

[Transcript] Leading / 35. Cathy Ashton: Dealing with Putin and Lavrov, Kosovo-Serbia, and 'radical humility'

Welcome to the Restless Politics Leading with me, Ernest Campbell.

And me, Rory Stewart.

And with a woman today who is on leading because for several pretty turbulent years in recent modern history, she was effectively the foreign secretary of the European Union, a position created by the Lisbon Treaty, which in a previous leadership position, she helped get through Parliament when she was leader of the House of Lords.

Made appear by Tony Blair, made a cabinet minister by Gordon Brown.

As the EU's foreign policy supremo, she chaired the Iran nuclear talks that led to a deal since, come under a lot of pressure, nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize no less for her work on the Serbia-Kosovo deal, also now under pressure.

And she had many, many encounters with a certain Vladimir Putin, especially at the time of the annexation of Crimea.

And of course, we're still dealing with the consequences of that today.

She admits in her book that the reception to her arrival in this amazing position was somewhat lukewarm, even in my own country, she said.

And yet when she left, General David Petraeus, one of your friends, Rory, called her one of the finest diplomats of her generation.

So I guess my first question, Baroness Ashton of Upholland, who we shall now call Kathy.

My first question is whether you've always kind of gone through life being a bit underestimated.

It's wonderful to be on this podcast with you two, I have to say at the beginning.

And thank you for inviting me.

I don't know whether I've gone through my life being underestimated.

What I am conscious of is that a number of the things that I've done, I've not applied for, I've not lobbied for, I've not even suggested that I could or should do, but somehow found myself doing.

And a few people have said to me over that time that it's interesting because in a sense it allows you the freedom, I suppose, to say, I will do my best and if it doesn't work, then I will step aside.

So perhaps that's what I should be better known for rather than being underestimated.

And you may be aware that my fellow podcast presenter, Mr. Rory Stewart, has a book out at the moment called Politics on the Edge, which, and a lot of the themes actually I think are quite resonant with yours, and I'm just going to read a section of your book.

But I think it sort of says a lot about you.

I've often been asked in the ensuing years whether I enjoyed my time as the first, here comes the job title, High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, First Vice President of the Commission.

The answer was no.

There were moments of deep satisfaction, even joy, and I made some of the best and closest friends of my life.

But it was relentless.

There was no time to be complacent or was another problem to try to solve.

I was admired and hated in equal measure every day, and the hate got to me much more in the admiration.

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I dreaded the press, feared the news, worried about my diplomats all over the world, hoped for good news that seldom came.

I visited some of the worst places on earth, saw children living in terrible misery, heard the stories of destruction, cried alongside the bereaved and injured from earthquake or war, and wondered at our capacity for evil.

I saw acts of bravery and kindness in unlikely places and watched the infinite willingness of children to learn in dusty, crumbling schoolrooms or tents in refugee camps.

I did everything I could to help knowing it was never going to be enough and worried that a better person than I could have done much more.

That's pretty bleak.

It's not meant to be bleak.

It's meant to be real.

I wrote that introduction in one go.

As you know, it begins with me talking about me being a little girl with a blue pencil case and how I wrote my name address.

I came from a pollen, wig, and Lancashire, Britain, the world, and so on, to kind of get across the idea that we're all connected in some way.

But I wanted to make it clear that the work that people do in trying to help the world get better, and Rory will, I hope, find this resonates with his own experiences.

It's really difficult, and it's never enough, and it's always the next challenge.

It's always the crisis you're trying to deal with.

Cathy, thank you.

I mean, one of the things that strikes me right off the beginning with that quote and your reflections is the sense of the crazy scale and challenge of these jobs.

You were responsible for thousands, maybe even tens of thousands of civil servants.

You're connecting with more than 20 countries within the EU.

You're connecting with, I think you've visited nearly 100 countries, we're engaged with certainly 100 countries.

I sometimes wonder whether the problem isn't that we pretend in books and movies normally that you sort of effortlessly get into those jobs.

The President of the United States is sort of micromanaging everything that happens in the country.

But the truth is, it doesn't matter whether you're the sexual state for health dealing with a million people in the health service or Britain or whether you're doing your job.

These jobs are basically impossible.

I mean, you're being set up to feel continually inadequate.

I mean, it's never possible for anyone to know enough, have enough expertise, have enough time to do them in the way that you might expect.

So I always rail a bit against the word impossible, Rory, and the reason is that it might be impossible,

but we all do them.

And one of the great things I had was 27, then 28 when Croatia joined and obviously before we left countries, their ministers, their ambassadors, their policy people.

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So I had this extraordinary depth and breadth of information and knowledge about the world. There wasn't anywhere on earth that when we sat around Foreign Affairs Council, which I chaired as you know, that somebody didn't have a depth of experience that couldn't actually say, well, these are the issues I think we need to be thinking about.

So we had an awful lot of people and I always said it was never me on my own.

It wasn't me as a high representative or HRVP, as people used to call me.

It was actually 28 foreign ministers and me.

It was 28 leaders of the EU.

It was 28 development ministers.

It was countries with all of the resources that they had coming together.

But I mean, you're being wonderfully modest and you're talking about teamwork, but can I just get back to the fundamental problem, which is even if you were a Wonder Woman, you were never going to be able to know everything about those countries and even those people around the table.

Actually, I feel as a foreigner who's worked a lot in other people's countries, I barely can provide a detailed account of what's going on in Wiccan, let alone provide a detailed account of what's happening in southern Afghanistan.

So there is a real problem of knowledge at the heart of the whole diplomatic thing.

I mean, we come from the global north.

We are white.

We don't speak those languages normally fluently and we are dealing with some of the most complex and charitable questions in the world where even the people inside the country don't necessarily understand what's going on.

Absolutely right.

I called the book and then what?

This is not an advert for the book, well, it is, but there we go.

But it was called that because...

Roy and I are the last people on earth who can object to people plugging their books.

That's what somebody said to me.

Whatever you do, talk a lot about your book because they will, about their own.

The point was that for me, I mean, everything you said, I couldn't agree with more, that the challenge really that I see in diplomacy is that you're faced with a crisis.

Well, the reason it's a crisis is because you don't know everything.

If you knew everything, it wouldn't be a crisis.

Might be a problem, but it wouldn't be a crisis.

They seem to come out of nowhere.

We try and grapple with the immediate consequences to stop things getting worse.

We sort of put a bit of sticking plaster or a bit of a lid on the problem and then we move on because the next one has appeared.

And one of the things that I've tried to tell in the seven stories I tell in the book that are aimed at people really who are interested in foreign policy, but haven't lived it as it were, is to show also that while you're dealing with one, you're dealing with the other, that they don't come one after the other.

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They come all together.

And that means that you're moving around trying to do as much as you possibly can.

And then what came from me saying, it's not enough to sort this problem for the moment.

And then what?

What do we do next?

How do we stop this getting worse?

And then how do we make it better?

Problems take decades to emerge.

They bubble up and then explode.

Why do we think it's going to take us six months to put the lid back on?

It's going to take decades to solve it.

So one of my pleas is that we think much, much longer term about these issues.

Were you hurt when you were first appointed to the top job?

You'd been a trade commissioner first, replacing Peter Mandelson, and then you were suddenly thrust into this new, incredibly powerful and difficult position.

And the reaction, as I said in the introduction, as you acknowledged, was very, very lukewarm.

What has she done to justify this kind of appointment?

First of all, did that hurt you?

And secondly, was the both then and going through the years that followed an element of misogyny about it?

I tried to rationalize it at the beginning by saying it's a bit like when you read a book and you imagine the characters in your mind.

So everybody thinks, you know, what Harry Potter should look like or are gone from Lord of the Rings.

And then when you make the movie and you cast the wrong actor, boy, does it drive you crazy when you get to see the film.

And I sort of felt like that.

They don't really love this high representative, it's going to be this big new foreign minister.

And then this sense of, who, what is she doing in that?

And I understood that because actually I didn't think that I should be cast in that either.

I didn't for a moment until the day I was appointed expect it to happen.

So I did understand it.

What hurt a lot was that there seemed to be a sense that I wouldn't be given the chance to even show that I could do something.

And a lot of the ways that journalists operated, particularly in Brussels, meant that as they said to me very openly, many of them were stringers.

They only got paid if they got something in their newspapers.

And I had 28 countries, plus all the rest, second largest newsroom in the world after the Pentagon, I think.

And I said, why did you write that?

You know, it's not true.

They said, yeah, but my paper doesn't like you if I write something nice about it doesn't get printed.

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I don't get paid.

And one journalist, just a little tiny story, once wrote something about me having my watch on British time that proves that I was really thinking about my family, hence the misogyny bit is quite right, rather than the job.

I was very struck by an article that Peter O'Born wrote in The Telegraph in September 2013, which begins, well, let's admit we were all completely wrong.

It's now obvious that Catherine Ashton has been a success.

And he goes on to talk about the peace deal between Cerber and Kosovo that nobody thought was possible, brokered by Baroness Ashton.

And he says, I've never met Baroness Ashton, but I guess that one of her secrets is that she keeps her heads down, does not flaunt her ego, and allows others to take the credit.

It takes little imagination to envisage how a male politician from any of the main parties would have exploited the Kosovo peace deal or the Morsi visit.

She just kept her head down and quietly got on with her job.

Do you think he's got something there?

I've never met Peter O'Born.

We've nearly met several times.

You don't want to meet him.

But we never have.

He wrote a very, very, very unpleasant book about me.

When that article came out, I cut it out and carried it round with me for weeks.

Oh, Lord.

Because it was the first time that I'd seen something where people accepted that just maybe they were wrong and maybe I had been able to do something.

And you know, when you've got years, months, years of people just telling you you can't do it, that you're rubbish, that you look awful, that this, that, the other, when you suddenly see something unexpected like that, it was a real, for me, a really important moment.

Cathy, just to, just to set the background and then we'll, we'll go back to the foreign affairs.

But I'd love to just sort of take us back into your earlier life.

Because in a sense in the book, the whole thing seems like a series of sort of rather wonderful accidents.

You turned out to be very, very good at the job.

You did the job very well.

But it's very improbable.

The story seems to be that you had worked in various positions in Britain, which weren't the most high profile positions.

You'd gotten to House of Lords, you'd been a junior minister in various departments in House of Lords, and then you'd become leader of the House of Lords.

And then you'd sort of found yourself filling in for Peter Mandelson, almost by accident because he'd been brought back to the cabinet.

And then you say quite modestly that one of the reasons you got through and became the

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foreign minister is because they were looking for somebody from the left.

They were looking for a woman.

There were quite complicated things going on within the EU and all that sort of perspective.

But tell us about the earlier life.

Tell us about really what you were doing in the 1980s and early 90s, what you expected you were going to be doing with your life, presumably you were not expecting to be the EU foreign minister.

So what were the sort of first 15, 20 years you're working life about?

One of the things I say to students, I'm Chancellor at Warwick, and when I do graduations is, remember the job that will demand most from you may not even exist yet.

And that's a direct reference to the fact that that was certainly true for me.

I'd always wanted to work in social policy for me, the thing that made my life interesting was trying to work on issues that affected people and especially issues that I saw of social justice.

And that's not to be highfalutin about it, it's just that those things mattered enormously.

So particularly in the 80s, I worked with business in the community and I did a lot around cold field communities, economic regeneration, and then work on disability issues, issues for women, issues for minority ethnic groups.

We set up different organisations and it was part of getting the public-private partnership to exist before the early 80s it didn't exist at all.

So that was a big focus and it was in that capacity when I was doing all that that I met young politicians, one Tony Blair, one Gordon Brown, to talk to them about what was going on and what we were seeking to do because it was unusual and it was about moving particularly

business away from just the charitable part of its functions, important others are, to being really engaged with their own communities.

Now hold on a minute, you've airbrushed the CND out of your life, what's going on here?

Is that because you've become a defence hawk under the influence of these European securecrats?

No, it's because you said the 80s and the 90s, those are the 70s, I'm older than that.

My first job out of university was CND, for sure, and that was again almost an accident.

Somebody showed me the advert and said, you know, you'd be good at this and I can't pretend that I was knowledgeable in any way, but they seem to think that I might be able to do something useful.

Just explain a little bit what CND has campaigned for nuclear disarmament and what you were up to because I think some listeners won't be so focused on that now, but it was obviously a big deal at the time.

Particularly in the 50s and 60s after you started to see the proliferation of nuclear weapons, lots of different organisations sprang up across the world and CND was the British equivalent.

It had at its heart the concept that Britain didn't need its nuclear weapons and they didn't make it safer, and that was defined as unilateralism, I suppose, which was very controversial of itself.

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People sort of divided into different groups, unilateralists, multilateralists or people who felt very strongly.

Even though you fell into the job, did you believe that then and do you believe that now?

I think over the years I would say that I very definitely believe in disarmament, but I think how we achieve it certainly now will not be through any individual action, it's going to have to be through the work that goes on in the UN.

One of the things that was really interesting for me to do though during the Iran negotiations was to go to Hiroshima and lay a wreath.

Just before we do Iran, Rory, I just want to go back even further.

What was there in your childhood that made you ever think that you might go on to do the sort of things that you've done?

What sort of childhood was it?

When I grew up in a village, my dad in particular came from an extremely poor mining background. His father had died in the mines.

Only in my 50s did I find out that he had a number of brothers and sisters who'd all died as teenagers of illnesses like TB or because of the work that they were doing because he didn't really talk about it.

He had managed to stay on at school and got a degree at night school and became a civil engineer.

I came from a background where my parents wanted me to go to university because they felt it was really important, particularly as a girl and a woman, that if I wasn't going to just end up doing a job in a sense that I was capable of and doing a lot more.

They pushed very hard for me to go to university and I was the first woman in my whole generation of women of that particular time to go.

Tell us about entering the House of Lords.

Why were you put in the House of Lords?

Alistair, do you remember this?

Why you were presumably part of the government at the time?

Why did you put Cathy in the House of Lords?

What's her view of it?

What's your view of it?

Mine is that all prime ministers need in the House of Lords a cadre of people of the right age and energy to be persuaded to become whips of ministers because whereas there may be, as you know, Rory, five or six ministers for department in the Commons in the Lords as one.

So they carry the legislative burden and all of the questions and debates.

They obviously don't have a constituency so it's not the same job but it's quite a big job.

I always say to people the difference between the Lords and the Commons is when you're doing a ministerial job in the Commons, everybody behind you wants your job.

When you're doing a ministerial job in the Lords, nobody behind you wants your job.

I'm trying to remember because we did put quite a lot of people in the House of Lords

at that time because of the imbalance that we were facing and this could be completely right.

Usually there was a kind of drawing together of different names and sometimes you would literally be sitting around saying, right, who else do we know?

And I think we knew you reasonably well but not very well.

Probably knew Peter, your husband, better in a way because of all the political polling stuff he did.

But I've got to remember that Angie Hunter was very friendly with you.

I think it might have been Angie coming and saying, look, this is Kathy, she's done this, this, this, and this.

Oh yeah, Kathy, we know Kathy.

And I think it could be as simple as that.

It often is, isn't it?

We all end up doing things as simply as that.

Just before we go back to Alice, just give us your penny worth in the House of Lords.

Do you think it's actually a good institution that it does a useful job that people underestimate it?

I mean, we get in a bit of a standoff about this because I think Alice is more instinctively in favour of a fully elected House and I quite like the idea of kind of experience across benches scrutinising legislation and not having too many politicians around.

So I've served on at least one commission about reform of the House of Lords when I was leader of the House of Lords and my problem is we always start from the wrong thing. We start with form not function and we should start with function.

What do we want it to do?

Do we want it to duplicate what the House of Commons does, in which case you run into the eternal problem that the Commons does not want to create a house that is of equal value because it will challenge the Commons.

So we never find a way through to do the changes.

If it's not going to do that, what is it going to do?

Should it be a pre-legislative scrutiny?

Should it look up bills before they become bills, if you like, make sure that they've got sense in them and should they look at what happened afterwards, which is something I feel really strongly about.

We don't look at whether it worked, what we tried to do, or should it do something else?

And once you've identified what it's for, then you can decide who ought to be in it, whether it should be a little Senate of clever people or a big group of people need to bring a certain group together for a particular reason.

Should it be fully elected?

Should it be representative of the regions and the countries and so on?

But we always begin the other way up and that's what I think will never get there.

And that requires everybody to accept that the current House of Lords is not fit for

I don't know if I believe in a fully elected second chamber, but I certainly don't believe in what we've got.

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The problem at the moment is that it depends what day of the week it is. Sometimes when the House of Lords has been spending huge amounts of time, as it has, for example, on the whole question of migration and small bolts and all of those issues, then they get a lot of praise from a lot of people for taking the time to scrutinize.

Wherever you sit in that debate, you can't argue they haven't scrutinized it better than the Commons.

And then other times people just say, well, look at them all, all these people that kind of come in, they're all able to claim this bit of money, they're all doing this, you know, other jobs and so on.

And it looks like something that is completely out of control.

And again, we're back to, well, what do we want it to do and what should it be thinking about?

I like that.

Function, not form.

Good.

Can we go into some of the big stuff you dealt with in Brussels?

I mentioned some of them and Rory's mentioned some as well.

So if you talk about Iran, Kosovo, Crimea, Haiti, Libya, if you were sort of lying awake at night worrying about them, which was the worst of those?

The one that felt heaviest to carry was Iran.

Because it was not just on behalf of Europe, but it was for the UN.

It was the only negotiation ever where the five permanent members worked together.

That's, you know, France, Britain, the US, China and Russia.

Plus Germany.

Plus Germany, because P5 plus one.

But the point was, the five permanent members stuck together for years and agreed what they were going to do and didn't waver from it.

And that's what you think about the situation we know seems almost impossible and yet that's what we did.

And I chaired, you know, for four and a half, five years of this, all those debates between the countries as well.

So that felt the heaviest.

So Cathy, you sat in a very interesting moment where basically 2009 to 2014 was the moment where the liberal global order, which had existed for 20 years, basically collapsed.

And by the end of your tenure, we were going full into the age of populism.

So you're beginning just after the financial crisis, when the whole shebang has collapsed and you're going right through Arab Spring, you're going through to the invasion of Crimea, the election of Durand Ramodi in India.

And then we're on pretty quickly to law and justice party in Poland, Trump, Brexit.

What on earth was happening during those five years?

I'm obviously not holding you personally responsible for a complete class.

Sounds like it.

But it's very, very interesting.

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You were there with a ring seat at the moment where the world changed from the liberal global order at the age of populism.

What was happening in those five years?

Why did it happen?

It's very interesting.

Yeah.

I mean, I spend time even now talking to former colleagues or people that I work with.

Often, we talk about this.

What happened?

What did we get right?

What did we get wrong?

What did we not see?

I do think that there is something about the financial crisis and the failure of a sort of what I call a centre-right, centre-left perspective on what should happen.

Nobody went to jail.

People felt that we just covered it all up, that lots of people lost their homes, lots of people lost their jobs, a lot of things went wrong and nobody paid the price as it were.

I think the follow-on from that, which in our country was austerity, but in other countries was a variety of different approaches and the inability really to have a narrative, which I think is something that always troubles me about what I call the centre-ground or the centre-right, centre-left.

We don't have a story to tell people about what we're doing.

We just have a staccato set of policies or ideas.

That meant that populism stole the slogans.

Simple slogans to difficult problems and made those simple slogans really easy for people to understand and made it really easy then for people to say, well, this didn't work.

This lot didn't do it.

They have nothing to say.

What about this?

You also saw a lot of leaders close up and there's a point in your book where you say there's some leaders prefer to do nothing for other leaders and I recognise the agony of their choices.

Which were the leaders that stood out for you?

Well, the agony of choices was particularly obvious in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue because a lot of leaders, as you well know, fight really hard to become leader when they get there and it's like, few, done it.

And then they just spend their time managing.

Great title.

And then what is, I'm not going to do anything that's going to rock my boat.

I'm going to keep my party or my coalition or whatever it is.

I'm going to remain popular.

So doing nothing is a great solution to that.

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Don't rock the boat, push the problem down the road.

The really fantastic leaders are the ones who are prepared to say, actually, for the future of the country, all the reason I was elected was to do something.

So who are the ones that stood out?

So in Serbia and Kosovo, they were a series of leaders who were prepared to actually do something.

It was not massive, but it was about sitting in a room together.

So imagine you have two prime ministers, Prime Minister Thakci from Kosovo, Prime Minister Dacic from Serbia.

They've never met.

The same age.

They live a few miles apart.

They come into my office.

I pull all the blinds down because nobody can see this.

They are both sweating.

They are both absolutely terrified.

And I'm absolutely convinced one of them is going to run down the corridor and disappear.

They didn't.

And they sat down, a translator each with myself and a senior official.

And I describe this meeting in the book, but the tension was palpable.

You could feel that for them, this was a moment where both would be declared to have betrayed their countries.

They were sitting with the devil.

And yet they sat together.

And from that moment on, I knew that we would be able to do something.

I did some work with that, G, a few years ago.

How do you feel about the fact that he's sitting in the Hague and seemingly without a date?

Just to explain.

He's in the Hague indicted for international war crimes.

Very fit for listeners.

Yeah.

Back to Kathy.

He is.

And of course, one of the things that, again, if you're working on negotiations or mediations with countries that have been through war and chaos, you're not dealing with people who are, you know, nice and easy and have no history.

I don't know the truth of his history because I'm assuming that all the evidence has been collected, all the information is based on the testimony of people who we all know in that region went through terrible times.

I wish they'd get on with it because I think it's important that if justice is to be done, it needs to be seen to be done.

That really matters to me.

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But all I would say is when you are dealing with solving problems at the end of a war, you are not going to be talking to people who sat back and did nothing in that war. How much do you feel that you're able, meeting someone, to really tell what their moral character is like and whether they've committed crimes or are going to?

You know, we got a lot of people wrong.

We thought Aung San Suu Kyi was wonderful and gave her a Nobel Peace Prize and then discovered that she wasn't really prepared to distance herself from the massacres, the Rohingya.

Many of us obviously got the direction of China wrong and misunderstood the direction that Xi Jinping was going.

You may have seen that in Kosovo and Serbia.

Presumably you saw this with a dozen or 20 leaders around that.

I'd wonder whether in Egypt we underestimated the nature of the rulers that were coming in.

So give us a sense of how much you feel it's possible for somebody to just sit down with someone and really look into their soul and know whether they're a war criminal.

I'm very nervous about looking into the soul of anybody.

It's an interesting concept, but one has to be a bit careful because what you see is what people choose to project.

What I do think, and I would say this about Aung San Suu Kyi, who I met many times.

I was in Myanmar a lot and I went back to see her at her request after I left office, is that we often don't understand two things about the people we're looking at.

One is that they don't look at the world the same way we do.

They look at the world from where they came from, who they are, their perspectives.

And what looks like a very obvious approach to us is not to them.

It's not to excuse them, just is.

And the second is that they're dealing with a world that is not going to allow them to do the work or do the things that we think they should do as easily as we might do.

One of the leaders that I think you indicated in your book that you probably get asked about more than any other, because you had several meetings with him at a particular difficult time is Putin.

And I think to go back to Rory's point, I think when he talked about projection, I think when Putin first came to London and met Tony, and we all looked into his eyes and tried to look into his soul, and I think we saw something very different to what we thought we did, to what we see now.

So when you were seeing him fairly regularly at the time of the annexation of Crimea, did you see the guy that's now doing all of the things that he's doing?

I saw somebody who gave me two strong impressions.

One is entirely transactional.

Europe was useful as long as Europe was useful to Russia and useful to him.

He didn't care about the development of Europe, except in the context of how it affected Russia.

He didn't have a sense of being part of something bigger.

He did believe passionately in Mother Russia, but this was a country that was great and

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he was determined to make sure that people understood it.

And what I saw in the context of Ukraine was somebody who simply could not believe, never mind except, that Ukraine could conceivably look in any other direction for its future than to Russia.

The only way that that could happen was because it had been somehow taken over.

And this was not only true for him, it was true for people around him.

And again, I talk in the book about meeting Sergey Lavrov, the foreign minister of Russia, at a room in the house of the Russian ambassador in Madrid.

I flew quietly to go and see him, to ask him, because one must recall at the time, they were our partners in the Iran talks.

So I was moving from the Iran talks.

So we had an ability to talk to them that we've subsequently lost.

And I said to him, Sergey, what on earth is going on?

And his description of what he saw was like Alice through the looking glass, completely different, a reverse image.

And you, again, you always have to begin.

Sorry, a reverse image of what he had been saying or what you were saying.

What I could see, he described Medan.

And it wasn't that the people weren't there, but how he saw them and the role they played was entirely different.

I wonder, you talked about the fact that we lost the trust, as it were, of Russia and China, that you were there at a very interesting moment, particularly 2009-10, when it felt as though we were going to be able to keep a liberal global order together, where the permanent members of the Security Council would vote together.

And one of the examples was that, was rather to everyone's surprise, they voted together initially on Libya.

Russia and Russia were prepared to come in and, you know, they were horrified by the threats that Gaddafi was making in Benghazi.

And then we blew it, or it seems to me as though we blew it.

What's your thought about this?

I mean, is it possible to suggest that actually people like Cameron overpushed their luck, that they took Russia and China for granted?

And if we'd been a bit more thoughtful then, we might have been able to keep a bit more of the global architecture together.

So the Russians and Chinese abstained on the vote on Libya at the UN.

This is huge, because the assumption had been that they would potentially veto it.

But actually, I've always maintained that they did so because of the pressure from the Arab League.

Both were very keen to have very strong relationships with Arab nations.

And the Arab League had absolutely come out 100% in favour of a no-fly zone, and in support of what the UN resolution was saying.

And I know that because I travelled via the Arab League to the UN.

So I think they were much more swayed by that.

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But it became in the mythology that Russia created particularly, that Medvedev as then president had taken this decision.

Putin didn't agree with it, Putin thought that it was a wrong decision.

And that was in part, to play to your point, that we then went further than the resolution said at the meeting that President then Sarkozy called in Paris.

It wasn't about just protecting the people of Benghazi, important though that was.

It was about the end of Gaddafi.

And that moved it into a different place.

And there are those countries, those leaders I've met, not just Russia-China, but across the world who would say, this is what you do.

You take a problem, you decide to get rid of the people in charge with no plan for what comes afterwards.

And then you leave chaos.

And there's a sense that you hear that repeated, unfair and untrue or whatever you want, but that's what they think.

Well, I think time asked Kathy for a quick break.

We talk a lot on the podcast about the battle that seems to be going on between the very concepts of democracy and the dictatorships feeling somewhat they've got the upper hand.

And of course, if Trump were to come back and he would probably agree has done more damage to your Iran deal than anybody, he talks a lot about the deep state.

And I love this phrase you have in your book about how we need deep democracy.

Do you feel that democracy is under threat?

Well, democracy is not finished anywhere, right?

And it's not a straight line.

You don't kind of merrily go down the path of democracy and it's all lovely.

It weaves about.

We elect strange governments.

We have funding coalitions.

We get presidents unexpectedly.

And the point about what I call deep democracy is that the underpinning institutional framework, you know, civil society, free press, trade unions, business able to operate, rule of law, all this stuff is what keeps that democracy in the end.

But they are kind of all of those feel under attack in a lot of places.

They are under attack.

And that's why it needs to be really deep.

It needs to be able to sustain.

So, when I look at, you know, even in European countries, you see it wobble about.

Absolutely.

That's why I say to people, it will wobble about.

You have to look after it.

And it's particularly challenging, isn't it?

Because the narrative, again, during the time just before you became the foreign minister, was a moment where the number of democracies in the world doubled.

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This was all about Francis Fukuyama in the end of history.

But your point about deep democracy is important.

Many of the countries that became democracies more recently, it doesn't feel very, very deep.

You know, we're just talking to you just after another coup in Gabon.

And we've seen seven coups across Africa in a matter of months where previous democracies have been taken over by military coups.

So, I'm slightly worried that we're moving into a world where more shallow democracies, if I can use that word, are in a much more fragile situation.

But if this continues, we're going to end up with fewer democracies than you saw in 2009.

I think there's a real risk of that, Rory.

You're right.

And that's partly because we don't have a response to it.

And then what?

You know, we don't know what to do.

We're not doing much around the challenges, for example, in Sudan that we've seen.

We don't have answers.

And I think particularly, we tend to move now to saying, oh, I know what we'll do.

We'll do sanctions.

Sanctions are a means to an end, not an end.

But we keep looking at them as if, having put sanctions on something, we somehow solve the problem as opposed to doing what they're supposed to do, which is to at least stop it getting worse.

Can I just try you on that one?

So, one of the most difficult current issues is Afghanistan, where clearly the Taliban government has deeply unpleasant attitudes towards women.

And women are in a very difficult situation in society.

But at the same time, it's extremely unlikely that sanctions are going to change the behavior of the Taliban elite.

They're not trying to go shopping in Harrods.

They don't particularly care.

They're very isolationist.

And the people who are suffering from the sanctions are often ordinary Afghans who are finding it extremely difficult to feed themselves and get the economy off the ground.

So what do you do in that kind of situation where the sanctions are being imposed almost as a sort of symbolic acts of moral outrage, but they're not really, as you say, a means to any end?

Sanctions are important because they're a statement to ourselves.

But you're right.

It's about looking at who gets affected by them.

All countries want to need something.

No country can solve any issue by itself.

Simply impossible.

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You can't deal with pandemics or trade or dealing with security or any issue alone.

Even Afghanistan.

So, I think what I would be doing is starting to try and work out what they need and want.

And then we start to look at, well, what does that mean in terms of what could be done?

Bearing in mind that the Taliban is not, as you know, one thing.

It exists in different forms with different leaders, more radical than others, more pragmatic than others.

And you need to put the time and effort and work into trying to do something because we have generations of girls and women to rescue from this, frankly.

And we have to start somewhere.

So it's not enough to me to, and you certainly don't do this, but many do, just sit and look at it and say it's awful and kind of wander off.

We have a lot to do to try and work out what actually could make a difference because we can't stop and we can't give up on them.

Do you think that the European Union is serious about being a pole in a multi-polar world and is it too complicated or is institutions too complicated for that genuinely to happen?

I think the European Union often fails to recognise its own strength.

I felt this when I was there and I think that hasn't changed.

You know, it's this massive economic superpower.

It has brought together 27 countries with roughly the same ideals.

I know there are big problems with Poland, with Hungary and so on.

And, you know, there's always an election somewhere in the EU, I used to say every day, which means there's always a risk of something going wobbly or terribly wrong.

But fundamentally, it's moving in a direction slowly, sometimes faster at other times.

Look at how many countries want to get into it.

They know that their economic security, their peace and their prosperity lies within it.

And look across the world at organisations that are coming together to sort of look a bit like it.

Institutionally, it can get a bit complicated, but then you're bringing 27 cultures, different ways of working into one.

So one of the real challenges, I think, I mean, you're somebody who lives empathy and is saying that with Sergey Lavrov, you try to understand their position.

With Aung San Suu Kyi, you try to understand their position.

But presumably, one of the positions you find most difficult to understand is the position of people who voted for Brexit.

So I wonder whether you could give a go at providing a thoughtful, respectful account of why people would have wanted to vote for Brexit.

And I write, does the word Brexit even appear in your book?

No.

Was that deliberate?

Yeah, because I wasn't talking about that.

That's a different story.

This was about...

It's part of the story.

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No, because it's 2009 to 2014 and it may not have escaped your notice that we hadn't done Brexit.

I know, but the point that Rory made earlier about a lot of change happened during this period that in part led to it.

And I was talking about places far away, not about Britain.

I do say at the end that I was the first woman that Britain sent to the European Union.

I did not expect to be the last.

And being the last is a new kind of first for me.

But can I bring you back to this question?

Please do.

Empathy and talkfulness.

You come from the north of England.

You come from areas that voted for Brexit.

But obviously you are, I assume, passionately pro-European, passionately Romain.

Do you find it more difficult when it gets closer to home with an issue that's really intimate to you to feel the same empathy, sympathy and understanding that you might be able to project onto Myanmar?

I can feel empathy.

It doesn't mean I think these people are right, certainly true in the case of the Russian foreign minister.

There's a degree to which understanding why people think what they do helps you deal with them.

It doesn't mean that you don't recognize how dangerous or difficult or in many cases of people I've met across the world, how just simply horrible some people are.

But in the case of Brexit, what you saw was, I think, two or three things.

One is a great slogan, simple slogans for difficult problems.

That you saw that people were looking for an answer, life had got tougher.

They were worried about their families.

They were worried about accessing the health service.

They couldn't get a GP appointment then.

They couldn't get a counsellor for their kids.

They worried that maybe that was because people were coming from overseas, particularly from Europe, that it was out of control.

And they didn't see any of the benefits because we have never told them the benefits of being in the EU.

And I'm going to tell you a tiny, quick story.

This is true.

When I was an education minister, I went to a place.

It doesn't matter where in England.

And I noticed a group of mums and dads with small babies outside a swimming pool in the town having an argument, clearly, with the manager of the pool and a big sign that said baby pool closed due to EU regulation.

And I said to my office, do me a favour, just ring up and see what that is.

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There is an EU regulation.

It's based, I think, probably on a British one that says you can't put babies in freezing cold water.

The boiler had broken.

The swimming pool couldn't work that day.

They couldn't afford to fix it.

So let's bring the EU.

And you thought, well, there's a group of Brexiteers from then on.

In other words, if you take something that people don't understand, we merrily talk about travelling across Europe and being able to work or study or whatever.

For many people, that's just an unrealistic idea.

It's never going to happen.

What they worry about is they're here and now.

And that was what they thought they were trying to address.

And so what I felt when people voted was a deep sorrow because when I think about the economic hit we've taken, it's not going to help them get better access to the things that they need.

What's your assessment of how not just the rest of the European Union but the rest of the world views the UK now?

I find it quite hard, actually, when I travel around because, again, a couple of things strike me.

One is how irrelevant we are.

We're not part of the conversation in many parts of the world.

People don't ask what the UK thinks.

I go to conferences where Britain just doesn't come up at all and yet we'll be talking about huge issues where you would expect Britain to be recognizably a player.

And I also think there's a sort of disbelief about us that we've kind of cut ourselves off.

We're not able to do the bridge, not just from the US to Europe, but I also think from the Commonwealth to Europe and the Commonwealth to the US.

I think there was a bigger role that we've also lost.

Do you feel, again, on this strange moment where you were in power right at the heart of things when the world was lurching into this age of populism?

You talked a bit about the financial crisis.

I wonder whether you reflect a little bit on the Arab Spring.

That seems to be something that was really central to you and a very, very odd moment, a moment where initially, I think, people felt optimism.

People felt this is absolutely wonderful.

This could be like 1989.

All these revolutions are happening, democracies coming, Facebook is changing the world.

And actually, we ended up with a world that was very, very bleak.

Can you just give us a sense of that and what do you think happened?

What went wrong?

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It was an extraordinary period and I've written about, particularly, Egypt and Libya. But we were watching this dramatic, this tidal wave coming across essentially parts of the Arab world. But we didn't really know what we were looking at, that it felt good. You stood in Tahrir Square and people were coming up and hugging me and they were forming political parties and they were going off to do things. And it had that headiness. There's a real sort of almost something you can taste in the air when you have a sense of revolution and change. But it never stays like that. And reality kicks in or people find themselves at loggerheads. There are those when change happens, this was certainly true in Libya, that don't want what we want. They're not looking for a democratic future. They're looking for an opportunity to take power. So that starts to play into it. And back to my deep democracy point, that everybody, the minute there's a dramatic change, says what we need now is an election. And I used to say to them, elections are the cherry on the icing on the cake. They're really, really important. But if you don't know who you're electing, if you don't have a free press, you don't have the rule of law, you don't have things operating so that you've got real choices. You're not just trying to work out if you've ever heard of anybody on the ballot paper. It's not enough. And although you can't delay that part of democracy, you've got to think about it and think about it carefully and properly. So that was also very much in my mind at that time. My last question relates to an election. Do you, I'm assuming that you hope Labour will win the next election, do you wish that Labour would be a little bit more proactive with regard to our positioning on Brexit and on future relations with the EU? So yes, I do hope there's a change of government and I hope it's the Labour government because whatever else we need change now. What I am hoping is that when they look at what needs to happen economically in this country and in terms of its standing and in terms of who we are and who we want to be and the pride that we should have as a nation and our place in the world, that when you look at and unpick all of that, you end up with the obvious conclusion that we have to be much closer to Europe. I'm not saying we should jump back in. What I dread is the idea that we'd have a second vote and a third vote and a fourth vote and every five years we go in or out. No, we need to settle this in terms of our future in a much more sensible, rational, thought-out way.

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But there is no question that we cannot get the economy to where it should be without a better and stronger relationship with the European Union, full stop.

And therefore, that has to be part of any serious and sensible government strategy.

So one of the things that struck me is that when you're describing sitting down with a Serbian and the Kosovo leader, it's very different to the style of your predecessors, predecessors I think of in that context, someone like Richard Holbrook, massive, hard-charging, aggressive American kind of banging heads together, ending a war.

And I think you, unless I'm wrong, have a very different philosophy about how you resolve issues, help bring peace.

And I wonder whether in that radical humility, whether there isn't a deeper lesson from the way that we pose in institutions, the way that politicians and peace negotiators set themselves up as though they're saviors or heroes, and maybe the lesson of our age is much more radical humility, but I'm going to hand that over to you as my last.

So the book is my homage to what I think real diplomacy is, which is it's quiet.

It goes on, it takes its time, it keeps going.

It's drip, drip, drip, it's small interlocking moments that create the opportunity.

In the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, there were two things that I took into that room.

One is this was their negotiation, not mine.

My job was to help them, to be there every minute.

We met for 14 hours at a stretch.

I never left them.

I was always there.

I was always willing to help, but it was their discussion.

And I allowed them the space and freedom, and I did not breach anything from that room.

I also made it clear that it was their negotiation.

So the document that was written, the Brussels Agreement, I typed it because I was a faster typist than anyone else in the room, but every word of it, they wrote.

It's theirs.

They have to sell it, not me.

It doesn't belong to me.

It doesn't belong to anybody but them, because if you're going to go home and say, I have sat with the devil, I have signed an agreement, you've got to A, believe it, and B, you've got to be prepared to sell it to people that will not respect you, admire you, and probably hate you.

And that's what I think the job that I saw was, my job was to make it happen, to bring everything I could to bear on the problem, to bring the 28 countries with me, to give them what they wanted, the real soft power of the EU, getting closer to Europe the opportunity, but to make sure that I wasn't the person that was leading it.

They wanted to call it the Ashton Agreement, and I said, absolutely not.

I've broken my word on the last question, but the footnote to this is very sadly, we didn't quite deliver by bringing them into the EU as rapidly as they would have done.

Is there not a case for saying that if we'd moved more generously and decisively to bring countries, the Western Balkans, into the EU, we wouldn't be facing many of the problems

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we now have?

I think the EU has sometimes given them all an excuse not to do the work.

They have to do the work to get in.

I was very clear that it would take them years, because you've got to do the work.

You can't just get in.

You've got to have done what they call the Aki, but it means your laws have to be the same.

People have to feel when they come to your country that they're in part of Europe, not in a strange part of Europe.

So the work has to be done, and some of them are very slow at doing the work, and I would get very cross with them about that.

But they also could turn to the EU and say, well, you're not interested, and it kind of let them off the hook.

So for me, it's about all of those things marching together.

And actually, Europe, I think, is now moving again to say, we're going to get them in.

Well, Kathy, thanks for coming in.

Thanks for talking at great length, in great detail, and with great passion and conviction.

Thank you for me.

And I think next book, please, on leadership.

I think you've got a wonderful, wonderful story to tell about a very different style of leadership.

So thank you so much for sharing it with us.

Radical humility.

I like that phrase.

Radical humility.

That's me, but...

Thank you for having me, it's what I wanted to say to you both.

Thank you.

All the best.

Thank you again.

Bye-bye.

So, Rory.

Well, congratulations.

So I was a little uncertain about how that was going to go.

I've always admired her, but would have had her down as quite a quiet introvert.

And I thought she was really good.

I thought that was really interesting and a real testimony to bringing on somebody who's not a massive, bloviating showoff, but instead somebody who's actually quietly reflective.

I mean, I learned so much, I think, about her, about her approach to international affairs.

So thank you.

This phrase, radical humility, is that something you've used before?

Is it in your book?

I don't remember reading it.

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No, I'm taking...

So thank you.

I'm taken with this idea that one of the problems that gives opportunity to Trump and other populists is our continuing belief in the sort of great man of history, the sort of superhero who's going to swing in and save everything.

And I think the world is ever more complicated and it's ever more implausible, this idea that somehow some superhero can save us all.

And I quite liked her sense that actually we do our best.

These jobs are not impossible, but that really they're often about a thousand small interconnected acts by very, very large teams that sometimes can't quite be sustained.

And that I love the sense there's a message for decentralization in Britain and what she was talking about with Serb and Cosfo, which is her saying, I'm not going to fix Serb and Cosfo, it's for them to fix, they need to talk to each other.

I almost think that that's also true if you were thinking about how to regenerate Wigan or Newcastle, that it's not about London, it's about facilitating, supporting people at a local level.

But the difference between Kathy Ashton and the people she was dealing with is that she was never standing for election.

Could you imagine her up against a Trump, a Boris Johnson, a Tony Blair, politicians good or bad?

Can you imagine her on the campaign trail with that, with sort of the message that this is very, very complicated?

No, I agree with you.

It'd be great if people could win like that, find it very hard to see happening in the current age.

Yeah.

It's very difficult, isn't it?

It's all in radical humility.

When do we want it now?

Vote Rory or Kathy.

Tell me about it.

Tell me about how you first got to know her and how you've seen a change over the times.

You presumably were also surprised when she suddenly became Foreign Minister of Europe.

No, I'm not surprised at that at the time because my memory may be playing tricks here, but I think what happened was that Gordon Brown became Prime Minister, wanted Peter Mandelson to come back into the cabinet, Peter was Trade Commissioner in Europe.

Gordon wanted to keep that, and I'm assuming the Europeans as well wanted to keep a Brit in a senior position.

You've read the book as of I, Kathy pretty stunned, I think, to be alighted upon.

And I think people were quite stunned.

And just to interrupt, to give people background, I mean, the tree says she'd not done any international stuff.

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She'd been at CND.

She'd been a business in the community.

She'd chaired an NHS trust.

And then she'd been a junior minister in various departments for five or six years on domestic stuff.

But there was nothing about international trade or foreign policy going on at all.

No, she's obviously, you know, she's very charming.

She's obviously got, you know, both Tony and Gordon clearly rated her.

The whole thing, if you remember, at the time, there was this talk that Tony might go off and be President of the Commission.

And that kind of, I never thought that was going to go anywhere.

I thought even though Sarkozy was saying it would happen, I never, ever believed that they were going to let somebody as big a name as Tony take that top job.

And if you remember, it was a little Belgian chap, Von Rumpoi, who got the job and with Kathy alongside him.

So, you know, she was some of the press coverage of their first press conference together, Herman von Rumpoi.

And then I remember one of the French papers calling her Lady Who.

It was brutal.

But, you know, it wasn't just Petraeus.

There are other people who said that, you know, they didn't know much about her, but they got to know her and saw her as a really, really serious diplomat who, you know, did really achieve things.

And I mentioned Peter Kellner, her husband.

I mean, you know, in the political world, I'd say that Peter back then was probably better known because he was never off the television talking about opinion poll, this and opinion poll, that.

But no, she's a very, very interesting case of somebody who has, you know, got to what was an incredibly serious position, done it by all accounts very, very well from a background that didn't suggest that would be her calling at all.

Yeah.

And maybe a reminder, you know, I tend to like the idea of specialists taking over.

I tend to prefer defense secretaries who know something about defense rather than Grant Shaps coming in on his fifth wing this year.

But anyway, I mean, but she actually, Curacy is an example of somebody who isn't, wasn't an expert in the field coming in and doing it really quite well.

And I think you've occasionally pulled me up on that and pointed out that sometimes outsiders can do these jobs quite well and that there can be a disadvantage in knowing too much about a subject.

Good.

Okay, Rory.

Bye-bye.

Thank you very much.

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Bye-bye.