

This episode is brought to you by Sky, where you can watch the brand new series of political thriller, Cobra Rebellion. This is, if my counting is correct, series three.

Robert Carlisle, with a Y, is back as Prime Minister. I'm sure you're going to prove it's a Scott in number 10, which is good news for everybody. That's always good, yeah. Absolutely. So this series, Prime Minister Robert Sutherland, facing more challenges than ever before. So his popularity is plummeting. There's a new controversial police protest bill. His administration's plunged into chaos when an environmental demonstration ends with grave consequences. Sounds pretty familiar stuff. And as the inquest into the protest gets underway, the Prime Minister and his government begin to realize that all is not as it seems. With his daughter potentially embroiled with a group behind it all, his interest in the case isn't purely political. The rebellion will push Sutherland to the edge and force him to question what he's personally willing to sacrifice in order to stay in power. So something should appeal to both of us, Alistair. I must admit, I did at times, when I was working in number 10, worry what my daughter might get up to. But thankfully, she went down the comedy route. Now, if you haven't watched Cobra before, it is a really dramatic political thriller. You do get that sense of being behind the scenes of a government that's in crisis, imploding. And you go right into the decision room. And of course, that's a place that you and I both had our experience of being. I can think about Cobra, which by the way, people should understand, all it means is cabinet's office briefing room A. It sounds like it's sort of named after a snake, but it's as simple as that. But what comes to mind with me, 9-11? We use it, obviously, as you can imagine, for a lot of things. But it was actually very useful during the floods as a way of getting all the operational data up and the weather information up and all the statistics up and making sure the police were there and the fire services were there, etc. Foot and mouth, that was quite a few Cobra situations.

So, Alistair, were you impressed by the cast? What were your thoughts on the cast? It's got lots of great actors, very British. Victoria Hamilton is the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff. Jane Horrocks plays the Secretary of State for Defence. David Aig is the Foreign Secretary. They're on top of really big issues, environmental terrorism, foreign corruption. So, it is, I think, it's fair to say, one of the most popular shows that Sky have done. Well, on today's show, we're going to be talking about what it's really like to attend a Cobra meeting, which you and I have done on many occasions, and how to manage a full-blown crisis. So, there you go. Keep listening to hear that and be sure to watch Series 3, Cobra Rebellion, all episodes available on Sky and Now.

Welcome to the Restless Politics with me, Alistair Campbell.

And me, Rory Stewart.

And we're going to be talking about the Labour Party conference. We've recorded a bit later than usual for this part of the podcast, so as we could talk properly about Keir Starmer's speech. But I think we should start, Rory, with continuing pretty awful developments in Israel and Gaza. We just, in case listeners missed it, we recorded podcasts about 24 hours ago. Judging by the reaction, we seem to get the tone and the balance about right, but it's very, very, very difficult to talk about this. And a lot of even worse stuff has come out today. I mean, we're talking about children that have been beheaded. We're talking about, I think we're now over a thousand for the Israeli death toll.

The hostages situation is really complicating matters for the Israelis now they're handling. And of course, Gaza now being subject to a level of military attack that it's frankly never seen, even it's long and bloody history. So how do you see things at the moment?

Well, we're talking late on Tuesday evening. I was just listening to Lisa Jusset who says that they reckon that they found 1500 Hamas fighters bodies who would have been killed in the course of the assault. There's a real problem on social media, which is that there are incredible allegations flying around on both sides of atrocities. Most of the reputable news agencies are being pretty cautious about repeating them, because I think there's not always the evidence. Clearly, I mean, it was a horrifying terrorist attack. And clearly, the reprisals have involved a lot of innocent civilians being killed partly because it's very difficult to move around in Gaza. There was another strange thing that just happened. We're talking about half past four UK time, but five o'clock Israel time, there had been a warning put out by Hamas that they were going to attack Ashkelon. And they told all the inhabitants to leave before they launched a missile attack. And in doing so, they were, I think, referring to the fact that the Israeli military will announce that they want people to leave before they launch an attack. And then an hour and a half later, rained a very, very large number of missiles in on Ashkelon.

And it seems as though Israel has now cut off electricity and water supply to Gaza. Now, as we mentioned in the podcast, almost all the electricity, water and telecommunications for Gaza for 2.2 million people on that strip along the coast comes from Israel. So cutting that off is going to be very, very difficult. And as you know, you can run hospitals and essential services maybe off generators, but lack of electricity is very dangerous in many ways and lack of drinking water even more so. I thought it was quite interesting this morning listening to James Cleverley, the Foreign Secretary. I mean, clearly both the government and the Labour Party are both saying we will support, you know, Israel's right to defend itself. But he did, Cleverley did use the word proportionate. And I wonder if there are fears that the pressure to do something really, really beyond anything that's ever happened before is there. I thought William Hague, your old party's former leader and former Foreign Secretary, had an interesting piece in the Times today. The headline was Hamas has set a trap that Israel must avoid.

The conventional wisdom does seem to be forming. And I know no more about this than, you know, what I read and what I see and the occasional conversation with people. But the conventional wisdom forming that this is in part related to the sense and the fear that Iran had that what Biden was doing in trying to push the Saudis and Israel closer together towards some sort of recognition and some sort of getting along, that this was there and Hamas's way of putting a stop to that. The other thing I think it's worth reflecting on, because this is now going to consume American foreign policy and security policy so much, is that there is probably a pretty difficult read across for Ukraine as well, which is why Putin is probably welcoming what's going on. Yes, I weirdly asked chat GBT for hypothetically what it thought would happen if an attack like this happened, hypothetically, because it stopped training in 2021. So it shouldn't be aware that this had happened. And it was astonishingly accurate and predicting the Israeli reaction, the fears about Iran, the way in which this would be perceived. And I think the only thing that made me sense is that what Hamas was doing to connect to your point about William Hague was almost certainly expecting the kind of reaction that they've got and that their objectives are, of course, to draw the world's attention to Israel-Palestine, which,

of course, has happened. Their objective will be to provoke a very aggressive Israeli military response and therefore get the international community more involved in trying to mediate. And as you say, to stop the peace talks with Saudi Arabia. So if you'd step back from the terrorist attack to kind of the strategic objectives, that seems to be where it is. Meanwhile, I mean, as you say, the ripple of consequences for everybody, I mean, these well over a thousand lives killed by this terrorist attacker, touched people in every dimension, almost everybody that I know in the Jewish community in London has relatives or friends who are directly affected by this. Somebody pointed out that compared to the size of the Israeli population, it's only 10 million people. It's proportionally much larger than 9-11. Oh, absolutely. It's a proportion. It's horrific. And now, I mean, I just can't even imagine what it's like living in Gaza at the moment. There was a very dramatic piece of reporting by one of the correspondents there who was reporting live just as these attacks landed, you know, really quite near to. And when you see those aerial shots of Gaza, it's kind of, it's hard to imagine where you'd go. And at this point about hostages is, I mean, the hostages always complicate this sort of situation, which is why they appear to have taken so many. But I was checking out the facts when one of his previous times as Prime Minister, Netanyahu, 2011, he traded 1027 Palestinian prisoners, including 280 who were serving life sentences to get one Israeli soldier back. Yeah. And the problem is that, of course, once you've done that, this is what will be expected again. I mean, some of the CNN interviews, some of the Fatah people are saying, it's fine, just release every Palestinian prisoner and we'll release these hostages. So it's, no, it's terrifying. You're at the Labour Party conference. I can see behind you a sort of amazing chart. Is that to do with the conference? I've actually, I've raced down from Liverpool to Cheltenham, where I'm speaking, so that is a banner for the Cheltenham Literature

Festival, where I'm speaking later this evening, and you're going to be here interviewing Theresa May.

That's right. Yeah, I'll be interviewing Theresa May, which having had some practice with you and are in the leading podcast. But I have been in Liverpool, and it was really very interesting.

As I said to you last week, I am a bit of a Labour Party conference ophob.

I wasn't particularly looking forward to it. But there was a, it's hard to put in words the kind of energy that was there, and the sort of excitement. And it wasn't just kind of Labour Party people, it was business people, it was media people. You really did feel that there was something quite significant happening. And Kirstam's speech was, I'd say that without a doubt, I mean, I'm pretty rough critic of speeches. And you know, he'd be the first to admit he's not Barack Obama.

But that was the best conference speech he's made by a long, long way. It was very interesting to talk to the people who'd been at both conferences, be they journalists, be they business people, charities and so forth. They really were saying, look, last week felt like they were just tired and out of it. And this feels like this remarkable energy. It's as strange as I remember the early Cameron conferences, that sense that all this sort of lemming thing, heard mentality, all the businesses suddenly flock in one direction or another. People remembered that was true just before Labour came in. Did conference speeches matter a bit less than they did in the past?

I mean, they're maybe not covered. I haven't seen quite as much coverage in the media as you would have got. It was at a conference, wasn't it, that Tony Blair did that famous clause four moment or have I got that wrong? No, that was absolutely right. That was his first conference as leader. Now look, what this conference is happening clearly in the shadow of events in

the Middle East. So it won't be the lead story on the news tonight, I wouldn't think, whereas normally a Labour or Tory leader's conference speech will dominate the media. So it won't get this sort of cut through in the way that a conference speaker leader speech might normally do. But I actually think more important than that in a way is that the content, what I sense from it, and I think we have to kind of acknowledge here that Keir Starmer has been perhaps more effective as a leader than we've given credit for. Because what I saw today, you know, we've talked often, or I've talked often about these three stages of his leadership, decontaminate the Labour-brand-post Corbyn, show the choice of unfit to govern, and then set out the alternative. What you got a sense of today, it wasn't a manifesto, there wasn't the detailed, there will still be people saying, where's the detail. But in terms of what he would like to be able to do as Prime Minister, and he took the five missions that you and I have talked about before on growth, on the environment and energy, waiting lists, crime, law and order, and also the shattering the class ceiling. And you could see the message to the party about where he now wants the campaigning to be on those. A lot about housing, building 1.5 million new homes on the energy thing. I mean, it was interesting to see the audience react positively to him essentially saying he thinks Sunak has taken a very wrong turn in winding back on climate, and he's going to go in the other direction as it were. Just quickly on that, is he actually, I did read the speech, but he didn't actually say he was going to reinstate the 2030 target city, which is disappointing in a way, because that's quite important for investment. Put it this way, he certainly didn't roll back from that, and he said, whereas the Sunak is rolling back, he wants to speed ahead. And I think what it was, it felt like a really important chapter in this third stage of that strategy. And although he did quite a lot of the kind of Tory bashing that you expect at a Labour Party conference, there wasn't that much of it. And what there was was about signalling a very different approach to how you do politics and the values of the Labour Party. And given he's not the most natural, great orator, it was quite something to see, you know, several sort of standing ovations in the middle of the speech. So Rory, did you get my email? I sent you what I'm defining as the dear Rory section of the speech. So you sent me an email which goes, so if you are a conservative voter who despairs of this, if you look in horror at the descent of your party into the murky waters of populism and conspiracy with no argument for economic change, if you feel our country needs a party that conserves, that fights for our union, our environment, the rule of law, family life, the careful bond between this generation and the next, then let me tell you, Britain already has one and you can join it. It's this Labour Party. Sir Rory, come on. There we go. That's a cheeky moment, isn't it? What's your answer? Well, I think, I think... And he did a lot about it. He did a lot of Theresa May's respect and service. Yeah, no, I think all that stuff. I love the stuff about the union, the environment, rule of law. Really, really excited by that. Conserving, anti-popular stuff. Not quite sure we can see yet the argument for economic change, but amazing. One of the big coups, wasn't it, was getting Mark Carney to endorse Rachel Reeves. And was that... Just tell us a little bit and let's step back for a moment because we understand you love the speech, but give us a bit of the sort of planning around that. How do you think that worked? Would they have known for some weeks and they would have sort of held that back and

then

how would you have handled the media strategy? Because I noticed in the newspapers this morning that was the sort of big story, Mark Carney endorses Rachel Reeves. Just for listeners, Mark Carney, obviously, former Governor of the Bank of England, actually brought in by George Osborne a conservative chancellor, so the Tories will be feeling pretty bitter about the fact that this guy, they appointed him. Not only brought in by George Osborne, George Osborne sort of chased him to the

ends of the earth and persuaded him. I think Mark Carney did find his experience during the whole Brexit-Johnson period pretty horrific in terms of not dealing with a serious government.

And then he'd gone by the time of trust, but I think Andrew Bailey, his successor, found exactly the same experience. So I'm guessing they'll have had that up their sleeves for a while. And what... I'm just sort of going to speculate for a little bit. Give us a sense. If you were doing it, I'm not saying this is what they did, but let's imagine this was 96 and you had a former Tory-associated Governor of the Bank of England. What would you do? You would have started

a few weeks before reaching out saying, do you think you might be prepared to actually endorse us at conference? Go on, talk us through the steps of this. I suspect what they have happened, Rory, is that they were looking for endorsers. They were looking for people in all sorts of fields that they could perhaps put on stage or have introduced as videos or, for example, last year they had Gary Neville, the football ex-footballer talking to Keir Starmer on stage, that kind of thing. It just sort of adds a little sort of stardust, I guess. But I think for this one, this will have been, I suspect, the development of a relationship over time.

Between Rachel Reeves and Mark Carney. And Mark Carney or possibly Keir as well. And then at some point,

somebody would have gulped very hard and said, well, what do you think about actually going the whole way and endorsing us? And he might have said, what, do you mean actually going to Liverpool and sitting in the conference? Well, if you feel a bit uncomfortable about that, we could maybe record a video and we could play it before Rachel speaks. What do you think of that?

And he clearly felt sufficiently motivated to do that. I do think it was quite a coup.

And I'll tell you the other thing that I thought was remarkable in the, I mentioned these several standing evasions. One of them was in response to that bit that you've just read out. Now, I've been at like party conferences in the past where you almost said, you know, we'd be willing to get Tories voting for us. We don't want Tories coming in here.

I saw somebody last night who's part of Keir Starmer's very, very close team.

And I said, you know, is it all kind of done yet? Because our processes, anybody who's read my diaries will know, we used to write the speeches till the last minute. There was even a time where

Tony was literally scribbling on it as he was walking up the steps to the stage. This one has apparently been locked down, as they call it, for several days. And they thought they might have to change it after Suneck's speech. They didn't change it other than to kind of reflect one or two things that Suneck had said. So he seems to have sort of, you know, decided very early on what he's going to say. He's got this guy, Alan Locky, who's a, who's I think one of the main speech writers, who's, I think, clearly, he's got Keir's voice. And that's really important in somebody who's

what we call holds the pen, because you've got loads of people feeding in things that they think they should be in there. But then you need somebody who's holding the pen. And I thought there were some really, really, really nice, nice touches. And there was a line, which again, I thought might appeal to you, politics should tread lightly on people's lives. I thought that was quite nice. He was essentially saying there that, you know, this is about being an enabling government

rather than, you know, or back to sort of status. And I thought he had, for somebody who's not a natural orator, unlike David Lambie, who yesterday got the whole place going with this amazing sort of peroration. But Keir had several kind of these rolling oratorical moments where he's going through

several lines of a speech, the clapping starts, and he just keeps going and the clapping gets louder. So the feeling in the hall very, very, very warm, quite sort of dramatic in terms of people I think thinking this was a big moment. And I think in strategic terms it was.

So I liked Rishi Sunak's conference speech. I thought it was also very much in line with his personality. It was intelligent. It was provocative. It was clear. You got a sense that he believed what he was talking about. It wasn't very, I mean, it was a different style, wasn't it? It wasn't very kind of rich on oratory. It was very much, I've decided that HS2, the maths doesn't stack up. I'm going to cancel it. I'm going to do this thing on smoking. I'm going to do this thing on bacalaureate. But it was interesting because I think as you said to me, you got the sense that these were things that Rishi Sunak personally cared about. If once it didn't feel as though there was a kind of gap between what he was saying and what he believed.

What I didn't feel in his speech was that there was a kind of intellectual coherence to that. I didn't see how it all sort of hung together. Whereas I think what ran through Keir's speech today was this, I mean, the conference slogan, get Britain's future back.

He really was being setting out the missions and then going through them quite methodically in terms of policy. It's a good contrast, isn't it? What Rishi Sunak did also shows the risks of being very clear about policy. I mean, Keir's summer didn't actually really say in that speech exactly where he was going to put the tax rate, how he was going to generate this growth, how he was going to pay for the NHS for any of that stuff. I think the only major new announcement, there were bits and pieces, but I think the New Towns, the commitment to building several New Towns, I think that's the first time I've heard that in a speech.

It's interesting, it's provocative, but that's an example of the risk that any of them run, that as soon as they say something clear, they get into trouble because there'll be many people like me saying, whoa, wait a second, what's happening with the green belt? It's all very well talking about the gray belt, but where's the line going to be once we start chipping in? Where's this going to end? I'd rather see the gray belt turn back into richer nature

rather than the gray belt being turned into housing. What I thought from Rishi Sunak's speech is that by taking the risk of being specific, what he really laid himself open to was then days of people digging over the numbers and attacking it, whereas probably what Keir's summer did was smarter in political terms by not being too specific. It doesn't give people too much to chew into. Yeah, because the problem with Sunak's position was that the transport stuff fell apart almost instantly. Now, there will be devil in the detail, there always is.

If you remember when Keir Starmer first came out with these five missions and we discussed them on the podcast. Can I just say on that? I think five's too many. I really do. I mean,

I know you've just managed to memorize them and you made it through them. I literally, I think I've got quite a good memory. I wouldn't be able to get them back. I've kind of got NHS. Go on, give it a go. Gross NHS, law and order. Energy. What was the fifth then? The fifth is aspiration, shattering the glass, the glass ceiling. That's sort of stopping these Etonians like Nicholas Colridge saying the only people in the world who matter are Etonians. Remember that one? Yeah, yeah. That was a good moment. That was really a good moment. So, no, but I think what they're doing is, I think this will move to something closer to what is, I hate the phrase, but you know what I mean, a retail political offer. What's in it for me? There'll be something in relation to all of those areas. But I felt there were just, what I liked about his speech, it fitted with this sense of sort of solid, pragmatic, strategic, both he and Rachel Reeves and several of the others who've spoken this week, they have improved so much in the job that they're doing and that feeds confidence as well. Can we ask the cheeky question? Did you contribute to that speech in any way, Alster? Sorry? Did you contribute to that speech in any way, Alster? No, in any way. Did you have an opportunity to look at the speech and give a bit of advice and feedback? Rory, this is like me asking you where you are right now. No, I did not. I know Keir Starmer and I know people who work for him and I know people who've been working on the speech and I may or may not talk to them. In fact, I do talk to them from time to time, but did I have the kind of role, anything like the kind of role I used to have with Tony Blair, etc. No, I did not. And I think the other thing I'd say is that this did feel very much like his speech. They're bloody long, these speeches, aren't they? Rishi Sunak's was an hour. This one I read and I was like, oh, I thought I'd got there and then I was reading more and more and more. Yeah, well, we like depth. We like a bit of depth. You don't think in the modern world they might give slightly shorter speeches. Does anyone actually really want to listen to an hour-long speech? I mean, why do they do that? I mean, they both do it. It's not a Chris and Keir Salmon. It's obviously the tradition where she's connected the same thing. I think these speeches are very, very important. You said earlier, are they more or less important than they were? I think, and it's very interesting when the rest of his politics put out a tweet saying that you and I were recording the podcast a bit later to take in Keir's speech. Any questions, folks, and any comments, the comments were overwhelmingly positive, hundreds of them. So I think a lot of people will have watched it live. It won't get massive coverage because of the Middle East, but it's a moment. What would you lose if you made it a half hour speech instead of an hour speech? You don't think you gained something. You don't think it might be a bit better at half an hour? No, it might be, but I think that what the expectation of a conference speech is that people kind of touch most of the base, most if not all of the big bases. Got you. And it's also, it's an event. I mean, it's like, it's partly for the morale of the party. The Labour Party will have left that hall tonight feeling really about buoyed up, really sort of ready for the fight, thinking they've got a plan. And that's important for motivation. And I like, I do like a long speech. I like a thoughtful speech. Look, you and I rage at the sort of, you know, the Twitter world and all that stuff, even though we rage on the Twitter world as well as about it. But Rory, do you know, by the way, do you, you've heard about the protest at the start where... Tell us a bit about it, yeah. Well, he got attacked on the stage. This guy just appeared and ran onto the stage and started spraying all this glitter on him. Can I just put in a personal update there? So my first great

appearance at the Conservative Party conference. Great appearance. Yeah. I was, I was giving my speech and I was attacked by a man dressed in a Badger suit. Ah, is that because of your hedgehog speech? I was the Environment Minister. And we were talking about Badgers and TBs. And this giant Badger came charging onto the side of the stage. Well, of course, your friend Theresa May had a, she remember she had the guy giving her the P45. Yeah. So this guy comes on the stage and he sprinkles all this glitter and stuff over. And I thought it was just stop oil, but it wasn't. It's a, and I'm worried, Roy, that you may have directly radicalized this guy because it turns out his life's mission is to fight for sortition. Citizens' assemblies? Those sortition, which is full sortition. Full sortition, yeah. Well, so citizens' assemblies are done by sortition, but he wants the whole parliament done by sortition. He didn't really get through his speech long enough, but Keir sort of, he handled it pretty well. John Prescott was trending on Twitter. Was he trying to get out of his seat? No, he wasn't there, but people were saying, why doesn't he do what John Prescott did? But Keir, he just stood there very, very calmly. I think there will be a bit of a little bit of a sort of inquest into how the guy managed to get on there in the way that he did. But he handled it very well. What he did was he waited until the guy had been dragged off. And he then said, this shows why we've got to change from being a party of protest to a party of power. No, so I believe what he was going for is exactly what I might be interested in. So PR voting system and replacing the House of Lords with a citizens assembly. Ah, so you're now admitting that you radicalized him. Were you behind the, you were asking me very personal questions about my life. I am the glitter behind the assault. Well, anyway, he handled it very well. In a funny sort of way, I think because he did handle it well, he took his jacket off because his jacket was covered in all this stuff. He made a very nice crack about his wife wearing a beautiful dress. When he did this line about this shows we have to move from being a party of protest to party of power. Of course, it underlined stage one of that three stage strategy. This is a change party from the Corbyn era. So in a funny sort of way, I think it, it rather helped him. Maybe it was set up by Labour Party headquarters, just so that would be terribly cynical to think that if you're going to ask me whether I had any discussions about how the speech should start, I'm just not going to go there. Okay. Very good. Now, as you'll have heard at the beginning of today's show, this episode of the Restless Politics is sponsored by Sky. And at the start of the show, you'll have heard us both talking about the brand new series of Cobra Rebellion, which is Sky's political thriller about a government in crisis. It's one of those TV shows that ends up being quite prescient because it's realistic portrayal of issues today, such as, for example, the high speed rail line, which they call Metro Ultra Line, which is under scrutiny, may be familiar to some of our listeners. I'm sure it is. And today we want to talk a little bit about our own experiences of being in a Cobra meeting, Cobra, Cobra, and what it's like to be in the room during a full blown emergency. So I suppose at its heart, what Cobra is, is the formal mechanism for crisis management in government, chaired by the Prime Minister or in the Prime Minister's absence, the senior cabinet minister, there to bring together all the different bits of government and get on top of a crisis. Yeah. Give us your first experience of Cobra. And listen, let's just locate it, because when I did it, you'd walk down and it was underground in one of them. Was it in a different place when you were going to Cobra meetings? Rory, I think that's information that could be deemed useful to an enemy. One of the things that I did think is that actually, it was very criticized in its early

days, and it's been running right from the 70s. But by the time I got there, I was beginning to tighten up. I was quite impressed by the group of civil servants who staffed it, civil contingency secretary. They'd had real training in crisis management. I actually got one of them in to talk to my class at Yale about how you do crisis management. And my strongest memory of it was during the days of the floods, which Cumbria, this 2015 end of 2015, going on in Cumbria and Yorkshire for many, many weeks, Lancashire, where they were always able to get the most up-to-date information up on the screens. We were able to get the fire service, the police around the table, and strategic communications people, the key strategic communications people, the key spending departments to make sure that we could really make decisions. So I thought it actually was one of the few cases in government where I really thought it was government done properly, properly staffed, proper committees, and it's actually how I would like to run a crisis response. Yeah. And I think what's interesting about this TV series about it is, although it's television, and it obviously wants to look dramatic and have that sense of it being a thriller and so forth, there is something kind of exciting as the wrong word. But you know that when you go into those meetings, it kind of really matters because they only really happen when it is either something that's unexpected or something that's become a crisis. So if I think of some of the situations that we were involved in that required it, obviously, several military situations, but also 9-11, probably the most dramatic of all. And that I seem to remember was when we were actually, it was kind of standing room only, because there was so many people who felt that people felt had to be there yet, all the security services, quite a few of the police forces, transport, infrastructure, all sorts of different people, foreign policy diplomats. It was a pretty crowded room. And it was almost like there was a sense of this has the potential to be a really profound crisis, and therefore an awful lot has to be gripped very, very quickly. And the thing about having a place where all the information flows into a central place, I think in a crisis you need that. And knowing who you've allocated to, there's a very funny but slightly disturbing piece by Jonathan Evans, who was the head of MI5, which we can share, which he wrote for Lucy, about the lessons he took from government, how not to manage a crisis, which is about all the classic problems that we saw, including things like optimism bias, and the ways in which you convince yourself you don't want to happen on your watch, and government often tends to be too slow to react. So one of the things in those meetings is absolutely vital to push people to look at the worst-case scenario, make the decisions, deploy the resources, rather than the temptation, which is, oh, well, maybe the problem will go away on its own. We don't want to waste any resources, but just get on top of it as soon as you can. Definitely. When you were saying that, what came straight into my head was the way that we handled foot and mouth. I think we wanted it, we wanted to feel that it was better than it was, and that maybe we didn't do that sort of early stage catastrophizing and imagining the worst and then trying to prevent it from happening. Anyway, if any of these other stories have peaked your interest about what crisis management is like at the heart of government, watch series three of Cobra Rebellion, all episodes available on Sky and Now. Right then, Alistair. So let's move on to our next topic. One of the things we've discussed a lot

recently, I think it's become a central theme of our podcast, is the way that AI can reshape politics, just as Twitter and Facebook did in earlier elections. And one of the big dangers you've been talking about this week are AI deep fake videos. So tell us a bit about some of those deep fakes. Well, over the weekend, there was an audio of Kia's Dharma. I was sent it by, God knows how many people, dozens. How did they send it to you? They were like, wow, isn't this worrying? Yeah, so some were saying the mass drops. This is the real him. He was basically sort of having an absolute tantrum shouting at somebody's effing and blinding. Just to explain for this, before we can analyze it, it was quite sort of subtle, wasn't it? So there was no, they didn't type to fake his face. They just had a picture of him and a bit of audio. And it was a bit crackly. And what it sounded like is someone recording on their iPhone while Starmer lost his temper at somebody for dropping an iPad, I think it was. And it's rather sort of clever because it wasn't him doing something so outrageous, like massive racist anti-Semitic fakery. It was just trying to make out that this calm man was kind of grumpy and nasty to his staff in private. Is that right? Exactly, exactly. It was sufficient for people to think, oh, well, that's him. I'm so remote removed from the images trying to portray. And it plays into that, this idea that they're all hypocrites. They're all liars. They're all the same. Now, to be fair to certain politicians, I noticed that Simon Clarke was one of them, Tom Tugghenhardt as well. There were quite a few Tories posting that saying there is a deep fake audio of Gia Starmer circulating. People should ignore it and we all need to fight against this stuff. And they pointed to the fact that Rishi Sunak is going to be hosting a sort of AI event. Now, that's fine. And I approve of that. But I wonder how many Tory members would have circulated it. Certainly, I was getting a lot of this from hard left people who were sort of saying, here's your mate Starmer, just as bad as everybody else kind of thing. And so God knows how much circulation it had. But that was, as you say, a relatively tame one. The other area where I think it's worth looking at in recent weeks, we had the election in Slovakia last weekend where this populist

Robert Fisco regained power having been kicked out in the first place through corruption. And there were lots of audio recordings that were doing the rounds on social media concerning his main opponent, Michael Symecha, who is the leader of the progressive Slovakia party. And these were discussions that he was having with how do you rig the election? How do you buy votes? Whether there's something special that you could do with the Roma community? By the time it was established that this was a fake and it was an AI product, it had been doing the rounds during the two day period when media outlets and politicians are supposed to be quiet. In other words, they have two days before the election where the media coverage stops and people are just meant to be sort of reflecting. That was being circulated during that period. Now, who knows how many people had their mind changed? Impossible to prove. But what is interesting is that the exit poll, the progressives were in the front and by the time the vote came in, they'd lost. So I just think we've got to be very, very, very careful about this.

And I think I've said before, when I was running to be Mayor of London as an independent, I had these companies approach me who were pitching to say, if I paid them lots of money, they could win the election for me. And they said, we've been involved in 52 elections and we've won these elections in former Soviet states and we do it by setting up sock puppets and bots and fake accounts and attacking your opponents. And they were talking in those days about Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. Nowadays, I guess those very same companies would be pitching you on their

ability to use AI. And it's interesting. I mean, I was thinking that the threat would be more obvious that it would be a day before the presidential election, you would have a deep fake of President Biden seeming very senile in a debate against Donald Trump or something. But this is actually of course, it's shown me what it's more likely to be. It's more likely to be and it's probably, I guess, clever of them to do things which seem rougher, seem as though they've just been caught accidentally. The model for this, do you remember Mitt Romney in 2012, one of the things that really damaged his electoral chances is he was recorded at a millionaire donor dinner being patronizing about poor people. And it had sort of been phoned by an iPhone in the corner and Mother Jones put it out, September 2012. And I guess that's the sort of style they're going for, isn't it? Probably because it takes a bit longer to prove that Keir Starmer hadn't lost his rag with some aid about dropping an iPad because it's not a public event. There's two real dangers here, I think. One of them is that people find it funny. That's the first thing. So I think sometimes these things will use humor and people will sort of say, we shouldn't take it too seriously because it's actually quite funny. So if you, for example, I've seen a deepfake of Joe Biden falling over, falling off a stage. I've seen another one where he's sort of wandering around a beach looking a bit lost. And, you know, when you sort of try to say to people, this is really dangerous, this is out for God's sake, who's going to take that seriously? I think it's the normalization of the and using fairly trivial examples to normalize this. But it's really just about making people find it difficult to work out what's true and what's not. And I think that, you know, if we had, you know, fair play to those Tory politicians who came straight out, because they will also know that there will be people that will be able to do this to them as well. So all politicians, I think, have an interest in trying to stop this. But we know for sure in the American election that the idea that Trump will say, oh, come on, guys, let's not do that stuff. Let's not play dirty. That's just not going to happen. And, you know, we've got an election going on, a very important election going on very soon in Poland. And again, you look at the polls, the numbers are very, very tight. And yet the governing party are up to all sorts of tricks that are, you know, they've completely sort of politicized in their favor of the state broadcaster. They've added these four questions, referendum questions that are all designed to sort of, in a sense, they're like leading questions into the electorate, so that they maybe think that the messaging of the election, the parliamentary election, is actually also part of this broader referendum question, which of course gives them then more money to campaign. So there's a lot of, you know, politics, as they say, has always been a pretty rough, tough game. But I think the capacity for populist politicians in particular, really to play dirty, really to use technology and any other black arts methods that come their way, I think we've got to be very, very wary. And that means we've got to stop finding this stuff funny. It really isn't funny. And we've all got a duty, I think, to call it out. Since Obama won with Jim Messina, his second term through this technique of micro-targeting, which was really using big data to try to identify the exact buttons to hit every photo. The idea was, and this was something that I remember, and we went to a conference in 2015, and Jim Messina, who'd been Obama's person for some reason, had agreed to be hired by the Conservative Party. So before the 2015 election, I remember these lectures on how we were going to be using all this data that we got from supermarkets about your spending habits. And on the basis of that, you were supposed to be able to micro-target and work out that because, I don't know, because Alistair Campbell liked eating camembert, we could hit him with something about the improvements, the NHS, and that would get him out to vote Conservative.

What do my cheese habits got to do with my voting habits?

This is where the geniuses in the vacuum seem to believe they were going to be able to take all this data. They could work out what sort of issues would press my button.

If you go back to the Brexit referendum, when the leave campaign, we're just sort of putting together these groups of people with different issues that they cared about, and they really targeted, for example, animal rights. Now, I can imagine in animal rights, which is one of those issues that kind of motivates some people more than any other. So if you imagine that you get hold of the data of all the people whose prime motivation in election is animal rights, and you put together an audio or a video like the one that we've just seen of Keir Starmer talking about, you know, losing his temper, and actually have him in a throwaway remark sort of saying, well, who gives a fuck about animals anyway? You know, you can see how that can then just get used, and it wouldn't have to be done by parties.

And the brilliant thing about it is that AI allows you to do that much more quickly, to replicate much more quickly, and do it at a much greater scale. So you could be, the machine learning can be targeting, as it were, 10,000 different subgroups, the population adjusting the message in real time very, very quickly.

One of the things you've all know, Harari said to me about two weeks ago, is that one of the big threats, actually, is the way in which AI would be perfect for generating a new type of QAnon type conspiracy. So obviously, QAnon, as this will remember, is this amazing conspiracy in the United States, which links child sex gangs to goodness knows what else, and is really mobilized by the Republican base to create particularly horrible views about Hillary Clinton. But those sort of conspiracies, these quasi-religious conspiracies are the sort of things that a large language model, an advanced form of chat GPT, can generate very, very beautifully, very subtly, adjust it to almost everything, and bring in endless data and information to confirm whatever conspiracy theories you're trying to produce.

Now, we're going to be talking in, we've already recorded, but we'll be putting it out soon in the interview with your friend Reid Hoffman, who's really big in the data world. And he had a very different view to the AI debate, didn't he, than say Mustafa Solomon or Yuval Noah Harari. He really does see it as a positive, but I think it's quite hard in the political space not to be very worried about where this is going.

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. And what will happen very quickly, I think, is a sort of race to the bottom that one party will start by doing it, and the other political parties will feel they have no option other than to follow. Well, I hope some of them just stand up against it, even at the risk of taking a hit, but it's a big thing to do.

Well, now, SNP, your friend, Peter Kellner, shared some quite interesting data. Sorry to remind people what happened is that Labour achieved a very startling victory when there was a by-election in an SNP seat. And a man who I decided appealed to me because am I right in saying that he ran every single street in his constituency? I tried to walk through every village in my constituency. Is that right? He ran every street.

This is Michael Shanks, who is clearly quite a good runner, but he decided he wanted to run up and down, or certainly along, every single street in Glasgow. He said that there's quite a lot of cul-de-sac, which are a bit of a nightmare because you have to do them both. And he took some fantastic pictures on the way. He became slightly obsessed, I'd say, with no ball sign. You know, what are they called? No ball games here. And so he's got a picture of every no ball

game site in Glasgow, which there are apparently plenty. But yeah, he did that. The other thing, I think, that is enormously to his credit, is that he did temporarily resign from the party over anti-Semitism, as indeed did my partner, Fiona, although unlike Michael Shanks, Fiona's yet to return. But what was interesting about, so Peter Kellner had done some polling, which really does suggest that this is obviously the result was terrific for Labour, albeit on a very low turnout, but it was a big swing. But beneath it, you get the sense that the SNP are now being judged much more as most governing parties are. In other words, they're not just seen through this prism of independence. And once people start to zone in on that about education, health and so forth, that they maybe don't do as well as they do when they're focusing very much on the questions of national identity. So there was a time, of course, as you will remember, and as I remember very, very happily, when, frankly, Labour was pretty much unbeatable, unstoppable in Scotland, and we took lots and lots and lots of seats, that fell away. I should point out, Roy Ian Murray, MP. Yes, he's cross-Disney, and he's right to be cross, because he was a friend of mine, and I completely wiped him out. You have a correction to make.

In my book, *Politics on the Edge*, I implied that Labour had lost all its seats in Scotland, and actually, of course, Ian Murray retained his, so they did retain one seat.

He did, and that's now being doubled to two with Michael Shanks. What's happened in, according to Peter Kellner's latest, quite big poll in Scotland, is that Labour's increased its vote share up to 28%. So that's nine points up on the last election. And this, of course, is just a snapshot. I don't think we should, you know, overlook that. SNP is on 37%. So that's still ahead, but down eight. Conservatives are on 18. That's down seven points. Now, on that, if that were the voter general election, that would lead to a majority of seats for the SNP.

They would get 34 out of 57, down from 48 out of the 59 that they were under the old boundaries. However, they would have a very narrow majority in around a dozen of those seats, and certainly based on the swing that we saw in Rutherglen last week, that would really put them under threat of a Labour win. So that is quite a big shift.

Yeah, and I think just to point out the obvious, which many listeners will be aware of, which is that there's a double whammy also for the SNP, which is that there are legal and police investigations

into the SNP allegations over party funding, which involved Nicola Sturgeon, the former leader, ending up with the police actually turning up at her house and digging up her garden.

That hasn't helped. And it also hasn't helped that the sitting SNP MP was toppled in a recall petition because she'd broken her own COVID regulations. So there were, I think, a lot of angry SNP voters staying at home. And the question is, are they going to be able to turn this around?

Are they going to be able to get what they need, which is a positive, optimistic message to voters before the next election of how they're going to deliver change for them? Or is this a sign that they're really in deep decline?

The fact that it seems that a lot of their own supporters, people who voted for them last time, kind of, it would seem want to put the independence question on the back burner, does pose Holmes Youssef with quite a difficult strategic question, I think.

Because in a way, it's what gave Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon such clear definition. But he's come in partly, as you say, because of the circumstances of Nicola Sturgeon's departure and then what's happened subsequently with this police investigation.

Every time it seems to me he tries to get his head up for some sort of fresh start. Something else happens to knock him back. So last week, for example, it was the by-election. He was out all over the airwaves essentially saying, this is really bad news.

And meanwhile, where this police investigation goes, we don't know.

I should say on that, by the way, Roy, I thought Rishi Sunak making a joke about it was pretty off and possibly in defiance of contempt of court laws, but anyway, put that to one side.

And what, so Peter's overall analysis is that essentially, you've got three groups of people here. You've got 25 to 30% of nationalists for whom independence absolutely matters more than anything else. You've got roughly that same number of people to whom unionism matters more than anything else. And then you've got about 40 to 50% who have views, but those views are not dictating necessarily how they're going to vote at general election. The issues that are driving them to a general election decision are health, education, jobs, cost of living. So I just think that all in all, that means that the mood in Scotland is changing. And it's changing because Labour is the party of opposition in the UK Parliament and the Scottish Parliament, that is playing in both places to Labour's advantage, I think. Yeah.

That does seem to me that every time you and I talk about Scotland, we get lots of nationalists saying, you don't know what you're talking about. You only come up here as sort of flying and out tourists, et cetera. But my sense, both of what this poll says and what I've been hearing when I have been going up to Scotland, and actually you and I going up there next week to do a charity event, I sense that there is quite a big change. And the fact of,

I thought such a kind of appealing attractive candidate, I thought he really was a good candidate, the fact that Keir Starmer has very quietly been visiting Scotland a lot in recent months, the fact that Anna Sawa, the Labour leader in Scotland, is now ahead of the use of in terms of his ratings, suggests to me that Labour can, for the first time in a long while, he and Murray can start to think that he will not be alone after the next election.

Also some interesting seats where potentially the Conservatives could have opportunities, because there are seats where it's really a Conservative S&P standoff. And if the S&P falls, the Conservatives may pick up more seats in Scotland than one would expect and lose others.

I mean, it's going to be interesting how that plays through. So can I just sort of very briefly, not really sort of big subject for conversation, but just put a brief shout out towards the tragedy in Afghanistan. We have had the most astonishing series of horrible earthquakes around the world. Turkey, Morocco, and now Afghanistan, and this is the second earthquake to hit Afghanistan just over a year. This one out in the west around Herat, whole villages just wiped off the map, entire families killed. And of course, Afghanistan is a very poor country. It's now October, it's beginning to get pretty cold there, pretty bleak outdoors at this time of year. Still a very difficult situation where the Taliban government very much strongly in place with its very regressive attitudes towards women and female education and female participation in the labour market. And as a result, a lot of sanctions still against the Taliban, not as much development assistance getting in as it should. And the Afghan people really at the brunt receiving end of this and a real urgent need for people to get assistance. And particularly, I'd argue again to return to my old warhorse, hobby horse cash assistance into these people who've lost their homes and who've lives have been completely upended. When earthquake where I'm fear over the next few days, we'll find

many, many thousands of people were killed. And of course, with all the focus on the Middle East

at the moment, it won't get the global attention, perhaps that it would if it was happening in a different time in a different country. And some of the I was watching the news last night, and some of these houses that we talk about houses collapsing, but lots of them were literally made of mud and just just destroyed, absolutely destroyed. And you then saw these terrible pictures of of men and it was all men of the obvious reasons of the Taliban digging with their hands through rubble, trying to find signs of life. Absolutely horrific.

That's extraordinary, isn't it? Well, okay. Alistair, thank you.

We'll see you soon. Thank you very much. See you soon. Thank you.

Support for this episode of the Restless Politics comes from Sky. And if you enjoyed our discussion on Cobra meetings today, I really think you'd enjoy the brand new series of Cobra Rebellion, all episodes of which are available on Sky and Now. So we spoke of what it's like to deal with the crisis at the heart of government, the toll it can take on you, even a bit on how Cobra came about, what it means. So now we've been able to shed some light on what it's like behind the scenes. We've hopefully whetted your appetite for a bit of drama. And I think the TV show makes a great pairing. I would say it provides a bit of proper escapism and maybe sometimes puts a bit of glamour into government, but it's actually remarkably well researched. And all the major themes are things viewers will recognise in the political debates we're having every week on the podcast. In fact, I have a vested interest here, because I remember one of the researchers very politely reaching out to me and trying to work out whether they'd got it right. So in this series, they're focusing on environmental terrorism, anti-protest bills passing through parliament, and the quandary

for the PM at the heart of all this, which is the existential question, how much is he willing to sacrifice to remain in power? One of our regular themes, Rory, on the age of impunity.

What will the Prime Minister and his government do when tensions run high?

Can they stick to their principles? So if you're up for something exciting to watch tonight, all episodes of Cobra Rebellion are available on Sky and Now.