

## [Transcript] Leading / 29: Yuval Noah Harari: Crisis and tragedy in Israel (Part 1)

Hello. Welcome to the Restless Politics, leading with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

And our guest this week is Yuval Noah Harari. So Yuval is a public intellectual. He's the author of extraordinary books which cover world history going back, almost the creation of the world, certainly all of human history. He's written books on the future. He's engaged with AI. He's sold tens of millions of copies. He's also, though, deeply involved at the moment as one of the leaders of the protest movements against Benjamin Netanyahu. So we are going to interview him into two episodes. And in the first, we'll focus on Israel and what he's up to at the moment, what's going on in Israel. And in the second, we'll do a much more typical leading episode about his work, about politics, about AI and about his beliefs. Excellent. So without further ado, here's part one of our two-part interview with Yuval Noah Harari. So welcome to the Restless Politics, leading with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

And we're very lucky today to have with us Yuval Noah Harari, who I saw in Israel last week, and I'm now in Amman. He's still in Israel. We're both, I think, in extreme heat, although that's not very rare nowadays. I think there's extreme heat almost everywhere in the world. Not an exception anymore. But Yuval, when I left you, it was a very, very tense moment because you were looking forward to what was going to happen in parliament on Monday when the government

was going to be driving through a decision relating to the position of the judiciary in Israel. You have been very, very involved in many of the movements and the protests trying to stop this happening. Can you just tell me what's happened since I last saw you?

Yes, basically, maybe we start with the context of what is really happening in Israel over the last few months. To understand it, we need to ask just one key question, which is what limits the power of the government? Which is the key question basically in every democracy. Democracy is a system of checks and balances, so no single body, no single center has ultimate power. And in Israel, which has a problematic history, there really is just one check on the power of the governing coalition. And this check has always been the Supreme Court. If, for instance, a coalition has a majority in the Israeli parliament, in the Knesset, it can pass, for instance, a bill that takes away voting rights from Arab citizens of Israel. The only institution, the only mechanism that can prevent this anti-democratic bill from becoming the law of the land is the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court can intervene and says, no, you cannot do that. What the government of Israel has been trying to do in the last few months is to neutralize the Supreme Court in various ways. It's been called, I saw in foreign press, a judicial overhaul, but it's much, much more than that. It's actually an attempt to gain unlimited power. Once the government, in the specific circumstances of Israel, this is not true of other countries, but in Israel, if the government succeeds in neutralizing the Supreme Court, it means there is no other check on its power. It can do anything it wants. And it says openly, I listened to supporters of Netanyahu's coalition, to members of Netanyahu's coalition. And they repeatedly say, we won the last elections. That means we can do anything we want. And any limit on our power is anti-democratic. This is their conception of democracy. You win the election once, you can do anything you want, even for instance, to disenfranchise

some people. And this is their aim. And unfortunately, this week, they have gotten a crucial step closer to realizing their anti-democratic vision. Now, Yvonne, I'm really, really pleased to meet

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you all over the internet. We should just explain to listeners as well. We're going to have two episodes with you. The first, we're just going to talk about what's happening in the here and now in Israel. And you're very, very well known in the UK and in different parts of the world for your broader writings. And frankly, this is one of the leading intellectuals and historians and philosophers that we know. So we're going to be talking about that much more in the second part. But just on this first part, because I can sort of feel in that first answer, the anger and the passion that you feel. And I just wonder, what is it like being in Israeli at the moment? But because we had a question on our podcast the other day from one of our listeners. How are we being seen from the outside? And my sense is of Israel, frankly, that feels very, very on edge that actually it's not impossible to imagine a civil war. Is that am I over dramatizing that? You know, one good thing I can say is that this has been going on for six months. There has been a very surprising and powerful resistance movement with hundreds of thousands of Israelis out in the street week after week. There has been some violence, but so far not a single person was killed. So this is the good news. But the level of hatred and fear between the different sections of Israeli society is mounting. This is a deliberate policy of the government. The government as part of its propaganda campaign, it deliberately tries to incite hatred between different parts of the Israeli public, divide and rule as strategy. Do you mean the whole government or just these extreme religious parts that Roy and I have talked about on the podcast last week? It's very hard to tell the difference. I mean, it's not just this Jewish power party and religious Zionism party. It's also members of the Likud, also members of the ultra orthodox parties. They've been saying some really terrible things in recent weeks. For instance, a member of, I think, one of the ultra orthodox parties saying that the demonstrators are the worst enemies of Israel, worse than Hamas or Hezbollah, and they should be destroyed, saying the same thing, for instance, about LGBT people, that they are a worse danger to Israel than Hezbollah or Iran and should be treated accordingly. When people reserve soldiers in the Israeli IDF, Israeli Defense Forces, saying that they're refusing to serve anymore under a dictatorial government, you have some members of these parties calling them traitors, and even someone, one of them mentions that the punishment for traitors on the battlefield is a firing squad. One of the things that struck me seeing you last week is how deeply passionate and engaged you've become, and I wondered how that felt to go from being a historian reflecting on populism in Britain or the United States, to then having to encounter it at home, and what that's felt like as a more emotional journey. Yeah, well, I've been thinking about this question myself. Living in Israel all my life, wars and very tense situations are not foreign to me, so it's not like this is the first time I come face to face with a problematic historical event, but I think beyond the fact that I feel that the future of Israel and my personal future is at stake, because of my very broad, long-term historical perspective, I see the present event in Israel as more dangerous than I think most Israelis realize. I think this could be a turning point, not just a momentary turning point in the political history of Israel or even the state of Israel. I think this could be a turning point in the 3000 years history of Judaism, that Judaism is facing one of its most dangerous moments ever. It has managed to survive the Jewish people and the Jewish religion, several terrible calamities during its history, but nothing really like that, because this time we are facing not a physical destruction, we are facing spiritual and moral destruction,

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because what is happening in Israel, the people who are leading it are members of extreme groups who hold an ideology of Jewish supremacy, and if they gain power and they are gaining power, they could take the Jewish people and Judaism in an extremely dangerous direction, which could really result in a spiritual destruction or the splitting of the Jewish people or the Jewish religion into two rival currents. On the one hand, this new Judaism that believes in Jewish supremacy and uses brutal force to repress not just Palestinians and Arabs, but also secular people and LGBT people and women, and on the other hand a more liberal Judaism that remains loyal to its traditional views, and these two types of Judaism may split and never be able to rejoin again. I think I've always found it quite difficult to place you politically, and I don't know whether that's been deliberate or whether you see yourself pretty much as being outside politics, but now in a way what we're seeing is that you're entering the political debate, the live current political debate in a more direct way, and I just wondered whether there's any part of you that understands what these extremists are about, and the reason I asked that is I read a very interesting profile of you in the New Yorker magazine before we did this interview, and you said you went through a period when you were, quote, a kind of stereotypical right-wing nationalist. You thought Israel as a nation is the most important thing in the world, and we're right about everything. The whole world doesn't understand this and hates us, so we have to be strong and defend ourselves, and I don't know if you follow English football, you Val, but there's a Rory does it, but there's a football team called Millwall, whose fans very proudly sing, no one likes us, we don't care, and I just wanted, is that what is now taken over, and just how political are you becoming? I want to get a sense of whether you feel yourself becoming more political. Yeah, I mean, this is not something I planned or hoped for or anticipated, but I have been drawn quite deeply into this resistance movement, for instance, shifting from just giving interviews in podcasts and academic lectures to standing in public squares, giving public talks to tens of thousands of people, which was quite a surprise for me that I can even do such a thing. And do you feel, when I say do you understand where these extremists are coming from? Does it flow from right wing nationalism? Absolutely, it's just an extreme version of it, it's just an extreme version of it, basically saying that we are right about everything, we are pure, we are the best, everybody is against us, everybody hates us, they don't understand us, but we are still right, and more than that, it's the feeling that we are superior to everybody, and they say so openly, they chant in the streets, it's difficult to translate from Hebrew, but basically saying that Jewish lives and Jewish souls are superior to the lives and souls of Arabs or of non-Jews, that they say it completely openly, our finance minister, our minister of internal security, other members of the coalition, they're completely open about these views, for instance, they are completely open about their plan to annex the occupied Palestinian territories without giving citizenship to the local Palestinian population. Again, one of the reasons they want to neutralize the Supreme Court, and this has been a long-term goal of theirs, is that they know or they suspect that the Supreme Court would block such a move as being anti-democratic or against basic human rights. Some of them even talk about destroying the el-Aqsa compound and replacing it with the Jewish temple. When you tell them, you know, this would lead to World War III and nuclear war and things like that, no matter, God will help us. This must be both a very courageous thing to do, but also a very uncomfortable thing to do, because presumably, there will be strong pressure on you from people saying, you mustn't criticize

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Israel, because if you criticize Israel, you will be giving, I don't know, comfort to Israel's enemies. Do you feel that you're under pressure from people who say, look, I understand what you think, Joval, but please don't say this, because this is going to be bad for our international reputation? Some people say it. I mean, I'm not doing these things. I'm just talking about them. It's not me that is causing the problem. And I think, again, the danger to Israel itself, to the Palestinians, to the entire region, to the future of Judaism, the danger is so great that I think we have to talk about it openly. Even people who don't care about the Jewish people or about Israel, I mean, this will have repercussions far beyond. I mean, just think about Mr. Netanyahu has been mourning the world repeatedly in recent years about the dangers of a nuclear Iran, going from capital to capital around the world saying, don't give nuclear weapons to religious fundamentalists. And he is now creating exactly this regime here. He is giving Israel on a plate to religious fundamentalists, including our nuclear weapons, our army, our cyber industry. And this could have consequences far beyond the limited borders of Israel or the immediate region. Okay, Yuval. Fascinating. Great to talk to you. We've got a lot more to talk about, so let's just take a quick break and we'll see you in a minute.

Hello, and welcome back to the Rest is Politics Leading, where we're joined by Yuval Noah Harari. So one of the things you said when I saw you last week is I was drawing analogies with other populist movements, with Donald Trump or with Erdogan in Turkey. And I think partly for these reasons, you said, no, Rory, you have to understand it. It's worse than that. This is a different type of context. Yes. I mean, partly because of the occupation, if you think about Hungary or Turkey, Hungary doesn't hold millions of non-Hungarians under occupation. And it is also

part of the EU and wants to stay that way. So it places significant limitations on what the urban regime is doing there. Also, in most of the other places, yes, the populists are supported by parts of the religious groups. But in Israel, it's the religious zealots who are leading this anti-democratic power grab. And their opinions, or at least some of their opinions, are really, really extreme. It's not about, let's not let immigrants into our country, or let's limit LGBT rights. It's about establishing a theocracy. Just like a week ago, one of the members of the coalition who is partly in charge of the Education Ministry, is not the Education Minister, but is in charge of one of the branches of the Education Ministry, gave an interview in which he said, yes, I know that Israel has always been described or was created as a Jewish democratic state. This was a mistake. We need to get rid of the democratic part and make it just a Jewish state. Do you think that the Benjamin Netanyahu in his heart believes any of this, or is he now just a prisoner of these extremists? First of all, last week we discovered that he certainly has a heart because he said, and this is so characteristic, he was hospitalized. He said that he forgot to drink water and had sunstroke. And then he had a pacemaker implanted. Now, usually you don't implant

people with a pacemaker because they didn't drink water. But this may be the first case in medical history that this happened. So we know he has a heart at least, or at least a pacemaker for the heart. But what's going on there? As a historian, I find it extremely difficult to get into the minds of leaders in general, especially in extreme situations. And I think that it's a general rule in intelligence gathering, also in the military, that it's very dangerous to base your intelligence on your assumptions for what people think or believe or want. You need to look at capabilities,

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you need to look at what they are actually doing. Now, I don't know what goes on in the mind of Benjamin Netanyahu. I don't know if even he knows it. This is why we go to therapists, because we often don't know what we do, the things we do. But I observe what is he actually doing and what he's actually doing is giving more and more power to these religious extremists, like taking somebody who was convicted in incitement to hatred by a court of law and was not recruited to the Israeli army because the army thought of this person as his views are too extreme, and he made this person minister of internal security in charge of the police.

And I look at the kind of laws that the coalition he leads is passing in the Knesset, and this is what I base my analysis on, not on trying to get into his mind.

Yeah, I understand that. So I met Netanyahu a few times when I worked with Tony Blair, and I can remember the very, very, very first meeting, turning to one of the foreign office senior advisors and saying, what's this guy like then? This was back in the mid 90s, mid to late 90s. And he said, all you got to know about Netanyahu is he's a 24 carat bullshitter. Now, the 24 carat bullshitter that we then saw was incredibly fluent, spoke perfect, Americanized English, very Western leaning, very fond of displaying his credentials with America. And I didn't have a sense of this religious, any sense of religious zeal at all, I got the security picture, that was it. So that's what makes me think, and I agree you're right not to sort of follow our own assumptions, but I don't see the religious bit.

First of all, it's been quite a number of years since that meeting. And people change, sometimes quite dramatically. For sure. Another thing is that in the Middle East, and Rory, I think, can back me up on it, we say, don't give any importance to what regional leaders are saying in English. Only listen to what they are saying in their mother tongue, in Arabic, or in Hebrew. Listen to what Mr. Netanyahu is saying in Hebrew, ignore everything that he's saying in English. You've got to say, I don't speak Hebrew.

And one last thing is that nobody disputes that the man is a genius. He's an extremely clever politician. He's a genius in PR. So without dealing with somebody very, very impressive, unfortunately, using his considerable talents, I think for detrimental purposes, certainly for Israel. So what does he say in Hebrew? I know it's very hard to translate things from a language where you express something they can't necessarily be expressed in the language, but are you saying he's more extreme when he speaks Hebrew than he is? And how does that express itself? Much more in the way that, for instance, he talks about the demonstrators, the protesters in the street inciting hatred against them, even calls for violence sometimes. If not himself, then his PR team and his son, Netanyahu, who is a very central figure also in all that. It's the way, let me explain like this. I mean, when people here listen to him speak, it's very obvious to us. And I said people, let's say, from the protest movement.

When we hear him speak, we know for 100 percent certainty he is not talking to us. He doesn't care about us at all. Who's he talking to? He's talking only to his base of supporters.

He's been giving a lot of speeches also on television and so forth about what's happening in Israel. And he sometimes makes a show as if he's trying to be conciliatory. But again, the man is a PR genius. And the man understands Israeli society like almost nobody else.

He knows if he wants to, he knows how to reach me and how to reach other people in the protest movement. And he doesn't even attempt to do that. And what you call, it doesn't matter exactly what he says. What you hear all the time is, I don't give a fuck about you. I care only about my base, my tribe. I'm talking only to them. And I don't care that you know that. I don't care that you

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know that I don't care about you. And this is a feeling about the person who controls our country, who controls the security forces, which is really, really scary.

Can I come back to what's happened in the weeks since I saw you? So just if you can, having given the context in the background, talk us through. I guess I saw you last Friday and we're talking again now on a Thursday. Just what's been happening over the last six days? So many things. The main things are that the Knesset, the parliament has passed the first crucial law neutralizing, stripping away authority from the Supreme Court, limiting the ability of the Supreme Court to strike down laws of the Knesset or resolutions of the government. I don't want to get into the legal details. It doesn't really matter. But it's a law that that limits, doesn't completely abolish, but limits the ability of the Supreme Court to resist actions or non-actions. Also, if the government doesn't do something, you can't go to the Supreme Court and says, hey, tell the government it must do that. By the way, can I just say one thing? Can the Supreme Court, with its old powers, look at this legislation? Yes, absolutely. This is now happened. People, of course, immediately ran to the Supreme Court and told the Supreme Court, strike down this law. And the Supreme Court said, I look at it in September. So now that the next big crisis will be in September, when the Supreme Court is supposed to debate this new piece of legislation. What also happened dramatically around this time is a wave of reserve soldiers in the Israeli army stopping their military service. It's most dramatic in the air force, but it's not only there. You have hundreds of air force pilots, of cyber weapons experts, of commanders, of elite units, of ordinary soldiers saying, this is it. Our contract is with Israeli democracy. Israeli democracy has expired. Our contract has expired. We no longer serve. And again, this is most dramatic in the air force, which relies to a very large extent on reservists. Nobody knows the extent of what is happening, because it's a military secret, obviously. But was unimaginable just a few months ago, you know, in Israel, after the Holocaust, given all the wars and security situation, military service is almost like sacred duty. And you have people, including former chiefs of the army, former commanders of the air force, former commanders of the security forces, publicly and openly saying to soldiers, don't serve. We support you. But this shows you the extent of what's been happening in Israel. Just one last example. One of them is the former chief of the internal security service, the Shin Bet, Nadav Ergaman, who was appointed by Netanyahu. And until about two years ago, was in charge of the security service. And this is what he's saying now. So this is not, you can say, okay, I'm a historian, a scholar, whatever, with my views. You have the heads of the security forces telling the soldiers, this is an anti-democratic power grab, don't serve. That's why it feels like it's on the brink of a civil war. If you have people like that saying things like that, that feels very, very, very fragile. Yes, the government has been trying to describe this, especially in internal propaganda as a military coup. You had people like Netanyahu and his coalition members saying, this is a military coup against the government. In military coups, usually soldiers take up arms against the government. Here we have soldiers laying their arms down. It's the first military coup in history that is conducted by soldiers who are laying down their arms. Well, one of the things that I guess we feel all the time is an attempt to try to understand the perspective of the other side. So obviously, you are very familiar with trying to describe why people vote for Brexit, why people vote for Trump. What is your best account of the other point of view? What is the most generous empathetic account you can give of why people are voting for this coalition around Netanyahu?

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Some of them honestly believe in this religious ideology of Jewish supremacy. I mean, it should be very, very clear. It's not just three people in the government. You have hundreds of thousands, maybe more, of Israelis who authentically and honestly believe in Jewish supremacy. Yes, we are God's chosen people. Everybody else is below us. And we should have more rights. We should be superior. Then you have a lot of people who really don't understand what democracy is. It's a very widespread problem. You have lots of people who honestly believe that if you win the elections, it means you can do anything you want. This is democracy, right? And they don't understand, no, this is not democracy. Democracy means that those who win the elections can form a government and can do many, many things, form policy on foreign affairs, on security, raise taxes, lower taxes, go to war, make peace, so many things. But they have to work within the limits of the law. And there are certain basic things like the structure of the regime and basic liberties, human rights that you cannot change even if you won the last elections. Otherwise, anybody who wins the last elections immediately says, okay, now I pass a law that there are no more elections and I rule for the rest of my life. I mean, if I won the elections, I can't do that. No, you can't do that because this is changing the rules of the game. Similarly, you can't, I won the elections, okay, so now I take away voting rights from Arabs or women because I won the elections. You can't do that. And many people really don't understand why not, but we won the last elections. In the last seven or so years, we've had a similar situation relating here to the concept of the will of the people, the Brexit referendum, you know, we won, you lost, suck it out, we'll do whatever the hell we want. I think it's more extreme because in Brexit, you can say, no, this is legitimate. This is a policy decision. Here we are talking about changing the basic rules of the game. Like you have a game, like I know if this is football, so let's say that in football, if you score a goal, now we can change the rules of the game. Now you score the goal, now we can make a new rule that your players can hold the ball in their hands and the other side can't. No, you can't. You have to keep playing by the same, okay, you're ahead, but you have to keep playing by the same rules. You want to change the rules? There is a different procedure for doing that. Sometimes what you hear in Israel is people will try to stereotype the opposition as being liberal, European, out of touch, privileged elite, and suggest that the supporters of the government are more working class, Mizraheem. Yes, this is exactly what I wanted to get to. First of all, there is nothing wrong with being liberal, but we do get this criticism a lot, but the key issue is really one of social injustice. Israel, for decades, since its establishment, had a terrible problem of inequality and social injustice, not just between Jews and Arabs, but also between Ashkenazi Jews who mostly came from Europe and Mizrahe Jews who mostly came from the Middle East. And this is one of, again, one thing that the government propaganda is playing on again and again successfully, and they are presenting their anti-democratic paragraph as just a means to correct the historical injustice to Mizrahe Jews and to create a more equitable society. Now, this could have been plausible if they started by having this broad package of new laws aimed to equalize Israeli society to deal with the social gaps. Let's say take a third of the budget in order to build hospitals and schools in underprivileged communities, give better education, whatever. If they did this and then the Supreme Court came along and struck it down because the Supreme Court said, no, we don't like Mizrahe Jews, we want all the money to ourselves, you can't do that, then you would have hundreds of thousands of people in the streets protesting against the

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Supreme Court and they would be justified in trying to weaken or neutralize the Supreme Court. But this is not what they did. They started with this package of let's destroy the Supreme Court and then when people asked them why, then they had to come up with an excuse and the excuse was,

oh, we need to do that in order to provide social justice. Who is preventing you from providing social justice? Netanyahu is in power since 2009 and previously in other three years in the 1990s. The Likud party is in power since 1977. If you care so much about social justice, you really need to wait 40 years to do something about it. So lots of people believe it. It's one reason that the government is popular and that what is happening is popular in large section of Israeli public. But at least my understanding is this is complete propaganda. They don't really care about social justice. Again, don't listen to what they say. Look at what they do. If they try to change the budget and the Supreme Court blocks it, then okay, deal with the Supreme Court. But if you go immediately for the jugular of the Supreme Court, then this doesn't make sense. But Yvonne, we've seen that with populist leaders everywhere, is that once they get into power, they continue to behave like a campaigning opposition and they create enemies and that's the way they quasi-govern. They have been in power for so many years and yet they claim that they never solve the problems of the country because the real power is with the deep state. This is an ingenious trick. On the one hand, you have all the benefits of holding power, but you don't carry any of the responsibility because whenever people accuse you of the state of healthcare or whatever, you say, I try to solve it, but the deep state is preventing me. What can I do? You've mentioned the Palestinians a few times. You obviously feel very, very angry and very alarmed and worried about what's going on, but how must they feel? Because they don't even seem to have a voice in this. Correct me if I'm wrong, but my sense of the protest has been very much Israelis fighting for their vision of what Israel should be, but with no real sense of we're actually worried about what's going to happen to the Palestinians in this context. Is that fair? I think something deep is changing that for quite a number of years, basically since the early 2000s and the collapse of the Oslo process and the Second Intifada, a lot of Israelis, they stopped worrying about what we are doing to the Palestinians and about the occupation. They felt it's hopeless. We tried. They didn't want to. It failed. That's it. And now it's coming back because Israelis realized that the occupation is ultimately endangering Israeli democracy and not only the Palestinians. Of course, the Palestinians are the number one victims of it, but also Jewish Israelis increasingly feel now that ultimately the occupation will destroy Israeli democracy as well because it's just incompatible. For years, you had this kind of typical Israeli, we call it Israbluf. I don't know how to translate it into English, but the occupation is just temporary. It's been going on all our lives, but it's just temporary. It's not a real deal. And this kind of made it possible to how do you square a democratic country with the occupation? But now the people who are leading this anti-democratic power grab, again, they openly say, one of our main aims, if not the main aim, is that once the Supreme Court is out of the way, we will annex the occupied territories without giving citizenship to the Palestinians. And this is basically the end of Israeli democracy and it pretends to have an Israeli democracy. So a lot of Israelis are reawakening to the issue of the occupation. Another thing that happened is that you had several really terrible incidents in recent months when after Jewish settlers were murdered by Palestinian militants, Jewish mobs of right-wing activists basically staged pogroms in several Palestinian villages and towns, most famously

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in Hawala in late winter. And in many of these cases, the Israeli security forces did nothing or almost nothing to stop it, basically just stood by. And if you had a mob of Palestinians trying to burn an Israeli settlement, you would have the strongest army in the Middle East putting a stop to it in half a second. And suddenly you had these events that I don't think that anybody was killed, but lots of Palestinians were injured, houses were burned, property was destroyed. And the army said, oh, we didn't know it's going to happen. We tried to do something, but we couldn't, all these kinds of things. And you had the finance minister, Betzal el-Smutrich, going public, giving support to these mobs, saying publicly, we need to wipe out Hawawa, but the name of this Palestinian town. He later under very intense pressure retracted it or proudly retracted it. But to have a finance minister saying something, this was a wake-up call for many people in Israel, including in the security forces. When you listen to the Air Force pilots who have stopped their service in recent days, one of their key arguments is if there is no judicial supervision over the side of the government, and we have somebody like Smutrich in the government, and he's not only finance minister, he's also a minister in the security department. There is a defense minister, but Smutrich is another minister in the same department. If we are now given an order to bomb something, how do we know that we are not annihilating civilians?

Yvonne, I'm going to hand to Alasdair, I think, for the final question, because we'll have a chance, I think, to explore more of these themes in our ongoing conversation. But I'm so, so grateful, and I'm so struck by the visible transformation that I feel in you. I mean, how much your political engagement is transforming you as a thinker and an activist. I'm going to hand back to Alasdair to finish, and thank you very much for this first part. I suppose my final question, Yvonne, would be whether you actually see any hope in this. I was listening to a German podcast with a guy who's a German guy who's based in Israel, who was making the point that he thinks actually there is no way that this lot can win another election. And therefore, that might be the time that this thing turns around. But then I also saw that you had said, we're really just like Russia now, we're going to have elections, but they won't be really elections. They will not win the next election. And therefore, if it's within their power, they will not allow the next elections to take part, or they'll rig it. They'll have an election, but they'll do something, they're already talking about it. Like we'll do something like, if you want to vote in the elections, you have to first sign a declaration of loyalty to the state of Israel, which of course will be phrased by smooth riches and his people, and lots of Arabs and also maybe lots of Jews will refuse to sign it. So, so many ways to rig an election when you have absolute power in your hands. So where is the hope going to come from? The hope comes from the hundreds of thousands of Israelis while demonstrating in the streets week after week after week. It's really been very inspiring to see this popular movement coming from below of people who were never politically engaged in their lives. You know, again, one of the interviews was one of the reservists who stopped their military service last week. He said, I was never engaged with politics. I didn't care about it. I didn't even go to any of the demonstrations, but something broke in me this week. And I just, I just quit. And you see this happening to more and more people. And this gives hope. And also, again, looking from the very long term perspective, we have this dangerous extremist wing now in Judaism. But we also have thousands of years of Jewish history with very different

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traditions of tolerance, of respect for other people, including for non Jews, of respect for minorities. And I think that if we connect to these parts of Jewish tradition, then we can not just stop the immediate madness, but we can create a much better Israel, which will be a real democracy,

which will respect its minorities. And hopefully, we'll also manage to reach a peaceful settlement with the Palestinians. Well, that is at least a hopeful note on which to end. Yvonne, thanks very much for talking to us. Thank you very much. Thank you.

So I come to this sort of slightly timidly, since for once in my life, I've managed to produce a guest. What did you make of Yvonne talking about Israel? I thought it was fascinating and illuminating. And I don't know him personally. I've only known him through body rights and casual interviews that I've seen. And he's always struck me as apolitical, somebody who sort of stands rather above an outside politics and observes it from the outside. But he's clearly becoming more and more politically engaged. And it's quite clear that what Netanyahu is doing in Israel is radicalizing people. It's amazing, isn't it? I mean, I first met my guest, maybe seven, eight years ago, went out to see him in his house. He lives in a small house outside Jerusalem. It's a very nice house, but it's a small, small house overlooking a valley. And the man that I first met seven, eight years ago, I found to be quite sort of quiet and a little bit restrained, a little bit shy, a little bit of odds with these books, which are these sort of monumental, you know, huge histories of the life, the universe and everything. So I was sort of expecting this sort of great talker who was going to sort of pontificate about global history. And I met someone who was much, much quieter. But I feel he's been, he's changing. So I saw him again in his house in Israel last week. And I was there with Shoshana with my wife. And I think she was already taken with him. And taken with the fact, I mean, I suppose one small thing is that he's become this sort of global superstar. But I think he's still got a surprising degree of sort of humility and self-reflection still going. But as you've picked up, also real passion. I mean, does he remind you of sort of labor activists and people, do you get the feeling of a political activist really getting into the, getting into an argument there? No, I get the feeling of, perhaps this is because I'd read a fair bit before we did the interview, when you phoned me up and said he was coming on, you know, relatively quickly, like in the next few days, I did quite a lot of research and reading. And I got the sense of a very different character than the one we've just seen. And therefore, what I think I see as a slightly reluctant activist, whereas most activists that I, most activists who go dive into politics are anything but reluctant.

Well, what was the gap? Be honest about what you thought when you were just reading about him before you met him. What was the difference? What were you expecting? And what was different? Well, something that came across in the way he talks about the things that he believes in, his ideas and so forth. I was expecting somebody quite arrogant. I don't know why.

I was expecting somebody very, very absolutely. I mean, I talked about the Millwall strategy a little bit, kind of listened to me, I know what I'm talking about kind of thing.

And I didn't, I didn't feel he was arrogant at all. I think it's quite amazing. He went through the whole one hour episode without plugging a single one of his books for it. Let's be frank, I guess if you've sold 25 million of them, you know, you don't need to worry too much.

But I just, I thought there was, yeah, I felt there was a humility there. And I also think that he's, he wasn't the person that wrote those books. That person was much, much more detached. You would probably have looked at people who go out on protest marches and felt

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quite know why they're doing that because there are bigger things here at play.

No, but I liked him and I thought he had a good sense of humor. It's interesting how one of the, I mentioned the New Yorker profile, that made the point that often the person who wrote it said that often when they saw him speaking in public, he took a, he was quite timid and took a time to warm up. And I kind of felt that with him. I felt he took a little bit of time to warm up. But once he was warmed up, he was like, just, you know, on it. No, I really, really enjoyed it. And also, I was really fascinated and quite moved by what he said towards the end about this is reviving people's understanding that it's not just about Israelis. It is also about the Palestinians, because that's the bit that seems to me is getting lost in this debate.

I think a couple of things I thought, I mean, one is paradoxically, the guy that wrote his New Yorker profile in Parker also wrote the New Yorker profile of me sort of 15 years ago. And it's the same slightly weird snarky tone that he views both of us. But it's also, I think, very interesting seeing how brave and clear he can be. I have often felt a bit tentative about talking about Israel-Palestine, that it's something that I feel that you need to know so much about, and people are so vested in. And I probably pull my punches on Israel-Palestine more than I'd like, more than I do on almost any other issue. But to have someone who is right in the heart of it, speaking with such sort of clarity and conviction, when we did our podcast last week, I tried to talk a little bit, and we both did, about what's worrying about people like Ben Gavir and Smotrich, and how weird it is, how it's sort of worse than Trump, because it's like Trump putting the January 6th people into his cabinet. But my goodness, Yuval was really setting that alight.

I mean, he was going well, well beyond, wasn't he? Yeah. And also, let's just imagine that these people become more powerful within the Israeli cabinet. Actually, do start to, for example, I don't know, reverse the legislation on gay marriage. Well, he's right in the fire line for that one. And also, I think if you do become a very high profile, he was making the point, and I've read this as well, that they think the people, the protesters are kind of, you know, a bit like vermin. Yeah. So it is quite a brave thing to do. But I think it is one of those moments where people either, you know, they are the standup or they don't, and it's to his credit, and the credit of all those other people that they're still going. And I think they do need to keep going. I was interested in what he said about the, where this goes within the Supreme Court process, because of course, if the Supreme Court does come back in September and say, this is overstated, exceeds your powers, abuses your powers, that really does throw you into a bit of a constitutional crisis. Oh, it's terrifying, isn't it? Because then, of course, all the populace go completely maniac. I mean, that would be like the British Supreme Court trying to overrule Brexit. I mean, that would be something completely astonishing. And I think the Israelis of free court would probably be very cautious, cautious not to do that.

So listen, thanks for that, Rory. Well done, Rory. You got a good guest. Well done. Well done. We're very happy with you. Now go do it again. So that was part one. He now follows John Major as the, the second person with whom we think two parts given how much time we had with them are worth putting. And in the second episode, we're going to be discussing his life and times, we're going to be discussing his childhood coming out as gay. We're going to be discussing his remarkable success as an intellectual, as an author, and also some pretty big stuff about the future, the power of AI, and frankly, the future of humanity. You get big stuff on the rest is politics. But if you can't wait a week and you want to listen right now, it's already available part two to members of the rest is politics. Plus,

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