

[Transcript] Leading / 24: John Major: The Gulf War, Black Wednesday, and Populism (Part 2)

So, welcome to The Restless Politics Leading with me, Alistair Campbell.
And with me, Rory Stewart.
And we are part two of our interview with former British Prime Minister, Sir John Major.
And I think we should get to the point of you being Prime Minister.
So, tell us how it finally came about.
The book was through those heady days that saw you finally making that short journey as you put it in your book from Cold Harbour Lane in Brixton to number 10 Downing Street.
Well, there's not much to tell, really.
It was fairly straightforward.
After Margaret resigned, it was clear Michael Heseltine was going to be a candidate.
I wasn't sure whether I wished to be or not.
People won't believe that, but it is true.
Because my daughter was just about to take A-levels.
My son was about to take O-levels.
I wasn't at all sure that I didn't wish to stay in my previous job for a little longer.
But my parliamentary private secretary, Graham Bright, said,
I think I'm sure you have 150 votes, so you can't run away.
So, Sir John, tell us what it felt like.
You won that election, you walked in.
And what was your first impression of going into that job?
And what, I suppose, most importantly, what was the difference that you noticed immediately between being Prime Minister and being a very senior cabinet minister?
Well, it was different.
I remember we had a vote in the House the evening I became Prime Minister.
And, though I wasn't appointed to the following morning by the Queen, of course,
and I went in there and you could feel the conversation stop when I walked in.
And I actually made a brief speech in the iLobby that particular evening.
And you notice there is a different attitude.
Power resides with the Prime Minister and that has an impact.
And you notice that pretty soon.
In fact, you notice it immediately.
You felt something?
You felt something. Yes, it was different.
Suddenly, people reacted to you differently to the way they did the previous day.
And that is as much to do with the office as with the individual.
I think there's a degree of formality about being Prime Minister.
It's not a question of being stuffy, but I think the Prime Minister needs a degree of formality because that is what is required by the office, even if not welcomed by the individual.
And tell us just very quickly, but that, of course, tempts me to ask,
give us a bit of a sense of Boris and how he rates in terms of the dignity of the office and the seriousness of being Prime Minister?
Well, I don't think I will, actually.
Boris is no longer Prime Minister.

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He's no longer in the House of Commons.
He wasn't my favourite Prime Minister.
I think that's fairly evident.
I didn't agree with his policies.
But Neil Kinnock once jokingly said to me,
the best time to kick a man is when he's down, but he was joking.
There's no need to kick Boris now.
He's down.
He's very possibly out.
And I really don't want him to continue to be part of the conversation.
He would wish to be a part of the conversation, but I would wish to look forward.
Very good.
But it was a good try, Boris.
You mentioned Neil there.
I was going to bring this up later, but actually, I will bring it up now
because I want to talk about the Gulf War.
I was really struck in your book by how warm and positive you were about Neil
because, of course, the public will just remember you across the dispatch box at each other.
You basically said that Neil was an incredible support during the Gulf War.
He was an old-fashioned patriot.
And I was really kind of quite blown away by your assessment.
And of course, later, after he stopped being lead of the opposition,
you made him a European commissioner.
So I suppose this is, Rory and I, we have this motto of disagreeing agreeably.
It feels to me that that sort of defined how you two operated.
Is that a fair assessment?
I think without a formal agreement, when I first became Prime Minister,
we both tried to clean up Prime Minister's question time.
It's a carnival.
I mean, the purpose of holding the Prime Minister to account has long since gone.
It's a carnival in which the Prime Minister tries to cheer up his troops
and damage the opposition.
And the opposition tries to prove that the Prime Minister is either incompetent,
craven, or whatever is the determination of the day.
I think for the first three months, Neil Kinnock and I tried to clear that up.
We didn't have a formal agreement to do it.
It just was the way things worked.
And, of course, our peers on either side eventually got the better.
The press said, this is very boring.
And it went back to the old merry-go-round, which is of no use then or now
to man nor beast.
But I thought Neil Kinnock was a more considerable person
than he was given credit for at the time.

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I could only say, when I shared confidences with him, they remained confidences. When you meet someone, you either are neutral about them, or you think, this is quite a nice guy. I didn't agree with his politics, of course, but I rather liked him and I thought he was quite badly treated by many people. And he was very supportive over the Gulf War. I mean, when the Gulf War began, it seemed to me, if we were sending young men and women conceivably out to the Gulf to be killed, because we were really worried about biological and chemical weapons at the time and the Republican Guard, if we're going to do that, there are several things we need to do. One of them was a broadcast I made to the families, because it was their husbands, brothers, children who were being sent out there. The second one was to, and I don't put these in any particular order, to make sure all the churches, Church of England, Catholic Church, all the churches were fully on board with the necessity of the war. And thirdly, was to make sure that all the party leaders were. And so I did go out on my way to make sure they were well briefed. I was fascinated by that, because so Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait, the Gulf War begins, you have to commit, or you decide to commit, UK troops. And yet it's clear from reading your book that you really felt it mattered, not just to get the politicians on board, but you had, I think you had the Archbishop of Canterbury-Runsey and Cardinal Hume come in, and you briefed them on the whole thing. I was blown away by that. Well, I think it was necessary. If you have young men on your behalf, they were predominantly young men. I remember addressing them on a tank, and I had this vast array of soldiers, as far as the eye could see, surrounding this tank in Saudi Arabia. And I looked at them and they were very young. And I knew, which they did not know, that the war would actually begin on the 12th of January. And the 12th of January was my son's 16th birthday. And many of these young soldiers were 17, 18, 19. But for an accident of a year or so, it could have been my son. I was looking out there who could have been going into war and could have been killed in a few days' time. And I thought they deserved to know that they had the whole country behind them without a shadow of doubt. And that was what was in my mind. Coming on from that, give us a sense of what you thought the moral responsibilities of being a prime minister are. And I think in two ways.

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One of them is your Ian McLeod point about the moral component of politics. And I think the second is the extraordinary transformation from being a cabinet minister focusing on one narrow field to suddenly having to be responsible for everything right the way through to young men going out to die. It's quite difficult to answer that without sounding pious or sanctimonious. Let me have a crack at it at the risk of doing one or the other in terms of the moral responsibility. And perhaps I can do it by mentioning the thing that I least like doing and most regretted doing the time I was there. On the day I became prime minister, we were heading for a serious recession. If you remember, interest rates were 14%. Inflation was very nearly 10%. Growth was down to half a percent. And we were going into what was going to be a very deep recession. In order to correct that, we had to do some pretty uncomfortable things in government. We had to put up some taxes. We had to cut public expenditure. We did many things that caused an awful lot of pain to people. The things that I wished to do when I came into politics were precisely the opposite of what I had no choice but to do during the period of that recession. And the belief that we didn't care was simply untrue. But I had a thing about inflation in particular because I remember in my childhood that for us to get through the week my mother often had to borrow money. I don't ever remember her in my youth buying herself a new dress or a new pair of shoes or going off to the hairdresser or spending money on herself. And I knew there were many families up and down the country who would be in a similar position. But I had no choice if I was going to bring inflation down. And that was immensely damaging. It made us look hard-hearted. It made us look as though we didn't care. And many people would genuinely have felt we didn't. And the opposition, of course, Alistair were making it clear that they felt we didn't and that was perhaps their job, but that's what they were doing. So that was extremely difficult. The moral aspect was it, if I may say so. On the day we left office, interest rates had fallen from 14% to 6%. Inflation had fallen from, it went up to over 10% to 2.6%.

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Growth from being in recession was at 3.5%,
which I think is the largest we've seen it for a very long time.
And the public finances were one billion in deficit.
It had risen to 46 billion.
So it was a complete turnaround.
I don't think you'll find figures like that very often in politics, if at all, in living memory.
And yet we had caused so much hurt and we had been there so long
and we had blue-on-blue battles, which is always absolutely fatal for any government.
For those three reasons, we went down to a terrible defeat.
But it's also interesting to note that we did it
because we thought we had to get rid of inflation.
And the fact of getting rid of inflation lasted for a very long time.
But I do think the way the government behaves, any government,
not just the one I was lucky enough to lead, but any government can look callous
when in fact the reasons behind it are much more complex and rather different.
Can I just ask you about the two elections, 1992 and 1997?
There was a conventional wisdom going into 1992 that you weren't going to win and you did.
And I guess there was a conventional wisdom going into 1997 that you weren't going to win and you didn't.
Tell me through the kind of psychology of the 1992 election
because it was fascinating to watch.
Did you feel through that campaign that you were going to win?
I did.
I was pretty much the only person who did, I think, but I did.
The first week on all of the campaign, I loathed it,
the Labour campaign was very professional.
If I use the word slick, I mean it in the sense of professional and it was very televisual.
Ours wasn't.
And yet when I went out into the streets, there was a warmth
that led me to believe that we were doing better than the opinion polls told us.
But I wasn't getting through.
If I made a long speech about education for an hour,
it would get one minute on the news,
followed by one minute from the Labour spokesman denouncing it,
one minute from the Liberal spokesman denouncing it,
and two minutes from the reporter explaining what it was I meant by what it was I said.
Now, in practice, I had actually said what I meant.
So the message just wasn't getting through.
And then I went to Bolton and it was a near riot.
I never did find out quite why.
And I thought, hang on, why can't I speak to people directly?
And that's where the soapbox came from.
I had learnt my politics in Brixton as a boy,

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starting at 14 or 15, whatever, 13 actually,
standing on the soapbox in Brixton Market and in Brixton Road,
just speaking to anyone who was passing and answering questions.
And people were very tolerant.
Here was this kid who knew nothing about everything
and it taught me something about British tolerance.
They listened.
Many of them just walked on, of course, but they did listen
and they'd gather in little groups and they'd cross-examine me.
But nobody ever, ever told me to buzz off.
I didn't have a right with you and I was very struck by that.
So I was encouraged to get out of soapbox.
And I did it first at Luton and it was dismissed by many in my party.
You thought I ought to be on television.
But it worked with the public.
It was flesh and blood politics.
Was this something sort of almost primal about going back?
Yes, it was.
It was an instinct.
Many people thought I was silly, but it just felt right.
So it was a really wonderful moment where you suddenly rediscovered
your genuine authenticity as a politician.
And I think it's an incredible sort of shifting moment, isn't it?
Moving away from the slickness of television back to standing on a soapbox
and communicating and then winning.
But I guess the question that comes out of that is,
would that still be possible today?
Or do you think we've now entered a completely new political media landscape
where that form of direct communication has become almost relevant?
I think it would be very difficult today.
It was a novelty value in 92 that was so effective, I think.
Because people thought that politicians were growing away from the public.
And here was suddenly someone in the middle of an election,
actually in the middle of a crowd with a microphone surrounded by large numbers of people,
some of whom were shouting at him.
So it was a novelty value, I think, that worked.
I doubt it would work today.
Tell us very quickly about how spin changed things,
the extent to which you felt that spin and the culture that actually
Alastair himself was associated with changed politics during your time.
Well, it was part of a whole series of changes.
I detect in your question a degree of mischief.
I'm asking you to be blunt what you think about what Alastair did to our politics.

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I find it hard to believe of you, Rory.

Well, he did for Tony Blair what I could have probably used someone doing for me.

And he was extremely good at it.

And the Labour Party had been out of office for a very long time.

They had lost the 1992 election unexpectedly.

They thought they were going to win it.

And they were ruthless in needing to win the 1997 election.

Because if they hadn't, there would have been a real question

about whether we were a plural democracy and whether the Labour Party had a future.

So there was a range of circumstances that made the Labour Party completely ruthless about what they did.

And plainly, one of the things they had to do was to damage the Conservative government and the Conservative Prime Minister.

And Alastair and his colleagues were very successful in doing that.

Very nicely put, may I say.

Did you ever think when John Smith died and Tony Blair became leader, did you think we're not going to win?

I'll tell you a story that will give you your answer.

In the 1992 election, Chris Patton, who was party chairman, lost his seat at Bath.

He was as able as anyone in our generation as a politician and his career has been extraordinary.

The following morning, he came to number 10 and we went up to sit in the white room and have a coffee and talk about it.

And we realised then that having been in government for 13 years and then got another five years, just we had stretched the democratic elastic as far as it could go.

Unless the Labour Party imploded.

We agreed the day after the 1992 election, not in any defeatist mode at all,

but we just agreed that dispassionately as observers of politics,

it would be extremely difficult for the Conservative Party,

even if led by the Archangel Gabriel, to win the next election.

And therefore, we should do what we thought was right

because we thought it would be extremely difficult to win.

Simply because longevity, people, there's a time and tide when you can feel the mood changing.

Do you think that's what's happening in the country now?

It may be, I'm not sure yet, because I think the Labour Party are making one or two mistakes that will damage them in the general election.

But in 1992, we foresaw the probability that we would lose in 97 unless Labour imploded.

And so, it wasn't a surprise to us in 1997.

The scale of the defeat was, but not the fact of it.

Sir John, let's develop that then.

You've raised this question in this comparison.

What is it that you think Labour isn't quite doing to put them in the position that Alistair and Tony Blair were in driving into 97 at the moment?

What is it that Keir Starmer's not doing?

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I think there are one or two policy points.

I'm a conservative.

I'm not going to alert the Labour Party to what they're doing that will cost them votes at the next general election.

Do you still identify as a conservative?

I do identify as a conservative.

I'm a conservative because I believe in what conservatives believe in.

Would you?

I believe in conservatism.

I believe in conserving.

I believe in obeying the law.

I believe in the unwritten laws of politics that we call conventions.

I believe in all those things.

I believe in internationalism rather than nationalism.

That is the conservatism that I believe in, that I've always believed in, and I haven't changed.

Parts of my party may have changed, but not all of it.

So can I ask you a very, very direct question?

Did you vote conservative when Boris Johnson was leader?

I voted for my local candidate.

Who was a conservative?

Who was a conservative and whom is a middle-of-the-road conservative and in whom I had faith?

Let's go to the big fault line for a succession of conservative leaders, probably going back to Ted Heath.

Certainly for Thatcher, certainly for you and all other leaders since, and that's Europe.

Again, going back to your book, I covered a lot of the events that you were talking about as a journalist.

I remember.

Yeah, Rory, do you want to ask about that?

Well, I do really want to.

John is much too polite.

Well, that's because he's not as tribal as you are.

He's probably not trying to get a seat on Rishi's list.

What about the mastery treaty negotiations, which I covered, and I thought I had a sort of handle on,

but that felt like one of the most difficult, complicated European negotiations.

I'd really love a sense of who the key players were,

how you sort of operated as you were trying to get the agreement that you finally got.

There were several points that were fundamental.

The Europeans were going to move towards the mastery treaty, whatever we said.

And if we had just tried to block it,

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we would have made ourselves complete outliers in Europe
and we would have lost all the influence that we had in Europe.
The point about negotiation is you give something to get something.
You don't just say, I'm having this and throw your toys out the prem if you don't get it.
There were two things that were a red rag to the majority of people in parliament.
One of them spread wide across the Labour Party, the other didn't.
The first was not joining the euro currency.
Nobody thought I could negotiate a deal that kept us out of the euro.
I did.
The second was the social chapter, which we conservatives believed rightly or wrongly
was going to be a job-destroying event.
Nobody thought we could negotiate our way out of that.
We did.
And so those were the two things which led people to declare the negotiation was a triumph.
On the day the negotiations were complete.
And the biggest single mistake that I made in politics
was not to get the mastery treaty through before the 1992 election.
But we ran out of time.
There were three dates and the date I picked for the 1992 election,
the 9th of April was a sentimental date because it was a day I met Norma.
But we couldn't have gone on any longer.
And so there wasn't time to get the mastery treaty through.
And since it had had a massive majority in parliament,
there seemed no difficulty in leaving it till the next parliament.
What I did not foresee was that the nature of the Conservative Party would change
with the membership of the members of parliament in the 1992 election.
The old guard who'd been in or after the war, who believed unity with Europe was imperative
for the future security of our country, left parliament.
And in came people who were imbued with a different view about Europe
and were prepared to vote against it.
And I should have really taken the treaty through before, but I didn't.
And so new people coming into parliament, led by some people who'd been there
and in courage by others who should have known better,
caused a great deal of trouble in getting the treaty through the House of Commons
and it disrupted the whole parliament and in many ways blew the government of its program.
And Sir John, of course, this then is repeated in spades
when I was a member of parliament over the fight over Brexit
and Theresa May trying to get her Brexit deals through
and the rise of Boris Johnson and things.
But yours was the first glimmer of the way in which Europe could really tear the Conservative Party
apart.
And I wondered whether, you know, we're all remainers here.
We all understand that you hate Brexit.

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You don't need to remind us that we all were opposed to it.
But I wonder whether as somebody who was a Conservative from your early teens,
you could play devil's advocate and reflect a little bit on why it is so many Conservative Party members
then and now continue to be Euro-skeptic
and why that was such a strong tradition within the Conservative Party.
Well, it goes back to the Empire loyalists, of course.
If you go back to that immediately after the war,
they were quite a significant feature in the Conservative Party
and that strand of opinion has always been there.
Tell us about them. I think most citizens won't know about them.
They were distraught at India becoming independent, for example, in 1948 under the Atlee government.
And they disliked the fact, they found it hard to come to terms with the fact
that we were no longer an empire, that we no longer had the whole of the world
with large pink blotches in which 50 million Britons, as we were then,
actually governed a very large portion of the world.
And of course, that worsened.
It isn't that we have retreated.
It is that many countries like India and many others that are in the Commonwealth have grown,
grown enormously.
As of today, for example, we British are 70 million people in a world of 8,000 million.
So let's not pretend we can be cockable to walk in the way we were 50, 60 or 70 years ago.
Now, that is a very hard lesson to learn.
And many people found it very difficult to accept that Britain wasn't an exception.
It went hand in hand with the growth of English nationalism, which has got far worse,
accompanied by the growth of populism.
The two things in the UK have gone hand in hand.
And there are people in all the political parties who don't really belong in them,
on the fringes of them, but who have gone to the three main parties
because they can get themselves elected to parliament under their labels
and they believe with many of the tenants of those parties, but not perhaps all of them.
And I think that's what you have seen in politics on both sides of the chamber over the last 20 years
and certainly what you have seen in recent years.
OK, lots more to get through.
Let's just take a quick break.
And let's go to Black Wednesday, 16 September 1992.
I guess of all the days of crises that you had, whether it was mad cow disease
or the Gulf War or all the different things, that must have been the worst day of the lot.
Was it not?
It was.
It was and the most most frustrating for a different reason
because why did we enter the exchange rate mechanism?

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We entered the exchange rate mechanism because we had a huge inflationary problem and had had since the 1960s and no government, Tory or Labour, had managed to tame inflation for a long time. Time and again, things had been tried. It had become too difficult, too painful. Policy had changed, inflation had dipped a little and come back. Now, I hated inflation with a passion I cannot begin to tell you because I learned about it. If the week is longer than the family's money, that's a problem. And inflation means that applies to everybody. So I was determined in our term of office not to back away from handling inflation. We had run out of everything except the exchange rate mechanism. When we went in, it was to almost near universal acclimation. Even the Telegraph and the Sun were warmly supportive. The Labour Party was strongly supportive. John Smith had been kicking me for ages about why we hadn't gone in. Bank of England were? Bank of England were? Paddy were? CBI was? Only a handful of people opposed it for different reasons. Just explain for our younger listeners what is actually in tail. When we say joining the exchange rate mechanism, what were we actually doing? It actually meant keeping sterling within fairly narrow bands. And the base of it was the Deutsche Mark. And what happened subsequently was the Deutsche Mark, the policy of the Deutsche Mark began to change. And what happened with Black Wednesday was there was turmoil in Northern Europe with interest rates at phenomenal levels over a couple of nights. And the governor of the Bundesbank said something at a private briefing, which implied that the turmoil would hit sterling next. He didn't name sterling, but he said something that led people to believe that. And so everything turned on sterling. And these days, with the degree of external money, it can be removed. And there is a great crisis. And that's pretty much what happened. So John, just to remind young readers, in effect, what happened is you tried to support sterling. And that's on the day. I'm coming to that. Yeah, wonderful. But so they can understand the impact. Tell us about it. On the day, we were facing huge outflows of money.

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We tried to protect, to stay within the ERM.

We had signed up to it in Europe.

And the only leave we had was interest rates, essentially.

The only leave that we had was interest rates and support from other governments.

Strange to relate, we didn't get the support from Germany that we thought we would have.

And later, when the French Frank hit the same problem, they did get support from the Germans.

So that was a very sore point, indeed.

But the fact of the matter is, it became clear as we put interest rates up.

We had got them down under the ERM from 14% to 10%, I think.

We put them up to 15% before realizing it wasn't working.

And then we had to withdraw from the ERM.

If we had done it without battling, it would have been seen as bad faith, apart from anything else.

Now, maybe these days, people don't care about bad faith.

But I did then.

Alistair, maybe it's a bit of a question to you.

How important was that debark in Labour's subsequent victory?

But how, at the time, did Labour present what happened to Sir John Major's government?

It was fundamental, wasn't it?

I think it was a defining moment from which the government probably never recovered.

Because the sense was you were losing control of your own strategy and your own policy.

It was a political disaster.

Yeah.

But what I was about to say was it was not an economic disaster.

Because when we were driven out of the ERM, we were looking to see how we could withdraw because it had done its job.

We didn't enter the ERM as a preliminary to a single currency, which is what the Euroscheetics always feared.

We were never going to do that, Lawson wasn't and I wasn't.

So we were looking to see how we could get out of the ERM.

Now that was more difficult because if you withdraw from the ERM, the markets say, ah, you've given up fiscal discipline and you have to put up interest rates.

So we were trying to deal with that problem and the crisis came upon us before we could deal with it.

So it was not an economic disaster for us, but it was a political disaster.

What about personally, how did you feel when you were watching these screens and they're just going wild?

How did you actually deal with that?

With you.

It's just something you have to deal with.

You don't go and stay in a corner and weep about it.

You just have to try and deal with what's happening and make a judgment as to what you can do.

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And we made judgments.

I was in the room with a number of other senior members of the government and we made judgments

and eventually we concluded that interest rates were not going to work.

The die was cast.

We had no choice, but to withdraw from the exchange rate mechanism.

Can I just follow on from Alice's question about the emotional impact of being PM?

Do you still wake up in the middle of the night sometimes worrying about things that you ought or not to have done as PM?

What is the lasting emotional impact on you of doing a job with that scale of responsibility?

The answer to your question is yes, you do.

I spend more time looking back, thinking about the things that we weren't able to do.

Not just that I didn't do, but that we weren't able to do because of the circumstances than I do about the things that we did do that went well.

So the answer is yes, you do and I think that must be true of everyone with any sensitivity who has been Prime Minister.

Sir John, what were those things?

Give us a sense of some of the things that you would have liked to do that you could have done and some of the things you would have liked to do that you couldn't do.

Well I'd like to have done a lot more towards reforming education, particularly education at the primary level.

That was one of the things that I very much wish to do.

I thought we needed a complete reform of the tax system.

Nigel Lawson had done a great deal, but it still had a lot of anomalies in it.

And today the tax system is desperately in need of reform.

Other things that I thought needed doing, like the Irish peace process, like the lottery, things like that, I was able to do, but there were a number of things that I wasn't.

Do you regret not having spent more money?

I mean, of course, Labour came in, took the results of your economic boom, found good exchequer and were able to increase public spending in a very successful and popular way.

I suppose over the Conservative Party's history today.

Yes, I would have liked to spend more money, but of course I wasn't in the position to do so.

We were still dealing with the problems of inflation and making sure that it didn't get out of control and bring it down, which we did, as I say, went over 10% or one stays down to 2.6% and growth up.

Just when we were in a position where we could have spent and I would have spent, we lost the election and Gordon spent it for us.

Now listen, you can do something very helpful for a lot of students who listen to this podcast because apparently one of the questions that's doing the rounds in schools and universities at the moment in both history and politics, it seems, is to what extent did the Tories lose the election in 1997 and Labour won it?

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That is apparently a very common question.

So if they wanted to quote the former Prime Minister who was leader of the Conservative Party at that time, what would your answer be to that?

Well, I may be said to have a bias in that question, may or not.

Well I think in all cases it's a bit of both.

It's a question of how wide it goes.

The Labour opposition in the 1990s were the most ruthless and best organised I have seen since my time in politics.

And I think for the reason I set out, it was do or die for them.

If they hadn't won that election, would there have been a credible Labour Party in the future?

So they were completely ruthless.

They had an extremely friendly press because we had been there too long.

It was partly a problem that I was neither very right-wing or nor very left-wing and of course that did remove from you some of the natural support you might otherwise have got.

And many of the policies, if I may put it this way, that Tony Blair successfully introduced, I supported because they had been my policies before they were his policies, except that the Labour Party branded them much better than I had done.

So you're basically still laboring on this illusion that it was all about the communication, not Tony Blair's?

No, no, no.

No, I don't think it was all about the communication.

But I do think the communication was very important.

Our communication, after 13 years, there comes a time, I think, when people cease to listen in such a friendly fashion as they do, there's a balance where people will give you the benefit of the doubt and people where they won't.

And at some point, the benefit of the doubt goes.

It went on Black Wednesday and that was crucial, as you rightly said.

Sir John, you've talked about they, Labour being very ruthless.

You could almost have said you were being pretty ruthless because you're sitting opposite Alistair Campbell.

And I wanted to know whether, when you think back to that period, do you think like a kind of tough Machiavellian politician, we should have communicated just as ruthlessly and just as brutally as they did and taken the election?

Or do you actually think that the brutality and the ruthlessness of that communication damaged British politics in some way?

It's difficult to go back and be clear about that.

It's certainly set a new trend in forceful politics.

That is undoubtedly the case, I think, in the 1990s.

By the way, I think Neil Kinnit would argue about some of the stuff that the Tories determined about.

He would.

He would.

[Transcript] Leading / 24: John Major: The Gulf War, Black Wednesday, and Populism (Part 2)

I mean, he'd argue about the tax bombshell and things like that, which are sort of things I had in my mind because all political parties will present their side of the case as though it is beyond doubt that that is the right thing and that's the nature of political debate. The question is, which side of the political divide has a public audience at that moment? And at that moment in the 1990s, the audience was listening to the Labour Party and not to the Conservative Party.

I want to talk a little bit about, you mentioned Ireland there, just give us a sense of your relationship with Albert Reynolds, which became key to the establishment of the peace process. And also, I guess just more broadly, how important these personal relationships are in politics and foreign policy?

Well, I think they can be very important indeed.

And I think Albert Reynolds was very important.

Albert and I had met when we were both finance ministers and we met mostly at finance ministers because in those days, the Irish and the British rarely met, except to disagree.

But he and I met at European meetings and we got on well.

And when he became a Taoiseach and I was Prime Minister, he came to London and we had a meeting

upstairs on our own with a bottle of whiskey and two glasses.

And we both decided that terror in Northern Ireland and on the mainland of Britain was utterly unacceptable.

And we should make it an absolute priority to do what we could to stop it.

Now we both knew that that could not happen without London and Dublin working in lockstep. That hadn't truly happened before in the same way.

And we began to do that.

And it was very difficult to get the Downing Street Declaration, which was the first element.

The first time in 70 years, since partition in 1922 when the North split off from the rest of Ireland, that the British government and the Irish government had been able to agree on anything significant.

And we set out the principles of what a peace process would be.

That nearly failed.

There was an awful lot of fear in Northern Ireland that we would sell them out and that they would find themselves drifting into United Ireland, which they passionately did not want to happen.

And again, I had to use the churches to reassure them.

I briefed the churches regularly and Archbishop Eames and others then went to the Unionists when they said, can we believe this guy and said, I think you can.

And so the peace process was a construct of many hands.

It wasn't just the senior politicians, although they had their role to play and were crucial.

But the relationship with Albert Reynolds was a very interesting one because we often rowed fiercely.

I remember at one stage, breaking a pencil and throwing it across the room and we marched out of the room and had a real fight in Dublin Castle.

What was that about?

[Transcript] Leading / 24: John Major: The Gulf War, Black Wednesday, and Populism (Part 2)

It was about the last agreements that were necessary for the Downing Street Declaration. And we were both agreed with one another.

I thought he had been going behind our back and he thought I had been going behind his back.

So we had a really rough discussion.

And then out of that discussion came agreement and 10 days later, with a few eyes dotted and T's crossed, we were able to announce the declaration.

One of the things, Sir John, which I really admire you for is the stance that you took on gay rights.

You were very early in inviting Sirin McKellen into Downing Street.

You led the drive personally to drop the age of consent from 21 down to 18.

Can you reflect a little bit about that and then maybe think, are there courageous things that need to be done today?

What are the equivalent issues that might face the Prime Minister today?

I think there are lots of things.

I mean, it was plainly necessary to deal with that particular problem.

And many people were critical that we didn't go further than we did.

But I was very impressed.

I asked Ian McKellen to come and see me after some speeches he'd made and some comments he'd made. And I was extremely impressed with the arguments that he presented to me on a very human basis.

And it seemed to me that the extent to which being gay was illegal and the impact it had on people's lives was absurd when you consider the people who were sent to prison in earlier years and the sheer ostracisation from so much of life that they faced.

So I think that was the right thing to do.

I don't know enough about this trans debate, to be honest, to have a clear view.

But plainly, it's something that needs proper examination by parliament.

And I don't mean hot-headed examination.

I mean, a cool collective examination of whether reform is necessary.

If so, what it should be.

There's all sorts of problems.

I mean, I know you're very keen on sport.

Famously, famously keen on sport.

Who's your favourite cricketer, Rory?

Yeah, yeah, it's, I don't know, Don Bradman.

Very good.

Have you seen him about reasons?

Exactly. It's a good question, John.

But I mean, plainly, there are lots of questions to be asked about, to which there are no easy answers.

And I don't pretend to have the answer to that.

It's not something I've studied deeply.

I'm not in politics.

[Transcript] Leading / 24: John Major: The Gulf War, Black Wednesday, and Populism (Part 2)

I've taken an interest in it, but I wouldn't claim to be really informed on it.
And I suppose also, there's a question of protests.
We have freedom of speech and freedom of protest in our country and defend that very much.
Should we be worried when the protests take a form that prevent citizens going about their normal jobs,
going, getting to the hospital to see people who are sick, getting to see people who are perhaps dying,
not being able to get to work when their, their companies may be in difficulty because roads are blocked or whatever it is.
Nobody wants to end freedom of speech.
Thank God we can stand up and say what we like about people in power.
And it is safe to do so in this country within the parameters of law.
And there must be places where people can demonstrate.
But is it really right to have absolutely freedom of demonstrating at the expense of the innocent citizen whose life is totally disrupted by it?
That's a debate to be had.
You mentioned the the build up to the 1997.
And I know because I've read your book again that you felt that the way that your back to basics campaign was reduced and the whole sort of produced.
That's a very kind word.
It was totally lied about, it's reduced and the sex scandals and so forth.
But ultimately, here's where I'm going to cheer you up about your role in modern life.
I think you can make the case that the reason ultimately that the recent Prime Minister that you don't particularly want to talk about, nor do I.
But the reason why Boris Johnson went ultimately is because he was sort of held to account against the Nolan principles and you brought in the Nolan principles.
Honesty, openness, objectivity, selflessness, integrity, accountability.
Well done. There you go.
And so that was, if you like, something good that came out of something bad for you, which has had maybe a during impact.
Do you think that standards in public life have been so damaged that we can't recover from what's gone on?
Or do you think actually there is hope that we can get back to a politics?
I do. Yes. I mean, I mean, nothing is irreversible.
I mean, very little is irreversible and politics is like a great tide.
It comes in, it goes out and so do fashions of opinion and fashions of behavior.
We have had times before when parliament and public life has fallen into disrepute and being restored.
So yes, I do think it can be corrected.
But I do think it needs action and example at the top.
I don't only mean in politics, I mean in life, in life, generally.
And people have to be held to account irrespective of their position.
I mean, you see that now in the United States in a very big way.

[Transcript] Leading / 24: John Major: The Gulf War, Black Wednesday, and Populism (Part 2)

I mean, quite extraordinary scenes we've seen over the last few weeks with the charges against former President Trump.
Well, he is an American citizen, first and foremost.
And the law should treat him as an American citizen, not as a former president.
And that would apply to prime ministers, politicians and everybody else.
But yes, I do think it is recoverable.
What do you think we have to do to recover it as a culture, as a society?
What do we have to do?
Well, I think that we have to live up to what we say.
If we admit the Nolan principles are right in terms of parliament to take that particular example, we have to live up to those Nolan principles.
And people who do not live up to Nolan principles must pay the price for not living up to them.
And if that is done and rigidly enforced, it will set an example that people will soon follow.
They soon follow a slack example of not accepting the law or not obeying the conventions.
We slipped into that habit quite quickly once it happened.
It's reversible and it must be reversed.
I sometimes wonder, John, whether this isn't too optimistic.
I mean, it's easy to see it as maybe just, you know, Boris Johnson comes in. He doesn't follow these codes.
He breaks the ministerial code and that somehow if he's replaced, things get better.
But the rise of populism is a global phenomenon.
And I wonder whether part of it actually isn't to do with what started happening to politics in Britain in the 1990s and the US in the 1980s.
The development of a more aggressive, hysterical 24 seven media campaigns actually created some of the permanent conditions out of which populism has come, maybe made even worse by social media.
I don't know whether that's pessimistic or realistic to be absolutely honest.
I could I could make a case for and against almost as if I was deciding which side of an argument to take.
I inclined to the optimistic side because there are so many people I have met who are not in politics, who are normal citizens whom I've met in all sorts of different positions who feel completely let down by what they have seen.
And I think the the the power of that is compelling.
Now, I can't possibly know how widespread it is in every part of the country.
And I don't pretend to do so.
But I do think the tone of the country is is beginning to change.
And so I am on the optimistic side.
You may be right in your pessimism.
It may have gone too far.
Populism is a slightly different beast, of course.

[Transcript] Leading / 24: John Major: The Gulf War, Black Wednesday, and Populism (Part 2)

Populism has got a lot to do with political self-interest.

And that depends upon whether it is successful or not.

The book that that your wife is very kindly reading remind me of the title.

It's called But What Can I Do?

That's right.

There is a chapter which begins by quoting a speech that you may not long ago, the title of which was in democracy, we trust question mark.

And admittedly, it was when Boris Johnson was at his peak, as it were.

But the question mark said to me that you have real concerns about whether we are going to be able to sustain democratic systems.

I do.

Now, I think I do.

But I think that's because in some ways there are bits of them.

They're a bit out of date, frankly.

I mean, there are several things I had in mind.

Firstly, I had in mind the growth of populism.

I also had, because it goes hand in hand with this, the growth of intolerance.

Populism isn't a political creed.

It's a self-interested and selfish creed.

It promotes its cronies, not the people who are best suited to a particular job.

It recklessly seeks out scapegoats in order that they can attack the scapegoats to the general encouragement of the populace.

It's an unpleasant way of conducting public life.

And it needs to be seen for what it is.

If it is seen for what it is and if it is not supported nationally in the media, then it will be defeated.

And I think that can certainly be done.

But I had wider things in mind as well.

Our politics has changed at the grassroots.

It's very difficult to claim these days that the three major parties are mass movements.

They aren't.

Millions of people now have better things to do with their lives than join the conservative, labor or liberal parties.

And they don't.

And the constituency parties have shrunk.

And with the constituency party shrinking, it is in the nature of life that the people who feel most strongly pro-tory, pro-labor, pro-liberal remain.

And the people who are middle of the road but on balance think this is the right mob for me, drift away.

And the danger that arises from that is you're going to have people who are more Tory, more labor and more liberal, as the people selected as candidates and elected.

And you get a more fractious, disputatious parliament than you have had before, in which you can't lean across the aisle.

[Transcript] Leading / 24: John Major: The Gulf War, Black Wednesday, and Populism (Part 2)

And other things have helped with that.

For example, one well-meaning thing was Robin Cook's reform of ours in the House of Commons. Now, it was meant to make the House of Commons more family friendly, but it's had a secondary effect.

It means there are no late night sittings.

Tory labours and liberals are not sitting there in the smoking room or the tea room, getting to know one another and talking to one another.

There were, used to be, quite a considerable number of friendships across the party barriers. It wasn't so tribal.

They weren't all in their tribal hideouts poking nothing but opposition at the other side.

And what about the institutions?

What would you do about the House of Lords as a revising chamber?

Well, yes, it is a revising chamber and that's a key point.

There is a suggestion, firstly, the House of Lords is needed of reform.

It's much too big and there are too many people who really don't attend.

A House of Lords between five or six hundred is example.

And it should certainly be smaller than the size of the House of Commons because it is a revising chamber.

But let us consider it as a revising chamber.

If you have an elected House of Lords, the people elected to it are likely to be people who could not get themselves elected to the House of Commons.

So the cream of those willing to face election will get into Commons.

The Lords would be secondary.

And if it was all elected, you wouldn't have the experience of the captains of industry, the great academic leaders, the leaders of the armed forces, who have a lifetime of experience in revising the legislation.

They don't make legislation, they revise it.

And an elected House of Lords would not be in a position to do that remotely as well.

So I do not, in any way, favour an elected House of Lords.

I do favour an appointed House of Lords, maybe not the way it's done now, of a much smaller size than the one we have got.

And in terms of things like Prime Minister's nominations,

I don't think you can stop them and I don't think you should stop them.

What I do think is you should limit the number of nominations to so many for every year the Prime Minister has served.

So let's trust you to get 0.6 OBs in her residential house.

I wasn't planning to determine what the award should be.

But clearly Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, who served 11 and 10 years, would get more nominations than I would who served seven, or David Cameron who served six, and so on.

Because I think you would remove some of the irritations to the public if you were able to do that.

Yeah, amazed you didn't put any 29-year-old interns into the House of Lords when you resigned.

Plainly an oversight.

[Transcript] Leading / 24: John Major: The Gulf War, Black Wednesday, and Populism (Part 2)

Well look, Sir John, your watch is telling me we've already taken up two hours of your time, which is incredibly generous.

But it does mean looking at my long list of research that we haven't covered China, we haven't covered Brexit, we haven't covered asylum and immigration, we haven't done lots and lots of the things I wanted to talk to you about.

I haven't got your assessment of the seven other living Prime Ministers, which would have been fascinating to get.

But I want to thank you for your time and I hope that when you realise the love that is going to come your way from our many, many listeners that we might even be able to tempt you back for a third episode at a later date.

You might even discuss prison reform.

And cricket.

And cricket.

With the ashes coming.

Yeah, indeed.

Thank you very, very much, Sir John.

And very much hope to see you soon.

So thanks for having me.

Thank you for coming.

Goodbye.

So Alastair, John Major, part two, Prime Minister onwards, what did you think?

Well, I mean, to be fair to the guy, he's 80, looks incredibly fit.

Clearly is pretty fit.

But that was an awful lot of time you gave us there.

So we should both be very grateful for that.

However, we didn't even get on to Brexit.

So we covered a lot of ground.

We covered a lot of ground.

I did, as we left the building, Rory, I did have a quiet word and say that we might have to get you back on at a future date to talk about Brexit in China.

And maybe you'll also tell us where he thinks the Labour Party's going wrong.

Well, it's interesting to say, I mean, I think he is sincere.

I think he genuinely is a rather wonderful man.

And I think he is a pretty decent guy.

I mean, I'm not going to tempt you to do what I failed to tempt John Major to do, which is to try to bring the other side.

If you were being critical, as you were of him in the 90s, what would be the other side of it from the point of view of somebody who was fighting hard to topple him and make sure that Tony Blair replaced him?

What was wrong with that government?

He said, John Major says in his book that the single most devastating line that Tony Blair ever delivered against him was when he said, I lead my party, you follow yours.

And listening to him now and also looking back at that time,

[Transcript] Leading / 24: John Major: The Gulf War, Black Wednesday, and Populism (Part 2)

I just wonder whether it was at a point where post Thatcher, the Conservative Party, was becoming virtually ungovernable. And whether actually he had, he did have clearly considerable political skills. But I wonder whether he maybe didn't face down some of those people as strongly as he might have done. But having said that, he did in the end, we didn't even discuss this. There's so much that we could have covered that we didn't have time for. But there was the famous moment when he basically resigned, whilst Prime Minister resigned as party leader and said, put up or shut up, if you want to get rid of me, put yourself up. And in the end, John Redwood stood against him. So he was, in a sense, doing the things that maybe I would have recommended that he do. I think there's something in what he said about having the Conservative Party, having been in power so long, we'd had the whole Thatcher thing, and then he comes along. He had seven years as Prime Minister. He was one of the longer serving Prime Ministers. Well, I mean, I think that there's a slight danger with both of you, that you're both mellowing with age and becoming more and more generous to each other. John, then why do you do the job that we've both failed to do? Well, if I went back to the Allister of the mid-1990s, you would have said, this is a truly horrible government. They've imposed completely unnecessary destructive cuts. They've emptied out our public services. They've got a pessimistic view of the country. We need new labor to come in. We need a new social contract. We need to increase public spending. We need to put social justice at the core of this. We need to restore integrity and parliament, I guess, and other things too. Rory, this is why you've got to become a labor candidate. Stop all this trying to go onto the Tory candidates list again. You've got to become a labor candidate. You're such a labor person. Now, it's obvious. So let me just push you on that one more time. Basically, Tony Blair and you believed that he needed to be got rid of, and you needed to get in. And it was a very good thing for the country to get rid of him. So just remind us a little bit about why you felt that it was enough. It wasn't just that the country was tired of the conservatives, or he couldn't manage the party. You disagreed with his policies, didn't you?

[Transcript] Leading / 24: John Major: The Gulf War, Black Wednesday, and Populism (Part 2)

Yeah, I think that we had a feeling that the conservative party had been in power too long, didn't really have a clear agenda for the future. We didn't really get into a lot of the domestic policy stuff. But if you think about how John Major's Premiership was defined on the domestic front, he talked about wanting to do more on education and so forth. But there was the whole citizens charter thing, which wasn't of itself a bad thing to do, but it wasn't, I don't think, was kind of defining. The lottery was an incredibly important thing to do, but again, it wasn't sort of defining in a way that we think of the great political leaders. And on Europe, I think this is where the ungovernability of the Tory party is a factor. I think on Europe, his instincts weren't that bad, but it became impossible to take the country and the party in that direction he wanted to. I also wonder, I mean, it's also difficult talking about this after Brexit, but I was struck by how difficult he found it to empathize at all. With the right wing of the Conservative Party, with the Eurosceptics that he basically said, just wrote them off as these guys are leftover of nostalgic for empire. Now, that may or may not be true. He may or may not think that, but that cannot have helped him in managing the Maastricht rebels. I mean, you would have needed a Prime Minister who at the very least was able to think thoughtfully and respectfully about what the better arguments would be. I mean, you could imagine someone saying, look, I disagree with them completely, but I can see they had anxieties about sovereignty or they had anxieties about immigration, and there are bits of the right wing Conservative tradition that I respect, but I think they went the wrong direction. But he doesn't do that, does he? He's basically incapable of seeing the other side of the argument there. Yeah, but I think if you go back to what that must have been like for him at that time, again, another very famous episode in his career that we didn't talk about was the thing about the Bastards. Do you remember the Bastards when he was... The Bastards, yeah, which is Ian Duncan Smith and people, right? Well, it was Gordon Brown, bigot gate moment for John Major, wasn't it? He did an interview with Michael Brunson of ITN, didn't realise that the microphones were still on, the feeder was going through to the pool, which I think was the BBC. And he basically talked about these three Bastards, which at the time I think people thought were Portillo and a couple of other ministers, but it turned out he meant, I think he meant people like Duncan Smith who were kind of not then necessarily high up in the government. I think he had this kind of visceral experience of, I think he felt that these people really, really were trying to destroy him.

[Transcript] Leading / 24: John Major: The Gulf War, Black Wednesday, and Populism (Part 2)

And I guess now I think it must be quite difficult.
It's a bit like when Jeremy Corbyn was leader of the Labour Party.
It was quite difficult for Tony Blair and Gordon Brown to think
that's the party that we led into power and we were prime ministers.
And now we're not really even considered persona grata.
And I think there must be a part of John Major that thinks that,
you know, every time that speech I mentioned about democracy
or the speech he made recently about prison reform
or the interventions that he made in the Brexit debate,
you know, you often see when he's not on social media,
but I often see he makes these speeches
and then you see these awful Tories out there saying,
you know, has been who the hell are you,
you know, get back in your box sort of stuff.
I mean, I think there must be a part of him that thinks
I did a pretty good job for the Conservative Party.
And, you know, I'm now treated by some of them,
by the populist wing as being yesterday's man.
Yeah, I agree.
It is a very interesting style of communication, isn't it?
He's, as you say, quite eloquent, talks in full sentences.
He's very good at not being drawn on things.
He's still quite sort of poised and restrained and reflective.
Yeah, but listen, Roy, he's very good also at giving you an answer
when he's not giving you an answer.
So you asked him about, you basically said to him,
could you please dump on Alistair Campbell, please?
You asked him that one several times.
And he sort of didn't do it,
but he did it in a way which meant that, you know,
if he was being completely frag,
he would have said a few choice things.
And likewise was Boris Johnson.
I thought he's put down that Boris Johnson was absolutely superb.
I don't want to talk about it because that's what he wants.
Well, and yet I think Boris was sort of the ghost
at the feast there, wasn't it?
Because when you talked about the Nolan Principles,
when he talks about the degradation,
when he defined conservatism,
that was basically an attack on Boris Johnson, wasn't it?
Oh, totally, absolutely.
He obviously thinks that labor hasn't quite pulled it together.

[Transcript] Leading / 24: John Major: The Gulf War, Black Wednesday, and Populism (Part 2)

But when I tried to ask him what I thought
would be a very natural question,
which even I am very happy answering,
which is what Keir Starmer doing wrong.
He gave me the answer that the Russian ambassador
in Kabul once gave me.
I was at a dinner with a Russian ambassador in Kabul
and the Russian ambassador who was called Kabul off said,
you guys are making all the same mistakes
that we made in the 1980s.
And I said, oh, what were those mistakes, Ambassador?
And he said, you think I will tell you?
Anyway, there's another Tory I pulled in, Rory.
One day you'll get me one.
But anyway, we'll just have to wait for that.
Thank you very much, Alice.
It was a great pleasure.
Thank you.
See you soon.
Bye-bye.