

Welcome to The Rest is Politics Leading with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

And today I've got a real treat, particularly personally for me, which is that we are interviewing Michael Ignatieff.

And Michael is somebody that I first came across when he was a professor at Harvard University.

He had a career which involved both writing very serious, thoughtful work on intervention in the 90s, on the Iraqi Kurds, on the Balkans.

He was a fellow at a Cambridge College.

He wrote a wonderful biography of Isaiah Berlin.

But I think from the purpose of The Rest is Politics Leading, his career took a new turn and a turn which really relates to us when he decided suddenly to leave Harvard University and become a Canadian politician.

And in a very, very remarkable turn of events, within a couple of years he was the leader of the Liberal Party in Canada, the natural party of government in Canada for many, many decades, took them initially to a very commanding position in the polls and then led them into a defeat, an electoral defeat, in which he actually lost his own seat.

So he went from the more, I guess, placid life of a Harvard professor to the brutality of years of absolute front-line politics.

And we're very, very honoured to have him with us today.

And thank you, Michael.

Pleasure to be here.

Now, Michael, Rory mentioned that you went from being something of a well-known intellectual, well-known in this country as well in the UK, because of course you lived here for a considerable period of your life and you were a broadcaster and a writer, as Rory said, and then you went into politics.

And I want to read to you, and I hope this may bring a bit of pain to both of you, because it was a review of your book written by David Runciman, who said this, the great German sociologist Max Weber thought that certain professions were not well suited to making the switch to a career in politics.

One was professional soldiers who were prone to become schematic and unimaginative politicians. Another was academics, far too thin-skinned and unworldly for the rough and tumble of political life.

Weber thought the best way to learn about politics was to do politics.

Now, he did go on to say that he thought your book was one of the best books he'd ever read about the kind of ups and downs and the emotions of politics, but do you think there's something in that, that politics is too rough and tough a place for intellectuals?

Yeah, but that's precisely why you go and do it, isn't it?

Because you get tired of living in the precious, causative world of academics, and so you want to throw yourself into the rough stuff, and then of course you discover how little you know about yourself, and you discover in fact that, ouch, it really hurts when you get bitten and you get attacked.

So on balance, I think Weber may be right.

I'm not sure academic life is the greatest place to start a political career from.

And Michael, talk us through how that felt, and remember, shortly after you went into politics, going to see you in Canada, and you were talking about how in the early days, how incredibly stimulating it was.

You said it called on every part of your mind, your body, that it was tougher than anything that you'd ever done, but that you felt kind of energized and buzzing in a way that you'd never felt as an academic.

Talk us about those first few months and years and what your initial sense of the political life was.

Well, I had to fight my way in, and that's an important part of it.

My nomination meeting for my seat was at the wonderfully labeled Valhalla Inn near the airport in Toronto, and I arrived at the Valhalla Inn to face a really howling mob.

I don't exaggerate.

A lot of Ukrainians, God bless them because there are a lot of Ukrainians in my writing who didn't want someone with a Russian background to be the candidate, and then a lot of people who, I think quite rightly, had real objections to the position I'd taken on Iraq.

So I had the left coming at me, I had the Ukrainians coming at me, and I had to cut through a really howling mob, and then I had to fight for my life and stand up and say, you know, I've got the right to run, and I'm not asking for any favors, let's put this to a vote.

I eventually became the candidate.

So from the get-go, it was absolute bloody shambles, and we got through it, and then we had an election, and I campaigned for 55 days.

Canada's, our listeners may know, is a little cold in the winter, and this was a winter election, so it was absolutely freezing out there, but we knocked on 10,000 doors, and we won.

So from the beginning, it was combat, and that was extremely exciting.

But when you saw me, I think you noticed something that I didn't see at the time, because I think you found me a kind of swarmy in a suit, I was very kind of, my hair was coiffed in a new way, I was speaking in perfect sentences.

I clearly become a different person than I'd been when we knew each other at Harvard, and I thought you were kind of uneasy about that, and I think you saw something about me that I didn't see, but which over time became the real problem for me in politics, which is that I became a different person, and I wasn't terribly happy with the guy I'd become.

That's the real cost in politics, I think.

That's really interesting, though, because when I used to see you sort of popping up on Channel 4 News and News Night and those sorts of programs, I always felt you did have that capacity to speak in the manner of a politician.

I was one of those people who used to look at you and think, yeah, I think that guy ought to give it a go.

And then you gave it a go.

So what was it that made you think you had to change, or did you feel that you were being changed by other people who were trying to get you to become something that you weren't?

Alastair, I think I'd spent a lot of my life when I was doing those interviews with News Night that you saw, speaking just in my own name.

The only person I was representing was my own view of whatever the question was.
Suddenly, I had to represent the view of a party.
I had to speak for a movement.
I had to speak for thousands of people.
I had to watch my peas and queues.
I had to censor my brain every time to keep myself, as they say, on message.
I found message discipline very, very difficult.
It made me over cautious.
It made me shut myself down.
So that was problem number one.
Problem number two was that I'm a pretty vain guy.
I'm pretty ambitious, pretty vain.
And I thought I would like being famous.
And here's the weird thing.
I really hated being famous because you'd get on a plane in Canada, because in Canada, if you're in politics, you travel all the time because it's such a big country.
And you'd sit in the plane and people would be coming on board.
And every time they saw you, they'd notice you and recognize you.
And then you would start thinking, this dreary thought, is she with me?
Is she not going to vote for me?
You start measuring every human encounter by whether they support you or not.
And I found that very difficult.
And I found it very difficult to be with my wife and want a little downtime, a little quiet time, a little cry on her shoulder time.
And you were never off.
You were always in public view.
And I found that stuff slowly became more and more difficult to support.
I understand how kind of whiny this sounds.
And I don't want to sound whiny.
I love being in politics in a way.
But let's be honest about the price it exacts.
And it began to exact a higher and higher price.
Michael, a loss of that, I feel.
And it's lovely to hear you say that there's an element of vanity in this too, because I'm sure that's true for me too.
One of the reasons I get uncomfortable with people praising me or coming up to me is partly to do not with humility, but vanity.
I wanted just to touch on another thing you sometimes said, which is that one of the lessons you took was that in politics, people don't want to hear you think aloud.
As an academic, you're having to think aloud.
They want to hear your conclusions.
You tell us a bit about that.
Oh, yeah.

I mean, one of the great skills in politics is what we call in Canada, skating. You know, if you're asked a tough question on a really important public issue, you absolutely don't know what you bloody think about it. Or you haven't worked it out. So you skate, you kind of circle around the ice, or to use another Canadian metaphor, you rag the puck. That is, you take the puck and you kind of circle around. You just hope they'll kind of go away. Whereas if you think aloud, you actually go at the question and you try and answer it. And you say, on the one hand, on the other hand, you do what an academic does, which is to measure up the probabilities, the consequences you try and think it through, which is what academics are very good at. That's lousy in politics. People don't want to hear that in politics. What they want to hear is leadership. They want to hear what you think. So in politics, you have two difficult choices. Either you have to know what you think, which is usually the message, and you just stick with it. And then if you actually are unsure, you don't want to show that part at all. So you kind of skate it. And this conflict between these two positions is very difficult to maintain. And I found myself often wanting to think aloud, but it's not what people want to hear. They don't. And yet, Michael, if you think of the current crop of world leaders at the moment, I would say the one that gets closest to being defined as kind of having very high intellect and would probably in another, if his life had taken a turn, would have been an intellectual, is Macron. And Macron famously, en même temps, he was the guy who kept saying, well, yes this and yes that. And here's the synthesis. And that, in a sense, is what made him the phenomenon that he became. Now, he's having a really rough time now, for sure. I just wonder if you, looking at world leaders now, do you see anybody that you think actually maybe is the antidote to what you've just said? I would suggest Macron is. It's very interesting. Yesterday, I was talking to a friend in France. And I said, what do you think of Macron? And she said very shrewdly. And she said, the problem with this guy is that he isn't a politician. He isn't fundamentally a politician. He can't, which means he couldn't go into the Assemblée Nationale and get a deal on

that pension reform.

And there was too much en même temps, you know, on one hand, on the other.

There's too much kind of Jupiterian presidential, let me lecture the French people what is in their interest.

He wasn't a politician and a great politician doesn't give people lectures.

A great politician understands his businesses to find that narrow place down the middle where you can get just enough votes to get by until tomorrow morning.

And everybody despises politicians these days.

But those are the politicians I really admire.

And so if you had to ask me, someone I really admire at the moment, weirdly, against all my instincts, is Joe Biden simply because he got deals that nobody thought could be done.

It's the deal maker that we've got to, I think, bring back and respect.

And all these Suadizant philosopher kings, you know, and I include myself, I wanted to be a philosopher king.

We need less of them and more people who could just, you know, get the deal done.

And so that would be my view of it.

What's your take on populism and what the proper response to populism is?

Well, it's complicated for a guilty reason.

You know, I'm somebody listening to me would think, oh, he's just a member of the liberal elite, Harvard, you know, Oxbridge, father was a public servant on and on.

So when we look at populism, what we have to understand is they're coming right at us.

They're coming at these liberal elites who've had a pretty good run from the 60s onwards, often did some very good things, understood the economy in a way that had never been understood before.

We've had better economic management from the mid 60s onwards than in any period in history.

So the liberal elite can be kind of proud of that in a way, but it's generated enormous resentment at our privileges, at our entitlement, at the way we speak, at the way we talk down to people, the way we seem to have an answer to every bloody question.

In a way, I think the positive thing to say about populism, because there's a populism of the left and a populism of the right, some of the populism of the left is very positive.

It says, let's shake up these elites, let's replace these elites.

And it reflects a lot of impatience and anger with the fact that, you know, almost the biggest fact of my adult life has been the steady increasing inequality since the early 70s.

You know, I grew up, I'm a baby boomer, I grew up in the 50s, and, you know, Thomas Piketty will tell you, you know, that inequality was very, very compressed.

I grew up in a vanished world from the 70s onwards, inequality soars.

Some of the people who benefited most from that rising inequality were people like me who went to fancy universities, and it's opened up a chasm in our societies.

And so, to that extent, I'm sympathetic to the anger that populism is tapping into.

The problem, obviously, and I think, you know, this has been said by lots of other people smarter than me, is that populists have no solutions.

If you ask a populist of the right, a Viktor Orban, a Donald Trump, a, you know, Kaczynski in Poland, what he does about the inequality, the gap between the haves and the have-nots, their only solution is to cut taxes ever more.

There's no solution there.

And then if you ask, you know, Ron DeSantis, what he wants to do, populists from the right, what he wants to do about, you know, these problems, he picks a fight against some obscure Florida university because it sends the right signal to his base.

But if you ask him what he does about inequality, this is a guy who went to Yale, who went to Harvard Law.

He's as elitist as the next guy, but he continues that phony attack on elites so that the populism of the right gets you precisely nowhere.

I've taken a long time to say that, but that's my day.

I respect the anger that populism has picked up in our political system.

And if our political system was responding right, it would do something to address that anger.

But the populists of the right are not doing anything about it.

When you left politics, you went back to academia and one of the positions you took was in Budapest at the University of Central Europe.

And if I'm right about this, Orban, in a sense, targeted you because Soros, one of the hate figures for the populist right, was one of your big funders of the university, one of the big supporters.

Just give us a sense of what that was like and whether that was simply somebody using Soros in the way that DeSantis is using his targets, or whether there was a deeper anti Semitic thing going on there.

What were the politics behind that in your assessment?

Oh, similar.

I think it was frankly anti Semitic.

There's no question.

They came after Central European University because it was funded by George Soros.

Orban came after Soros because he had to win the 2018 election and he needed an enemy.

This is one of the key things about populism.

They succeed electorally by defining an enemy and then going after that enemy relentlessly.

Michael, could you just maybe reflect a little bit on the significance of Soros?

George Soros is a Hungarian Holocaust survivor who left Hungary after the war, went to London and then New York and made a fortune as a hedge fund investor and speculator and is famous in Britain because he bet against the British pound in 1990 whenever it was and made a huge amount of money.

He's a consistent supporter of progressive liberal left wing causes, extremely generous philanthropist, but is widely hated by pretty well everybody from the right wing onwards.

He's the baton of the entire global conservative movement and he's the founder of the university that I was asked to lead in Budapest and then Orban led a campaign against him, which eventually led to our expulsion and I think set up something that has now I think spread more widely.

Orban has become a kind of leader of a global conservative international that includes DeSantis, that includes Kaczynski and Poland, it includes Marine Le Pen to whom he's given a loan.

So it's a big deal and conservative politicians from the United States make a beeline to Budapest to learn from the master because he's been in power for 13 years and he's perfected all these anti-liberal, anti-intellectual, anti-Jewish tropes.

The thing about the anti-Semitism though Alistair is that it's anti-Semitism that denies that it's anti-Semitic.

If you went to Victor and said, hey, come on, what is this?

This is complete vulgar anti-Semitism.

He would literally say some of my best friends are Jews and he would angrily deny that he's anti-Semitic.

So it's 21st anti-Semitism, it's anti-Semitism without anti-Semites, it's anti-Semitism without Jews since most of the Jews in Hungary were exterminated.

So it's a very vicious phenomenon.

So it's basically, it's back to your point about they're just defining an enemy that can be made a hate figure because were you in Hungary when literally you could barely move for seeing posters of George Soros?

What was that like?

Well, it was, it was very difficult to run a university where your founder is on every billboard in town, on every billboard in the subway, on every billboard on the roads to the airport everywhere.

There was a billboard that said, don't let George Soros have the last laugh with a smiling picture of our founder.

And if you said to people, look, don't you realize that in the 30s, the Nazis had one steady theme throughout their campaigns against the Jews, which was, don't let the Jews have the last laugh.

And so if you said to Fidesz people, don't you realize you were freezing anti-Semitic tropes from the 1930s, they were stunned, baffled.

So this is the vicious new mix of 21st century politics that I saw firsthand and is extremely dangerous.

And God, I pray that it doesn't spread to the United Kingdom or anywhere else.

Michael, do you think there's something inevitable about this that somehow social media, Twitter, Facebook, 2008 financial crisis, the humiliations of Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of China, that there are kind of big structural features, which mean that we have entered an age of populism and which will make it extremely difficult for old style politicians, the technocratic center to actually defeat this, that there's whole features of our society which just give people like Orban and Trump the advantage in almost every election?

Well, I hope you're wrong, Rory, but I fear you may be right.

It's clear that the tectonic plates are moving and that the kind of centrism that I've lived by is under enormous pressure at a time when we need, what I said much earlier, we need politicians who can get the deals done that get us successfully to tomorrow morning.

That's not what people want.

They want people with big answers to big questions, even if they're wrong answers and the wrong questions, because we all feel the tectonic plates shifting and the social media element means that we're looking for enemies, we're looking for memes, we're looking for discourses that explain things to us even if the explanations are completely false.

I am a bit worried by what social media has done to politics like everybody else.

To give you the flavor of it personally, my wife would say to me, there's one thing, Michael, you are not going to do through your entire political career, which is to look at your

social media feed, because you won't want to get out of bed, and that was true.

The paradox which we need to remember is that in five years of politics, which wasn't very successful, I must have shaken 30,000 hands, and I never with three exceptions met anybody who was personally offensive. Whereas in the digital sphere, it was offense and malice and viciousness the whole time. In many ways, the key feature of modern politics has been digital disinhibition, the ways in which because on the internet, as they say, nobody knows you're a dog, you could behave like a dog on the internet. That's had a terrible effect on politics because politics used to be governed by the codes of civility that determine everyday social intercourse, and everyday social intercourse is holding together. I doubt you, both of you folks are famous people,

but I doubt that people are screaming at you in public. They may give you a hard time on the internet. They're polite, and the civility and politeness of contemporary life is still just intact, but underneath it is this digital world which is just completely out of control.

The other difference, Michael, is of course some of the top dogs, Trump, for example, and to a lesser extent, somebody like Orban, they actually behave in public as they want their supporters to behave online. They give them license to do that. You mentioned what it was like with the campaign against Orban, but also the sense of Canadian politics is being maybe less right than, say, the United States or Australia or the United Kingdom, but I was looking up some of the campaign ads that were run against you. I've got to say they were pretty effective. I thought that pictures of you all over Canada with the, they just said, Michael Ignatiev, I'm just visiting. That was pretty effective, because that was basically saying this guy's lived abroad most of his life. He's a citizen of nowhere, as Theresa May Mike put it, and he's coming back to try and and then the other one they had was he didn't come home for you. So how did you react to that, and how effective was that as an attack line?

It was devastatingly effective. It was the largest campaign spend in the history of Canadian politics directed at a leader, and I made a couple of fatal mistakes.

One of them is I, because I'm an elite patrician in a snob, I thought, I'm not going to dignify that with an answer. Allie, you would have been the first to say that's the stupidest mistake you could possibly make in politics, and I made it. I didn't dignify this. I should have fought back, because essentially, Stephen Harper, the Conservative leader, was saying, I get to define who's a good Canadian and who's a bad Canadian. There are two or three million Canadians living outside the country. I was merely one of them, and attempting to target me as a bad Canadian, because I actually had some pretty interesting jobs in other places. I never held another passport other than Canada ever. I never will, and I was attacked by people who had turned out much later, held American passports. So it was pretty disgusting, but I made the elementary mistake in politics, which is not to come right back at them with a counter punch, and I paid the price, and it was wonderfully effective, and I still meet people who say, oh, you're just visiting. When I come back to Canada, they say, oh, you're visiting. Nice to see you. So you live with that. You live with your mistakes, and you move on. Michael, can you talk us through the experience of the loss of the election and losing the seat? Just to add the context, I think for the first time in Canadian history, the Liberal Party was not either the government or the main opposition. Yes, this was the worst defeat in Canadian history. We went from number two, part of the opposition, to three, and it took Mr. Trudeau to get us back into government five years later, so it wasn't permanent damage, but it was pretty devastating, and I lost my seat, and I woke up

the next day and thought, now I know what my obituary is going to read. I thought, that's it. That's the end of my life. I might as well die tomorrow. I soon recovered because I've got a fantastic wife, and the other good thing is that I have a profession. I'm a history teacher, so I went back almost immediately into the classroom. I think if you don't have that, if you don't have somewhere to go, you can really spiral down, but I did have days when I go to the liquor store to buy a bottle of wine, and I think I better put a bag over my head because I just don't want to be seen because defeat is very humiliating, but it was interesting because I remember vividly walking to the liquor store and seeing an enormous cement truck go by with a Sikh guy driving the truck, and he was wearing a red turban, and he kind of slowed down and rolled down his window and waved at me in a kind of affectionate greeting, and I thought, this is going to be all right. So God bless that Sikh cement mix driver because I think he brought me back to reality, and the reality is most people don't care. I mean, it's a dramatic, horrifying, shameful loss for you, but most of the public either doesn't care or they think something interesting, which is you tried to do a dirty job, you got defeated, but it was honorable to put your name on a ballot, and that is where I've come out. I've come out thinking, there are a lot of things worse than defeat in politics, and what would be worse for someone like me would be not to have done it at all, and I still feel that.

What did you learn about yourself in that process?

I think I learned I'm not bloody good as a politician. That's what I learned. I came out paradoxically with much greater respect for the few people who really are good at politics, who don't find message discipline painful, who aren't always yearning to express themselves, you know, who don't really, this is the key thing, who don't really care at some inner level what other people think of them. I mean, the great enormous strength of a great politician is that he can endure months, even years of attacks and criticism and carping and bitching. Or even enjoy it.

And even enjoy it, and I just wasn't cut out for that. I'm actually, I think, a pretty tough guy, in a way, I'm pretty resolute, but I really found that difficult, and I admire people who can put up with that and above all retain their sense of humor. I got very humorless about it towards the end.

I, you know, the great politicians laugh it off, and it's really wonderful and life-enhancing to see them do that. But I just, I got, I got over serious about it and uptight about it. And, and fundamentally, just to conclude the thought, I didn't like what I had become.

And I like myself, I mean, within limits, I like myself better now that I'm out of it.

So, I worry though sometimes that the personality that you have to develop in order to endure the campaign, win the campaign, can unfit you for government. So, in a UK context, Boris Johnson is astonishingly good at laughing off the attacks. Liz Truss was incredibly good. I mean, she's very tough, very resilient, laughed at all the attacks, didn't seem to mind. But I think that was a problem too, because it meant that when they're sitting around the cabinet table, they simply don't have the ability to think about complexity, to process things which are ambiguous, to have the necessary intellectual humility or curiosity, to be able to run things well. So, I wonder whether you feel this too, that maybe the personality required to endure modern politics may get in the way of your ability to actually run the country well. Boy, I never got close to running the country. I was in opposition the whole time. So, I never actually knew. You actually got around the cabinet table, and Allie helped to run a government for a decade. I didn't get close. So, I don't know what

governing would take. But I sense that you're right. I found opposition didn't prepare me for anything other than, you know, getting used to getting beat up all day. And that wasn't bad. I mean, don't cry for me, Argentina. It toughened me up in a way that I think was useful. But I think you're probably right. Our political system does not train us to govern. I think I remember Tony Blair saying when he came in in 97, it just took him the better part of a decade to understand how to actually govern a country well. And I think that's a real problem. But I think that's always, I think it's an intrinsic problem. I mean, if you think back to one of the most dramatic transitions of all was, you know, Franklin Roosevelt dies in early 45 as the war comes to an end. And this kind of nondescript mediocre senator from, you know, from Missouri becomes president overnight and has these earth-shattering decisions to take with no preparation. And he turned out to be, I think, one of the great presidents. So, I just think that's maybe intrinsic to politics. And it's a little technocratic to think, okay, let's design a political system that will prepare people for the burden of office. The burden of office is always unexpected and frightening and scary and test you to the limits, which is precisely why over and over and over, people seek elected office because they want that challenge. Go back to your life as an intellectual. One of the things that we talk about on the podcast a fair bit is the sense we both have a lack of ideas, a lack of new ideas being generated. Do you agree that that's a problem, not just in politics, but in the world more generally now? And what's your sense of where new political ideas can come from? I think I'm supposed to say at this point in the proceedings, because I'm an intellectual, that we need more ideas. I'd like to see competence. I'd like to see just steady incremental delivery so that people have more confidence that politicians know what the heck they're doing. Every time we have a victory, that is every time, for example, COVID is well managed, incrementally boosts or deals with what I think is the salient problem, which is the gulf between the political elite and the electorate. This enormous sense of suspicion, which is fed by social media. I'm not sure good ideas are the solution. I think that the solution to me, maybe this makes me an unimaginative incrementalist, but I just think every time a politician anywhere in the world gets something done right and done well, it's a matter of rejoicing for democracy everywhere. And that's the key thing. Michael, can I just throw on this? Clearly, you've pointed with talking about rising inequality and to what seems to be a massive problem in our economic system. It does feel as though the consensus of the 1990s, these kind of global liberal free markets, was hit very hard by the 2008 financial crash and in Latin America by the crash of commodity prices. And there is a real sense of stagnant incomes of rising inequality of many parts of our country, feeling incredibly excluded and many other people feeling just precarious, feeling they're barely hanging on by their fingernails and debt. So, it does feel as though we need a new economic settlement, whether that is a new form of industrial strategy, new forms of taxes, new forms of investment. And I'm not feeling that. I'm not feeling that any of the Western leaders are producing something convincing, which actually deals with that problem. Oh, Rory, you have to be right. I mean, I look at the numbers. I simply look at distribution of income in most Western societies since the 1970s and you see that. And I look at my children having to struggle to get a foothold in the 21st century. And I found it effortless to get a foothold in the 20th century. I'm sure you're right. What I'm skeptical of is the idea that there is a new economic settlement.

What I'd like is persistent, bold experimentation, as Roosevelt said, at which you try one little thing. And if it works, you make it bigger and you try and scale. I think we're flying blind in terms of knowing what will actually fix this problem. And one of the biggest problems, which is eating away at the legitimacy of politics worldwide, but particularly in Britain, is the sense that the determinants of the economic fortunes of the citizens of Great Britain are determined outside Great Britain altogether by a global economy that's just raging around and reallocating advantage thousands of miles away and stripping jobs out of Sunderland or stripping jobs out of the Northeast and plopping them somewhere else. And politicians desperately trying to use industrial strategy, old nostrums from the 80s and 70s to plug the holes. And that's why I don't hear a new synthesis. And I'm suspicious of one because the problems are so large that what I like is incremental success anywhere I see it. And so, I don't know, I'm picking an example at random. When I hear that the Norwegians are about to ban or have nothing but electric cars by kind of 2025, 2023, I think, hooray, now let's get another country to do that and begin to scale as we get more electric chargers. Because Carl Popper said, he didn't believe in big plans. What he believed in was piecemeal social engineering. And I think I've become that way too, simply because I don't see a new Keynesian synthesis, for example, that would solve the problem that Rory, you rightly want to address. I just don't see it.

But Michael, is there not a danger with that that you mentioned Joe Biden, who I agree with you, I think he's an incredibly effective politician. But in his State of the Union address, he basically said that the dividing line in the world at the moment essentially is between democracy and authoritarianism. And Rory and I do this Q&A every week. And we had a question last week which I've been reflecting on ever since we got it was, is capitalism destroying democracy? So people look at China, and even for all the horrors that are going on now, look at Russia, and look at Iran, and look at Saudi Arabia, and look at Erdogan, who's just won another election. Is there a risk that unless the democracies come up with this sort of big new answer that gives people that confidence, then actually people start to say, do you know what, the Chinese might have a point. Boy, challenging stuff. I fundamentally disagree. The thing I think that makes democracy and capitalism necessary and essential twins is that democracy is the one system that allows you to correct mistakes and we're bound to make mistakes. The Chinese system has enormous difficulty reversing mistakes. Just look at the amount of capital poured into housing that's just vacant. Look at the total failure of their demographic policy in terms of their way below replacement rates. The society's central authority just is too rigid to change. Democracy can change much faster. It's much better at admitting its mistakes. It's much better at going into reverse. That's the positive side of democracy on the economic front. On the capitalist side, there's simply no question, but this is, I'm a 60s Canadian liberal. I believe in the purpose of democracy is to keep capitalism from destroying society. I'm not a socialist. I'm a liberal centrist, but I think you have to regulate and regulate, and even now these big guys who run chat GPT and all the artificial intelligence are basically begging governments around the world, particularly the democracies, to regulate a technology that they know could destroy us all. Nothing encapsulates the necessity of government, the importance of government, than the AI problem. Nothing vindicates, it seems to me, the ways in which democracy,

for all its failings, I think can get in there and regulate capitalism before it gets out of control. Michael, lots more to talk about, including Canada, the future of the world, all sorts of stuff. Back in a minute. Welcome back to the rest of politics leading with me, Rory Stewart, me, Ernest Campbell, and with Michael Ignatieff. Michael, two things. Canada is a sense of Canada and Trudeau and where the strength and weaknesses are, how you analyze what's going to happen in the next election in Canada. I think the second thing related to that is the question of the relationship between democracies and the transitions we need on climate change, because of course, one of the other arguments often made is that the challenges of climate change is so extreme that only an authoritarian state is able to carry them through. I've never believed this stuff about the need for an authoritarian solution to the climate change crisis. It's been around for 50 years, by the way. I remember hearing it in the 1970s. I didn't believe it then, I don't believe it now. What I see around me in my lifetime has been a vertical climb in public consciousness of the environment, a vertical climb in the search for alternative technologies. We're in the middle of an epical energy transition that has been basically driven by markets. I'm a big believer in markets and their capacity to signal and allocate demand. I don't have an anti-capitalist bone in my body because I think it's the most efficient marked signaling system in the world and beats authoritarian systems every time. The problem is it's not happening fast enough, but I don't think this climate change should give us an excuse to limit democracy. We need more democracy, not less. As for Canada, Canada is right in the middle of this because we pump just about as much oil as Saudi Arabia. We're an energy superpower and we're pumping some very dirty oil south and our national income depends crucially on it. The issue divides the country deeply because all the oil is pumped out of Alberta and the rest of the country prefers to virtue signal and say we want to have a nice free green future when in fact we're all sustained by the petrodollars we earn from Alberta. Energy policy is a national unity problem in our country in a way that it is in many other places. Frankly, I just don't know how we're going to solve it except to persuade Albertans, one Albertan at a time, that we have got to move us into a sustainable future and there are some signs in Alberta and other parts of our country that we're beginning to get the message. We're on a hiding to nowhere if we stick with fossil fuels indefinitely, but this is where I'm frankly glad I'm not in politics. This is a really tough issue in our country and we're going, I think, as fast as we can, but we're not there yet. Trudeau is one of those guys, it seems to me, who is pretty respected around the world, but has he yet got into that position where a lot of leaders get to where they're more respected abroad than they are at home? And secondly, this guy, Praliev, the opposition guy, is he as populist as some of the leaders that we've had to deal with here such as Johnson? I think my successor as leader of the party is an incredible politician. He fully inhabits the role and I mean that as praise. I never inhabited the role the way he does. He just is completely in the role. He's unpopular in Canada, because he's been around for a while. He's, I think, haunted by the shadow of his father, who was the great politician of the 20th century and he never quite can manage up. Justin Trudeau is a formidable political actor. Probably you're right, more respected overseas than he is at home. I don't know. As for Praliev, I think, and this allows me to say something that I think is generally a crisis in Western democracy, which is that a lot of the world that I grew up in was not built by liberals and socialists and social democrats. It was also built by conservatives. You think about Macmillan, Harold Macmillan and housing. You think about all these conservatives after the Second World War, who basically supported

the welfare state. And you think about Europe, the Christian conservative tradition, basically created the modern Europe with social guarantees for everybody. It wasn't a left or a centrist achievement. It also involved this constitutional conservatism that built our world. And it's not my family. I'm not part of it. But in Canada, we call it a progressive conservative. Well, there are no progressive conservatives left. This is why Pralievá is an important phenomenon. He's a kind of grade B Canadian imitation of DeSantis. And that's terrible. We had an indigenous conservative tradition, which was progressive conservative, more fiscally conservative than us liberals. But part of the idea of building a country around a broad center, that's gone. And I think it's gone in most countries. I've watched British conservatism go into some extraordinary places that I just never thought possible. And you see this across Europe. Michael, why is that? I mean, why has British conservatism gone in a weird way? Obviously, I resonate with me because I feel that I'm one of the victims of this. But is it something about our age? Is it never going to come back? Are people like me doomed? I mean, what's what's going on? Roy, I never thought you would ask me that question. Since you're one of the world's living experts on that one, I think some of it is top line stuff. I'm so struck by the difficulty Britain has had to accept a post-imperial reality. I mean, I just see from the coronation on. I love Britain. I lived there for 20 years. As a Canadian, I've always admired your institutions because we borrowed them all and stuff. But I feel a tremendous decay of your institutions. I feel a kind of enfeebling nostalgia that is at odds with the other side of Britain, which is a very post-imperial country with innovation everywhere. Go to London and people love London precisely because it's so post-imperial and so modern and so 21st century. But the party is, I think, trapped in a kind of imperial nostalgia, which is tremendously disabling. And I think that then produced a desire to escape from Europe. And the suspicion of Europe is a 500,000 year old tradition in Britain. And there's some good reasons for it. But I do think the turning away from Europe was a catastrophic cultural mistake, let alone economic mistake. And Europe is extraordinarily enfeebled by the British departure. And it results in something that's just amazing to me. I live in Vienna here. I'm talking to you from Vienna. Everybody in Europe speaks English. It's the lingua franca of a continent that you just left. That just seems tragic to me. Why the Conservative Party has gone that way is not just a question about Britain. It's a question about what's happened to conservatism across the world. The central problem of democratic politics to me now is the ways in which conservatism, and you see this particularly in the United States, is at the edge of the constitutional order. In France, it's at the edge of the constitutional order. The key question in French politics will be, will Marine Le Pen respect the Constitution of the Fifth Republic? Yes or no? We don't know the answer. Will a Trump president in 2025 respect the Constitution of the United States? We no longer know. We know the answer to that. Well, the answer to that is no. Let's plead that it's still an open question. This is a new question in politics, never asked in my lifetime. It goes back to what I was saying before. We had a conservatism which built the world we live in, and we've lost that conservatism. I'm much more worried about the conservative end of the argument than I am my own political family. My last question, Michael, and thanks for giving us so much of your time, is you said earlier, I thought it was very interesting about the day after your election

defeat, you basically said, well, that's it. That's my obituary written. But I just wonder, looking back at your whole life, politics having been a part of it, do you view your whole life thus far as a success or a failure? Boy, I don't know. What I would say on the success side is that I lived my damn life. I lived it. I didn't sit around. I lived it. I took some risks. I took some shots. I wouldn't judge it in terms of success or failure. All I would say is I lived it, hopefully with both hands and full heart. That's all I feel about it.

Michael, how have you dealt psychologically with criticisms or envy from people trying to deal with the fact that you have done so many varied things in different fields, that you've been a novelist, you've been an academic, you've been a politician, been a philosopher? Presumably, that means that people within each of those fields will be suspicious

of you, feeling that you haven't become a profound enough novelist or a dedicated enough philosopher or a professional enough politician. Do you feel that sometimes, do you feel that you became too much of a circus performer doing too much? And how have you come to terms with that and

found pride and confidence in the way that you've lived your life? Well, that's a question you must ask yourself because you've been incredibly successful at a range of different things, but you're exposed to what I get exposed to, which is jack of all trades, master of none. And all you can say to that is this is about who you are, your deepest temperament. It's just who you are. I mean, I often wish I'd sat in a monk cell for all of my life and written some absolutely beautiful masterwork, but I didn't because I'm not a monk. I didn't want to be in a cell. I want to get out and see the world. The key point is provided you're prepared to pay the price, whatever the price is for doing a lot of things, and part of the price is people being envious or jealous or saying, well, he's really not very good at that. Provided you're prepared to pay the price, the full freight, fine. Michael, I love it to talk to you.

That was great. Lovely to talk to both of you.

Thank you, Michael. That was lovely. Bye-bye.

So, it was a weird interview for me because it's one of the first times we're interviewing someone that I know much better than you do, whereas obviously with Tony Blair and Jonathan Powell, they're your friends. What did you think of him?

I enjoyed it. I found it a little bit depressing because of his assessment of politics, I guess.

I want to maintain the belief that very, very clever people, intellectuals, can go into politics, can really do it, can make a difference. I thought he was very authentic. I didn't say,

I have read his book some years ago, but I had a real sense that that stuff goes quite deep in him and he's not kind of hiding or camouflaging anything. I feel we do need intellectuals to be coming up with big ideas at the moment and I don't know, maybe it's just he's in a different stage of his life now, but I enjoyed it. Yes, I think the thing that maybe there was frustrating you is he didn't want to produce big ideas. He talked about bold experimentation or carpopper and small incremental changes and I think he probably struggles with this, but I guess he's also somebody who has lived through the dangers of big ideas, maybe I guess the Soviet Union and great utopian fantasies that he's worried about. It's interesting to this question around democracy. I mean, he's absolutely insisting and he's written a beautiful essay on this, that the best way of dealing with climate change is through democracy because it requires you to be flexible to get the consent of the population, bring them with you, whereas he

thinks an authoritarian approach to climate change can be much more brittle. But at the same time, he's acknowledging that in Canada, it's brutal. I mean, what do you do really to try to deal with the fact that Alberta and indeed much the Canadian economy is pumping filthy fossil fuels and how do democratic politicians come to terms with that? And if you just bring that to the UK for a moment, Kier Starmer having come out with a pretty bold announcement on oil and gas in the north of Scotland, the political fight back on that is already starting and is becoming quite strong. I guess what we saw in that in Michael was the conflict between a little bit like with Kate Rayworth, but he did actually go into politics, but it's the conflict between idealism and a sense of I know what I want the world to be, I know what I want to do with power. But then when you get into power, feeling you have to become something different. And I guess I think there are lots of people in politics who are very, very clever and who can do that. You know, my old boss would be one of them, Clinton would be another, Macron, I think, up to a point. There are lots through history who have done that. But I guess what he's saying and which reflects something that we talk about a lot is that it's just become a lot harder to do. Yes. And I think the brutality of his experience, his book, *Fire Nashes*, goes into this and he keeps coming out, putting an optimistic spin on the end of it. But I think the truth of the matter is that to have taken over as the leader of the Liberal Party in Canada, to have been, in all the opinion polls, about to be Prime Minister against a opposition leader that he basically despised, going into an election, losing it catastrophically, getting this leader that he despised back in power. And at the time, seemingly so, he'd actually destroyed this party by putting into third place, I think was incredibly painful. And he talks about, you know, how the Sikh waving at him out of the cement truck helped rebuild him. But I think anybody listening can pick up the fact that the scars were really, really bruising. Oh, yeah. And it was such a catastrophic defeat. It was so big. It's almost impossible to imagine the scale of that defeat. When he mentioned the Sikh cement truck driver, an image popped into my head. I remember after Neil Kinnock lost to John Major in 1992. And Fiona and I went with Neil and Glenison, some other friends and relatives of Neil, and we were down in the West Country. And I can remember we were out in this little village, and it wasn't long after the election. And this little village in a very, very Tory area. And virtually, everybody came up to Neil and said, I'm so sorry for what happened. I voted for you. And, you know, and after about half an hour of this, Neil sort of sitting there says, I'm really surprised about Prime Minister because this Tory stronghold, everybody voted for me. But I think Michael was right that people, they don't necessarily want to pile on the agony. But I think for him, I don't know how you recover from that. It was interesting, he's answered the question about whether he saw his life as a success or failure. He sort of said he'd lived his life. He didn't really want to go there, did he? He was obviously very successful. It's a very interesting question you asked that was quite a profound question. So I'm going to maybe end this little reflection by turning it around on you. And if it's a question that fascinated me, is it a question you sometimes ask yourself? I mean, do you think of your life as a success or failure? How would you answer that? I won't decide until shortly before I die. I do think a lot about that thing about thinking in terms of obituary. I know what the first paragraph of my obituary is. And it has Tony Blair in the sentence. No matter what I do, it's not going to say Alistair Campbell, who topped the UK podcast charts for a long time with Roy Stewart,

died yesterday, is it? It might be paragraph eight. But so I think I've had a good life and a really interesting life with a lot of success and a lot of failure en route. But I'm one of those people that I don't actually believe in that life is about the pursuit of happiness. I think it's about the pursuing of fulfillment. And you get that in all sorts of different ways. And I thought your question about Jack of all trades was interesting as well, because I'm seen as a political figure and I've never actually done what you and Michael have done, which is go into elected politics for reasons that we've talked about. See, I'd say I'd say I think when just before I die, I'll say, well, that was quite good. I enjoyed that. That was alright. I did quite a lot. But I don't think you can say success or failure until you're close to the end. Very good. My final question to you though. Did you agree with Max Weber about soldiers not making good politicians?

I think Weber is fascinating. So there's this amazing essay by Max Weber called Politics as a vocation, where he basically makes the argument for what today we'd call the professional politician. He's very doubtful about the idea of people going into politics later in life, having experience elsewhere. And as you're absolutely right, he makes this point about soldiers being too rigid. I mean, I was a soldier for a very short time, but I think it's something that a daily male columnist called Andrew Alexander once said to me, he said, I remember having lunch with him when

he was in his 80s, and he said in his political life, he'd often observed that soldiers made bad politicians because, and he's not talking about people like me, we're in for a short time, but people in for 10, 15 years, because oddly, they are trained in obedience. And so although they have immense physical courage, they often lacked the moral courage to rebel or stand up against their parties at critical moments because they like to be loyal. They like to fall into line.

I also think that somewhere in this Weber story that you've raised is this question about integrity because Weber's vision of politics is very, very Machiavellian. He basically says that you have to make incredible moral compromises. He almost creates this kind of heroic idea that politicians have to do evil things for the greater good. And he's very dismissive of people who put ethics too centrally in politics. He says, you know, the public realm is completely different from the personal realm. And in effect, you can lie, you can cheat, provided you achieve the greater good. And I'm still desperately trying to resist that. But it may be a bit like Michael's defense of democracy. My defense of integrity in politics may be less about the realities of the world and more about some thing I've taken from earlier life. But Weber's interesting because he's another one, like Machiavelli actually, who are renowned experts on politics, who never became politicians. Yes, well, particularly, I mean, he was a real academic. Whereas some of the others that we often read have spent a short time and failed and gone to exile. And that's why I think these perspectives are interesting. So Machiavelli, I think, was briefly a senior member of the government in Florence and then thrown into exile. Burke, the great conservative here, basically failed as a politician. Tocqueville was a politician briefly and then was booted out. Cicero, again, in some ways, had successes, but ultimately, maybe like everybody, his career ended in failure. So I wonder whether that there isn't something interesting that the really successful politicians, the kind of Tony Blair's this world or the Bill Clinton's, almost because they haven't failed, never quite get the headspace to do the full step back, intellectual reflection on all the features of it. And it's the ones who a little bit of odds with it, who can see it most clearly. Right. Excellent. Onwards and upwards. Onwards and upwards.