

[Transcript] Leading / 23: John Major: From Brixton to Downing Street (Part 1)

So, welcome to another episode of the Restless Politics Leading with me, Alasdair Campbell. And with me, Rory Stewart.

And joined by, I think you're our first, you're not our first former prime minister, but you're our first conservative former prime minister.

Shame, when I say many, two, two, three, four, five, there are quite a few here.

So welcome and thank you, Sir John Major, we're actually going to do, we're going to try and squeeze the lemon here.

We're going to get two whole episodes out of you with a bit of luck because it is, it's quite a story.

And I wonder if we can start right at the beginning, your childhood.

And I guess the question that's bugged me all my life, really, is why you became a Tory.

Well, I think it was, as Macmillan would have put it, events, dear boy, events.

It's quite a lengthy background, but I mean, briefly, my father was a Victorian man.

He was born in 1879.

He was 64, 65 when I was born, which was something that was a prize to my mother.

But as a Victorian man, he did a business deal just by shaking hands.

And in terms of shaking hands, the deal then went sour.

And my father lost everything he had, which wasn't much.

It was a small bungalow in Worcester Park and whatever savings he had.

And we moved to Worcester Park to two rooms in Brixton.

And although I didn't know it at the time, I wondered where we found these two rooms.

Our landlord was my father's son, who I didn't know existed, who'd been born in 1902.

So this was your half-brother?

It was my half-brother.

And what was the gap between you and age?

Oh, the gap was 41 years.

So I had no idea who he was.

And neither my mother nor my father had told me.

It was sometime when we moved there.

I was about 10 before I actually realized who he was.

But life was quite tough there.

Because my parents were sick, there was no money to throw around.

And at one stage, we were approached by the Lambert Labour Council offered to rehousers when they could.

They were very kind.

They were very decent.

They were very gentle.

But they couldn't actually do anything at the time.

And I was more attracted, I was then 12 or 13, 12, I think, by the Conservative creed that you took the opportunities to get yourself out of the difficulties in which you were in.

And that was a quite binary choice at the age of 12 or 13.

And did you feel political at that point?

Yes.

I mean, school for me was something I loathed from start to finish.
I didn't work at school or too much of rebellion about me at the time.
But the two things I cared about were history, which is essential to politics and English, which is essential as well, at least in this country for most people.
I was very lucky then because I went to a local church and I met the local Labour MP, Colonel Marcus Lipton.
You may remember him.
And he'd been the Member of Parliament since 1945, so he'd been there a long time.
And he was very kind to me.
He realised in talking to me that I was likely to be a Conservative, but we talked often.
We met on these occasions.
And he gave me some tickets to go to the House of Commons.
And I went there in 1956 for the first time.
And I saw one of those dreary afternoons where they're doing the finance bill in committee stage on the floor of the House.
But I heard Harold Macmillan, who was then, I think, the Chancellor.
And as I walked into Downing Street, before I saw the Chamber, the atmosphere reached out and grabbed me.
And I thought, this is where I wish to be.
As you walked into Parliament, you mean?
As I walked into Parliament, yes.
And Sir John, can I come in from this great distance in Doha and huge welcome and thank you for coming.
And sorry that I'm in the Middle East and bearing huge greetings from many people in Qatar towards you.
I wanted to just develop this question a little bit more of becoming a Conservative.
So I think you write about it quite well in your rather wonderful autobiography about why you were attracted to Conservative, not Labour.
And you talked partly about language, so questions of envy or resentment, questions of class struggle, questions of individuals as opposed to political troops.
I wonder whether you could develop a little bit about on what you were saying in the autobiography.
Let me try.
Well, in terms of inspiration, the politician who inspired me more than any other then and since was Ian McLeod.
And I don't know whether everyone listening will remember Ian McLeod.
He was quite a short man with a high domed bald head and a slightly paralytic neck.
And when he spoke, it was like a great church bell ringing.
And he was, to me, as a child, truly inspiring.
He didn't just talk about political things.
He talked about the morality of politics.
He talked a lot about what was right and wrong, about what shouldn't, could be done, and what was intolerable.
And how were you aware of him?
Were you family political?

Were you sort of listening to the radio?

How were you connecting to somebody like Ian McLeod?

Well, in those days, of course, there was a proper parliamentary reporting, a couple of pages of blogs from East Moles, he said this and so on.

So I saw a bit of that.

But also, he was often in the news.

He was in the cabinet at the time.

And of course, the party conference speeches.

And they also issued a record of his speeches at times of general elections.

So that was really how I heard him.

And then I met him and was similarly inspired, metaphorically sitting at his feet when he was making a speech.

So you're at school and by your own admission, not working that hard on the schooling stuff and yet you're becoming a bit of a political geek already.

You left school before you were 16.

You had three O-levels.

And yet you're sounding like somebody who's already decided as a teenager, I'm going to go into politics.

I had.

That was what I wished to do.

Indeed, if you think about it for a moment, the choices were limited.

For someone, I had no sponsors, no backers, no money, no background, no educational qualifications.

Top of the civil service, unlikely.

Top of the armed forces, unlikely.

Top of sport, wasn't good enough.

But politics, you lived on your wits and what you did throughout your career in a way that doesn't apply elsewhere.

And I found that very attractive.

And Sir John, can I get you to come back to the question of conservatism and individuals against class and envy and resentment?

Roy is getting very tribal in his old age.

He basically was, you say, Tory good, Labour bad.

And actually Sir John, I'd love to, as we talk, come back to that more because obviously you've become a great icon in later life of people like me and Alistair who are centrists and people tend to forget that you were once a conservative.

So I'd like you to talk a little bit about why you believe in the Conservative Party and why you were not attracted to Labour.

The second half of your statement is only partly true.

I never was especially tribal.

I wasn't especially opposed to Labour.

The Labour people I came across then in those days in Lambeth were straight up and down people with a left of centre view who were trying to do their best in very difficult circumstances and also at a time of massive immigration into the borough which added to

their difficulties.

I had no particular opposition to them at all, but I did feel conservative.

I wished to conserve the rule of law to me seemed to be an extremely important thing.

The chance of the individual's chance to do for himself what he wishes to achieve rather than to have it collectively done was something appealed to me very much indeed.

I did no work at school, but I did a great deal when I left to pass the exams that I hadn't passed at school and to get some qualifications.

So I was really looking for a freedom to make of myself what I could.

I wasn't sure what I could be made, but I wanted to try.

And John, can I quote you from your book?

It's always a mistake to write books.

No, it's not.

I was attracted to the Conservative Party because it did not draw its language from the dark emotions of envy or resentment.

It cared for the weak, the poor and the old.

But unlike the Labour Party, it did not demand a lifetime of adherence to class struggle.

It saw people as individuals, not as political troops.

Well, politics was much more class based in the 1950s and 1960s.

I think it's more culturally based now, frankly, than class based.

But it was class based in those days.

If you were middle class, if you were white collar, if you earned a good income, you were likely to be conservative.

If you were a manual worker and if you were relatively lower income, you were more likely to be Labour.

So that was certainly how I saw it at that particular time.

I'm not sure that that is as true now.

In fact, I'm sure it isn't as true now as it used to be then.

But class is still a very, very big part of Britain's.

It's a very big part of Britain and my dream of a classless society is something that has never come about.

Yeah.

But I'm not sure it's such a big determination in which way you vote anymore.

I found in my first seat in Highgate, whenever I went up to a very large, well, well-disposed house, it was a Labour voter for sure.

It certainly wasn't a conservative.

And if I went around the council to states, I would find more conservatives.

So in terms of the way people instinctively vote, it is less class based today.

We were saying before we joined us that if you can't really sunak, there are eight people alive today who can say they have been UK Prime Minister.

Two of them went to the same school, Eaton.

The current one went to another of the top private schools.

Tony Blair went to a private school.

It's quite hard, I think, to imagine that somebody like you today would rise to become leader of the Conservative Party.

Well, if it's hard today, it would have been harder before and yet it happened.

So I'm not sure I entirely agree with that.

But you do accept that your vision of the class of society has not come about?

No, it hasn't come about.

I think there's been moves towards it in many ways.

For example, politics is much more inclusive these days.

I mean, the number of minorities around the House of Commons is immeasurably different, even from the time when I was there 20 years ago.

And I think that is a necessary change.

And of course, many of these minorities have now served in the cabinets of both Labour and Conservative Governments and have constituencies where you would not have expected them to be chosen as a candidate 20 years ago, but which they are now and where in many cases they're very popular.

So I think there has been a quite significant shift.

Is it perfect?

No.

Will it ever be perfect?

I very much doubt it.

But I think in that regard, we're moving in the right direction.

Now, you mentioned Prime Ministers coming from top schools, that's true.

But what I was talking about was not who passed through the sieve to reach the top.

What I was talking about was the general determination of people to vote.

And that, I think, is less class-based.

And when you went for Puntington, did you not feel that your background was...

Was it an asset or was it a problem for you when you were going to vote for selection?

Well, going around generally, it was a problem, but not as big a problem as another issue.

The other issue was whether I was in favour of capital punishment, which I was not, until I found a word, a form of response that beat off the people who were in favour of it.

What was that response?

Tell us what the response was.

Oh, I pointed out that the country was pretty evenly divided between capital punishment and not.

And if you maintain capital punishment, you diminish the chance of getting convictions for people, even though they might be guilty.

And that piece of sophistry worked quite well.

I remember Tristram Garrel Jones training me when I was standing to be a Conservative MP.

And he said that what he always did on this selection was, if somebody said to you in favour of capital punishment, he would say, I'm not, but if somebody killed my sister, I would kill them myself and everyone would cheer and put him through to the next round.

So when you went for Puntington, you had 300 people up against you, including Michael Howard, Chris Patton, Peter Lilly, Peter Brooke.

That is quite an array.

So what were the qualities that you felt in yourself at that time that thought you could

become a Conservative MP in a rural constituency?

And when did you start to feel in yourself, do you know what, I might actually be able to go the whole way?

Well, as far as Huntingdon is concerned, it sounds like a very rural constituency.

It had had a huge amount of London overspill, much of it in Peterborough, but also it had spilled out into the villages.

So there was a much, it was a very different constituency from the one who had selected my predecessor in 1945.

And so it wasn't as rural as you may think.

And many of the problems that were arising in Huntingdon were problems that I had been familiar with from London.

So I did think I had a better chance than many people did.

I was completely written off by the Sunday Express who had a column in the middle of their paper each week, Crossbench, I think.

I was the unconsidered outsider, which I thought was quite helpful.

I think Jock Bruce Gardine and Alan Hazelhurst and Charles Duro, now the Duke of Wellington, the other three in the final shortlist, all of whom were favoured in some way and I was not.

Do you think you've been underestimated throughout your whole life by the Conservative party and by the country?

Well, that's for others to judge, I think.

John.

You're looking very mischievous.

I'm a mischievous chap.

I'm particularly mischievous because Alistair keeps pointing at me to say that I'm going to ask the next question and then he jumps in there because he can't quite resist it.

But I'm teasing him.

Tell us a little bit about books.

You talk about a lot about loving books.

Tell us about the books that you read as a young person and what kind of books you loved.

Well, I read all the children's classics, things like Black Arrow, the whole of the Bunter books, of course, were absolutely essential reading in those days.

But I also gravitated to more serious books as well, as I have done subsequently.

I remember reading a book called Below the Salt by Thomas Costain, probably out of print now, but an absolutely brilliant book that excited me tremendously.

Is that to do with the class, The Salt, Below the Salt?

Yes, it is.

Yes.

Well, I won't tell you the story of the book.

It'll take half an hour.

But if anyone hasn't read it and they can get a copy of Below the Salt by Thomas Costain, it's one of my favourite books.

You still read a lot, I believe.

I do.

A huge amount, yes.

Tell us what you love to read and what you're reading at the moment.

I'm reading A Peasong Hitler by Tim Buvery at the moment.

It's his first book, but I think it's one of the finest books about the lead-up to the Second World War that I've yet read.

It's beautifully researched, beautifully written, and raises it from an angle that many people have not previously approached.

So I thoroughly recommend it.

Are you reading that?

No, I'm not reading Alistair's book because Norma has got it, and it's only a half-way through.

I wasn't asking that.

I was asking whether you...

You were.

Rory was.

I was.

I was...

But you claim you have read...

I do believe you have.

I do believe you have.

I do believe you have.

Blushing.

No, because you wrote me a very nice letter about that book.

I hope this is called on camera.

Yeah.

Anyway, are you reading that book because you're interested in Hitler, or are you reading that book because you're rather alarmed about the state of current politics and world affairs?

Well, I am alarmed about the state of current politics and current world affairs, but I'm reading that book because I heard it was an extremely good book.

I mean, what do you buy some at my age at Christmas?

You buy them books.

And I think at Christmas I had about 24 books, so I've got two shelves of books that I'm still reading, and will take some time to get through.

Now, I want to come on to the start of your career as an MP.

You didn't quite answer my question, but when you started to think that actually not only could you become an MP, but actually you're somebody who could reach the very, very top.

Well, I don't know that I consciously did think that at any stage.

My ambition was to get into the Treasury, and if I could to be Chancellor.

I don't know that I'd stretched it beyond that.

Everyone who has become Prime Minister, other than the true, other than the perhaps titans of politics of whom there are a handful over the past 300 years, needs a measure of luck, time, and circumstance to get there.

So I didn't particularly sit there thinking, am I going to be Prime Minister?

I did want to go to the Treasury.

And Sir John, one of the things that seems to have happened is that you became, I get the impression, part of a group of quite a talented intake that came in with you.

I remember sitting in someone's house seeing a very peculiar portrait with people like you and Matthew Parris and Chris Patton all dining around the corner from the House of Commons and charging in from whips.

Would you tell us a little bit about the group that came into the House of Commons with you and the friendships that you developed and what that was all about?

Well, I think the group we're talking about is the Blue Chips.

And they were a lot of centrists and maybe slightly centrists left and one or two from the right, Robert Cranbourne, for example, who I don't think would call himself a centre-left Tory.

And we liked one another.

We were the same vintage.

We came in at the same time.

I think all of us came in in 1979 and we naturally gravitated together.

Chris Patton, Matthew Parris, can you remind us who they were?

William Waldegrave, John Patton, Tristan Carroll-Jones, there were a range of others as well.

What was your relationship then, I suppose, coming in, given that that sounds a bit sort of centre-left-ish?

Tristan Carroll-Jones, Chris Patton, quite pro-EU.

How did that then work with Mrs Thatcher, who I guess was the dominant figure under whom you came?

What was your sense of her?

How did she embrace people like you?

What was the difference between you and the wets?

Were she suspicious of people like you?

Well...

How best to tackle this question.

I was in the whip's office and it was my job as treasury whip to keep an eye on what people thought of our economic policies in the early 1980s.

Well, I'm going to interrupt you here because I'm going to read from your book because I think this answers this even better than you could right now because you're probably thinking back through the midst of time.

So I was up all night rereading because as we know, Rory keeps telling me, you never read a book, you re-read a book, I was re-reading your autobiography for last night and I particularly enjoyed this bit.

I regarded it as my role to tell the Prime Minister what the backbenches were saying and I did so.

I set out in detail the grumbles that every whip present knew were the views of the vast majority of our backbench colleagues.

Margaret did not like the message at all and began to chew up the messenger.

I thought her behaviour was utterly unreasonable and I repeated the message.

She became more shrill.

I'm astonished at what you're saying, she snapped.

[Transcript] Leading / 23: John Major: From Brixton to Downing Street (Part 1)

I made it clear again, I was merely reporting the views of members, but she continued to attack me.

I became increasingly annoyed and I said, that's what colleagues are saying, whether you like it or not, it's my job to tell you and that's what I'm doing.

The tirade continued.

It goes on, the meeting was dangerously close to collapsing and mutual recrimination.

Jean Trumpton, one of the Lord's whips, attempted to lower the temperature and had her head bit off her pains.

It was an extraordinary performance by the Prime Minister, I have never forgotten it.

Then however, as we rose from the table for post dinner drinks, her husband Dennis came up to me.

She would have enjoyed that, he remarked, and he drifted off happily, clutching a gin and tonic.

So she didn't mind, it would, you would be suggesting, being told what people thought or did she mind?

Well I didn't know whether she'd mind at all at the time and frankly I was so fed up with the way she'd behaved, I didn't much care, but I found out pretty soon in a pretty spectacular way that it was easy to misread her.

The whips thought I'd blown my career, several of them said it and I remember one of them putting his hands around me and said, never mind, she won't be there forever, you can always come back.

But the very next day I was the whip on duty, sitting on the bench in the House of Commons. When she came from the Prime Minister's office at the back of the speaker she had sat down beside me and said, I've been thinking about what you said last night, we must have another talk about it, I'll convene another meeting.

And she did.

And it was a much gentler meeting.

And five weeks later she appointed me a member of her government and gave me what I call a proper job.

It was the, it is she said when she appointed me, the job I started with, Parliamentary Secretary at the Department of Health and Social Security.

And Torres Wanderse and Health and Social Security are reasonably rare, reasonably rare.

It was a wonderful place to start.

So John, just to return to this bit, tell us a little bit about this tension between Mrs. Thatcher, Wetz, Bluechips, give us a sense of the ideological fight in the heart of the Conservative Party from Mrs. Thatcher coming in and what it meant her coming in from 79 to 83, the positives, the negatives.

Well, first off, I may say so, it's overdone and was overdone by the media.

Of course, she was right of centre in her attitudes and many of the others were left of centre, particularly on economic and social matters.

But you will recall, she appointed all the people I mentioned to government.

There was no question of having a Brexit government with only one conceivable view.

She saw these people were talented, she knew she needed a government that brought in the best talent in the Conservative Party, and she appointed them.

And she was prepared to argue her case and argue with them.
I'll tell you something about Mrs. Thatcher, which people haven't particularly remarked.
She could be extraordinarily brutal and blunt and occasionally rude, but only, only to people who were in a position to fight back.
And if they did fight back, she didn't mind.
If they didn't fight back, she thought they were wet as a stream.
But what I never saw her do was be unkind or brutal to someone who was not in a position to answer back.
So she accepted we were a party with a very broad base.
And on that subject, what would she have made of somebody like Boris Johnson deciding to throw out of the party Ken Clarke, Nicholas Soames, and of course, including me?
But what would she thought about the general view that you throw 21 MPs out of the House of Commons because they disagree with you on a no-deal Brexit?
Well, I can only tell you that she was Prime Minister for 11 years.
She threw nobody out and never even suggested it.
And there were certainly plenty of differences.
And that is strange that you had with her in terms of the, because if you remember the whole sort of spitting images, had a revival, I don't know whether Mrs. Thatcher is still in it, but the image of her sort of, you know, utterly dominant within the cabinet.
What were cabinet discussions actually like?
Well, they were very blunt.
If anybody seriously thinks you're going to stop people like Peter Walker saying exactly what they think in cabinet, even though it might be diametrically opposed to the Prime Minister, then they didn't know Peter Walker.
And if they think Jeffrey Howe would be deterred because he has a gentleman manner, then they don't know Jeffrey.
And you could say the same about Willie Whitelaw.
The beliefs that Margaret just said, we'll do this and we all do it, it is true that she tended to introduce the subject.
And at the end of her introduction came her conclusion.
But that is not how the discussions always ended.
But did she change over time?
Did she become more...
Yes.
But after 83 and 87, well, I wasn't in the cabinet at any degree, but after 87, yes, she did.
She became a bit more determined to get her own way after 87.
Okay, Ray John, let's just take a very, very short break.
Back in a minute.
Can I come back to you on the subject of the tone of cabinet?
So I remember Ken Clark saying to me once how frustrated he found it in David Cameron's government, he said, his memory of cabinet going back to your time in government and even to Mrs. Thatcher was longer, more leisurely conversations where you could really chew into policy and discuss things.

And he actually blamed Tony Blair for creating much more short cursory meetings, which were inherited by Cameron.

So Ken Clark's complaints when he came back in 2010 was he said, oh, Rory, cabinet meetings have become short and cursory and we never really have a chance to chew into things or discuss them properly.

The whole thing's now run by special advisers.

It was a very, very poor impersonation of Ken Clark and Roy, well, Ken, if I can put it this way, is one of a kind.

They have never produced anyone like Ken in my political lifetime.

The thought that anyone could cow Ken or keep Ken quiet if you wish to speak is just an illusion.

They certainly couldn't.

It is true.

I didn't enter Margaret's cabinet until 87 when I became Chief Secretary.

And you were the first of that 79 generation, weren't you?

Yes, I was.

Which is quite interesting because if you think that the next election, Keir Starman and Rishi Sunak have both been around less than the time you had before you got into them.

Yes.

Well, Prime Ministers are getting younger and younger.

The next but two will be pre-puberty, I think.

But it was a little more difficult in those days.

So yes, I think I was the first.

But there were in Ken's time when he was there with Margaret, longer conversations, I understand.

And there certainly was when I was there because I tended to draw all the voices in before reaching a conclusion as to what the voices said.

It was a novel concept that it seemed to work in cabinet.

So you became Chief Secretary.

My best job.

Really?

Oh yeah, it was a wonderful job.

Because in those days, I'm not sure it's done the same way now.

But in those days, the Chief Secretary negotiated one to one, just as I'm sitting opposite you, with the spending minister.

No civil servants present, nobody present.

The Chief Secretary prepared.

The Departmental Secretary of State prepared.

They debated it and they reached a conclusion.

So it was given to the Chief Secretary, the junior member of cabinet, the opportunity to shift public expenditure in very large sums from some areas to others that he judged were more deserving.

And was Nigel Lawson, who was the Chancellor, was he?

Nigel was the Chancellor.

And he just let you get on with that?

Well, Nigel was concerned that I balance a budget which no one had done for a very long time.

And we did balance the budget.

And providing I did that, Nigel was content.

Sir John, I guess that so many wonderful things to talk about, but will you give us a sense of how culture was different in terms of the media and the press, how Parliament was reported on, how press secretaries worked in those days, and what you think has changed in terms of the media landscape, the way Number 10 behaves and the way the press has behaved since the 1980s?

That's what Sherlock Holmes would call a three pipe problem, I think.

Let me try and address it from the point of view of the politicians first.

There was no social media then.

That is a huge difference, an absolutely mega difference, which makes life immeasurably more difficult for many politicians and certainly more difficult for senior ministers and the Prime Minister, because they're never quite sure what's going to come out of the undergrowth from their own side.

So that is a distinct change.

I think also, although we always have the newspapers broadly Labour, broadly Conservative, I think they're much more part of the debate now than they were then.

I think they're participants in politics rather than reporters of politics.

And we began to see quite a bit of that at the end of the 80s, I think, and certainly in the 90s, when the government ran into trouble, particularly over Europe, where I was seen as a pro-European, and many of the newspapers and others were becoming, let me put it this way, disenchanted with the European scene.

And I think they began to become more participants than they had been before at that stage. And I think that has carried on and worsened.

You mentioned Geoffrey Howe there, and I don't know if you heard, but at the weekend there was this play on Radio 4 about Geoffrey Howe's resignation speech.

I heard of it.

As for the younger listeners, Geoffrey Howe, very senior cabinet minister, made a resignation speech in the House of Commons, which I think many historians will say finally dead for Mrs Thatcher as Prime Minister.

I think you were sitting next to Mrs Thatcher at the time.

I just want a sense of two things, really, because you had your own difficulties, we'll come on to when you'd be Prime Minister with Norman LeMond, when he was your Chancellor, Tony and Gordon, pretty well-known story.

What is it about the number 10, number 11 relationship that makes it so difficult to manage?

And just give us, I'd love to hear what you were thinking and what you were feeling Mrs Thatcher was thinking, as Geoffrey Howe made that truly stunning speech.

Well I was sitting next to Margaret and she didn't expect it.

She certainly didn't expect a speech that was so blunt and clearly aimed with a deadly accuracy at what she had been doing and how Geoffrey disapproved of it.

So I think she was pretty shocked and she was a sufficiently astute politician. She had a very good nose for politics, stories about that I could tell you, but I'll spare you them.

So she realised immediately how deadly that particular speech was. And when she got up and left the chamber, she asked me to go with her. And we went into her room and talked about it for a while. It wasn't really a conversation. She was emoting about what had happened and how it would be received in the party. Did she know she was finished? No, I don't think she did. But she realised it was trouble and it wasn't a trouble, she could just shake off. It wasn't something that could be handled by by a burning or anybody else. And there were comments made that really didn't help from within Downing Street. I don't know who made them. Tell us a little bit. Give us an example of her political instincts because we often think about her as a sort of technocratic economic ideologue. I will then. And I notice you didn't answer me about the number 10, number 11 relations. I'll come back to that. But while I can remember the example of her instincts, there was a Berick and East Lothian by-election in the 1980s where there was a majority for the Labour Party of just over a thousand. And the Tories were pretty confident they'd win it. The candidate was a lady I'd known for a very long time, Margaret Marshall. And I went up to help her for a couple of days and I was there when Margaret came up and I was asked to look after Margaret for part of the time she was there. And she was only up there for a morning. But I remember her saying at the end of the morning, it doesn't smell right, we're not going to win this. And everybody was anticipating we'd win it. But she was bang on the button. I think it was John Hume Robertson who won for Labour with a majority of about 1100. But she was up there just for a morning and she knew it was wrong. And that was a remarkable instinct. I don't think many people would do it. The tension between 10 and 11 is because they have different roles, really. I mean, the Prime Minister has to keep in check all his spending ministers. And that isn't an easy job. They all have a case for spending more money because you can always have a case that will never be a time where a spending minister cannot make a case for spending more money. And the Treasury have to hold the ring to make sure the macroeconomic situation is correct and so there is an instinctive divide between the two of them. It depends how well they work together, whether that divide can be easily handled

or whether it actually becomes a point of friction.

Often it becomes a point of friction.

It didn't with David Cameron and George Osborne.

That's true.

But mostly, mostly it does.

And that is, it's that they both have to live with the success of different objectives.

So we're going to, I think, stop this before we get onto your role as Prime Minister

because we're going to really concentrate that in our second episode,

where we're really going to dig into your time as Prime Minister.

But can I try to come back last time for the sort of snapshot of this fall of Mrs. Thatcher,

the incredible drama around that, the pushes for the leadership, I guess,

the figure of Michael Heseltine, who we've interviewed and who's a great charmer

and a great one for winning over Alistair all the time with his beautiful suits.

So tell us a little bit about the drama of that moment.

And who I think is fair to say, again, from looking at your book again,

I always get a sense of your relationship with Michael Heseltine.

You never, you respected him, but there was maybe never fully trust between you.

Is that fair?

I didn't know him until I made him Deputy Prime Minister, obviously,
after I became Prime Minister.

From, from when on, people had said, he's very ambitious.

This is a mistake.

You shouldn't have done it.

And he was absolutely superb to work with.

So he became an extremely good friend and remained so.

But I simply didn't know him before.

But the fall of Mrs. Thatcher is, is, is subjected to so many false narratives
that it's worth actually remembering what really happened.

There were two things that brought Mrs. Thatcher down and one event.

The two things of them, the bigger event was actually the poll tax.

It was the poll tax that destabilized her position in the party long before,

well, not long before Europe ran alongside it, but the poll tax was the big one.

And just among that, did you at the time, did you, as a politician,

foresee the problems that was going to create?

Well, the Treasury did.

And I was the Chief Secretary.

And Nigel Lawson often sent me along to the meetings to argue against the poll tax

because he had done it privately with Margaret and it had obviously caused friction between them.

Remind listeners who don't remember what the poll tax was.

We've got a lot of many, many younger listeners.

So give us roughly the case for and against the poll tax and what it was, if you could bear.

It's the dustman and the Duke argument, really,

whether they should play the same amount for public services or whether it should be related to
income.

And it's always been related to income or property or whatever.
The dustman, the poll tax was the other way around.
And the Prime Minister had been assured by departmental ministers at the time that the poll tax would not increase the levy on the average working man, dramatically, if at all. That turned out to be totally mistaken by which time she was hooked on the policy and couldn't really retreat.
She wasn't great on retreating.
She didn't like it as a matter of principle and she was stuck with it.
And because she was stuck with it, she dug her heels in and advocated it even more.
And the poll tax was killing the Conservative Party.
And then at the dispatch box, she referred to, I think it was after the law had spoken to the Labour Conference.
And she and the law, I think it fair to say, were not soulmates.
She was the European Commission President.
They were not soulmates.
And she ended her remarks about something saying, no, no, no.
And the Conservative Party was overwhelmingly pro-European.
And the reason it was overwhelmingly pro-European was we still had that stage in the 80s and an awful lot of people who'd served either in the war or in the forces after the war.
And they were prepared to do anything to make sure there wasn't another European war.
And the easiest way of doing that was the unity of Europe.
And so that deeply affronted them.
Then, of course, was a great clash with Nigel Lawson and Geoffrey Howe about the exchange rate mechanism when they favoured it and she did not.
And they won.
Eventually.
Yeah, eventually.
I'm sure we'll come to that later with Rory's threat about what I'm trying to say.
September the 16th, 1990.
I remember the day, I'll just thank you very much for reminding me.
And I will have something to say about that when we get there.
OK.
So Europe became a second issue.
The parliamentary party felt that Margaret was going to lose the next election.
They had other fears as well, but they were concerned she would lose the next election.
And I'm sure if she had metaphorically put her arms around the party and sweet talk to them, I think they would not have voted against her.
But she didn't.
And I don't think she ran a great campaign when Michael contested the leadership.
So a final question for me.
I remember you gave a speech at Ditchley Park, which I attended, where you talked about the fact that you thought MPs didn't have the right expertise anymore. In particular, you were saying that we needed people with expertise from finance, experience from...

And you needed...

You were suggesting in your Ditchley speech, we almost needed to change the constitution to bring people with broader knowledge from the professions into parliament.

Is that something you just felt briefly at that moment?

No, no, no.

I thought it then, I think it now.

I mean, I think there's been a great change on both sides of the House of Commons.

And I think it's detrimental to parliament on the Labour side.

There are a lot of what I suppose you might call horny-handed sons of toil who were in the Labour Party.

And my goodness, they mattered because they didn't talk about things that happened in their constituencies

as an abstract point.

They lived it in the middle of their constituencies, whether they were miners or whatever they were.

And they represented a large part of the British nation.

And you don't see many of those in the Labour Party now.

It's much more middle-class, much more technocratic, and I think that is a loss.

And on the Tory side, you always used to have a fair smattering of people who'd been in business and run things at a high level or been in the armed forces at a high level.

And we've lost that practical expertise.

It exists in the House of Lords, but that is unelected, of course.

And I think the fact that that expertise is lost in the Commons.

I think for some years now, it's been pretty shocking to me how poorly the legislation is examined in the Commons.

Whole swathes of bills are rushed through quickly under a whip without proper examination and then sent off to the Lords.

And if the Lords are so impertinent as to change what has not previously been discussed, the House of Commons will probably overturn them.

And that is bad legislation.

And you do need people in the House of Commons, A, with experience.

I'm all in favour of youth.

They have vigor, they have intellect, all sorts of wonderful things like that.

But a bit of experience isn't a bad idea when you're passing laws that affect people's lives.

And I think on both sides of the House of Commons, we have lost that.

My final question before we end part one, as it were, is you mentioned earlier about you need a measure of luck.

And again, I'd completely forgotten until I had a look at your autobiography.

But Mrs Thatcher had wanted you at one point to be Chief Whip.

And I think it was a combination of Lawson and Willie Whitelaw that sort of...

That's not quite right.

Willie Whitelaw had wanted me as Chief Whip.

Lawson wanted me as Chief Secretary.

And Margaret Thatcher intervened and Lawson won.

So between then, and literally within a very short period of time,

[Transcript] Leading / 23: John Major: From Brixton to Downing Street (Part 1)

you became Foreign Secretary Chancellor and eventually Prime Minister.
Chances of you becoming the leader of the Conservative Party from a position as Chief Whip would have been negligible, wouldn't they?
Oh, you didn't see the first showing of House of Cards, clearly.
Well, I don't remind you, remind me.
Is that what happened?
Was that the playbook?
That was France's aircard.
Yeah, who was Chief Whip?
And I'm teasing, of course.
No, you're quite right.
I would have been Chief Whip and who knows, Margaret might not have lost that vote against.
Oh, you think you'd have been a better Chief Whip?
I don't know.
I don't know.
But I think if I had been responsible for her campaign, I would have handled it differently.
You didn't really enjoy being Foreign Secretary much, did you?
Yes, I did.
It was a complete fallacy.
I mean, what I didn't think was that I was equipped to be Foreign Secretary when I was made it.
I had no real experience of Foreign Affairs.
I went away to Tristan Garrough Jones's house in Spain, and he and Catalia lent me the house.
And I spent the latter part of July and the whole of August reading huge piles of brief on every aspect of Foreign Affairs.
I'm sure this is exactly what Boris Johnson did when he was appointed Foreign Secretary.
I'm sure he did.
I'm sure he did.
And in Latin, or Greek.
We then came back and a few weeks later, Nigel and Margaret fell out and I was moved from the Foreign Office to the Treasury.
But I would have liked to have stayed at the Foreign Office.
I think Foreign Affairs are immensely interesting.
I think they're immensely interesting at the moment, and we are handling China wrongly,
I think, in my view.
So yes, I would have liked to have stayed at the Foreign Office for longer.
It's a fallacy that I didn't like it.
But you then got your dream job, which was Chancellor of the Exchequer.
But that, too, didn't last that long because you then...
The worst possible moment, I got it, yes.
We'll save like Wednesday for part two.
Thank you, Sir John, very much.
Okay, well, thank you for your time so far.
Thank you.
So, Rory, part one, Sir John Major.

I thought, fascinating, and I thought you were on a really good line of questioning on whether it's possible for somebody from his background to become Prime Minister today.

I mean, he's very modest about it, but as you say, he left school before he was 16.

He grew up in a family with absolutely no spare money at all.

And it was a very unusual journey.

I mean, I don't think...

I mean, have you got a sense, really, of why, in the end, he ended up as a conservative when he came from a background which you would have thought at that time would have made him more likely to be a Labour MP?

Well, I noticed you trying very, very hard to sort of take him down the

Tory's good, Labour bad line of questioning,

hoping that Rishi Sunak and the candidates selection panel are listening to our podcast.

Look, I've known him, obviously, as both as a journalist,

and I actually knew him very well when he was coming through the ranks.

I think I've told you before that when I was a journalist,

I wrote a piece for The Sunday Mirror magazine.

I did my six tips for the top.

OK, now, how's about this for quality punditry, Rory?

My six for the top, who at the time were barely household names outside their own household, were Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, John Major, Mo Mole, Michael Portillo, and Andrew Mitchell.

And Andrew Mitchell.

Well, Andrew will be very, very grateful that he's here.

Well, he's the last man standing in a way, isn't he?

Because he's still in government.

And I notice you didn't include Alan Clark in your list,

who, reading his diaries, not only a friend of yours,

but also often had fantasies he was going to be Prime Minister.

Yeah, indeed, though.

I think he was already fairly well established by that.

No, I think he became fascinated in politics.

But from this perspective, I think he did have that sort of sense of, you know, pull yourself up and what have you.

I think he slightly caricatured the way that the Labour Party would have seen itself at the time.

But it is one of the most incredible things that he became a Conservative Party leader in the Prime Minister.

And having reread his autobiography came out in 1999.

So I guess I must have read it around then.

So that's 20-odd years ago.

But it's just very, very interesting to get that sense of his childhood being very, very different to the childhood of most people who went into Conservative Party politics.

But also unbelievable that, as he says, his father was a real, real Victorian.

Yeah.

That his father was almost 70 when he was born and John Major is now 80.
So we're talking to a man whose father's child had stretched his back 150 years.
I've got to say, when he said that, his dad was 63, 64 when he was born.
So I'm 66 last month.
The idea of having a child now just is sort of terrifying that thought.
And also there's a very moving bit in his book about when his father dies.
And he describes the scene of the deathbed and his reflections on it.
I think the other thing that came through talking to him there is,
despite your relentless efforts to get him to sort of be very, very political
and say what an evil person I was and how much damage I'd done to him down the years.
I think there is an integrity there that is pretty deep.
I do sometimes reflect that I was pretty brutal in both as a journalist when I was on the mirror.
I was very supportive of him up until the point where he became Tory leader.
But having been on the mirror and being suddenly becoming the Tory leader,
I'm afraid all bets are off.
I think one of the things that I wondered about listening to him,
I agree with you, he's a very gentle person.
He doesn't ever resort to cheap jibes.
I sort of wondered, I mean, has he changed a lot?
I mean, I don't know any politician who is quite as reluctant to get
involved in any kind of criticism, party politics of anyone.
I think he does it occasionally.
So he has made speeches recently which have been very, very critical of other leaders.
His book is very, very spiky at points about us, about Tony Blair, about new labour and so forth.
But I think he sort of feels that he's got this,
I think he does have a much better, more popular, positive image than he had.
And I think he's sort of just, he's kind of playing it out.
The other thing that I think is really interesting is how,
I think he's still very, very careful in how he speaks.
And I always remember that when he was an active politician.
He has this very, maybe it's the Victorian thing,
but he has this very old fashioned way of speaking,
which I think people quite like.
And he's very, I don't know, I think there's a, listen,
I actually think he's more ruthless than he lets on.
I think to become leader of the conservative party, you've got to have real steel.
And I think he did have an awful lot of steel,
but I think he's just got this very nice manner with people.
So hopefully all of our listeners at home have enjoyed that.
If you'd like to hear the second part of our extended interview with Sijon Major right now,
it's already available to members of the Restless Politics Plus,
and you can sign up at therestlesspolitics.com,
or you can subscribe through Apple Podcasts.
If not, no worries, it'll be out next Monday.

See you then. Bye-bye.
Bye-bye.