

[Transcript] Leading / 18: George Osborne: Austerity, Boris Johnson, and the UK's next Prime Minister

Welcome to another episode of the Restless Politics Leading with me, Alistair Campbell.

And me, Rory Stewart.

And I am in a building with which I'm very, very, very, very familiar because this building in a rather swanky part of London used to be the office of Tony Blair's empire.

But no listeners, we are not interviewing Tony Blair for the third time.

We are interviewing George Osborne, former chancellor.

I don't know how many jobs you have these days.

There was a time when you had about a dozen jobs on the go.

Were you down to single figures yet?

Just about.

So thank you.

I have a primary job and we're in the office of that job now.

Okay.

Well, it's certainly what we call pretty high-end real estate.

Tony Blair would not have been anywhere else.

And I guess where I'd like to start is with austerity, if I may.

I'll tell you why, because I've just come from a conference on mental health services and it was really depressing.

And I've just walked around from the tube station and there were quite a few people who are living on the streets and we know what's happening in our public services.

And I just wonder whether you looking back will at least accept that austerity and the policy you pursued in the early years of the Cameron government is in part responsible for the state of the country now, which is, I think even you would agree, not in great shape.

Well, I don't want to sort of start by disagreeing with you, but I do.

And I don't dismiss those issues.

I think there's a lot more we need to be doing on mental health and we've actually worked together on that kind of thing before.

I think there's a particular challenge with rough sleeping and we've shown in the past that that can be tackled.

It's not just a question of resources, but on the overall big question of austerity, there's a very simple truth, which is if you have a very large financial crash or economic crisis, the country pays the price.

And that is what happened 15 years ago with the big financial crisis.

And it was a lie to tell people at the time that there was never going to be a price to be paid for that.

And I think the reason the Gordon Brown government was ejected was because Gordon Brown did not

tell the truth to people about the consequences of that crash, although Alistair Darling tried as Chancellor.

And David Cameron and myself and others took a risk in that 2010 general election of saying to people, look, there are some really hard decisions that are going to flow as a result of what's happened to the British economy.

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And as a result, I think we commanded the confidence of the British people during that period as we made those difficult decisions, precisely because we had fronted up to them what was going to be required before an election.

And that was why we were elected five years later.

And I would say one of the reasons why the late body has been largely irrelevant to British politics for the last 13 years is because it has not come to terms with the basic truth, which is a country has to live within its means.

And it's only now relevant because you have in someone like Rachel Reeves, the shadow Chancellor, Kirsten Dahmer, people are beginning to say, look, we agree, there's not much money to go around and we're going to have to be very tough about how that money is allocated.

I get what you're saying about the crash, but what you did politically very successfully was pin the crash on the Labour government.

But the economic record of the Labour government over the period was, I would argue, stronger than what we've seen from the Conservatives over the last decade.

Well, it's a bit like saying to Mrs. Lincoln that the play was okay, apart from the assassination of her husband.

I mean, the Labour record was kind of fine until we had the biggest crash in recent British history.

So, politically, you successfully pinned that on the government?

Well, it's the same like saying, well, first of all, of course, governments in charge take responsibility both for the upsides when economies generally do well and the downsides when they don't.

The major government was pinned for Black Wednesday, even though many other countries suffered difficult problems that day.

I would make a broader point.

I don't think, I don't know, I'm going to get back into ancient history of when I was the shadow Chancellor.

I think Britain was particularly exposed to that crash when it came.

I don't think the banking system was as well-regulated as it could have been, and we suffered more than most.

It was a bigger crash in Britain than it was in many other European countries.

And I would say the economic policies we pursued after 2010 meant that we actually had the strongest growth in the G7.

We did more jobs that were created under the Cameron government than any other government in British history.

We avoided that mass unemployment threat that looked very real in 2010.

So I think there's a lot to be proud of or what we did.

But where I tell you we're going to agree is that then something happened in 2016 which did put the country back, set the country back, and that was the Brexit referendum.

Do you think you secured the recovery in the way that you could have done?

Yes, I think because...

Compared to some of the competitors who now do much better than we are.

I think in Britain in 2016 was buzzing.

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We had near full employment.

The incomes of the lowest 20% were rising rapidly because we'd introduced the national living wage.

Britain was becoming the global centre for business and finance.

It was an exciting people looking at the UK and saying, well, that's the example we want to follow.

And unfortunately, that is not the case today.

I'm not saying it's irrecoverable.

But we have obviously suffered a great setback in not just leaving the European Union but the way we've left the European Union and exiting Margaret Thatcher's single market and all of that.

I'm not saying, again, we can't do things about it.

I'm realistic.

We're not going to rejoin the EU.

But that was...

Well, I personally think it's highly unlikely.

I think we could rejoin something that looks akin to the single market or the customs union.

I think there's a great...

I did an event with Ed Balls this week in the House of Lords and he made a really good observation and he was my great political rival back in the day.

He said, you know, if you do something that is not accepted by the other side that doesn't become part of the consensus, it doesn't last and the real achievements in politics are the things that everyone accepts eventually like Bank of England independence or the Labour's minimum wage.

And I would say things we've done like the OBR.

Now, I'm afraid, you know, to my point of view, leaving the EU is now an accepted kind of consensus.

I don't think the fact we left the single market and the customs union is accepted.

I think, you know, the people who won a referendum 52, 48% went for 100% and as a result have not secured their legacy and that is open for debate, whether it's actually called rejoining the single market or whether it's called a new trade deal with the EU, who knows.

But it's clearly the big economic challenge the country faces or one of the big...

And the clearest kind of policy lever in the incoming government, either Conservative or more likely Labour, can pull.

George, can I try to sort of follow on from that Ed Ball's observation?

One of the things that hasn't really become consensus is the policy that's associated with you, which is austerity.

So in that sense, you haven't won in the way that people did with the independent central bank the basic idea of fiscal prudence.

There is a very, very strong group of people and Alistair represents them who continue to feel that we could have borrowed more, could have spent more and that the way out of a recession would have been to borrow and spend more.

Why do you think you haven't won that argument?

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I would beg to differ because I think every time a political party, since I was Chancellor, has veered off the fiscal prudence path, they've become essentially unelectable or been ejected from office.

It's very interesting and maybe I want to sort of bring out the difference between the fortunes of political parties and separate that off from the sort of intellectual case because there is a very, very large number of economists still out there.

You just have to open the Guardian almost every day, go on Twitter any day, who continue to argue that austerity was a big mistake and that if we'd borrowed and spent more, we would have had more growth.

We did actually have, unfortunately for our country, a perfect experiment last autumn of what happens if you are not prudent, if you think you can go and borrow in the case of the trust government, this was to borrow to cut taxes.

Is anybody before a trust was recommending that approach?

Well, it's whether you borrow to cut taxes, which would be the sort of conservative thing to do or borrow to spend more, which might be the labor thing to do.

The trust government tried to do that and the world said, no, we're not lending Britain any more money.

And it created a financial crisis.

It created a crisis in our pension funds and it brought down the government just weeks after it had been put into office.

And I think that was proof, a proof point for the things that myself and not just myself, but of course, our coalition partners, liberal Democrats who got a little stick for this, also were saying at the time, which is Britain cannot just borrow endlessly.

It has to live within its means.

And we had a real life example of what happens if you don't.

Yeah, George.

So I guess I'm going to attempt you to sort of step back for a second.

I absolutely understand the arguments here and I agree with a lot of your arguments.

But I'd like you to sort of step back and look at the politics of it.

Why do you think it continues to be the case that there is such a considerable body of progressive opinion, economic opinion that continues to see austerity as a very bad thing, notwithstanding all the arguments that you would make in favor of it?

I think it's essentially lazy because it thinks that public policy problems can simply be solved by more money being thrown at them, even if that money is not available.

i.e., we can't borrow it and we can't raise taxes further to pay for it.

Taxes already being, by the way, at a post-war high.

So I'll give you an example.

When I was a young opposition MP, the most interesting domestic policy issue was education. He made it a priority.

People like David Blunkett were doing interesting things as Education Secretary.

When the Cameron government came in, Cameron Clegg coalition, education and free schools and academies was a big part of our domestic agenda. Michael Gove was the Education Secretary doing a lot of interesting stuff there. I have not heard a single mainstream politician say anything

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interesting about education for four or five years. I hear nothing from this government and I hear nothing from the Labour opposition. If you ask me what's Labour's education policy, and I'm someone who follows these things, I haven't got a clue.

I'm not really clear, although beginning to get a sense that they want people to learn maths, what Rishi Sunak's education policy is. In other words, domestic public service reform, not just in education, but health, welfare, law and order, these issues, which were the great animating issues when I was an opposition MP and then became a member of the government, seems to have largely disappeared from the British political landscape.

That as a result means failures to properly educate our young people, failures in our health service to provide a decent level of care, are blamed on levels of public expenditure, even though levels of public expenditure are historically at almost record high, rather than the failure of both the political leadership of the country and the institutions themselves and the professions involved to face up to the fact that most of these public services need far-reaching reform. Okay, well, I really want to come to Brexit, it won't surprise you to know, but just to maybe finish on this, your kind of economic strategy, you would at least accept that at the start of 2010, there was growth starting to come into the economy and that the deficit had gone up largely because of global recession, we'd seen a plummeting

of tax receipts. And you then did make very, very big choices, which were focused on not just keeping

public spending down, but actually huge cuts in some of the most important public services, and we're still seeing the consequences of that now.

But I just simply don't accept that, because Britain had, for the period 2010 to 2016, the fastest recovery of all of the G7 countries, it's now a labour ambition, or one of the pledge guards to have the fastest growth in the G7, we had it under the Cameron government, as I say, more jobs were created than under any previous government in British history or subsequently. And there were big improvements in the outcomes of some of our public services, things like education standards were rising, crime was falling, because we were undertaking complicated reforms to those public services. And although it is true that people largely forget this now, the criticism I often got at the time was for measures that made better off people pay for this. So when I removed child benefit from the richest 20% of the country, there was more BBC coverage of that than there was for any changes I made to tax credits for the poorest 20% of the country, not least because most of the BBC people were in that top 20%.

When I increased stamp duty on the most expensive houses, you still see endless newspaper stories about that. I made a big effort to make sure that the job of filling the hole that the financial crisis had blown in our public finances, and it wasn't a temporary hole, it was a permanent hole, because permanently money coming in from financial services was going to be less, and permanently Britain had created a structural deficit that had to be...

But hold on, you and David Cameron, successfully at the political level, persuaded the country that we were facing this kind of grease-style financial crisis. It wasn't just Greece, it was...

Look, you were very successful politically, but you made economic choices. You must accept some of the consequences of what's happening in our country now, our public services, you must accept some of that responsibility. I don't accept that at all, and let's go to Alastair Darling,

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right, who we would both, I think, acknowledge as a decent public servant. He was going to make some

spending cuts, that's just true. Before the 2010 election, you were working in Downing Street at the time, that the cuts coming would be bigger than those under Margaret Thatcher. Gordon Brown went apoplectic and told him to shut up, but he was telling the truth. Peter Mandelson, who was the Deputy Prime Minister at the time, was telling Gordon Brown, he had to tell people there were cuts coming. They used to talk about using the C-word, and Gordon Brown wouldn't do it.

And as a result, he was not telling people the truth. And we told people the truth, we won the mandate for it, we got re-elected. And I think there's a lesson, one of the great themes of your podcast is talking the truth to the public, let's get away from this populist nonsense of pretending everyone can have everything all the time. That's what the camera and government did, and we got rewarded for it at the ballot box, not because we had smart PR or not because we'd sucked up to particular newspaper groups. You did that quite well.

Well, not as effectively as you did back in the day, but because we were telling people essentially a truth, and the public were not stupid, they knew it to be the truth.

George, I want to take us off the sort of punch and duty of our different views on austerity, and take the tone down a little bit back to something more personal.

Part of this program is about politics and what it means to be a politician. And I'd love you to reflect a little bit on what it felt like to be in opposition, what it felt like to be a shadow chancellor, what that makes you think about Rich Reeves and the challenge that Kirsten Stammer faces, give less as a sense of just the structure of opposition in British politics.

I spent half of my political career in opposition. It was in some ways the most sort of challenging and rewarding period. And I know that sounds kind of odd because obviously the job of being Chancellor Exchequer comes with enormous responsibilities, incredibly intense job, but the job of being shadow chancellor is unbelievably difficult. Because if you're chancellor and you decide not to get out of bed that day, the treasury purse on as a kind of machine and the government carries on, and it's a bit like eventually the country would notice that all the politicians were still in bed, but it'd be a bit like a kind of plane on autopilot that would eventually kind of crash into the mountain. But in opposition, if you don't do something that day, if you don't get out of bed and say, right, what am I going to do to make an impact today so that people notice we're around, we've got something to say, then nothing happens. And I spent many years, a sort of junior shadow posts with various conservative leaders all sort of struggling and failing to make an impact against Tony Blair. And that period of 2005 to 2010 when with my good friend, still my good friend, David Cameron, we put together a different kind of conservative opposition, built our case for the country, and then won the election or got ourselves into a position where we ended up in Downing Street, was incredibly hard work, but so rewarding. And I have the sort of fondest memories of that period. And I think it's, you know, I kind of, I can see in the labor opposition, I don't actually think we can come on and talk about this a bit that they're necessarily in quite as good position as either we were, or let alone the kind of Blair Brown opposition in the 90s. But, you know, that kind of tension and excitement and nervousness that you're going to screw it all up. And, you know, the prize is there to be won if you, if you can get your message across in a compelling way, I think is, and I, you know, look, I would say this, and it's a bit unfair on the kind of current

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government ministers who, you know, didn't have the opportunity to be an opposition. But I think it does make you a very, I'm not sure, a better minister, but it certainly equips you. You know, by the time I become chancellor, I had had five years to think about what I was going to do a job. And you'd be facing a very formidable opponent. And a very formidable opponent in Gordon Brown, you know, you know, when I became the, I was a bit like, I think it was a bit like a kind of First World War trench, I was like the next second lieutenant told to jump out of the trench to fight Gordon Brown, the kind of tank of Gordon Brown. And, you know, and, and I was the seventh shadow chancellor he'd faced. And I was only 33 years old. I was, you know, it was absolutely terrifying. But it meant that when I actually became chancellor, I had had a lot of time to think about what I wanted to do with the job, which you just don't get in the nature of, you know, governments been in power for 13 years. And Chancellor gets five minutes notice that they're about to take on the job. Can I offer this question, both to you and Alistair? I mean, what was your impression of Alistair Campbell when you started in politics, what his strengths and weaknesses were, what you thought of that part of the New Labour Project? And then I'd love to hear, Alistair, what your sense is reflecting on, on fighting the Tory opposition and what, what they did badly, what they did well, but George first on Alistair. The number of meetings I was in, where people said, we need our own Alistair Campbell, with the whole string of communication directors, until we actually landed on a very effective communication director in Angie Coulson. You know, Alistair was a really formidable opponent. I was in the opposition leader's office, William Hague's office, still remains a good friend of mine, and I kind of was my mentor in politics, in that period, 97 to 2001. And, you know, we were, we were a little happy band of brothers and sisters, but my God, were we facing the standing army of Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, Alistair Campbell and Co. And, you know, it was very effective. I think, you know, the lesson we learned from Alistair and, you know, and his colleagues was, do everything required to win. You know, they were ruthless. And I had been working as a very junior photocopy boy in John Major's Downing Street. So I'd also seen the kind of opposition coming. You know, if, you know, if you have to travel to the other side of the world, to go and talk to Rupert Murdoch, to try and persuade him to get his newspapers to back you, then that's what you need to do. You know, we did everything we could and when we learned the idea, David, myself, that kind of generation of, we were the sort of survivors of the new labor destruction of the Tory party. And we kind of emerged from our, you know, from our holes to this sort of scorched earth that the new labor created for the conservative movement. And, and we started to rebuild. And we did, we learned a lot, you know, much as I think Tony Blair or Gordon Brown would say they learned a huge amount from the sort of Thatcher period and they were formed and as politicians during that period, David and I were formed during the Blair Brown Campbell period. Alistair, what's your thoughts on all this? What's your reflection on listening to all this and your memories of those periods when he's in opposition? Well, I think there was definitely a period when Tony Blair was prime minister, where we sort of felt invincible against some of George and David Cameron's predecessors. We just never

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felt that this was loseable. And that's a very dangerous thing to think. And we tried to resist that a lot. And I think that what happened when David Cameron and George Osborne came along is that we could see that there was a genuine threat. I felt a lot of the time that they learned the wrong lessons about us. I think they, there was too much focus on media management as opposed to bigger strategy and challenging the party. And I think you did maybe more of that in government than in that opposition period. But it definitely was the first time where we thought, hmm, I remember having a conversation with, of course, as you know, Rory, I've got a bit of a thing about posh boys. And I would, and I used to say to, did you made this point to Fetty's educated Tony Blair at the time? Yeah, but Tony's a man of the people as you know, George, I did have

this sense of, God, is the public really going to elect a bunch of Etonians and private school, this club, these bullying and club people to run the country. And I remember Tony saying, you know what, you look at him, they're going to think he's good enough. I remember that very, very vividly. And that was at a time when actually the Tories weren't doing that well. What did he mean when he said, I think they're going to think he's good enough? What was it that he had that his predecessors didn't seem to quite have that made Tony Blair think people would think

he was good enough? I think, I think he felt that people would look at David Cameron and think a little bit, actually, I think he's beginning to have him with Keir Starmer now, they look at him and think it is not absurd that that guy's the prime minister. Whereas I think with some of predecessors, I think with the in Duncan Smith, we used to force ourselves to imagine that in Duncan Smith could become prime minister, because we felt we had to operate on that basis.

Because

the minute you think, in this room at the moment, we've got some pictures of amazing sports people on the wall, Bjorn Borg and Ian Bootham and Roger Bannister and all sorts of people. And as you know, Rory, I'm obsessed with sport and what you can learn from it from politics.

Darren Bent, is he on the wall?

Shut up about Darren Bent. It's the one football he's ever heard of, George.

And but the point is that we, George is right, that we thought every day, what can we do to lose? And then we tried not to do it. And I think I'm, I regret to say, I think they did, they did operate in that way.

You would have enjoyed being in the Prime Minister's questions prep sessions with Ian Duncan Smith,

because there were three young MPs who were drafted in to help myself, David Cameron and Boris Johnson. Every every Wednesday morning, we had to work out how Ian would face Tony. Actually, to prepare, there was also another Tory MP, Paul Goodman, also was also in that session, in Aaron's Conservative home. And we basically came up with a strategy, which was, we had to ask Tony Blair, it was a bit like getting your first servant to use your sporting analogy, right? Ian would have no chance if he didn't try and kind of land the first blow at Prime Minister's questions. And so it was basically find some really obscure fact and ask Tony Blair, like, how many people are waiting more than, you know, X weeks in hospitals in the north of England? Aha, you don't know, right? Anyway, and this, this worked for a while, finding things that definitely Tony Blair would not know the answer to. So it's just a simple until

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Ian stood up one day, and a Labour MP just before he opened his mouth, because he used to have to clear his mouth with a kind of cough. He had a sort of nervous cough and a Labour MP shouted out, how many? And that sure enough was his first two words. And then that was the end of that strategy. Much as I love Ian, that was, that was not great. But Boris would always, he was editing the Spectator at the time, at about nine in the morning. So he was pretending to be an objective journalist, and he's coming in to help the Prime Minister, the opposition leader, Charlotte. I don't think that's the biggest crime you can lie in at this door. And anyway, at about nine, we started seven in the morning, it was pretty early. And what Johnson was there at seven in the morning? Well, he was actually, and then nine in the morning, he would, he'd need to leave. But he wouldn't want to say, looky, and I've got to go and say he would start to sort of move slowly towards the door. And then, you know, David or I would go, Boris is leaving. And he would go, no, no, no leader, I'm just going out to get a cup of coffee. You've got him, you've got Tony nailed to the floor. Don't worry, you don't need me anymore. And then he would leave

the scene of the crime. George, give us a, give us a sense. Am I right in saying you're somebody who actually really enjoyed politics? And if you've got a sense amongst colleagues and people you worked with, what kind of personality takes to politics if you were giving advice to a woman or a man going into politics? And what kind of people don't really take to politics? What, what, what is, what, what is the political personality? Oh, gosh, right. I think, you know, I think politicians come in all shapes and sizes and temperaments. I also think I was very lucky. And I'll show an essay appreciated this at the time, but I do with sort of hindsight.

First of all, I was working with people I really like to a friend's mind, and they're still friends of mine. And that has not been the case for many other people I know in politics, who've found, you know, for example, the recent years in the Tory party, very difficult, difficult. Although interestingly, they all, a message I get from a lot of them right now.

In fact, someone who's in the cabinet texted me yesterday saying, for the first time since 2016, I'm actually enjoying it. And I'm working with people I like. So I was lucky to work with people I liked. And I was lucky, essentially, not to have to sort of live a lie. There was never a time, particularly in government, and when I was shot a chance that I was saying things I really didn't agree with. There were some policies I didn't particularly sport. I wasn't a big fan of, for example, recognizing marriage in the tax system. But David Cameron wanted to do it. He was the leader. That's fine. You know, he was the boss. So individual policies, I wasn't, you know, hugely keen on. But I didn't, I fundamentally believed in him and I believed in what we were doing.

And so I didn't have that sort of awful period of having to sort of pretend, you know, I guess with Keir Starmer had to do with Jeremy Corbyn, or some people have had to do, you know, with Brexit, which is sort of pretend this is all going really well, or this is what they want. You know, so those two things, I think, were very lucky. I think generally also, you know, I just, I think you have to have a, you have to be able in politics to sort of step back a little and sort of observe yourself and recognize that there's an element of kind of ridiculousness to that, and element of theater, and an element of nonsense, even if the issues you're dealing with are incredibly important. Is there a danger with that, that you end up with people like Boris Johnson running the show, because that's all he thinks about? Well, I think he, you know, in fact, his skill, I mean, there's many things that aren't, you know, that he's not very

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good at, but I think he always was quite good at noticing how people saw him. I thought he was good at sort of stepping out of himself to a degree, and having a wry smile on his face, when people he knew didn't like him would come up and say, Boris, I think you're the best things, it's widespread, and he would just, you know, a lot of the like a kind of king in a court, he would know he would spot the courtiers coming. Right, then we'll be back in a second. So let's just take a quick break.

Just one thing you did disagree with David Cameron about, which is probably the most significant thing, was that you were always very strongly against the idea of a, of having a referendum on Brexit in the first place. Is that, and when you look back at that, do you, how do you feel about that? Because I mean, you've already said you think Brexit has been a bit of a disaster for the country, and it's probably going to get worse.

Why did David Cameron feel you had to have that referendum?

So I did disagree with David on that, but it was done very amicably. And his reasons, I think were reasons that a Conservative Party leader would hold, and I was not the Conservative Party leader. And actually, unlike Gordon Brown, who I think underestimated the step up from Chancellor to Prime Minister, I never underestimated that the job of leading the party was a lot more difficult than being the Chancellor or the shadow Chancellor. And, you know, it was clear to David that the Conservative Party, as he had to try and resolve this issue, and because everybody is itself an expression of a lot of views in the country as well, which is why it's been politically successful. But the country wasn't clamoring for a referendum?

Well, the country was not clamoring for a referendum, but it is true that European issues were intruding more and more into the sort of domestic political debate. Now, I, you know, look, I didn't think they had to be put to the kind of, we didn't have to bet the farm on an all in or out referendum. And I never, and I always thought, you know, people blame the European Union

essentially for things that we ourselves couldn't get right as a country, which just proves to be the case. Now, years after we've left the EU, we've got more red tape than we had when we were in the

EU and higher taxes and more intervention in the economy than we have in the EU. And yet the EU used to be blamed for all those things. So it became a kind of bugbear. And David, you know, would say it was a way of trying to resolve it. Obviously, he hopes to win the referendum, and we all hope to win the referendum, that this was a way of bringing the issue to a head, resolving it and therefore cementing Britain's relationship as being in the EU, but not in the euro, you know, comfortable with economic sovereignty being pulled, not comfortable with other aspects of political sovereignty being pulled. And, and, you know, he felt and lots of other people I respect in the Conservative Party at the time felt that it would be good to sort of essentially confront that issue with a referendum, as we had done in the Scottish independence referendum, which I think now with, again, both at the time and with hindsight, turns out to have been a really important moment, because it kind of basically called the bluff on Scottish nationalism. And ever since then, although they've endlessly talked about it, and I'm not talking just about the recent implosion at the SMP, I'm talking about the kind of golden period of the Nicola Sturgeon leadership, you know, she was never able to get the Scottish public back into thinking that

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independence was a good idea. Yeah, it was a weird thing, that referendum, wasn't it? Because it worked out, but it was an enormous gamble. And in some ways, the Scottish independence referendum

gave David Cameron the confidence to think that he could resolve other issues in the same way and use the same kinds of arguments. Although on the timing point, it's, it is worth noting that we had already committed to have the European referendum before the Scottish referendum had happened. The problem that's essentially with the Brexit referendum was what had become a kind of important issue, but only to a very small, relatively small group of the country, although quite a large number of conservatives, which was issues around sort of theoretical issues around parliamentary sovereignty, was very successfully by the Brexit campaign, connected to the question of immigration and borders. And, you know, the question that we couldn't answer, just like in the Scottish independence referendum, the SMP could not answer the question, what is the currency you're going to use tomorrow if you're independent? We could not answer this question, which is, how can you control your borders if you're in the EU? Because if you're in the EU, you have to let people in. Now, in fact, the answer is controlling your borders is a very complicated issue. And being in the EU might actually help you because you can have a good relationship with France, for example, as we've discovered with the small boats issue. But, you know, that was the kind of killer that connection was made between immigration and the much more sort of obscure issue to my mind of parliamentary sovereignty, which I think is an instance anyway, because we pull sovereignty by being a member of NATO, for example. I think we all violently agree on the arguments against leaving the European Union. But I'd love a pithy attempt by you to give us your view on what the consequences have been. How bad is it leaving the European Union for Britain?

Well, I would start, let's start with the positives, which is Britain is an incredible country, one of the few really, you know, open economies with stable institutions and a decent rule of law. So, you know, Britain still... Which has been undermined in recent years. Which has elements of it have been undermined and, you know, need to be challenged. So, outside the

EU, Britain still can have a bright future. But I think it would have been brighter inside the EU. I think there is little doubt now that it has knocked our economic performance permanently. It's erected trade barriers with our nearest and biggest export markets. All this talk of free trade is a nonsense. We've undertaken the biggest act of protectionism in British history. And it has impacted Britain's standing in the world, or rather the ability of the British administration of the time to leverage membership of the EU as one way of influencing global events.

And, you know, increasingly in the world, it's going to be around who sets global standards on things like artificial intelligence that you were talking to Hillary Clinton about.

And who's going to do that? And it's not going to be the House of Commons. It's going to be the European Union. It's going to be the United States. It's going to be China. And we had a big front seat role in the EU. I saw it when in terms of regulating financial markets, you know, where a lot of the EU legislation was essentially drafted in the UK. And when we don't have that anymore. So we're much more, I'm not saying we can't make our own way in the world and we can't make friends with, you know, allies like the Australians and so on. But we've lost one of our

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big forums where we could influence global events.

But that's why it worries me that I mean, both you and Rory talk quite positively about Rishi Sunak. Rishi Sunak actually believed in this and believed this was going to be good for the UK. So I'd like to get your brief take on how you see Sunak's Premiership.

But also let's just, can we also return to Boris Johnson? What does it say about the Conservative Party that he became your leader? How damaging was his leadership both the Conservative

Party and more importantly, in my view, to the country?

Well, Boris had his big impact before he ever became Prime Minister because his support for Brexit, which is a cause I don't think he actually really believed in, which alone should disbar him from my office. But he was decisive. I think, you know, Boris Johnson's support for Brexit turned it from a kind of slightly dodgy, kind of right-wing Nigel Farage-ish issue to, you know, mainstream. And he was the most popular at the time, mainstream politician in Britain, Boris Johnson. So he kind of legitimized the Brexit campaign and was decisive. And so therefore, long before he arrived in Danny Street, he'd already had his big impact on British politics. I think his Premiership will largely be forgotten by history because he's very little in that Premiership. I think, you know, the lesson, there's the extracts at the moment of the Antony Seldon book on... Which I read on your recommendation. Yeah, which is, you know, it's pretty kind of shocking.

Because what it really shows is it's something that I was sort of, I guess, aware of when I was Chancellor. But right at the top of the British state, all power flows to the Prime Minister. You know, the Prime Minister can fire the Cabinet Secretary, the Prime Minister can fire the head of MI6, the head of the Foreign Office, the Prime Minister. You know, there was a Prime Minister once who told the King they had to quit. So, you know, there is no actual check on a Prime Minister who doesn't obey the rules. And there's nothing you can really do about a Prime Minister who doesn't read anything, doesn't do the work. All the Prime Ministers in my lifetime, Labour and Conservative, you know, have sort of worked all hours. Some not really managing the workload particularly effectively, but nevertheless, sort of trying... And Boris, you know, was, you know, just sort of breezed through the job. And I couldn't help but smile when I saw that the way to get him kind of animated, his visors would say like, you know, come on Boris, David Cameron and George Olsen will be laughing at you if you don't do this. Well, unfortunately, it wasn't a very funny period, but we're certainly laughing now. So, obviously, I feel massive personal loss and bitterness about this, still trying to deal with why I wasn't able to beat Boris Johnson.

I basically become Roy's therapist, George. We talk these issues through.

And I guess the question is, why was it not possible to beat him in 2019, given that all this was patently obvious? There was enough evidence mounting over 20 years that he was an incompetent buffoon, that he was a terrible human being, that he'd be a terrible Prime Minister,

that he was telling lies about Brexit, that his plan didn't make sense. He didn't even understand his own Brexit deal. And yet, it didn't matter how many times you tried to explain this to people, people were still going to vote for Boris. What do you do in that situation?

I always thought, you know, if it came to a leadership contest where I was contesting to be

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the leader of the party, I would be up against Boris Johnson. And I wasn't as sure how I was going to beat him. And that's because there are aspects, and I've been Boris for a long time, you know, aspects of Boris that are really positive. You know, he is a very good company. His optimism is infectious. You know, I think the sort of free Brexit Boris had a kind of generosity of spirit about people. You know, sometimes politicians, you know, can be quite mean-spirited. You know, Boris, there's a generosity about him, which I think people like. And then a kind of, you know, he sort of blows his nose at the kind of, you know, the sort of pomposity of public life that you sometimes get. So there's lots of things, you know, and as London Mayor, I liked all that. But that was partly because he didn't have much responsibility for real things. And, you know, unfortunately, as Prime Minister, he demonstrated that you needed other things to be promised. You need to take the job seriously. Do you think he's based on the same person as he always was? Or has he changed? Well, I think he'd like one of those sort of Greek tragedies that he would know more about than me. The sort of pursuit of the prize ultimately kind of corrupted him and led him to support causes that I don't think intrinsically. I remember the Boris Johnson TV programme where he was extolling the virtues of the European Union and saying that

Turkey should be a member of it, which I happen to agree with. But why could the public not see it, George? Why could the public not see his flaws more clearly? I mean, you've described an amiable personality, but it should have been apparent to everyone that he couldn't run the country.

Well, well, first of all, there was a kind of collusion of all those sort of, you know, because he really he was quite he's a loner and he was quite a loner inside the Tory Parliamentary Party. And most MPs did not, you know, would not have wanted him as leader 10 years earlier. But by the time you get to 2019, you've had the paralysis of the Theresa May period with her unable to do anything. He offers a kind of solution to that. He's also ruthless. Remember, he fires a load of Tory MPs, including Ken Clarke and Philip Hammond and, you know, Roy Stewart, right? I mean, that he's absolutely ruthless when it comes to the pursuit of the prize. And let's, you know, let's not allow Alasdair off the hook here to general elections. The Labour Party offered up Jeremy Corbyn, a complete disgrace of a candidate to be the prime minister. So you'd have to be completely mad to want Jeremy Corbyn instead of Boris Johnson for all of Boris Johnson's faults. So, you know, frankly, in 2019, I think a lot of people didn't know how to vote because they, you know, if you look at my parents, I remember them asking me saying like, we don't like Boris Johnson, but we can't have Jeremy Corbyn. Who the hell are we going to vote for? What did they vote? I don't I think they must have voted Conservative and they're not actually natural Conservative voters. But your parents weren't what I would define as ranked Tories? No, my my parents were, they weren't particularly party political. I never met an MP when I was growing up, except when they would come and speak at my school. They, you know, they're back, my father's interior designer set up his own business, and my mother worked for Amnesty International, then she ran her own shop. And my mother voted Labour, my father voted Liberal.

I think they both would have backed Tony Blair had I not by then sort of screwed the system by becoming a working for the Tory parties that they would. So why did you become a Tory? Do you know, I always thought that the Labour Party was more tribal, that it was sort of hard. Can't imagine what gives you that impression. I think the thing about the Tory party is it can

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be anything, you know, as you've seen over the last 13 years. It's a sort of and I'm, you know, broadly in favour of those sort of principles. And that, you know, and I think you get to and so for me, although it's true that Rishi Sunak supported Brexit and has never really explained why he did. But what is this sort of he's an arch free market.

Well, I think he brought into this argument that, you know, you heard amongst some sort of hedge fund

types and whatever that, you know, is great. The moment we're going to all be like Singapore, the moment we leave, you know, the Singapore can fit inside the M25. And it would be, you know, it's much, it's a very different country. But the Rishi Sunak Premiership is to me a massive breath of fresh air. We have a sensible, serious person with integrity. He runs things properly. He does the work. And he's making a series of meaningful strides forward for the government. And for the first time in years, you feel I feel just as a Britishism, like the grown ups are back in charge. I think I think that's the Tory line to take. I actually think it's only by comparison with what's gone before. And we haven't really covered this trust. Let me mention one other prime minister where I think you two will hopefully disagree agreeably, possibly even disagreeably. Because I think it's fair to say Roy rather loves Theresa May. And I think you should put him in the cabinet. Yeah, he's not only driven by his personal ambitions, partly possibly. But your view of Theresa May, I think it's fair to say is rather different.

You know, I actually had a lot of respect for Theresa May when she was Home Secretary and I was Chancellor. We worked well together. You know, I thought she was unnecessarily callous, not, not particularly towards me, although. What was she said? Do you go away and learn about the contemporary party? It's not the best way to fire someone. You just, you know, you can be nice to people or you fire them. But then she fired a whole lot of other people. I mean, it is a bit inside baseball, as they say in America, but it takes a particular kind of political genius to make Oliver Letwin your nemesis. Oliver Letwin is one of the nicest people who wants to generally help in life. He wants to help in life and was an enormous help to the Cameron government and the coalition. You know, eventually Theresa May fires Oliver Letwin for no good reason at all, other than comes on kind of spite. And, and ultimately is the Oliver Letwin kind of amendments in parliament that completely screw her government. And, you know, it's just, you know, how she couldn't

see that her allies were people like me, who I voted for us in the leadership campaign, Oliver, that, you know, she was the inheritor of the Cameroon legacy, if you like. That's why she became the Prime Minister. Not remember, it looked like the opponents at the time of Bevoris Johnson and then was Andrew Letson, you know, and she couldn't see that the, the coming at her was always going to be the hard Brexiteers, that that was where the challenge was

coming from. And so she basically torched her own allies. And as a result, when, when the Boris Johnson challenge came, she had no one there. She had, she had, actually had Oliver Letwin against her rather than for her. It's interesting, isn't it? But I think somewhere in her time with you guys in government, perhaps even before, she seems to have become very, very wary about the Cameroon project. Not, not the policies. I think she broadly shared many of your policies, but she didn't like the manner of it. I think she felt that it was too chummy, there was a lack of seriousness. It was too slick.

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It was good at winning, maybe, that element to it.

I guess, I mean, I don't want to sort of ventriloquist on behalf of her because we should get her on, but I, I think she, and this was certainly something that was very appealing on doorsteps in Cumbria. I remember people, people feeling a deep, deep sense of affection towards her, that by-election beginning of 2017, people suddenly feeling happy to campaign for Theresa May, that she spoke to people as being a dignified, serious individual. And people were more comfortable doing that than I'd seen them be campaigning for David Cameron in 2010 or 2015.

Well, I don't disagree that she started with a great hand and she just misplayed it.

She lost the Cameroon majority and, you know, as I observed at the time, the moment, you know, it was clear, the moment the 2017 result was that she could not survive.

She was done.

And yet, you know, the Tory party continued with this myth. I was criticized at the time for saying, you know, she was a dead woman walking, but that was absolutely obvious.

You also talked about putting her body in a fridge. That was a bit over the top.

That was, I actually apologized to her for that. And that was, that was said in a, well,

I thought was a private editorial meeting at the evening standard. But life is on the record,

George, even if you're editing a newspaper, life is on the record.

It is. Much as I achieved, editing the evening standard was one of the most enjoyable things I did.

What about one other primalist that will also be written out of history? Liz Truss in a word.

Well, do you know, I was, she was, you know, I quite admire Liz as a, as a junior MP, a new MP and as junior minister. And I, you put her in the cabinet, didn't you?

Yeah, I think she, well, David Cameron did, but I certainly supported it. And, you know,

I liked the fact that she, you know, was full of ideas. She didn't just got to go with the brief that was handed to her. She was, you know, that's a lot about her though. And so it's not, to me, sort of surprising she ended up as prime minister. But she, she then makes like two basic errors. She first of all, doesn't include any of the people she's defeated in her team, which is like politics 101, you know. And then second, she, you know, obviously there's that catastrophic budget where coming without reopening the austerity debate, she suddenly thinks the country can borrow a load of money it doesn't have. So what I really worry about, she during that period, it was a very short period of British politics, but there was a determined attempt to undermine the independence of the Bank of England and essentially close down the OBR, which I created.

And, you know, I think one lesson from that, and indeed from the sort of Johnson period where some of the rules at the very top of the game is with these institutions need to be strengthened. And it would be a great Rishi Sunak agenda to put the ministerial code on a statutory footing. And the OBR should be made like the Bank of England. I hope Labour, the Labour opposition picked this up as an idea. You know, let's make it properly independent, give it its own independent budget, give it the power to request information from the Treasury. And then, you know, you've sort of protected the institution against someone else who wants to come along and vandalize it. It was a very poor period of British politics that autumn of last year. I think the most depressing moment was when Boris Johnson got on the plane from the Caribbean. I thought my country really is sunk. And then amazingly, we like throughout our history, we somehow

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managed to find the exit door from the mess. We might disagree about Rishi Sunak, but, you know, I'm sure, as you would agree, that like Rishi Sunak or Keir Starmer essentially at the end of the British electorate at the next election is going to be presented with a, presented with a decent choice of two decent people who can do the job. We don't have enough time to get into this. I think the Liz Truss and her mistakes as prime minister and her particular ideological blind spots were very, very visible in her as a junior minister and as a sexual estate. And I think there's something interesting about how you made that decision. Put her in there. But let me get, as we come to the end, my last question and then back to Alistair. What does Labour need to do to win the election? What are they, why is it that you think they're not a shoe-in? And what is it they would need to do to actually have a chance of winning this? So I think they've missed a big opportunity in the last six months to seal the deal. You know, again, to use a sporting analogy to kind of be to make it absolutely clear they're going to win the game. Tony Blair by this point had done that. You know, there was nothing the John Major government could do 18 months out, because Tony Blair not only defined himself against the past in the way that Keir Starmer has effectively done, he had not only presented himself and to be fair, Gordon Brown had also as people who could be Prime Minister and Chancellor. And I think Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves have done that. But, and this is the missing ingredient, they had also made an argument, a positive argument about the change they were going to bring to the country. You knew what they were going to do to education and health. And they had, they dressed it up in a theory about how Britain had become a gone from being a producer society to consumer society to a sort of post stature era that, you know, they were going to stick with Tory economic competence, but they were going to deliver social justice. Spending limit is not competent, we didn't define it as competent. Well, it was, I think it was accepting the thatchery.

Some of the parameters. I'm saying it was accepting the thatchery economic settlement. Now, here Starmer has not, to my mind, said anything really interesting about how you changed the country. And whilst you had Boris Johnson or indeed Liz Truss, you know, being the kind of grown up who could do the job was a pretty compelling offer from Keir. But it's not enough. And I don't hear, you know, if you ask me, and I, you know, you ask you to, what's Labour's economic policy in a sentence? What's Labour's health policy? What's Labour's education policy? Well, you just, in fact, with the exception possibly of Law and Order, where they have made some inroads under Yvette Cooper, nowhere else do I hear anything that's exciting, ties in with the big kind of changes in our society that are happening around, you know, things like technology. You know, there's, it's just not creating that kind of sense of a zeitgeist. And there's my favourite kind of quote in politics is a Jim Callahan quote, which Tony Blair would often refer to, which was in 1979, he felt that there was a sea change in ideas, and that Labour was therefore going to lose to Margaret Thatcher. And I don't feel a kind of sea change in ideas that Labour's riding the crest of a sort of intellectual wave and a new way of addressing the very real question is they've got to fill that gap. They've got to have a big time. Yes, they've got time, but it's rapidly running out. You know, I mean, we are now 18 months from a general election, and this is the work you should be, you should have been doing now, and over the previous year. And the last, you know, the Tory party gifted Labour a period of, you know, political incompetence over the last 12 months, a window in which they could seal the deal with the electorate. And they've, that window is closed because Rishis, you know,

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is a competent Prime Minister doing effective things. And, and I think, you know, the kind of, it's, look, some things are moving in Labour's favour, like the implosion of the SNP, you know, it's not to be neglected as a big plus for Labour. But generally, if you'd said to me six months ago, can the Tories win, I'd say, I can't see a route to victory. And now I can see a route to victory for the Tories. And if they, if Rishi Sunak can get to the autumn with the polls closing a bit, big if, but if he can, all hell will be unleashed for Labour. Because people will say, you've not done enough, Keir Starmer, the critics in the Labour Party will start to emerge and he'll be on a sort of downward spiral. And Rishi Sunak will be on an upward spiral, which you're already seeing, for example, the Tory party uniting behind him now, of like, hmm, this guy might actually win. And the British public, British media love the underdog story. The guys coming from behind, 20 points behind the polls, written off the Sunak Premiership, Sunak pulls it off, is actually a better story than Starmer gets his coronation.

Flip it around. How do you think if you were still at the top level of the Conservative Party, how does the Conservative Party fight the next election, other than as a negative campaign against Labour? Well, I think they have to move. And I think this is instinctive of what they want to do towards the centre, because they've also got a threat from the Liberal Democrats. And they've got to hold on to essentially middle class Britain. And yes, I know there's a lot of focus on those Red Wall seats, which, you know, to be fair Boris Johnson won and David Cameron didn't. But there are a lot of middle class, you know, prosperous seats in the south, with city suburbs in the north that, you know, need to be held by the Tories. And they need to have a more compelling mainstream offer, which is what I think Sunak is developing. You know, things like his business event this week, you know, he's back, instead of telling businesses to f off as his predecessor did, he's sort of woo them, big offers on beginning to have an offer on education, I think, you know, trying to solve the problems in the health service. He's moving into the sort of mainstream space. It feels very, let's try and fix the mess that we've created over the last 13 years. Yeah, but you know, one of the, I wouldn't say over the last 13 years, I'd say over the last, not fully for that, last six or seven years. And I think these are problems that many advanced democracies face. They're not unique to Britain. But if you were, if you had to put your life on it now, who's the Prime Minister in two years' time? Well, I think the most likely outcome is Geostomas, Prime Minister, but it's all to play for. One thing we haven't talked about, I do want to just maybe finally ask you whether you think you've got things right on China. I see James Cleverly, the Foreign Secretary, is making a speech about China today. Well, I think he's sort of trying to say similar to you. We've got to call it out when they're bad, but we've got to be very, very careful because they're so powerful. Do you feel you've got two kind of China-centric? No, I mean, I think I was in the tradition of kind of Henry Kissinger and a whole series of US and British administrations since then that said, we've got to work with China. China's the longest existing, continuous existing civilization on earth. It's a fifth of the world's population. It's the second largest economy on the planet. It can't be kind of contained and isolated in the way you could attempt to do the Soviet Union during the Cold War or indeed Russia now. And so you have to find a way to work with it. By the way, there are issues like climate change which are simply insoluble unless we work with China. Now, that does not mean you have to accept that their regime is one you like or that their suppression in Xinjiang or Hong Kong or their threats towards Taiwan are acceptable,

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but you have to find a means of working with them because they're a very important big player in the world and they represent a large number of people. And finding that kind of modus operandi, I actually think it's a bit unfashionable because everyone thinks the kind of tensions with China are rising. I actually think tensions with China are somewhat diminishing and the US has found a way to start engaging again with China. Xi and Biden meet, Macron does his visit, even things which are provocative like the balloon that kind of, you know, the Chinese balloon over the United States did not lead to a kind of big international crisis that was kind of handled by the big powers. And all that speaks to me is that there are they're finding a way to try and make what is the biggest geopolitical challenge of our lifetime, which is how do you manage the re-rise of China? You know, I think they are finding a route through. Yeah, well, it's very interesting. This is another whole podcast and maybe we can get you back some point, but I think the challenge to come back on that is to say that the one thing that the two parties have in common in the US is increasing conviction that they need to be more confrontational with China. I think it's very plausible that Xi Jinping will feel that his legacy is bound up with incorporating Taiwan within China and that he will try that before he finishes and that he may want to try it sooner rather than later before the US has fully disentangled itself in the Chinese economy. But I feel we may not have time for a full China debate. We should get you back and do a whole one on China. And I'd also like at some point to do a whole episode on the on the Bullying Deng Club and what that was like for both of you. You would have loved it, Alistair. You would have loved it. You would have been the drunkest person there. You would have spat out more blades than anyone else. George, thank you for coming on. And on that unfortunate note, the Bullying Deng Club will bring it to a close. Thanks for having me on. Thank you.

So Alistair, what did you think of that? Well, I enjoyed it. I know that a lot of my friends are going to say you should have given him a much harder time on austerity, but he's so sort of set in his tram lines about how he explains that. And I actually thought it was more interesting when we got onto some of the other stuff. I was fascinated by the fact that I've always assumed he gave him a kind of rank Tory family. And he tells us his mum was Labour and his dad was a Lib Dem. What went

wrong? It's interesting, isn't it? I wonder whether we shouldn't also have maybe asked him a little bit more about his childhood and development. I know we tend to do it because we tend to assume that that's a more interesting question with people from more diverse backgrounds. But I do think the general question of how people become politicians, what it is that makes some politicians is interesting. I also think that whatever you think of him, he is very, very articulate and effective. I mean, he's quite pugnacious. I mean, you get a sense that he's going to defend his line. Partly as well, I think, because you and I have argued about austerity so much. The book I mentioned

recently by this guy, Russell Jones, it really does take the austerity thing. I'm going to send you a copy because he absolutely takes it to bits from the economic perspective. It was all about the politics. And I do think that, look, Osborne is political to his fingertips. I think way more than Cameron was. I think he was the politics in the whole thing. And also the thing about being pugnacious, I mean, look, Gordon Brown is a formidable, intellect, political force. And I think for Osborne in his early to mid 30s, stood there week after week up against Gordon Brown and landing

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a few blows from time to time. But I do think that ultimately, part of the mess that we're in as a country does stem from austerity, their failure to secure the recovery and Brexit. And to be fair on Brexit, I've always known that because I knew it at the time. He tried very, very, very hard, I think, to persuade Cameron not to go for the referendum and he failed. Yeah. He was very clear-sighted about that, much more so than almost anybody who was in the Conservative Party at the time, except maybe for people like Ken Clark, very clear that he thought it was the wrong thing to do and a big mistake and push very hard on that. I also think that he's a reminder of the talent that was there in that David Cameron administration. Again, many, many different views on what it all added up to. But there was some very, very bright, effective communicators in that generation that came in in 2010. And in a way, I particularly during the Boris Johnson period, it was easy to feel a little bit nostalgic. And he's gone on to, which is unusual again in politicians, to be quite successful in a number of different areas. I mean, he edited newspapers, unusual. He's now chair of the British Museum. He's having quite a successful career, not as a banker, not as an advisor, but actually putting the deals together, which again is unusual. So he's clearly somebody with a lot of capacity. We should have pushed him more on whether he regrets leaving politics. I think he loves politics. And I think he probably all these things he's done since, although he puts a good face on them. And I sometimes think this with David Miliband too, that these are people who really would have really liked to say in politics. I also think it's there's something interesting. And again, obviously, I'm having all the scars of the Tony Blair, Gordon Brown relationship. And the other interesting thing in the Russell Jones book is the story, of course, of the Thatcher Lawson relationship and Major LeMont. These relationships between primalists and chancellors, that even when they start very well, often break down, is with Cameron seems to me never did. That's as much about Osborne, because what that basically says is a deeper level. David Miliband said the thing about me that I was utterly committed, but I also knew my place as it were. And I think with Osborne, I think there is a part of Osborne that knows that actually deep down, he probably would never have been a prime minister. But he was so he was a very, very effective foil to Cameron. I think as a relationship, it seems to me that they were kind of equals in many, many ways. But he accepted and knew that Cameron just had the better kind of, I don't know what, human skills, empathetic skills, call them what you want. When did you first meet him, by the way, Roy? Well, I met him just before I came into parliament. I was doing an event on Afghanistan debating the British ambassador at the Hay Festival, 2008. But Osborne played a very important part of my political career, because I rebelled against the government, against the three line whip, because David Cameron was proposing to abolish the House of Lords to please the Lib Dems in order to get a gerrymandering of the electoral boundaries to guarantee a conservative majority in the next election. I was completely horrified, because I thought these kind of constitutional changes should be done in a proper, thoughtful, serious way. I couldn't believe it was being taken through in the way you'd vote on the pasty tax. I was a backbencher and I told David Cameron in advance and told the chief whip and I was discreet about it. I didn't go to newspapers, but I wasn't going to vote for this thing. Anyway, 10 minutes before the vote was due to happen, George Osborne comes up to me outside the voting lobby and he says, I am going to promote you

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to be a minister in 11 days' time. If you walk through that door, I'm not going to promote you for the rest of the parliament. I had to look at this guy who I liked in many ways and I admired him in many ways and deal with the question of whether I was going to walk through that door or whether I was going to be bullied into staying in order to be a minister.

That's a guess what you did.

No, I walked through the door because I didn't have much choice. I think actually it was a misjudgment on his part because I think almost anybody who you try to bully in that way 10 minutes before a vote is going to walk through the door, but he was true to his word. He would then remind me about it through my first five years that he left me as a backbencher. He kept saying, remember, Rory, you could have been a minister. You could have been a minister. I warned you and Boris Johnson used to enjoy this. I remember when I was staying with George Osborne and Chievening, it's his country house that he got his chance at. Boris is saying to George Osborne, why did you not make Rory a minister? George smirked and went, Rory knows exactly why I didn't make him a minister. So it was amazing. I kind of wasted five years of my life and someone at the heart of it is George Osborne. I thought the story about Ian Duncan Smith preparing for PMQs with Tony Blair being briefed by Cameron Osborne, Johnson and Paul Goodman and Johnson trying to sort of sneak away the whole time. I mean, what a lineup that is.

I suspect at least three of those four were sitting there thinking, think I could do a better job than you, Ian.

But I think good also for balance that we have done someone from the right. I know many of our listeners tend to be more on the center left, but I think it's good to get a variety of voices even if it's challenging for listeners. Can you kind of get King Charles? I mean, for heaven's sake, Rory, you know, I put in all my mates. George Osborne is obviously a closer mate of mine than he is of yours. George Osborne at one point in his life was utterly obsessed with me, as indeed he said. But now I think if I can pull in the lights of Hillary Clinton and Tony Blair and Bernie Sanders and all these other people, surely for heaven's sake, you can get the King. It's a good challenge, isn't it? It's a good challenge. We'll meet it. All right, so long. Bye-bye. See you soon. Bye.