

[Transcript] Leading / 37. Chris Hipkins, New Zealand PM: Working with Xi Jinping, fighting to stay in power, and zero covid's double-edged sword

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Welcome to the rest of the policies leading with me, Alistair Campbell and me, Rory Stewart. And we're very, very lucky.

This is a credit to Alistair, has brought on his friend, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, right Honourable Chris Hipkins.

And Alistair, tell us a little bit about how we got this privilege.

How do we get here?

Via, a mutual friend of ours, being Chris that is, called Darren Hughes.

I think he's one of your closest friends and he was trying to get Jacinda for a while while she was still Prime Minister and then after she left and Chris, what's great about you doing this, you're right in the middle of an election campaign.

So thank you very, very much for giving us some of your time.

Oh, it's fantastic to be able to talk to you.

We are, we've got five and a half weeks to go until polling day.

It's a busy time over here in New Zealand, but it is great to be able to talk to you.

Well, it's great to see you.

Let's just kick off with it, with the campaign, because that's where you are.

Now Labour had an amazing success at the last election.

You know, you absolutely run away.

And now you look at the opinion polls and it's looking very, very tough for you.

You've been involved in a lot of campaigns.

Just tell us a little bit about the psychology of campaigning.

One when you feel like momentum's with you, as you've known in the past and one when you

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feel like people are kind of, you know, talking you down, trying to do you down and it's feeling like an uphill struggle.

How'd you cope with those?

It's a really interesting campaign that we're involved in at the moment.

I've certainly been involved in campaigns where we just knew we were going to lose pretty much from the time the balloon went up and I've been involved in campaigns where we were pretty confident we were going to win and 2020 was certainly an election campaign that we were feeling pretty confident about.

In terms of this election, it feels like neither of those things.

It's a very interesting campaign to be involved in.

We're kind of dealing with that post-COVID-19 hangover, which I think a lot of the countries around the world are, where people got through the pandemic, we got through the pandemic very successfully as a country and the result that we got in 2020, I think, was an endorsement of our approach to managing, you know, the pandemic, but we've got through that and now I think everybody's suffering a little bit from, you know, post-traumatic stress when it comes to COVID-19.

They don't want to talk about it.

They don't want to think about it.

They don't want to know about it.

They just want to kind of get on with life, but it still casts a bit of a shadow over this campaign and so it's an interesting period.

As I said, I've been involved in campaigns where we just knew we were going to lose and I think the way that you get through those is you just have to focus, I guess, on why you're in politics, make sure that what you're doing is true to the values that you believe in.

At the end of the day, when you go home at night time, you have to be able to answer, in my view, two key questions.

Did I do everything that I could today, you know, was what I was doing today consistent with my values?

And if you can answer yes to both of those questions, then you have to accept that in politics there's a number of other things that are outside of your control and events shape things, you know, there's a certain momentum that goes with campaigns that shape things and whilst we try and shape momentum as much as we can, we have to accept that not all of that's within our control.

So Prime Minister, just to remind international listeners, I mean many listeners in New Zealand but also listeners in the States and Britain and elsewhere, Jacinta Arden came in just seven weeks before the 2017 election into your party, very, very young leader.

I think she was in her late thirties, entered a minority government and then led the Labour Party, your party to a majority at the 2020 general election and became a real sort of major high profile international figure.

And then 19th January this year, not very long ago, she announced that she no longer had enough in the tank to fulfill the office, the premiership and said she wouldn't seek reelection, which is what then brought you in as the Prime Minister.

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Can you just talk us through just very briefly how that felt?

Was it something you'd been expecting?

Was it very surprising?

Do you feel that politics is now becoming increasingly brutal?

It's more difficult to keep the fuel in the tank?

I think it was certainly very brutal for Jacinta in the sense that as a young, charismatic, articulate woman, there were a number of people who struggled with that concept and she was subject to far more scrutiny, far more vitriol than I've ever seen a male politician subjected to.

And so I wouldn't, you know, I wasn't surprised that that over time wore her down.

You know, I think Jacinta can be incredibly proud of her legacy as a leader and what she contributed to New Zealand.

But in addition to just dealing with that, we also had the pandemic period and I don't think we should underestimate the toll that that takes on leaders managing a country through something that is as unprecedented and as consequential as that.

In politics, a lot of the decisions that you make, you get the verdict on them years down the track.

When it comes to COVID-19, we were making decisions and we were getting the verdict to the very next day on whether the decision that we'd taken was going to work or not.

And the decisions that we were taking were incredibly consequential.

And Prime Minister, just very quickly on that, you were a very leading figure, weren't you, in the COVID response?

I mean, you were the health secretary, you became a major media figure in New Zealand.

In fact, there was a gaff, but there was also a lot of time for this.

I think there's an image of you sort of emerging from a beach in a suit, trying to encourage people to do the right steps.

New Zealand had a more radical policy towards COVID than other countries.

Tell us a little bit about the policy you brought in and how it worked.

When we started the COVID-19 response, we were looking at countries like Italy in particular who had just been overwhelmed by COVID-19 and we started with a strategy of trying to flatten the curve.

So it was all about buying time to allow the health system to catch up and to stop the spread of the virus.

And that actually morphed into an elimination strategy because our flattening the curve strategy was so successful that we ended up with no COVID-19 in the community at all.

And as a result of that, we then found that for the next 18 months or so, we were able to have an elimination strategy in life continued as normal as long as you didn't want to have to cross the border.

If you wanted to leave the country or enter the country, it was a lot more challenging.

But for everybody else on a day-to-day basis, life felt exactly the same as it did before COVID-19 had even existed.

And so that, of course, added so much pressure at a government level though because when everybody was enjoying life as normal, while the rest of the world was rolling in and out

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of lockdowns, the pressure to keep it that way was immense and it meant that, you know, and there is no way you can't hermetically seal a border.

So there's no way of keeping COVID-19 out completely.

So what we were having to do was isolate people at the border and try and filter it out so that it wouldn't make its way into the community.

The pressure associated and the huge decisions that you had to take to make that happen were massive.

And, you know, I certainly hope in my lifetime that we never have to go through that kind of process again because it was an all-consuming process.

Now, Chris, I'm going to name five of your predecessors as Prime Minister and you're going to tell me what they're all having in common, okay?

Jack Marshall, Bill Rowling, Mike Moore, Jenny Shippley and Bill English.

I'm not aiming to be like any of them, Alistair.

I know exactly what you're getting to there.

Not since the Second World War have we had a Prime Minister in New Zealand that's taken over midway through a parliamentary term and gone on to win the next election.

In five weeks' time, I'm hoping to break that spell and do exactly that.

But it has been, I guess, a feature of New Zealand politics that Prime Ministers who take over midway don't tend to fear very well in the next campaign.

You led the COVID response.

I mean, obviously Jacinda was Prime Minister, but you were kind of, I hate to put it like this, but you were like the Matt Hancock figure in New Zealand.

We had this guy, Matt Hancock, who got into all sorts of difficulties, but you were judged to have done it very well, very efficiently, proper leadership is one of the reasons probably why you became Prime Minister when Jacinda stepped down.

I'm not asking you to whinge about this, but why do you feel that there's been no kind of credit given for that and no credit for some of the changes that you've tried to bring in since?

Well, perhaps if I draw on an analogy from the UK going back several generations, Winston Churchill won the war and then was deposed from office within a very short space of time after that.

Generally when populations of God threw a relatively traumatic experience like that, there's a natural inclination to want to move on quite quickly.

I guess the campaign that we are running now is very much focused on the future and it is based on moving on.

We're not spending a lot of time talking about what we achieved during the COVID-19 response, but I do think that actually the experience of leading the country through a major event like that actually sets you up pretty well to lead the country through almost anything else that might get thrown our way.

Yeah.

Prime Minister, tell us about being a Prime Minister.

I mean, we infuse a lot of past Prime Ministers on the show and a few serving, but one of the things I think that's fascinating to me as somebody who was a Cabinet Minister but

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never became Prime Minister is what is the transition like?

What's the difference between being a Cabinet Minister and being Prime Minister?

What was unexpected about that?

I mean, you've been involved in politics since you were a young man.

You've been presumably thinking in the back of your mind this might be a possibility somewhere in your life.

Suddenly the thing happens.

Give us a sense of the first two, three days and what surprised you about that?

There's a tradition in New Zealand very similar to the tradition in the UK where the outgoing Prime Minister goes off to visit the Governor-General and tender their resignation and then 10 minutes

later another car sweeps up the driveway with the new incumbent to be sworn in and I was driving up the driveway to Government House, which is where the Governor-General lives in New Zealand and I got a text message from Jacinda literally as we pulled into the driveway saying, Tag, you're it, as she exited through the side door and I didn't get a lot of time for the transition actually because I took over on the 25th of January and on the 27th of January we had flooding in Auckland and then two weeks after that we had a cyclone which devastated quite a large part of the east coast of the North Island and so I had to go straight into leading through that.

If I was to describe the difference between being a Minister, being a Cabinet Minister, a Senior Cabinet Minister and being Prime Minister, I would say that they're entirely different jobs.

As a Cabinet Minister you'd look at the Prime Minister and think, I could do that job, it's just like being a Cabinet Minister but with more responsibility.

In reality it's actually not, it's an entirely different job.

The similarities between being a Minister and being the Prime Minister are actually few and far between.

I spoke to one of my predecessors in the job not long after taking it up and he said to me, being Prime Minister is 50% ceremonial and 50% making the decisions that no one else is willing to make and it's actually not a bad characterization of it because there's an awful lot of just being out there and being the figurehead of the government, selling the government's message, doing the things that a Prime Minister needs to do but then almost every decision that lands on your desk it's got there because no one else could or was willing to make that decision and so naturally it's all the tough stuff that ends up on the Prime Minister's desk.

That's interesting.

You of course would be defined maybe by, I don't like the phrase professional politician but you've been political all of your life.

You were head boy at your school, you were student president at your university and I can't remember who, somebody very kindly sent me this when they heard we were talking to you and it's an extract from something you wrote in your school magazine but it's very, very, very prescient, I don't know where age you were, 16, 17, I've learned that to be strong you need to believe in yourself no matter what others say.

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You need to develop the ability to switch off when your emotions start to overload. Most importantly you need to learn to depend on yourself as there is no guarantee that the other people you depend on will still be there in a year's time.

Set yourself goals and work towards them, never lose sight of what you're trying to do and you can make a difference.

Blimey.

Well, I guess you have to have a strong inner resilience to survive in politics I think. I didn't even know at that point that politics was really a thing, I mean I kind of got interested in politics when I started at university, it wasn't something that I really wanted to do as a secondary school student, it was something that I discovered not long after finishing secondary school actually.

But I do think that that idea that, I mean there was, I think the second thing in there that you mentioned, I don't remember that quote now but I must go look it up, I'm quite proud of it actually, but the second thing in there about being able to switch off is actually really important as a passionate redhead who in my youth would have moments of losing my temper, I've learned to control that and actually that's really important in politics.

You have to know your own limits and you have to know when something, whatever it is, is actually getting on top of you and you have to be able to walk away from that and regather yourself and if you can't find the inner wisdom to be able to do that then actually I think politics is going to be a real struggle.

There's something I find very attractive about New Zealand politicians, we've interviewed Helen Clark who of course played a huge role in the United Nations.

I served in Iraq with a man called Mark Mitchell who's not from your party, from the National Party, who I came to like very much, found extremely courageous.

We were under attack in our compound in Iraq.

He was up on the roof commanding the teams with machine guns, holding backs that are insurgents and he was a very, very decent man and so I feel I've got a friend on the other side of New Zealand politics too who I've liked for many years but I get a sense, maybe this is wrong, maybe I'm being unrealistic, this seems to be a slightly more courtesy than understatement in New Zealand politics than maybe we see in the US or the UK or am I getting that wrong?

Yeah, I wouldn't necessarily say that.

Maybe that's just an outsider's perspective because when I travel to the UK and I look at the civility of the way members of parliament approach each other outside of the parliamentary debating chamber, I often think the same way about UK politics and I sort of lament the fact that we don't have more of that in New Zealand.

I think there are isolated patches of that.

There are a few people on the other side of the chamber in New Zealand who I would happily sit down and have a meal with and talk about issues of the day or more to the point, not talk about issues of the day with and thoroughly enjoy that but there aren't as many of those as I thought there might have been.

A couple of things that we talked to Helen Clark about which I'd like your view on.

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First is the benefits and disadvantages of your very short parliamentary terms, three-year cycle and the second is where you've stood throughout your life on the issue of electoral reform and moving from the system that you had, which is more like ours to the system you've now got, which is a pretty effective form of proportional representation.

I think proportional representation has worked very well for New Zealand.

If we look back over history, Labour governments often didn't actually get to be governments because of the way the old electoral system works so Labour would get more votes than the Conservatives, the National Party in this case in New Zealand, but wouldn't get enough seats in order to be able to form government and so the National Party would govern despite the fact that they had effectively lost the popular vote.

With a proportional representation, that doesn't tend to happen.

You actually have to get out there and you've got to win the country rather than sort of stack electorates, which is what happened under the old system.

So I think proportional representation has worked well for New Zealand.

My first vote, the first election that I voted in was in 1996, which was our first proportional representation election.

So in terms of as a voter, I don't know any different to proportional representation and it does give a greater range of voices in Parliament.

But what it also does is it means that other than this very unusual circumstance that we have been in for the last three years during the pandemic period, you don't have majority governments.

So no party commands a majority.

You have to work with other parties to form government.

And that probably slows things down a bit, which is why I think the three-year term is absolutely crazy.

I think you get bad governance decisions from a three-year term.

I think four years would be about right.

I look at the UK's experience of five years and I think about where the current term of the UK Parliament started and where it is now.

And I still can't quite believe the fact that you've still got a year to go before you, before the British people will actually get a chance to have a say on that.

Really music to my ears, and I think probably to Alice's too.

I mean, we are trying to push hard, at least I really believe that we need to change our electoral system, that the Conservative and Labour parties feel to me sclerotic, rigid, old-fashioned.

We need to bring new blood in.

I also wonder whether one of the advantages Helen Clark suggested this is that it allows these mainstream centre-left, centre-right parties to get rid of some of their fringes because they begin to form their own independent parties and that can be healthy actually for the main parties as well as for the other parties.

So I really think that that's one big element and we'd love to take that from New Zealand.

We'll take your point on four years instead of three years.

The other thing we often talk about is decentralisation, localisation, giving more power down to local

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mayors, trying to get away from an idea that everything's micromanaged from the centre. What's your experience on that in New Zealand?

How has that worked?

How hasn't it worked?

I think in New Zealand we have two extremes.

We have a very centralised system of central government and then a very fragmented local government that is probably far too fragmented for a country of only five million people. And so our experience of localisation is a pretty patchy one.

I think we probably need to find something, if we wanted to devolve more responsibility we'd probably need to find something that had a little more scale because some of our local authorities are so small that if you gave them additional responsibilities I think they would really struggle to be able to fulfil them because they just wouldn't have the size and the scale to be able to do that.

You mentioned the UK a couple of times and you know the UK pretty well.

You lived here for a while.

What's your take on the UK at the moment?

It's really hard to form a judgement.

I just haven't spent enough time in the UK in recent times to really be able to form a judgement on the UK.

I've always found the UK a pretty vibrant and resilient place.

I'm still somewhat sceptical about where the Brexit's going to deliver anything near the benefits that were promised by those who campaigned for it and my gut feeling is it's still going to prove to be a costly exercise for the British people.

But I'm not close enough to sort of domestic politics at the moment to kind of understand the dynamic.

Prime Minister, one of the things that you've done which we haven't done recently is do a visit to China.

That's a really big deal, Prime Minister of New Zealand going to China.

And China of course is, I don't know what it is, it's the elephant, the dragon in the room.

Tell us a little bit about how you work your way through that.

There's some big stuff going on, you know, Britain and the US are involved in building nuclear submarines with the Australians, there are attempts to get these alliances going with Japan.

There's clearly a rising view across different parties in the US that they're going into something that feels like a cold war with China.

And you're right in the middle of this.

I guess China's important to your economy, you're trying to tread a line on this.

Tell us about where you see China going.

How do you think the West should be handling China?

The New Zealand relationship with China is incredibly important from a trade perspective. As a small trading nation, China's our biggest export market now.

And so that's incredibly important to us economically.

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And the travel to China was quite fascinating in the sense that when you look at what businesses are doing on the ground and how different it is to trade in China versus other countries that we are more familiar with.

Clearly New Zealand businesses have had to adapt to the different Chinese approach and that was certainly a real eye opener for me to be able to see that up close.

I think it's one of our most complex relationships.

We navigate a path very carefully there in the sense that there are many areas where we can work with China particularly economically as a big export market for New Zealand.

So there are always going to be areas where we disagree and our traditional security arrangements put us at odds with China on a fairly regular basis.

And so what we found as a country is that the best way to approach that is to be predictable.

And so where we disagree, we say we disagree and we're consistent in that.

I think where it gets more difficult is if we change position on things.

I think the Chinese government understands where New Zealand stands.

And as long as we're consistent in that, we found that we've been able to have a good constructive relationship.

Would you define that as the most important relationship and if not, which are the most important relationships to New Zealand?

I mean clearly our neighbours across the Tasman are probably our most important relationship.

Australia is our only ally in these post-Ansis era that we live in.

Australia is incredibly important to New Zealand and our relationships in the Pacific are incredibly important to New Zealand.

There's a huge Pacific population living in New Zealand and we've got a responsibility to support countries in our own region, in our own backyard, so to speak.

But other relationships, the US, the UK and Europe are actually incredibly important to New Zealand as well.

China is an economically very important relationship to New Zealand, but there is also I think an awareness amongst New Zealand exporters of the importance of market diversification.

And I think we're going to have to see more emphasis on that in coming years.

So your relationship is happening on the same day as the voice referendum in Australia.

And your Deputy Prime Minister, Kamel Sepuloni, she's the first Pacifica descended from Indigenous people from the Pacific Islands, I know it's not Maori, but do you feel that New Zealanders maybe has dealt with some of these Indigenous issues better than the Australians?

The Kamel is, my Deputy Prime Minister, is a mix of Samoan and Toggan and the Labour Party Deputy Leader Kelvin Davis is Maori from Ngapui, which is a Northern Iwi, a Indigenous Iwi in New Zealand.

We've been on a long journey, I think, as a country in terms of reconciling some of the past roles in the relationship between the Crown and Maori, which has included the suppression of Maori culture and identity for quite a significant period of time, the confiscation of land, and even to the point where children were subject to corporal punishment if they spoke their native language in school, for example.

So we've been on a journey for the last 30, 40 years through my lifetime of recognising some of those historic wrongs and attempting to put those right.

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It puts us in a different position to Australia, I think, where some of the things that they're grappling with at the moment were conversations we were having 40 or 50 years ago around, how do you actually give Maori greater recognition within the system of government? Those are things that I think we've already done.

Why is that, Prime Minister?

I mean, given that the Maori population is much larger in New Zealand than the Indigenous population in Australia, you would have thought that it would be easier for Australia to come to terms with it than New Zealand.

What's the history of that?

Why is Australia 40 years behind you in trying to address these issues?

I don't really know what's happened in Australia.

I guess speaking again from the New Zealand viewpoint, the Maori population in New Zealand is rapidly growing.

So having been through a period where the Maori population relative to every other population group was declining, in fact, now it's growing quite rapidly.

It's one of the fastest growing segments of our population.

The other thing I guess that's changed a lot in the last 30 or 40 years through what we call the Treaty settlements process, so the correction of historic wrongdoings.

There was some recompense for historic wrongdoings, only ultimately a fraction of what was taken in modern terms.

But it's created quite an Indigenous economy now.

So Maori are quite big traders.

Some of our big exporters are Maori businesses.

And so I think that's just changed the dynamic, it's changed the nature of the relationship in a really positive way in my view.

As you say, the population is going to go up.

I mean, some places like Gisborne, by 2043, you're projecting 69% of the population there is going to be Maori.

So it's a very interesting dynamic, isn't it?

I mean, it makes New Zealand distinct from Canada, the United States, Australia, other places that have had experiences with Indigenous populations.

Yeah, I think the whole dynamic in New Zealand has changed a lot.

And I'm really proud of the work that we have done to sort of right some of those historic wrongs, but that doesn't mean that there aren't still big challenges ahead of us.

We've got huge challenges in the health and education space, for example.

Our Maori population don't get the same health outcomes as the rest of New Zealand.

They don't live as long.

They're more subject to a whole variety of poor health outcomes and their education, the levels of educational achievement amongst our Maori population aren't what they are for the rest of the population.

So we've still got a lot of work to do, but I think that we're making progress.

But Prime Minister, just on China, your intelligence agencies issued a report, we're very, very similar to the reports that have been coming out from the intelligence agencies and committees

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in Britain about Chinese interference and Chinese intelligence operations in New Zealand. And this is right at the top of the news for us here in Britain.

We've had a parliamentary aid arrested and accused the Chinese espionage.

And there are big calls now in Britain, which the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, are trying to resist for massively tightening up the legislation against anyone that does business with China.

They're trying to move from just a normal official secret act stuff to trying to get anyone who does connection to China to declare in a very special way and introduce new laws. Do you have some sympathy for why Rishi Sunak might be reluctant to massively ramp up laws against China, despite his concerns about espionage?

This is a challenge for the rest of the world and New Zealand has been a party to calling out poor behavior when it comes to coercion, when it comes to espionage.

And we'll continue to do that.

I think it is a challenge where there's a significant amount at stake.

And I think one of the things that many countries around the world, New Zealand included, will be very mindful of is the potential for a great decoupling and a great polarization of the international geopolitical environment.

I don't think it would be in the world's best interests for countries to end up dividing effectively into two groupings, the sort of the liberal democracies on one side and all of the others on the other side.

So I think that navigating our way through what is a complex web of relationships is going to continue to be a challenge in the coming decade or two.

Because I don't think that a great polarization is actually going to be in anybody's best interests.

Prime Minister Alastair, let's take a quick break and we'll be back in a second.

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Now, can I tell you about a great year for the world, which was 1997 when a labor government ended a long period of Tory government in the UK, where you were occupied as a student protester, getting yourself arrested for a protest against education policy.

Now lots of students take part in protests.

What seems really interesting about this to me is you then spent the next 12 years fighting to get an apology and compensation for you and your fellow arrested protesters.

Can you just tell us what was going on and why that mattered so much to you?

Well, actually, Alistair, I could blame you and Tony Blair, at least in part for that, because I watched the New Dawn has arrived, has it not, and felt so sufficiently inspired by that that I felt the need to get more politically involved.

Great.

But it was a student protest and it was a degree of self-interest.

Actually, it was about a student protest about the increase in student fees and I was sufficiently outraged about the fact that our fees were going up so exponentially that I took part in the student protest and it was from the university to the grounds of parliament and we were on the grounds of parliament when the Speaker of the House decided that he'd had enough and issued a trespass notice against us.

And although I was young and new to protest and new to politics, I was actually quite outraged about the idea that by doing nothing more than standing on the grounds of parliament and making a little bit of noise and exercising your right to free speech, I was outraged at the idea that the Speaker could issue a trespass notice and have you all carted away by the police.

And so the police said, well, you can leave now or we're going to arrest you.

And I was sufficiently outraged that I was willing to allow myself to be arrested.

And we then went through a sort of 10, 12-year period of fighting that through the courts.

And we actually got a ruling out of the courts in the end that the grounds of parliament are the place where citizens should be able to come and exercise their right to free speech and they should not be trespassed in the process of doing that.

Now that created an interesting dynamic at the beginning of last year when a bunch of occupiers took over the front lawn of parliament to protest a bunch of decisions that I was making as the minister responsible for the COVID-19 response because we had all these anti-vaxxers basically setting up camp on the forecourt of parliament. And the police were reluctant to do anything because of the case law that was established by the protest that I had been involved with some decades earlier than that. So I found myself on the other side of history.

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And I don't think anyone envisaged the idea that you should be able to live on the forecourt of parliament as those occupiers were going to do. But you should certainly be able to vocally express yourself. And if you can't do that on the forecourt of the people's house, then where on earth could you? Well, I'm very happy that we radicalized you and then you were further radicalized by your own parliament. Can I go even further back? I read an interview with your mum. Now, we talk about our mum's quite a lot, but your mum came over as a pretty strong character and defending you to the hilt, which would fair play. But just give us a little bit about your child and your background and what sort of family you grew up in. Well, we were talking earlier on about the need for inner resilience. And actually, one of the things that my parents equipped both my brother and I with, which I'm forever grateful for, is the notion that it's easy to see people who have more than you. It's much, much harder to see people who have less than you. And if you can find ways in your life to recognize the advantages that you have, and in the case of politicians, the privileges that you have, and actually understand them and recognize them, it gives you a greater degree of perspective when you are challenged on things. And I got that from my parents, that that real value of understanding that just because you have a lived experience of whatever it is that you've had a lived experience of, that doesn't mean that everybody else has. And that they'll approach things from an entirely different viewpoint and an entirely different perspective. And their perspective is just as valid as yours, even if it's entirely different to your own. And I think that's actually really important in politics. And that's a value that I got from my parents. The other, I think value that I got from them was a generosity. My mother used to quote her own father. He had a saying when it came to money that it's made round to go round. And again, I think it comes back to that notion that if you're doing well, you actually have a responsibility to share the benefits of that. And so I'd try and do the same.

Prime Minister, one of the things that strikes me about politics is that, particularly when you're campaigning, but also when you're Prime Minister, it is unbelievably busy. It's relentless, it's like 120 hours a week. And I remember Mitt Romney, the US senator, saying to me when I went into politics, I was teaching at an American university, and he said, Rory, get your thinking done now, because when you're a politician, you're not going to have any time to think. And I worry about this. I worry that the relentless nature of politics and campaigning means that it's very difficult to really have the time to sit down, to tatch, go analytically and carefully through policy. Tell us a little bit about that and how we deal with that as politicians. Ironically, as Prime Minister, actually, you get a little bit more space to do that sometimes. Because as a minister, you're involved in a lot of day-to-day decision-making. You're processing submissions or briefings from departments and so on. Whereas, as Prime Minister, you do get the opportunity to elevate yourself a little bit higher above some of that. But I guess there's new distractions that emerge on a day-to-day basis. I talked about the ceremonial nature of the job. And that actually does consume a lot of your time. But you can create more space for yourself to have that thinking time. And that's something that I've been very conscious of the need to do. I like to read things. I like to talk to people. And then I like to, wherever I can, have a bit of time for reflection. And so doing the reading and the conversations and then going for a nice long walk with the dog on the beach, for example, just by myself, where I can grind things over in my mind, actually often really helps to get

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myself into the frame of making a good decision. You don't get much more ceremonial than the British

monarchy. And I know you came over for the coronation. I just wondered where the monarchy debate is in New Zealand at the moment. I know historically you've always described yourself as a Republican. But is that debate kind of just not even front of mind at the moment?

I'd probably describe myself these days as an apathetic Republican. We actually have a system of government that works quite well for New Zealand. And the king or the queen previously is the figure head of state for New Zealand. In reality, the day-to-day business of the head of state in New Zealand is conducted by the governor general. And it's a very, very simple system. We only have one house of parliament. So we don't have an upper house. And therefore, the process of government is actually very simple. Whereas I think where we, where Republicanism kind of becomes challenging for New Zealand is when you start to talk about, well, if not, the monarch is the head of state, then what? And do you have an elected president? Do you have, you know, what kind of constitutional change would need to sit underneath that? I know I can really agree on what that should look like. And so we end up with this kind of sort of apathetic Republican malaise where I think everybody would say, yeah, in time, we would like to see New Zealand being more independent. But no one's really in a rush to do it.

That sounds very good. That's what I like. That sounds like a good, good traditional approach where I'm fully endorsing your electoral system, your love of the monarchy, the whole thing's terrific. One thing I'd want to challenge you on a little bit is it seems to me from a distance, and maybe this is very unfair, that when I look at the National Party campaign, when I look at the Labour Party campaign, it seems unless I'm wrong to be fighting around economics, healthcare, law and order, it feels a little bit 1990s to me. I'm not seeing actually a campaign that really is embracing the challenges the next 20, 30 years. I've just been on the websites here two parties, and I honestly do think that we could have pretty much seen a similar campaign run any time in the last 30, 40 years. How do politicians really create space in public conversations for talking about how much climate, AI, global poverty, how these things are going to change the world? How do we shift the conversation on from talking about the things we've been talking about for the last 40 years? Yeah, I think debates on these things do tend to go in cycles. I mean, we've had a focus over the last six years where climate, child poverty, some of those big decisions have very much been front and centre of political dialogue in New Zealand. If I look at what we've been able to achieve over the last six years, for example, we've actually reduced our carbon emissions for three years running now, and in the last quarter of last year, we had the largest reduction on record. We've made a lot of progress, and I think one of the reasons you'll find the debate in New Zealand returning to some of those traditional things around health, around education, around public services, around taxation is because we haven't actually been talking about those things as much in the last few years. There's a certain cycle to it where people actually want to know that we're still focused on the back-to-basics, if you like. That's not to say, though, that they don't want to know that we've also got a plan for climate change and that we've committed to lifting children out of poverty. We've done that every year that we've been in government, but I think we're just at a point in the cycle where I think people's bandwidth for some of the bigger picture issues in the current economic cycle is perhaps more limited. They want to know that we're focused on getting the basics right as well.

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Chris, I know you don't like talking about your private life, and I completely respect that, but I just wondered how you've been through a marriage which ended and you've got two young kids, one of whom is being quite ill. I just wondered how much harder it is to do a really top job in politics without having that personal support, very, very close 24-7.

It's very challenging, but I started off in politics as a single young back-bench EMP, and I looked at the scrutiny that members' families were getting, MPs' families were getting, where they were in the public spotlight. Then I made the decision at that point that if I was fortunate enough to acquire a relationship and have a family, that I would not subject my family to that. That's been a rule that I've tried to adhere to the whole way through, because once you put your family into the public domain, you can't take them back out again when it's no longer convenient. If you hold to that rule, then actually it's helpful because having your family in the public domain, where your family is being scrutinized, I imagine is also incredibly stressful. By keeping them out of the public domain, you actually shelter them from that, and then that actually is one less thing that you have to worry about, whereas if your family is being picked apart, I think that would be incredibly distracting, because you would find yourself immersed in that. By not having my family in the public limelight, I've been able to protect them from that. What about you as a human, I mean look, campaigns, as Bill Clinton said, it's the one human activity designed to make everybody look like their passport photo. How do you find going through the horrors of a campaign, and you're going home and you don't have the sort of person to kind of just be yourself with? Does it not make it a lot harder? I do have my extended family, I'm very fortunate that my parents continue to help a lot with the raising of my own children, given the prolonged absences that I have, and I've got some extended family, my brother and sister-in-law and their kids are great. So I've got a small group, a small core group of friends, who again, I would keep largely out of the public limelight, but when I feel the need to just be me, and to just completely disconnect from politics, I've got a small group of very trusted people who I can do that with, and that is, I guess, a bit of a substitute for having a person at home who I can go and vent off about the day to. Cheeky question. You are a prime minister of country, you've got huge responsibilities for that country, and you're going into a campaign with the enormous responsibilities of trying to lead your party back into government, and I would guess that that means that you would feel that you need to be pretty cautious and thoughtful in the way that you communicate, and I absolutely admire that, I think that's right, but it's not necessarily the style in which modern politics is going. There's a lot of people out there, Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, I mean, even actually some of the figures from the center who have beginning to develop a style of politics where they're becoming much more outspoken, making many more shocking statements. A lot of what you're doing is quite nuanced, and I wonder whether there's a risk for people from the progressive center left, such as yourself, that you're going to be thoughtful, serious, but people might begin to think you're a bit boring, and they'll begin to go with the more showy figures.

I think one of the major threats to democracy internationally is the rise of expectation caused by unrealistic campaigning that then ultimately disappoints and therefore leads to a growing disillusionment in the institutions of democracy and the institutions of government, and so I've tried to be realistic in the commitments that I've put forward to people, and maybe I've actually gone too far to that extent, and maybe we do need to do a bit more

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of the inspirational part of it as well, but I think that there is a real risk that if you elevate expectations and then fail to meet them, that actually you don't just undermine confidence in yourself, but you actually undermine confidence in the institutions as a whole. Rory mentioned earlier in relation to your COVID, you dropped into the blue that you made a gaffe without explaining it. I think we should explain what the gaffe was, because I think you turned it to your advantage. It was when you came out talking about the need for exercise in COVID, and you said people should get out there and spread their legs.

It was one of those moments we were doing a one o'clock briefing every afternoon that was broadcast live on television, and it was the most watched show in New Zealand for a period of time. It was being live streamed, it was on TV. Literally, the country would stop at one o'clock to watch the COVID-19 briefing. There was a question about social distancing and when you had to do it and so on, and I was trying to say that if you lived in a built-up area when you went outside, it could be difficult to distance from other people. The verb you were looking for was stretch. That's right, I was looking for the phrase stretch your legs, but I said spread your legs instead. Instantly, I didn't really realise what I'd said right at the moment, but I saw there was sniggering amongst the journalists, and I could feel my phone in my pocket vibrating furiously, and I thought, what on earth have I, what has happened? It took me a few minutes to figure out what had happened, and then I just decided through the COVID-19 period, when you're making these huge decisions, inevitably you're going to make a mistake, and sometimes that can be humorous and sometimes it can be more serious, but I made the decision that

part of preserving public confidence was to own whatever mistakes you made. If something didn't go well, you should just stand up and you should say, I've made a mistake or this hasn't gone according

to plan. So I decided to embrace that. I got back to my office to find that there was memes just circulating wildly, and a woman made some coffee mugs with a photograph of me, and you know,

spread your legs, not the virus, I think was the phrase that she'd put on it.

And so I went down to one of those one o'clock briefings a week later, and I took the mug with me and I drunk water from it in the middle of the press conference, and there's this meme about spreading your legs, not the virus just continued for the next few months, but I think it actually came at one of those really difficult points in the response where everyone was kind of getting to the point where they were a bit over it. We were asking them to stay home because we were in a lockdown period, and it just gave everybody something to laugh about, and it was, and it sort of broke the tension, I think, in a way. I got messages from people saying, this is really tough, but we really needed that, you know, we really needed something just to have a good laugh about. And so I was willing to just own that. It wasn't intentional, but it still haunts me where I go, you know, when I go into schools now, campaigning, you know, as Prime Minister, I still get kids yelling out from me across the playground, spread your legs, and you know, I don't think that's ever going to leave me. Well, thank you very, very, very much. I mean, it's been a real pleasure to have you. I really am, you know, genuinely admiring of the way that you've managed to conduct yourself at what must be a very stressful time late at night, middle of a campaign as a Prime Minister, and be so thoughtful and restrained. And I know you say

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that New Zealand politics sometimes feels less courteous than I think, but very, very difficult to imagine any other Prime Minister at this stage being able to be quite, quite so measured and balanced in the middle of these things. Thank you very much.

Thank you very much. It's been great to talk to you.

No, because good luck. I mean, I'm sure you're a little bit biased, but I've had to look at Mr Lux than your opponent. I don't like the cut of his jib at all. So I'm hoping you'll still be there in a few weeks' time. Thank you. Thanks so do I.

Bye bye, Prime Minister. Thank you again.

That was great stuff. Thank you.

All right. Thanks, guys.

So, Rory, that was pretty good for a Prime Minister in the middle of a campaign.

Well, I thought it was lovely of him to come on. I mean, to be honest here, I mean, you know, obviously we were very lucky to get him, but would you have advised Prime Minister six weeks out on election campaign to be going on a UK podcast late at night? I mean, I'm not sure my team would have done. No, but I think it might get picked up. I think it's, I think the New Zealand media might be interested in things you had to say on that. You know, we had a bid in a while back and, you know, it's just sort of times worked out and stuff. I mean, you're talking to the guy who in 1997, we used to get thousands of foreign bids. I used to write NVTV on top of them, which meant No Votes TV. Yeah. That was generally the view whenever I was asked to be interviewed by New Zealand, Australian or American radio. Yeah. You know, I think I will see, but I suspect there'll be a little bit of pickup in New Zealand for that. Let's look at the comms, Alison. You know, you're always telling me that when you do an interview, you need to know what it is you're trying to land. What was he trying to land? What was the one sentence that his comms director would have told him to land in that interview? No, but I think he'd see this as slightly different. I think what he was landing was with an audience that doesn't necessarily know him that well, was his serious guy in a very, very tricky political situation who's kind of setting out the character. It wasn't an interview to come on and tell us about all the policies, especially when you go and tell them they're all boring and all back in the 1990s. I thought I was a bit rich, but I think he was coming on to say he's a serious guy in the middle of a campaign, coming on to talk at length about who he is and what he stands for. Look, I really liked him, so I'm being a bit unfair here, but what sense did we really get of his policies? Did we get a clear line, clear sense really on what he'd do? You don't think six weeks out he should be giving us a slightly clearer sense of what's going to happen when he comes back in? Yeah, but as you say, he's talking to two Brits on the other side of the world. He might even have seen us as a bit of relaxation from doing that. Okay. Let him off the hook on this. I don't think we are on his grid for the campaign today. I suspect we weren't the top. The top would have been the stuff that he's been doing through the day. It's now towards the end of the day in New Zealand and he's coming on for a chat and you're putting him through the ringer for not telling us about the future of the New Zealand health service, for God's sake. Give the guy a break, I'd say. Very good. What did you think about him? What do you think was the positives, negatives? What's your sense of him as a person, as a politician? Obviously, you like him. We're picking that up. No, I think very likeable, very articulate. There was a previous leader who was really not behaving very well, and Chris Hipkins was the first to call it out when he was the chief whip and the guy went

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pretty tough, pretty ruthless. I think he's a good guy and I think it'd be a shame if he got kicked out, but it is quite a thing to go from the scale of victory that they had at the last election when even under a PR system they got a majority to if the polls are to be believed. He's out in a few weeks, but I hope he's not. It's very weird, isn't it? Because it's it must be brutal and really brutal. He's putting a lot of emphasis on COVID and the paradox there is that he was genuinely seen as having handled COVID well. Although he said that, although he didn't go into all the future policy, he said actually they're not talking about COVID much in the context of the campaign because the country clearly just wants to move on. But he sees it as very much the backstory, doesn't he, for the problems that he's in? He brought it up, I think three or four times, that politics had changed through COVID, that Jacinta Ardern had part one of the things that strained her was COVID. So he clearly sees that as part of the whole deal. I also thought his stuff in China is very difficult. I mean, New Zealand is in a tricky situation. He went to see Xi Jinping. He didn't raise human rights particularly. There's been some pretty negative comments coming up from bits of the US. When he was asked whether he was going to agree with Biden that Xi Jinping was a dictator, he wasn't prepared to do that in a way that I think Jacinta Ardern would have been prepared to. Now, I understand all that. I mean, I was obviously sympathized a lot with that, and I sympathized with the predicament that Rishi Sunak finds himself in. But again, it's difficult in modern retail politics to not take a clear line one way or the other. You know, a little happened to Australia when they started to call out China in a very clear, hard, pretty hard way. They paid a very immediate heavy price economically. And I think he was making that clear. No, those trade-offs are really difficult. And I think we didn't maybe get into something I had down on my list, but we didn't get into it, was the specific challenges of leading a smaller country. We talked about the G20 on the main podcast. You just had the G20. Well, Australia is there. New Zealand's not. You know, some of these big international situations. New Zealand's voice doesn't automatically get heard. Jacinta Ardern was something of an exception to the rule. I mean, when I listed those five prime ministers who took over midterm and lost, you know, they're not household names outside New Zealand, in a way that Jacinta Ardern in some parts of the world is. And so I think being the leader of a smaller country has got advantages, but it's also got massive challenges. And, you know, what good does it serve him as the leader of a small country to get the praise from the people he's going to get the praise from to stand up and be some sort of sub-Ian Duncan Smith slagging off China? Yeah. Very difficult. Yeah. Well, thank you very much for making that happen. Great privilege to get a serving prime minister in the middle of a campaign coming on. Good to get an insight into New Zealand. I mean, I think actually looking at other countries is a wonderful way of thinking about all the other countries that our listeners live in. I mean, I think one of the ways of seeing the US clearly is by looking at New Zealand. One of the ways of looking at Britain clearly is by looking at New Zealand. So really great, I think, intellectual discipline for us. Anna, thank you to you, Asta. See you soon. Bye-bye.