the way the party operates. And then I think probably the party needs to go through a period of defeat. It probably needs, unfortunately, to elect the Suela Braverman figure, realize how unpopular and toxic that type of politics is, and then find its way back.

Because in the end, the Conservative Party wants to win. That's how David Cameron did it.

So after the end, Duncan Smith, Fiasco and Michael Howard, essentially in the end, the party members wanted to win. And that's what allowed them to bring back somebody who was more

from the center ground. I think Nigel Farage thinks he can end up as leader of the Conservative Party.

Oh, well, we heard that here first. Something to watch.

My final observation of the Conservative Party conference is, didn't get much coverage, but Jeremy Hunt's speech, I found pretty disturbing as well. I think to put, when you think he's the Chancellor of the East Checker, dealing with a really difficult economic situation. And it seems to me that this government has completely given up on going after the big tax avoiders. And he made

a big thing about going for this stuff about people on benefits, not being work shy. And I just felt that felt straight out of the populist playbook. And I think we should put in the newsletter, there's a, I don't know who this guy is, but he's called at Red North UK. And he did a really kind of very, very long thread of real cases of people, including many who take their own lives of people who've been put through absolute hell by this, by the work capability assessment under this government. So I found that quite disturbing because he's meant to be one of the last sort of grown up standing, isn't he? Yeah, well, thank you, Alison, all very, very depressing. But you

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 176. Can the Tory Party be saved?

are going to be going to the Labour Party conference next week and reporting from the front line and telling us what you find there. Well, we go for about a day.

He said with much experience of party conferences and not that much enthusiasm.

Very good. Thank you. See you after the break.

Welcome back to the Rest as Politics with me, Alistair Campbell.

And me, Rory Stewart. And we just, we've just been doing a little bit on party conference, but it's a good segue into Theresa May because of course, Theresa May will be famous both for her dancing queen performance at a party conference and also for having a terrible moment where she essentially broke down on stage at one of these big party gatherings and lost her voice.

Oh, she lost her voice. She didn't break down.

Well, it was a very, very, I was, I was, you know, it's a very, very strange moment in her life.

But we've, we've interviewed her on the podcast and I think I'm really pleased with the way it's come out. I do encourage people to listen to it. I think Alistair, you brought out a side of her that I haven't often seen in interviews. It's a, you know, she can come across obviously, famously, sometimes a little bit wooden, but I thought she thought she really engaged and took it seriously and you were quite challenging and it worked well. So I'd really encourage people to listen. What did you think of it? Fiona, my partner listened to both episodes in one go because she's a subscriber to the rest is politics. Well done. Yes. But she, she said, she thought, she thought she came over really, really well and I said, I was a little bit worried. I was maybe a bit too soft. And she said, no, she didn't think that at all, that she thought actually it was quite challenging without being rude. No, I think, I think you landed everything you wanted to land. I think you made all the points. But you did it relatively respectfully and you had a bit of back and forth. I thought that was impressive stuff.

So if like Fiona, you want to hear part two before next Monday, you can do so by going to the rest is politics.com. Very good. So there we are. So shall we talk about Kosovo, a land, a very, very small land, which is a very large place in my heart. Because of course, the Kosovo war back in the late 90s was a huge part of our first term. And it sort of feels like it's a little bit on the edge again. It's very, very, very, very sad. And we've been talking about Kosovo a little bit over the podcast listeners. Loyal listeners will remember that we've been raising this as a potential problem area for months now. It feels very, very dangerous. And there's a very high likelihood now of a proper conflict breaking out in Kosovo again. But just to go back very, very quickly for younger listeners to the history of this, Kosovo is an area of former Yugoslavia and Serbia, which had as a predominantly Albanian Muslim population. 92%. 92%. So it's about 1.8 million people, about 50,000 or so Orthodox Serbs. But it is a place that was historically incredibly important in the national imagination of the Serbian people, because it's a site of very famous Orthodox monasteries, Serbian Orthodox monasteries.

But it's also the site of a great battle, the Battle of Kosovo Polya, which for the Serbs is like Waterloo was for the 19th century for the Victorian Brits. They're great fight against the Ottoman hordes and the defense of Serbian civilization. So when the Albanian Muslim community was really pushing for autonomy, there was a brutal reaction from Slobodan Milosevic, who was then the leader, which began to result in attacks that were leading to ethnic cleansing. And this is now in 1999. And it is at that point, I'm going to hand the story over to you, because you were very closely involved in the UK-US Coalition intervention. No, I was seconded to NATO. President Clinton asked Tony Blair if I could go and help NATO

sort out their comms, because it did become kind of the propaganda side of things became very, very important. I remember the guy in charge of the whole thing, Wes Clark, who later became a presidential candidate, remember, or a presidential nomination candidate. And I remember him saying that it was only when we sort of gripped the comms against the Milosevic comms machine that he felt that he was able to kind of get the military to focus on what it was that they were trying to do. And the reason why that's relevant to us happening today is that there I was, as Tony Blair's comms guy seconded to NATO. And my opposite number doing the job for Milosevic was Alexander Vukic, who is now running the country. So there he ends up running his country, and I ended up doing a bloody podcast with Roy Steuroy. So I was also there then. I was there as a diplomat. I'd been posted to be the British representative in Montenegro, which is this country obviously between Kosovo, Bosnia and Serbia. And so I spent quite a lot of time in Kosovo. I had a K-4 pass, which was the Kosovo Force Pass. I remember going up to visit some of those Serbian Orthodox monasteries, which in those days were surrounded by Italian armored vehicles with then 50,000 foreign soldiers on the ground. And the particular flashpoint was around these northern areas, Rami Trivica, where a Serbian population had been left behind in what was now an Albanian Kosovo dominated country. And a lot of the efforts, just to fast forward over the last 24 years, have been trying to resolve the status of those areas. And there have been repeated agreements, four agreements in fact, put together by the European Union or France and Germany, trying to resolve the tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. But to cut to the chase... They've never really worked. They never really worked. And what really became the cause of the real problems that we're now facing was license plates. So basically Serbs living in Kosovo want to continue to have old license plates, which don't really recognize the existence of Republic of Kosovo. And the Republic of Kosovo want them to drive around with Republic of Kosovo license plates. The thing you've jumped there is that in 2008, Kosovo declared it was independent and has essentially devoted its entire diplomatic policy to getting recognition. And it's almost at 100. It's above halfway now, 100 of the 193 United Nations countries recognize Kosovo, including us. And the United States and Europe, the people who don't, of course, are Russia, China, Serbia, most importantly. Yeah. And I think there are still five European countries that don't. But they've done a pretty good job on that. But Vukic, President of Serbia, has said that they never, ever will recognize it. So you've had the plates thing. Then we've talked before about the elections of mayors in an election, which the Serbs in the North boycotted. So these Albanian mayors were elected on 4% turnouts and that led to violence. And then this latest one is very, very hard to work out what's going on. But essentially, three Serbs, there was a group of Serbs very heavily armed, engaged in a shootout with Kosovo police officers, one Kosovo police officer killed, three Serbs killed. And despite the Serb government saying, this was some freelance guy, this kind of rather sinister mafia guy who was running the whole operation, nothing to do with us, they nonetheless declared a national day of mourning for these three guys who'd been killed, which is what is made an added to which the the arms that were discovered could only be state sponsored. State sponsored arms and the Serbs moved serious military units up to the border. So it feels to me as though Vukic was hoping to pull off sort of little green man, Russian style paramilitary provocation inside northern Kosovo and then roll the army in to protect the population.

So it feels like Northern Ireland sort of 68, 69 feels like a moment at which you can see what's happening. There's an academic and we can send a link who said that people talk about black swans, these sort of unexpected occurrences. But what's happening here is more like a great big gray rhino that the violence that's coming is so predictable. It's like a two ton rhino sort of snorting at you and charging towards you. It's been triggered basically, and here I'm going to take a sort of radical line here, which will be unpopular with some of the Europeans, the Americans. But basically, there are two things going on. One of them is that it was held together by the European Union promising accession for Serbia. And so long as Vukic thought that Serbia would get into the EU with all that that would mean in terms of freedom of movement and the economy, he held off the confrontation and Europe basically gave up on that. And Vukic concluded the whole thing was a sham. He was never going to get in the European Union. The second thing I think to be clear about is that it is Vukic, not Albin Korti, who's at fault here. Albin Korti, you know, there's a real attempt by the Americans, European say, oh, blame on both sides. And Korti's a bit radical. I'm pushing to God. Albin Korti, who's the Kosovo leader, is essentially just insisting on what has been agreed on these license plates four times in different agreements. But your point about Northern Ireland is relevant here because you'd now have a situation where both sides are refusing to believe that the other is actually in good faith. And I think that's why the Americans are Europeans. There are there are things that were agreed that the Europeans appointed saying Korti said he would do this, but then he hasn't, for example, is a great autonomy for the Serb population living in the north and so forth. But I think you're right. And the other thing is that, you know, we can play in sometimes about the kind of inward looking nationalism of our media, but my God in Serbia, it's something else. And so at the moment, you know, Vukic is playing into a ramped up nationalist agenda, which is real within the population. It's not just being manufactured by the government. So one thing we often say on the podcast is that you need to look not at what people say in English, but what they say in their own local language. So if you see Vukic being interviewed by Christian Amanpour and CNN, we can share the link, he comes across as incredibly sort of reasonable holding up the rule of law and nothing to see here. I'm all for peace. But when you read the the Serbia newspapers, you see something very different. So the pro government tabloid, which claims to be have the largest number of subscribers in Serbia, runs a headline on the front page, which is Korti cisti Kosovo od Sorba, which means Korti is ethnically cleansing Kosovo of the Serbs. And then it says so the fake premiere of the so called Kosovo was pomod zapadni mentora with the help of his western mentors, sprovodni tihu etniko ciscenje nasa stanavista nakim. So is conspiring with western mentors to ethnically cleanse our people from from Kosovo. So when that's appearing in the local press, and you can see some outrageous comments by Vukic's defence minister and by Vukic himself, they're really whipping up to what's going to be a brutal confrontation. So he's very good at charming when it suits him. He's charming the Americans, he's charming the Europeans as Vukic. But when he's talking to his own people, it's all no surrender, no compromise, I will never accept Kosovo being independent. I met, I obviously had dealings with him of a non speaking nature when we were running comms operations against each other. But I met him more recently when I was

partly because of the work I was doing in Albania with Edirama. And I had a quite a long one on one with Vukic. This was after, I don't know if you remember when the extraordinary incident with when Serbia were playing Albania at football and a drone flew in and dropped the Albanian flag and it was just all kicked off between the players and it became a massive sort of diplomatic incident. It was it was around that time. And it was unfortunate way because he had a terrible cold, really bad cold. And as you know, Rory, politicians with colds, it's not a good look. But and he's got quite a sort of he's a very tall guy and he's very imposing. But he's got quite I think he's got quite a weak face. And I think sometimes he has to exaggerate his strength in his rhetoric and with his actions. And you're right, he does a very different stick for his domestic audience than what he does for the international audience. But I'll tell you I think that there was I mentioned Edirama there. Albania has been for the first time, I think, a little bit critical of the European Union. Yeah, your friend Edirama strangely has been sort of charmed by Vukic and seems to be attacking the cost for Albanians. I don't think he's attacking them. I think I think he's not happy with the way that the European Union are doing this sort of you know, there's there's there's equal there's equal blame on both sides, because I think he's more with you that in terms of what happened, this attack by the Serbs by this guy, Rodoicic and his gang that has led to the current crisis, I think he feels that the European Union response has not taken sufficient regard of that. One of the things that we're seeing here is the sort of fantasy of all these populace Vukic, Orban, etc. which is the fantasy that Trump is going to come in and save them. So Vukic got very close to Richard Grinnell, who was the who was Trump's special envoy for the region, and I think has very much thinks he's convinced Trump that Serbia is in the right and would want Trump to he hopes Trump's going to come in a year to time and withdraw all the American troops. Well, Trump will probably say, well, Vukic is very, very tall and Kuwait is quite small. Therefore, I'll probably back Vukic because he's the kind of his toddler mentality operates. No, it's really disturbing. So I guess there are two things. One is, is the European Union going to grow a backbone, recognize how dangerous this is. And secondly, is that any way of getting back to life again, the process to get Serbia back into the European Union, because there is now a real national security argument, it's now like a whole, a terrible hold on the donor, which if we don't get some kind of reconciliation with Serbia will be a sort of Russian authoritarian populace proxy, bang in the heart of Europe. There's an interesting parallel to to the work that you did in Ireland, which is the depth of the history of these people. So I was just looking at the individual biographies, and there's been a great report again by my favorite people, the European Stability Institute on this which we can share. But the president of Kosovo was driven from it as a child. Albin Korti, the leader, was imprisoned from 97 to 2001 by the Serbians. The foreign minister, Garvala, had her father and brother murdered in Germany by Yugoslav spies. And on the other side, the Serbian foreign minister, Dacic, was a spokesman from Lossovic from 92 to 2000. And if you watch, there's an extraordinary moment in the Security Council where Dacic starts attacking this foreign minister, the Kosovo Foreign Minister, who's had her father and brother murdered and he starts screaming at the UN Security Council, your hands are bloody, it's your fault, and essentially starts blaming her father and brother for being sort of traitors and separatists. And then she turns around and screams back,

you're a small slobber down Milosovic. So there is a real kind of depth of history here, which is going to make it unbelievably difficult to reconcile unless the West concentrates and it will be tragic. I mean, nothing is more tragic than 20 years in Afghanistan where we go and get rid of the Taliban and 20 years later, we hand it back to the Taliban again. But it feels as though we're about to do it again in Kosovo. Bosnia and Kosovo were, of course, the successes. They were the things that made people proud of humanitarian intervention. They ended wars, they set up states, and despite all the grumbles, broadly speaking, the world is a better place for the interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo and it would have been without it. But it now looks like it's going to unravel through Western vacillation and weakness. The only thing I'd say to that is that when there was this troop build up, pretty close to the border, getting way, way too close for Kosovo's kind of security interests, and the Americans did step in and essentially have some pretty hard words with the Serbs. And Vukic came straight out and did a statement saying, it would be absurd for them. How would that possibly help us that we were going to start a war there, et cetera? Now, on the one hand, we've heard all that before from other other leaders, but this did feel to me like a quick word from the Americans led to a bit of a pullback. But in terms of the fundamentals, they are not in good shape. And I think it's something that we'll be coming back to again and again. Well, pretty depressing, but some very, very interesting stuff. It's an extraordinary story. And it's also an amazing place. I went there after the war because of course, once the Serbs had effectively had lost and were on their way home, I was then asked to go and help sort the the comms going forward. And I spent a bit of time there and it's a very beautiful part of the world. But what was incredible, I was there at the time when the Serbs were literally retreating, so they were coming back and we'd be driving along the road and there'd be sort of truckloads coming the other way. And I mean, the hatreds, you felt it so powerfully. Every time one side passed the other, there were these almost sort of, you know, animalistic noises being sort of, you know, they'd stop fighting at this point, but there's still that you could feel the kind of absolute loathing and hatreds. And it's still there. And of course, this region up in the north is still very, very, it's more Serb than Albanian and the Serbs in Belgrade want those people to feel, this is why the number plate thing is so kind of visceral, want them to feel that they're Serb, not Kosovan, because they don't and say they never will recognize Kosovos and independent nation. It's very, very sad. And the, and as you say, it's a very, I mean, in some places, a very, very beautiful place with these amazing monuments. Other bits are kind of sort of slightly bleak modern communists, but it's an extraordinary part of the world. And of course, it's on this, one of the reasons why it's so raw, of course, is that originally it was on the fault line between the Christians and the Ottoman Muslims. And Kosov, this battling Kosov was seen as a kind of existential fight. And it is still still remembered in that way. Anyway, thank you. And I don't think we're going to resolve it all now. But thank you for sticking with it and having a chance to talk about it. And see you tomorrow. Question time. See you then. Bye bye.