

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 180. Question Time: Is Suella Braverman pretending to be right-wing?

I'm Dr. John Watson.

For the first time ever.

I'm a consulting detective.

Every single Sherlock Holmes story

God help me.

will be retold.

We believe there is a bomb on a tube train heading to Clapham Cromby.

I know this.

Yeah, sorry, I was speaking to the listeners.

For goodness sake.

Hold this.

Oh my God.

Just don't pull the pin.

Why on earth would I pull the pin?

The game is afoot, Watson.

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Welcome to the Restless Politics Question Time with me, Alistair Campbell.

And with me, Rory Stewart.

And Alistair, I have a question to start you off.

Simon Hewitt.

Does Alistair regret Labour not going ahead with proportional representation in the 1997 government after the work done with Charles Kennedy in opposition?

I don't regret being part of a Labour Party that won three successive general elections, which is a mealy-mouthed way of saying that once we got into power, that sort of went on to the back burner.

Do I think that at some point in the near future we need a radical fundamental change of the way we do politics, of which looking at our electoral system, not just in Westminster, but other elections as well, has to be a part.

Yes, I do.

Very good.

So I'm admitting to the political opportunism at the heart of the stance that I took.

Actually quite violently, to be honest.

I can remember we used to have these debates

and I was very much on the John Prescott side of the argument saying,

why on earth are we talking about giving up the only system that seems to give us power?

But I have, as you know, Rory, from our own discussions on this,

I've had a bit of a, I'm on a journey, as they say.

And do you think, what would it take realistically to get Keir Starmer to do it?

Would it have to be a minority government where he was in coalition with the Lib Dems, or do you think he might do it on his own?

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He doesn't seem to be making any signal at all that it's something that appeals to him. Then whether that's, I don't know, because a lot of the trade unions, I know are very, very opposed to it.

I suppose it would be that, but also,

I do get the sense of Keir Starmer that he's quite pragmatic in the way that he kind of does track what people are saying and thinking and doing.

Let's say Labour did get into a sort of minority government situation and obviously they're going to go all out not to be in that position.

Then I think it will come a point where the country starts to make its voice heard way more voluble than it has thus far.

And why are the trade unions traditional against proportional representation?

I think in part because of the point I made that actually they, if you can get a majority government on, you know, 40% of the vote, then why not have that, especially in a country where the Tories have been, you know, in power for so long, but actually that argument works against.

So that's, I think, why we need to rethink it.

I'd love to see a line in Labour's manifesto that just said, given the probe room in which so much of our politics is held, there will be a review of our electoral systems around the UK.

I think that would be a good thing to do.

Compulsory education, Oliver War.

In the recent German local elections, which polled about 25% of the population, the far right alternative of Deutschland won 20% of the vote.

A quick analysis shows that voters were more likely to vote AFD if they left education early. It seems uncorrelated to unemployment.

In order to counter extremism, do you think we should make more continued formal education compulsory?

If so, how and in what subjects?

Boy, that's interesting.

I've never heard the argument made that the reason to do it is to change people's political opinions.

I'm afraid if I was really in charge of an education budget,

I think I would target mid-life education because I think AI is going to mean that millions of people are likely to find their jobs disappearing and they will need to retrain in their 40s for a different profession.

So I'd probably put the money into being able to pay for everybody to take a year to learn a new profession in their 30s or 40s rather than try to extend the time they spend as a younger person.

I don't necessarily support what Oliver's saying but I do think that in the UK we have a real problem of political education and political culture and that's why you and I both have written the books that we've done in a way is actually to draw attention to what politics has become but I don't think it's enough just to blame the politicians.

I think people don't really try necessarily to be very informed about politics a lot of the time

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and that's something I think we could quite easily correct in schools.

I think if we actually did teach primary school kids the very, very basics of politics and political history, I think that would be a good thing.

Okay, question for you.

Tara Ward, do you think that Suella Braverman and the radical right members of the Conservative Party

really stand behind her populist comments and theories

or are they just trying to attract new and different voters who might have ignored them in the past?

It's very hard for me to answer that because I think I've only ever met her once.

I don't know how she operates, I don't know how she thinks.

I don't believe that deep down she or Rishi Sunak or anyone else believes that what they're doing in relation to Rwanda, for example, is the way to resolve the small boats problem.

I don't believe that when she was making the speech that she made about a hurricane of immigrants

I think she was just trying to provoke people like me and people like you

to say that this is over the top as a way of then appealing to people

for whom immigration is a really, really significant problem

and something that makes them get very emotional about politics.

So I think what she's doing is nakedly political and I think it's about her positioning.

Now, I could be wrong, it may be that she fundamentally believes this

but I think it's about positioning in the past.

No, I think you're right.

I think she's a political entrepreneur and a lot of these people are.

I've been looking into a bit, she was an Erasmus scholar back in the day

so European Erasmus scholar studied in, I think, France.

She then, I think, set up with Cherie Blair, the Africa Justice Foundation in 2010

where she was talking about democracy and the rule of law in Africa.

So she's been on what one calls a bit of a journey

and it's true for Preeti Patel and Liz Truss who were part of Cameron's A-list

of what was supposed to be centrist, compassionate conservatives

that he was bringing in to make the party more diverse and more relatable.

The fact that all those three have ended up on the radical right of the party

I think is more about the fact that that's where they see the opportunity.

They can see these populist movements in Europe,

they can see that this particularly potent mixture of culture war and immigration chat

appeals to 20-25% of the electorate and they're going off there.

I don't think it really reflects the beliefs they had before they were members of parliament.

Political entrepreneur, interesting.

Yeah, but worrying, very worrying.

I mean, they think there's opportunity there.

I'm really sure for what it suggests, yeah.

Here's a question that slightly relates to that.

Green Party policies in Europe slash Luxembourg and Marie Benoit.

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Today Luxembourg had its general election with the Green Party losing a significant vote, nearly half of its votes from the last elections in 2018.

In line with the drop in support for Green Climate policies elsewhere in Europe, why do you think this is happening?

Why do you think this is concerning you given how vital it will be to deliver decarbonizing policies in the next decade?

Or do you think the other parties will be equally as ambitious in achieving net zero?

We saw this as well in, we've just had elections in the Varia, which of course is one of the most important German states, and the CSU, which is this kind of sister party of the CDU, Merkel's party, have won.

But I read lots of stuff during the campaign about Green Party politicians being attacked, being spat at, being picked on in the streets, being booed as they went around the place.

A lot of it by the far right who increased their score up to, they I think were on about 18% when the whole thing was counted.

But all the parties in Schultz's coalition, which in course includes the Greens have slipped.

The center left SPD, the governing party, the FTP and the Greens have slipped.

I think one problem here is that the earlier days of making progress on environmental policies now look as though they were a bit low hanging fruits.

So Britain made a lot of progress on decarbonization just by going from coal to gas in terms of CO2 emissions, which didn't have much impact on the average voter.

We're now getting to the tougher stuff to try to get to net zero, which is really often involving putting taxes on people's energy bills or taxes on people's fuel bills in their cars.

And I think that as the rubber hits the road and as the burden often of environmental taxes is falling on poorer people, the Green movement is going to get itself in more difficult situation than it would have been in 5, 10 years ago.

But it's clear that the right, the radical right has decided that this is the issue for people like Farage.

It's becoming the new Brexit for the AFD in Germany.

They're making a big play of it, and it's the least in this campaign that we've just had.

The SPD, by the way, the Schultz's governing party, they've done just single figures in Bavaria.

Now, it's never been a stronghold that's made that clear, but that is not good. That is not good.

No, and of course the problem is that we talked about political entrepreneurs.

I mean, these populace are real political entrepreneurs

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and this grizzly figure of Victor Orban sitting there in Hungary, he of course thinks the whole world is moving in his direction.

He thinks liberal democracy is over

and every one of these little victories, every one of these rises, convinces him of it more and more.

And he very much sees a world dominated by Xi Jinping

and people like Putin, he's looking forward to Trump coming back in

and he's really hoping that PEN is going to be the next president of France, etc.

and all of this is playing out of the same populace playbook.

Yeah, absolutely.

Okay, Rory, time for a quick break.

Did you know that tens of thousands of German companies are already using Shopify?

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and bring your business idea to the world successfully.

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Rosanne Bostock, how can Rishi Sunak have the power to stop HS2 at Birmingham without asking Parliament?

HS2 was originally a parliamentary decision,

surely in order to cancel it,

it should be discussed and voted on in Parliament.

You presumably were part of that vote.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

I mean, I'd be interested to know what you think about this.

I mean, part of the problem of having an uncodified constitution is it's very, very ambiguous.

So one of the examples of this is

David Cameron started the idea

that every military intervention needed to have a parliamentary vote and he was referring back to Tony Blair's vote on Iraq on that.

Before that, primalists didn't think they needed parliamentary votes before taking military action.

It's now becoming, as it were, a kind of unwritten convention.

Would you have thought when you were in Paris 97

that you would have naturally gone to Parliament about a big infrastructure decision like this?

Oh, I think so.

I'm trying to think if there are anything comparable that we did.

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Crossrail and things, did you go to parliamentary votes?

There was a legislative crossrail, wasn't there?

Yeah, I think that the legislation,

sometimes there's differences in the between the enabling legislation

that the government needs to get the legal permissions to do things

is maybe a bit different from the Parliament making decisions

opposed to the Prime Minister on whether to go ahead with the funding for something.

I do think that there was something quite odd about the way

that Sunak conducted himself at his party conference.

And honestly, the way he talks about himself as well,

he very rarely talks about the government.

He talks about himself making decisions that he has decided

that he is thinking of the right thing for the country to do.

And I think on this one, it does feel like the three big things

that he announced in his conference speech,

HS2 changing the exam system for older kids,

and the ban on smoking.

I do think that there was a sense that that was him

sort of just going for the things that he finds particularly interesting

as opposed to this having emerged through some sort of cabinet policy discussion.

And I think there will be a move to have this voted on.

Isn't this trust already flexing her muscles about this?

Yeah, so what do you think about it?

So to put the case for Rishi Sunak, I guess he would say,

look, when this project was first put forward under Gordon Brown

or before Gordon Brown, people were talking about it costing

16 billion then 20 billion.

And it was going to have 100 billion worth of benefits.

But by the time the cost of the project was over 100 billion,

the cost-benefit analysis doesn't look so good.

And I guess what he's saying is that you can't be driven by sunk cost,

that it's very, very bad policymaking to just say,

oh, for goodness sake, we spent so much,

we've got to push ahead with it anyway.

And of course, I liked the idea that he was going to prioritize

investment in the North and prioritize the lead Manchester connection.

Obviously, the Cumberland MP, I was always saying,

I would much prefer them to build a leads Manchester line

than worry about the connections between London and the rest.

I've been hearing about improving leads Manchester for many, many, many years.

I think his problem is I'm not sure that people believed

the so-called plan for this 36 billion pounds.

I don't know if you saw Mark Harper, the transport secretary,

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being interviewed by Victoria Derbyshire at the weekend.

But my God, it was not good.

I mean, the whole thing just unraveled.

She was going one by one through these promises that had been made.

And by the end of it, he was saying, no, no,
they were just sort of indications of what you could build
if you decided that's what you wanted to do.

It was not good.

There's a political problem, isn't there?

To get onto the inside baseball of this,
this is something you must have thought about a lot.

Localism.

Well, it's not just localism, but it's also this big thing,
which is if the prime minister wants to make an announcement
that is kept secret, he can't talk to too many people by definition.
How do you get the balance right between properly consulting inside government,
doing all the maths on all those projects,
and also keeping it as something that you can reveal as something new
at a party conference?

How do you get that right?

What sort of advice would you give someone on that kind of thing?

I think on things like that, if you...

Oh, look, we had things that we announced at party conference,
like, for example, the initial decision that we were going to review
the Labour Party Constitution.

We were absolutely determined that that should be announced by Tony Blair
in the conference hall, and there shouldn't be a whiff of it beforehand.

In the end, soon, that ended up with the worst of all worlds,
because the thing was leaking left, right, and centre.

We had three, four days of him saying that no decision had been made.

Then we had this video emerged of him announcing it,
that he recorded a video of the announcement sort of four days before.

I think you have to trust your colleagues,
and of course, that's very, very different when you've got a factionalised party.

I also wasn't comfortable with Grant Shaps using the conference platform
to do his big announcement about sending troops to Kosovo.

I think that's something he should have maybe kept away from the party platform.

These are difficult judgments because Parliament's not sitting,
but I think that barrier between party and government
is sort of really, really has fundamentally broken down.

Just go back to the really big announcement, I remember,
which was Gordon Brown announcing the independence of the Bank of England,
which I think was a really good thing and was one of the things

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that I remember feeling, my goodness, this government knows what it's doing.
That's really impressive. That's very bold.
That was the right thing to think, Rory.
That was the right thing to think,
but presumably that needed to be kept secret,
so he couldn't actually consult with every economist in the world
before he made his decision, right?
I mean, there had been a debate going on for years,
but I think what is true is that he kept it very, very tight,
and my memory may be failing me here.
I think there was a cabinet meeting that morning
at which it was kind of basically presented as a fait accompli,
but what Gordon was very good at was making sure that the arguments he had
were strong enough for people to say,
yeah, we'll go along with that.
And I think that was the other problem with HS2,
is that they were all sent their talking points
and they dutifully went out to deliver them,
and then by the end of the day,
they were all rather regretting the fact that they had...
I mean, the best one was the Manchester one,
where they were announcing to build something
which has been running for several years.
So I don't think they really did the...
Yeah, but it wasn't helped by the fact that he then had David Cameron
and Boris Johnson then tweeting against him.
Yeah.
On the other hand, I watched that speech,
I watched that Rishi Sudeik speech,
and there were bits of it that I thought were clear and impressive,
and I thought he was kind of coming into his own.
He was beginning to find his voice.
I mean, the quality of speeches had been very, very poor through the week,
and I think as a performance, I think his was probably the best,
but I think the content was very, very poor
because I think there was no sense of a coherent theme running through the whole thing.
And long-term decisions for a brighter future,
I'm afraid it just wasn't.
Right.
I will return to that in a bit.
Anyway, Hillary Douglas,
please explain why Labour don't go for a wealth tax.
Seems popular, doesn't affect 90% of people,

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and would set a divide between them and Tories.
Because they want to be able to present themselves as a party that is not ideologically committed to high taxation, particularly at a time when people are paying such high taxes. And there's another problem, isn't there, which is that, of course, it's not true that it doesn't affect 90% of people. In our country, really, the big inequality of wealth is between the 60% who own houses and the 40% who don't. And a wealth tax will have a big impact on the 60% who own houses. And that's why Ed Miliband, when he was the leader of the party, was looking much more closely at the so-called mansion tax. Look, I think that Labour are absolutely putting all their chips on growth. That's clear from this week that they're basically saying there's going to be a different approach to the economy, a different industrial strategy, and it will lead to growth. And if it doesn't, then they're going to have to look at things like this, I think. I'd love to see us looking again at a wealth tax on houses after people die. I thought that was a really smart way of the desperately needed funding that we need for adult social care to say that you're not going to take someone's house away from them while they're alive. But when they die, the government will have actually taxed them to pay for adult social care. And I think that's a good, fair way of doing it. Well, that brings me neatly to a plug for our second episode of the interview with Theresa May. I'm not a Tory voter, but everything Mrs. May said about why she was in politics, being an MP, balancing cabinet, constituency responsibilities, respecting the civil service, doing something before being in politics gave me a sense that there are those who really get what I as a voter want to see in a politician. Keir Starmer could learn a lot from her approach and her experience. In contrast to the SPAD approach, that's when a special adviser becomes an MP, to what extent is it feasible and appropriate that a Labour leader could be advised and mentored by an experienced member of another party? Hmm, interesting question. Theresa May interviewed it very, very well, Rory, both in terms of numbers, but also the response. She was very dismissive in my pointing out that if she really believed that SPADs, the route to an MP shouldn't be through the SPAD, then Nick Timothy, who is waltzing into Matt Hancock's seat, seems to me to go against that. But fair point, I think she's right about a lot of things that she said, and I was very pleased she stood up for the civil service as much as she did. I hope Keir Starmer does that. I think his appointing Sue Gray is actually signaling that he wants to take the civil service seriously. Doing something before in politics, well, he's done that as DPP and as a lawyer.

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And I think this point about taking advice for others is a good one.

I mean, one of the first things Tony Blair did when he became Prime Minister, much to the disgruntlement of some, was actually that he called Margaret Thatcher in for a chat about how to deal with other leaders.

But it seems to me that's a very sensible thing to do.

I said at the start of the pandemic, you know, you have John Major, you have Tony Blair, you have Gordon Brown, Theresa May, David Cameron.

All five of those actually became quite significant voices during the COVID pandemic.

But actually it might have been an idea for Johnson to have called them in and actually sort of almost given them a role or given them some part of that response, the national response.

So I think I hope Keir does sort of not think if he does become Prime Minister that he can get good advice from people who've done the job before, regardless of party.

Very good.

Well, look, here's a question.

Duncan C, since both of you are polyglots, you're a better polyglot than me.

Do you have any advice for people wanting to learn a language?

And is there anything you would change about how languages are taught at school?

Go on, Alastair.

Well, something I'd change is reverse the change that we made.

I would get languages back on the curriculum, but possibly with, you know, broader approach.

I think if I were going into learn languages today, if I was at school, I'd probably want to learn Chinese.

I'd probably want to learn Arabic.

If I was picking a European language, I might pick Spanish rather than French and German.

Why Spanish rather than French and German?

I think more people speak Spanish.

Worldwide.

Yeah.

There's a way of connecting to Latin America.

Yeah.

Yeah.

It's interesting.

You and I often say to each other, we don't talk much about Latin America when we sometimes feel that we should.

But I think one of the reasons for that isn't neither of us speak Spanish.

Yeah.

So we don't read as much.

I probably speak more about France and Germany because I read French and German quite a lot.

Yeah.

You, by the way, speak a lot of languages to a certain degree.

Hold on a minute.

We had praise for your...

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My Serbo-Croat.

Your Serbo-Croat last week.

Somebody wrote in to say that your pronunciation was almost flawless.

Almost flawless.

No, but I think the key to learning a language is not to be worried about making mistakes.

And it's also, I think you have to love the language.

I think you have to love that feeling of being able to express yourself in a way that you couldn't express yourself before.

It's a wonderful feeling when you get into it.

I think people learn languages in different ways.

I mean, you obviously did very well at school and university in a more conventional language thing.

In my case was actually, I didn't like traditional sitting in a classroom being made to memorize grammar and vocabulary rules.

I really came alive with languages.

When I moved to Indonesia and the foreign office put me in a language school in a rural area, maybe live with a family.

And I had three different teachers every day.

Two hours one teacher, two hours with a second teacher, two hours with a third teacher after lunch, then two hours of homework.

And living with a family that didn't speak English.

At the end of three months, I had made so much progress just by talking, talking, talking, talking, talking in a way that I didn't feel that I had made when I was sort of sitting through French classes at school being made to learn 40 words every night.

Does the foreign office still put ambassadors through that same level of training?

Or has that been part of the cuts as well?

The promise is always getting cut because they're always in a hurry to deploy people.

It's always the thing that gets squeezed.

But yes, theoretically, as an ambassador, you should still be able to get decent language training before you go out to a country.

So Simon Walters has just gone out to be the ambassador in Israel, speaks really good Hebrew as well as really good Arabic.

Thanks, the foreign office.

Oh, wow. That's not Simon Walters, the mail on Sunday journalist.

He used to make my life very difficult from time to time.

Different man in time.

I cannot imagine him as a diplomat.

Although he does get a shout out in Theresa May's book, I noticed.

I think she even calls him the respected.

Oh, goodness. Well, there we are.

Yeah.

Shows I read the whole book.

Didn't just skim read it, Theresa.

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I read the whole damn thing.

Rory, it's been a pleasure as always.

Thank you very much indeed and look forward to speaking soon.

Bye bye.

Bye.