

[Transcript] Leading / 19: Leo Varadkar: Ireland's Taoiseach on NATO, China, and Joe Biden

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

And with me, Rory Stewart.

Joined today by the T-shirt of Ireland, Leo Varadkar.

I'm very, very, very happy we are to be with you.

How?

My pleasure.

I've been a big fan.

I was hoping to get around to doing this sometime until I've found the opportunity here in Belfast.

Thank you.

I want to start by just particularly for an audience outside maybe Ireland and further beyond the UK, just to get a sense of you.

And this also does speak to a sense of how Ireland has changed.

I think to have a gay background immigrant politician who's a doctor, that's not that common either, all sorts of things in your story that speak to a modern Ireland.

But I just think if you could maybe give us a sense about what it is like growing up here with your background, gay young man in a country that traditionally very, very conservative socially.

Yeah.

Well, I grew up in 1980s Ireland, which was a very different place, a conservative country in which our constitution forbade things like divorce.

And when I was four years old, the people voted by an overwhelming margin to copper fasten our ban on abortion back in 83, 84.

So that gives you a sense of how much has changed in Ireland in the past 10 or 20 years and grew up in West Dublin, in suburban Dublin as a person of colour to use the term that people like to use now.

So I'm just biracial, my mum's Irish, my dad's Indian and would have been the only person in my class with dark skin and a funny name and Ireland is a different place now.

You know, Dublin is an extremely multinational international city with people from all over the world.

And I think it's fair to say that Ireland is now a very prosperous country, which it wasn't at the time and is now a country that is socially liberal, more so than most countries in Europe and indeed the world.

But me becoming Tisha becoming leader of my party does show how much has changed because like it wasn't a big deal.

I remember, you know, the day I was elected party leader, you know, of a party that's a centre party, centre centre right party, and then was elected Tisha Prime Minister of the country.

It was a big news story internationally that I wasn't here.

Yes.

Yeah.

So, so I think in some ways that showed how much we changed that was a bigger deal around the world that what's this happening in Ireland as opposed to Ireland that already changed at that point of that makes sense.

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You mentioned your party.

If you were a British politician, would you be a Tory?

No.

I might have been in the past.

Would you be Labour?

Well, that's a very good question.

I am a satirist.

I probably shouldn't, I probably shouldn't answer that.

Historically, Finagale would have been seen as closer to the Tories than, certainly than Finanfall and certainly than closer to Labour.

That's probably correct at a point in time and, you know, I'm conscious of the fact that the Conservative Party was the party that brought Britain into the European Union and when the other first referendum, Mrs Thatcher and others thought very bravely to keep Britain in the single market or the common market as they called it at the time.

All parties changed over time and the Conservative Party is currently, it would appear to me going through a more nationalist phase and that may change and parties change too.

And, you know, so the convenience now of not having to vote in other countries elections.

So I probably, as I said, wouldn't consider myself to be a Tory, but that's not to say that there weren't Conservative politicians who actually think are deserving of respect and made some magnificent changes and, you know, we're here in Belfast.

John Major, I think, was one of those who was crucial in the peace process with the Downs Street Declaration, took big risks at the time, both for Europe and for peace in Northern Ireland. Who were your political heroes growing up? Were you particularly interested in certain politicians, you growing up through the 80s, early 90s? Who were the people that you looked to?

Well, you know, certainly in my own party and from my own party background, we're very much in the tradition of Michael Collins, somebody believed in a stepping stone approach to our national story and ultimately was willing to make compromises to achieve that. Would have admired another former party leader, Gareth Fitzgerald, a lot who, you know, was crucial in terms of trying to modernize Ireland in the 80s.

And abroad, I mean, for listeners who aren't into the details of Irish politics, if you were trying to explain yourself to an American audience, how would you explain your political heroes, your political ideology, your vision of your role in the world?

Well, that's kind of harder to answer, I think.

I definitely would have been attracted in the 90s, you know, when I was becoming more politically aware as a teenager by the kind of third way approach that people like Bill Clinton, for example, and Tony Blair were trying to put across. And then maybe in the European context, more from the Christian Democrat side, people trying to do something quite similar, like Helmut Kohl. But I'm always a little bit afraid to answer those kind of questions because everything is in its cultural context, its national context and the context of the time.

Are you essentially socially liberal and economically quite conservative? Is that a fair way to label you? Yes, if you need to label me, I think that binary approach to politics of left and right is too simplistic. So socially liberal would be correct and economically liberal or economically conservative, depending on how you define those terms, would also be correct in

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the sense that I believe in balancing the books and I believe in the private and public sector working together. Which makes you sound a little bit from a distance, like David Cameron or George Osborne, who would have very much seen themselves as that. No, he's much more Tony Blair role. Restless move away from British politics. Well, if you take a big change that's happened in Britain, for example, somebody like David Cameron was very committed to overseas development aid and understood the importance of that in terms of soft power and finding a new place for Britain in the world. And I think it's a real shame that you've seen that now go backwards in Britain and I hope that changes again. And also in climate action, he is somebody who understood that a progressive centre-right party needed to understand that agenda and maybe doesn't now. And gay marriage? And did it, yeah, absolutely. And look did it, A, because he probably believed in it, but B, he also understood that elections are won in the centre and it made sense to move a centre-right party into that space. And that's changed, but you know, it might change back again. But in terms of left-right thing, you know, often people describe being socially liberal as being centre-left. It doesn't have to be. Believing in people's freedom, in personal freedom, in liberty and in autonomy can also be a centre-right concept. You know, it's not the government's business to tell you what you do in your own life or in your own bedroom. That can be that can be a writer's interview as well. This trust's ultimate libertarian on the right. But let's stop talking about British primalism and focus on the Irish T-shirt that we've got with us. Did you grow up in a very political household? I think I did, but I didn't realise it at the time, if that makes any sense, because neither of my parents were active politically. But we did talk about politics at the dinner table. So, you know, our dinner table debates would have been about politics, about what was happening in the news, about money, religion, controversial issues. Would have been aware how my parents were voting, what their thoughts and things were. We would have watched the news a lot. And because my dad spent a lot of time in England and so did my mom, because they met in England and got married there. They met very nearly to where Ronnie went to school. Yes. So, you know, they met in Leicester, but they lived there for quite some time. Quite some time. I'm told they worked in the hospital instead when they were filming Carry On Doctor. So, it's actually that long ago. But I got married in Maidenhead, which of course, Street's Amaze constituency. But, you know, again, Ireland at the time only really had two channels, two TV channels, One News, which was RTE. And everyone watched the same programme on a Friday night and went to Mass on Sunday. My household was different. We obviously were aware of all of that. But we also had Radio 4. In the morning, we'd the BBC News. And, you know, because my dad was Indian, because my folks spent so much time in England, I was much more aware maybe than most kids of the broader, bigger world out there. And what about was your dad political when he was in India? I once got in a cab and somebody told me that they knew your dad and actually thought that if he was UK, he would definitely be Labour. Was he more left-wing than you? Yes, in terms of his sentiments, but wouldn't like to pay higher taxes and would have a very low tolerance of people who don't work and don't make their contributions. So, I think probably like a lot of people on the left, left in sentiment, but in reality, you know, is that really, is that really, really what they think? How important is your, the Indian part of your

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background? How important is that to you? It's part of my heritage.

But does it make you particularly interested in that region as a politician now?

Would you just, it's just part of your personal background?

I'm definitely interested in it. It's a fascinating country. Been many times. Very curious about the politics there. It's going to have a big impact on our world. You know, what happens in China in the past 20 years has changed our world. What's going to happen in India in the next 20 years is going to change our world in my view. But I'm also really interested in what's going on in the US, for example, and, you know, a family there too. But so, you know, interested, but maybe I should be more interested, quite frankly, than I am.

Tisha, one of the great themes, of course, in India at the moment with Modi

is populism. And one of the great themes in the United States is the rise of populism.

And potentially, you could make the argument that the rise of Sinn Féin

in Ireland is also a story of a certain type of populism, a certain type of political messaging, appeal, techniques, tactics. And your political career, I guess I'm sort of handing this to you, do you think it's coincided in a way with the rise of populism? How have you adjusted to that? What has that meant for you as a politician? Yeah, like Sinn Féin figures describe their own party as a left populist party. So, you know, it's not a, I don't think it's an insult to describe them as populists, left-wing, ethno-nationalists. That is what they are. And that's not what I stand for. But, you know, I think populism is a largely an international phenomenon at the moment and is defined by some very simple things, you know, simple solutions to complex problems, emotions being stronger than facts. You know, my emotions are more important

than your facts, demonization of opponents and also these conspiracy ideas of, you know, elites plotting against the virtuous masses and whether it's left populism or right populism,

it's there and it's dangerous. How do you deal with that as a modern politician

who's trying not to be like that? I'm still trying to figure that out,

still trying to figure that out. And certainly for people who are in opposition, I can see the attraction of it. When we were in opposition ourselves, we were populist a bit sometimes.

So, you know, I'm not going to be overly righteous about these things. I think for

politicians who are in government, you know, it's, you do to do to continually try to convince people that you're on their side and really want to solve their problems, because sometimes they doubt that, particularly when you're struggling to solve their problems. And that can be a real challenge to demonstrate that you're on their side and you care about their problems. And that's what you're spending most of your day and most your weekend on. And I am, whether it's housing or health care or cost of living issues, you name it. And the other, I think, is actually to make inroads into solving those problems, because what people will accept rhetoric from opposition politicians, from government politicians, they want to see results.

Just bring it on to what's happening here now. What is your sense of where the peace process is, how well the Good Friday Agreement's working? And I'm particularly interested in your assessment of what Brexit has done to that process, but also to your relations with the United Kingdom.

Well, I think the most important thing that we're marking 25 years after the Good Friday Agreement is that we do have peace in Ireland. And we didn't have that for a very long time.

I'm part of a generation that has lived most of my life since the Good Friday Agreement was signed.

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And it hasn't just brought about peace in Ireland. It's also opened the door to prosperity, to social change, to migration into both Ireland and Northern Ireland, which has changed the demographic makeup of our countries for the better, in my view. And that's the most important thing. What's sad is that the promise of the Good Friday Agreement hasn't been fulfilled. For nine of the 25 years, the power-sharing government here in Northern Ireland has not functioned. And as a result of that, the North-South Ministerial Council hasn't functioned. And this relationship isn't as strong as it used to be or it ought to be. And that's the real shame is that the promise of the Good Friday Agreement hasn't been fulfilled. Is that Brexit? Is that Johnson? What have been the factors that have made that as bad as it's become? I think two things. Initially, it was that the more extreme parties became more popular in Northern Ireland. You know, the Good Friday Agreement was agreed by two moderate parties, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists. And the more extreme, more nationalistic parties became stronger. And that made it harder to make it work. Let's not forget the DUP didn't accept the Good Friday Agreement at the start. It took a lot for them to accept, including some modifications that were for the worse, not for the better, in my view, in St Andrews. And then in more recent times, Brexit has definitely upended things. And that's weakened and damaged the relationship between London and Dublin and also created issues for the relationships between the communities here in Northern Ireland. And that was entirely predictable. It's one of the many reasons why more moderate unions, for example, were against Brexit. And it's also why, for example, something like William Hague made the case against Brexit because of the impact it would have on the Union. When you look at Ireland's future, it's easy from the outside to be superficially optimistic. See it as this great success story. And of course, it's been incredibly successful. But over the next 20, 30 years, you, like every leader in the world, are going to be confronting soaring pension costs, aging population, problems paying for the welfare state, rise of artificial intelligence, potentially trade wars with China. How do you begin to think about how you steer an economy like Ireland out of its period of rapid growth into this more difficult choppy waters? Well, first of all, Ireland is a great success story. There's 200 countries in the world and we're in the top 10 or 20 by almost any index, whether it's life expectancy that the best in Europe, educational attainment, full employment, more people coming into the country than leaving. And that includes more Irish citizens coming home every year than leave. So by any reasonable measure, notwithstanding our very real problems like the housing shortage, for example, Ireland is a success story. But yes, we face the same challenges that other Western countries are going to face. Our demographics are a bit more favorable than others. And, you know, when it comes to pension costs, for example, we're now bringing in a flexible pension age so people can choose to retire between 66 and 70. And their pension will be adjusted accordingly. So a lot of the figures you see around demographics talk about people over 65. And I think that's actually a mistake. You know, first of all, the pension age in Ireland is 66 and and frailty in terms of health care terms and health care costs really doesn't kick in until 70 plus anymore. So I think one thing we need to do is plan for changes in demographics, but also not be too alarmist about them. You know, 65 years old is not what it used to be. And, you know, like I say, the pension age is higher than that.

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And AI T-shirt?

Well, that's an absolutely fascinating area, which I'm learning more about all the time.

That's good because a lot of politicians don't bother me.

Yeah. Well, look, I think it's going to change our world as much as the internet has for the better and for worse. And it's going to be fascinating.

Where do you stand on the balance of better and worse at the moment?

Oh, I think almost always technology results in more changes for the better than the worse.

And is this part of your doctor background coming out in terms of what you see as the interest? Well, like, yeah, like among the things in terms of the medical applications, you know, AI being able to read x-rays, read pathology results quicker at lower cost and with less error than is done by doctors and scientists. Like to me, that is amazing in terms of what can be achieved. And it's already picking up patterns and markers that we didn't know existed before, just because it's so smart. And, you know, I think you're not that far away from people being able to have medical consultations with with avatars. You know, it's extraordinary if you think about it in terms of the practical applications that are possible from AI. And that's all going to be better from the point of view of the patient, from the point of view of the doctor. We may see the doctor shortage not being a bigger problem in five or 10 years time as it is now.

Yeah. When you went back to do a bit of keeping your hand in as a doctor during COVID, one, well done for doing that. That was pretty impressive leadership. But secondly, even in the time you'd been away, had you noticed much change within the delivery of healthcare? Yeah, look, there's been a phenomenal amount of change, you know, particularly new medicines and new treatments. You know, because a lot of my my my partners are consultant cardiologists and a lot of my friends are doctors, I still keep in touch with what goes on. But there's been huge developments

and new treatments and new therapies. What's frustrating is that so many things haven't changed, probably not as bad in the UK as in Ireland. But the use of IT is still not where it should be. You know, you see how the banking sector, for example, has embraced modern technology. We're still going around our hospitals with paper charts by and large. Not sure that's the case in the NHS, but you know, it's extraordinary that we haven't made more progress on areas like

that. Okay, Leo. Thank you, Rory. Let's just take a break.

I'd love a sense of we touched briefly on China, but what did you make of Macron's attempt to steer apart from the EU separate to the US when it comes to China? And how would you think about China's threats against Taiwan and where Ireland would be likely to land if conflict develops?

Can I just add to that in a similar field? Has the Russia-Ukraine conflict war changed your view or you view on the need for an assessment of Ireland's strategic and security interests and even the question of neutrality? I think it's definitely caused Irish people in the Irish government to think about neutrality and think about security in a way we did in the past. You know, Ukraine was a neutral, not allowed country. It got attacked. NATO countries will not be attacked. That's why Finland, a historically neutral country, has joined NATO and Sweden is going to join. They've made the calculus now that actually not being in military lines can potentially make you more vulnerable. You're a soft target and that has made us think again. Where's your thinking on that at the moment?

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I don't anticipate. In fact, I'm sure Ireland will not apply to join NATO.

But we will do three things. We're going to increase our own military spending, particularly when it comes to things like radar, cyber security, not just traditional security. And we will become more involved in European defence and security. We're part of the PESCO programme. Sinn Féin, by the way, wants to take us out of that. I think that's a big mistake, one of the differences between the government parties and the opposition parties. And we are part of NATO's partnership for peace. And we're going to renegotiate that link in the period ahead. Perhaps a little bit more important, though, is Irish people are now very comfortable with the idea that while we are militarily neutral, we're not politically neutral. We know exactly whose side we're on when it comes to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. In fact, the Cold War, Irish people would have been more ambiguous than would in people who had a sneaking regard for the

Soviet Union, believe it or not. And you don't have much of that when it comes to Russia now.

Tisha, can I bring you back? Alistair very swiftly came in behind my question. I want to pin you on China. What is your view? Do you think the US is doing the right thing in relation to China? Do you think we need to move into a position of more muscular confrontation with China? Or do

you think a gentler approach would be better? You think a lot about the world, you travel a lot, but I haven't heard you talk much about issues with China and the Pacific. And is that because you're worried about Chinese trade with Ireland? You know, Chinese trade with Ireland is important, and Chinese investment in Ireland is welcome. It's a fraction of the kind of investment that we have from the US or the UK or the European Union. So, you know, Ireland is part of the West, and we share the same values around democracy and human rights. And when the West, at least when

the West said its best, it believes in those types of things. It doesn't always demonstrate that in its action. So, you know, Ireland is part of the West, and that's never going to change. But I don't want the next few decades to be characterised by a new Cold War between the US and China. I don't believe President Biden wants that either, by the way. And I don't want to see Europe caught somehow in the middle of that. And I think that's a concern that we all have. So, I think that's where President Macron was coming from, but perhaps he didn't say it in the right way, because, you know, the United States is showing unbelievable support for Europe, for Ukraine, and to then suggest that somehow if Taiwan was attacked, and by the way, I don't believe

China's going to attack Taiwan, they've... You don't believe that? I don't believe that. No, I could be absolutely wrong about that, by the way. I didn't believe Russia was going to attack Ukraine. So, you know, I'm not going to claim to have gifts of foresight that I don't have.

I didn't think they'd do it. And I don't think that China will attack Taiwan. But I think it was just a bit offbeat, you know, at a time when the US was showing such enormous support, you know, in terms of guaranteeing the security of Europe and helping to save Ukraine from being overrun for any European leader to be, you know, sort of ambiguous about support for America, I think was, you know, probably wasn't exactly what he meant to say, but that's sometimes how things happen. We talk quite a lot on the podcast about the importance of soft power. I'd be very interested in your assessment of the President Biden's

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recent visit, both to the North, to Belfast, very, very briefly, and then to that rather extraordinary few days in the Republic. Now, I know where his Irishness on his sleeve and the relationship is incredibly important, but it sort of felt to me like a pretty important moment. Am I overstating that? No, it was an important moment. And it was a great visit. And he is somebody who, whose sense of Irishness and his Irish identity is very real, you know, probably the most Irish president since Kennedy, if not more so. And he really cares about Ireland, really wants to know what he can do to help and wants to be informed about what's going on in Ireland. And that's not just him, it actually then permeates throughout the administration. How does that actually, in practical terms, help a smaller country to have that relationship with one of the two big powers in the world? I think it did help during difficult periods in the Brexit negotiations when we were trying to come to agreements around the protocol, wins the framework, backstop all of those things. Sometimes Westminster doesn't always listen to what we say in Dublin, but they do listen to what the White House has to say, because it is the most important economic and military power in the world and because of the special relationship between the UK and the US. So if the president says something in London, they hear it. They don't necessarily always hear it, we say, unfortunately, that's the nature of things when you're a small country.

That sounds to me like you've got the special relationship.

No, well, I think we have a different sort of relationship. You know, the special relationship between the UK and the US is very real. I know it's important to President Biden, even though some people may doubt that. You know, the UK and the US have fought side by side in World Wars, in conflict since then. It's a very particular relationship that we don't have with the US when we have the different one, but it's important as well, but in a different way.

Tisha, you're unusual as a politician and having come into a department that you knew something about, you became Minister of Health having been a doctor. And as a working politician, there's endless controversy about whether that's a good thing or a bad thing. And I wonder whether you could step back for a second and reflect on the contrast between those two jobs. You took over as sports minister, knowing about as much about sport as I do. And then you took over as health minister. Sorry, that means less than zero. And then took over as health minister.

That's not fair.

Took over as health minister, knowing an enormous amount about health. Do you want to reflect a little bit on what the strength and weaknesses are of being a specialist in the department that you're running as a politician and whether there are some things that you can see as an outsider that you can't see as an insider? Yeah, it's a good question. You know, first of all, I don't think that politicians becoming ministers, becoming secretaries of state need to be experts in their field. They need to be experts in legislation and communications, in politics, in getting things done. You know, the Minister of Education doesn't teach any classes. The Secretary of State for Health doesn't teach any patients, you know, so you don't actually need to be an expert in that field. But did it help you? Yeah, it did help because, you know, I didn't need to be briefed up on things, could understand things quickly, was able to learn things quickly, and would have had a certain level of credibility with the professionals working in the sector that wouldn't be the case for somebody who doesn't come from that field. But it can also be a downside too. You come into these things off of preconceived notions and preconceived ideas, or in part because I was a healthcare professional going into the Department of Health, thinking

that, you know, you could fix things quicker than maybe they can be. You know, for example, we've a big problem with emergency department overcrowding. It's now an international problem, but it's a long-sending problem in Ireland, and sort of believing that it was just a case of lots more beds and lots more staff, which we've done, but it hasn't actually solved the problem.

But as a doctor, I would have believed that because that was the preconceived notion that doctors have, because they don't have any political experience or management experience, and they don't actually know that there are about 10 to 12 different factors that give rise to emergency department overcrowding. That's getting too technical perhaps.

Yeah, no, I don't think it's getting too technical. I think it's absolutely fascinating, because it's something that we struggle with all the time in practical politics.

There will be strikes of doctors, strikes of teachers, very, very firm views being expressed about how health systems can be run. But then on the other hand, when I talk to colleagues who are doctors and end up in the Ministry of Health, they will often say that they turn out to be experts in one quite narrow part of the system. But until they joined the book full department, they hadn't seen the full context of things. And you can end up micromanaging and fighting a battle in a particular corner and take your eye off the bigger picture.

Yeah, I think that's spot on. And one thing politicians get, which very few people really get, is the helicopter view of the whole service, if you like. So as Health Minister, for the first time in my life, even though I grew up in a medical family and worked in health care for seven years, I for the first time got that real overview. And what you often see in healthcare, and it's not unique to healthcare, is people in their own specialist area think that the solution to the problem is more of me and a bigger place for me to work in. So the emergency department doctor thinks it's more of me and a bigger emergency department. And of course, it's not.

You know, you have to think about why people end up in the emergency department in the first place,

how they get treated while they're there and where they go afterwards. And that's not a criticism. It's just, you know, the world that we live in, people often think politicians are in a bubble, and very often we are, but is everyone not in a bubble of some sort? We're surrounded by our friends, our family, and the people we work with, and not much else.

Can I ask you one final question, which also relates to some of your previous job, and that is about Ireland's relationship with alcohol, which you've taken on, and just the Scottish government had felt they had a particular problem.

How would you assess Ireland's relationship with alcohol?

Deeply problematic relationship, unfortunately. And, you know, I'm somebody who drinks, by the way, and sometimes I drink too much, and it is a very, very powerful drug, and we don't acknowledge it as that. It changes your personality and makes people do things they wouldn't otherwise do. And a huge amount of violence in Ireland, public order offenses, violence against children, sexual violence, is linked alcohol, a huge amount of long-term illness, and we discount that. And we also sometimes find it hard to socialize out of any sort of social occasion without the presence of alcohol. And that's one of the big differences, by the way, when I go to an Indian event, almost always a family event, almost always children there, very rarely any alcohol. And that is so totally different to, like, an Irish wedding, or an Irish birthday party, or an Irish going away drinks, you name it, alcohol is there. And

I don't think we really realize yet how much. Is it harder to do policy that you might want to do when you've got this incredible global alcohol brand, which is Guinness, which is such a part of the Irish culture? I don't think it's just down to one brand. And actually, I think Irish, and I may be wrong on this, but I think Irish people now drink more wine than Guinness. No, it's not that. They may do, but I'm just that you've got such a powerful brand. And are there other things you'd like to do on the policy agenda in relation to alcohol and mental health? Well, we've done a lot of the things like that. I'm proud of having done this, Mr Helt, is our first public health legislation on alcohol. And that involves minimum unit pricing, and involves restrictions and advertising, structural separation in shops, things like that. But what's what's the famous line called treat strategy for breakfast, you know, and when something is such a huge part of your culture, even though alcohol in Ireland is expensive, very expensive, actually, people are still willing to spend huge amounts of their hard earned money on it, because it's so ingrained in our culture. And it's something we're really struggling with, quite frankly. Now, alcohol consumption, by the way, is falling in Ireland, so we are making some progress. But I think we understate the extent to which so many of the bad things that happen in our communities, in our families, and in our society more widely are affected by alcohol. So can you tell us what the two things are that you think make for a bad politician? We often talk about lessons in good leadership. Give us two things which you make think make a bad politician. I'll give you three. The three things I think every every politician should always try to avoid bitterness, jealousy and paranoia. They're the three traits or feelings and they enter into everyone's head at some point that I think destroy politicians, either bitter about where they are, or why they haven't progressed more, or why they lost their seats, or you name it, jealousy of other people within politics, because it's an enormously competitive game, you are a sole trader in many ways, and then paranoia. Believing that the media or some group or whatever is about to get you, they might be, but if you allow, I think if you allow yourself to be consumed by any one of those three things, that's what destroys politicians, both in terms of their performance and their own mental health. It's quite a good lesson for life. Yeah, probably. Very good. Listen, it's been lovely to talk to you. Thanks for having me. It's been a pleasure. Splendid residents in Belfast, and we'll see you again soon. Thank you very much indeed. Thank you. So, Rory, Leo Varadka, qu'est-ce que tu penses? Well, I thought, particularly like the last answer, which I think you like too, about bitterness and paranoia. He's quite polished. I mean, I sometimes grumble to you, Alistair, that serving politicians are a bit boring. I do worry sometimes that his answers were very sensible, but sometimes a little bit on the safe side, and maybe not quite as much kind of color that I was really hoping for. But he came across as a thoughtful, dignified figure. What do you make of him? I'm not sure the French ambassador to Dublin will think that he was sort of, I thought there was a little bit of a spike going on there with Macron. I found him, I first met him years and years and years ago when I did something in a place called Trim. It was the Swift Festival, and he was, I'm not even sure he was a minister. I think he might have just been a kind of pretty ordinary MP, TD as they call them. And I remember the time people saying, oh, that guy's got in places and what have you. And since then, it's been fascinating to watch him. And he's, I was told by lots of people before we sat down and talked to him. Oh, he's a really tough guy to interview. He's quite, he can be quite monosyllabic. He doesn't open up. He hates it if you talk about asking him about his personal

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stuff. I found him very open and very engaging. I mean, I think it does help if you're in the room and you were doing it down the line. And I think just the sort of, maybe he was, I found him a lot warmer than I'd been led to believe he would put it that way. And I actually found his, I found, for example, his answers on some of the stuff that maybe he hadn't been expecting us to talk to him about some of the kind of AI stuff and that kind of thing. I found him kind of quite on the money in that. And so, no, I really like talking to him.

But it's also an interesting job, isn't it, running a country that's doing very well, but it's still quite a small country. And when we compare that to talking to the Bernie Sanders or Hillary Clinton's, who tried to talk on behalf of the superpower.

To me, Roy, I think the most interesting observation he made in the, because he's obviously, I think you don't have to be, you don't have to read too closely between the lines to realise that his experience of working with Johnson through Brexit and the trust was horrific.

And I think even with Sunach, I think it's been quite tense at times. But I thought it was, that was really, really interesting when he said that, you know, the truth is, we've got a lot of experience of these Brits in the last decade or so not listening to us. But the American, they know that the Americans do listen to us and they listen to the Americans.

I thought that was a very, very interesting explanation of the dynamic and why it was so important that they had that amazing visit with Biden recently. Absolutely. Well, thank you. Good. See you soon.