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Welcome to the rest of this politics, leading with me, Rory Stewart.
And me, Alistair Campbell.
And we're very excited because today we have Minette Batters,
who's head of the National Farmers Union.
Many, many things to be said about Minette.
One thing that's often said is that she's the first female head of the NFU
in more than a century of its history.
But much more than that, fascinating life story,
starting as the daughter of a small farmer,
basically an elite athlete, very, very interesting career in horse racing,
then took over the family farm, rebuilt it,
both in terms of suckler cows and a catering business.
But I think more than that, it's the connection between that personal life
and standing up for British farming at the most difficult possible political juncture,
the fallout of Brexit, COVID, etc.
So welcome Minette and thank you for coming.
Thank you for having me.
So can we start right at the beginning?
I get the sense that you had a tricky relationship with your dad.
And Rory mentioned your skill as a horsewoman.
And I get the sense, given how long ago that was, I know you're very young,
that you maybe could have gone a lot further,
but your dad didn't really think that you should be doing that.
And also that he didn't really think you should be a farmer.
So you're right. It was a long time ago.
Dad had acquired really serious head injuries.
And for anybody that's lived with someone with really serious head injuries,
it does affect their mood.
He was completely paralyzed down one side, but he was an amazing character.
And he was really loved in the farming community.
He had a huge amount of friends at his funeral.
There were 500 people that came to his funeral.
But he was quite a lot older than my mother.
He had pretty strong views about the role of women.
And going into farming was not really one of them.

So yeah, he was opposed to that.
And of course, I was a bit of a bull in a China shop back then.
Somebody some people would say, I still am.
And so we did clash most definitely.
And tell us a little bit about him.
When was he born?
Was his father a farmer too?
How did he move around if he was paralyzed on one side?
Well, that came.
So he'd led a very, very colorful life.
He signed up to basically fight in the Second World War under age.
So lied about his age.
Of course, he could back then.
Went to Italy and was training effectively in Italy.
And so he led a colorful life.
He had two very bad motorbike accidents.
And of course, back then, dealing with head injuries was,
we don't have anywhere near the technology that we have now.
What was the colorful life?
He did stuff after he left the army before he entered farming.
Did he do other things?
So I think his mother died when he was very young.
That was difficult.
So he was brought up by his grandparents.
He had, I think, a very, very difficult early life.
I'm actually a fifth generation farmer.
So his parents, his grandparents were all farmers.
All in Wiltshire?
All in Wiltshire.
But they'd owned a farm, actually not far from where we are.
They'd then sold it in the Great Depression.
And so he'd ended up with his brother actually being allowed to have the tenancy.
And he always reminded me that he had a note given to him basically saying,
best of luck, you know, your brother's got the farm.
Your sister's got a house and best of luck to you.
And he went off and then was farm manager on an estate in Gloucestershire.
And why did he think you shouldn't be a farmer?
I think back then and the world that he'd grown up in,
sort of through the 40s, 50s and early 60s farming,
was it was all about heavy-duty work.
We didn't have the technology that we do now, you know, farming now.
It's not about strength.
It's about technical expertise, really.
But then a lot of it was about really hard manual work.

And it was about strength.
So he saw it as a physical job, basically,
and not one for a woman to be involved in.
But, I mean, most of my relatives from farming backgrounds
would have escaped to be a vet.
But farmer's wife, that's a legitimate role in farming.
Is that how he thought that maybe you should end up
rather than being a farmer yourself?
Well, that's an interesting one, too, because obviously, you know,
I represent farming businesses and they are about men and women.
And often the women doing a lot of the running of the business.
And certainly my mother was very much doing all the accounts,
you know, she was very much looking after the financial side.
So the other thing was that we were farming in partnership
back then with my landlord.
So it was a set time.
He had a partnership that was going to last 25 years.
He knew that would end and there was no succession.
So that was another part of it for him that he knew it would end.
And for my brother and I, he was always saying,
look, we don't have a future here,
so you need to think of something else.
It seems a bit unfair to be talking too much about your personal life.
But it'd be great to hear a little bit about your son.
So I've got twins.
My son, George, my daughter, Holly,
who both just started at university.
And I think what Roy's alluding to is that you've spoken before
about your son being quite seriously ill at one point
and possibly you worrying that he was actually dying.
So when George was five,
he was diagnosed with type one diabetes,
which is an autoimmune disease.
And it was an absolutely terrifying moment.
George is his life and I will be forever indebted to our local doctor
who actually came back out.
I'd had a chest infection.
I'd taken George to the doctor,
presuming he had a chest infection too.
And Dr. Davis had listened to George's chest and he said,
well, he doesn't have a chest infection.
Take him to A&E if you're not happy,
but keep him warm and see how things go.
And I was actually pregnancy testing cows at the time.

And unbelievably, the doctor came back out
and I just don't think that would happen now.
But he came back out and he tested him for diabetes.
And he said, no, you need to take him to hospital now.
He doesn't need flashing lights.
But actually when I got George there,
his body had shut down so his veins had collapsed.
And there was a consultant there
who finally, after two hours,
managed to get a line into his ankle.
And they said at the time,
he's on the cliff edge.
We hope through the night to keep him awake,
keep asking him questions.
He will step back and we got to the morning
and he had stepped back for the cliff edge.
But those are life-changing moments.
I can remember it as if it was yesterday.
I remember every single person and our NHS.
I mean, my family will be forever indebted.
They are incredible.
And tell us about the National Farmers Union.
Do you feel like you're a trade union leader?
Is that how you define yourself?
I'm often referred to as a general secretary,
which is sort of amusing.
We're not a trade union.
We're a membership organization.
So we're a trade association
and we're an organization that is led by farmers,
four farmers, but we're backed by technical expertise
within our staff.
So that's what makes us, I think, really powerful
that we are working up policy wherever there is a problem.
And it's that great strength of having farmer leadership,
the realities of understanding
what our members are facing because you're doing it yourself.
But having that technical expertise
to really work on all those different areas,
it's a great strength.
Always struck me as being one of the most challenging
management jobs in the world
because farmers, at least my experience
as a member of Parliament Cumbria, farming constituency,

are very, very independent.
They've got very clear views about the world.
They're running their own land.
They understand their own land very well.
They've got very clear views
on what they want the government to change.
And, you know, my experience constituency MP
was my farmer saying them,
get into debt for a kick them,
sort out what's happening on the milk prize,
sort out what's happening with up and funds.
And you're right in the middle of that.
All the expectations of these very experienced,
well-informed men and women being projected at you
to go and deliver for them.
And presumably you're on the receiving end
of a certain amount of disappointment
when you're not always able to achieve what people want.
You're absolutely right.
And I think there's a really fine line
between representing and leading.
It's actually really easy to represent
but what do you achieve?
And so you've got to represent
because you want to keep representing
as many members as possible.
And that ultimately is how you get to see prime ministers
and have effect is having a lot of people behind you.
But also, especially as there's been no playbook
effectively for what has been happening
in the last six years,
leadership has been critical too.
But that's a very fine tightrope to walk
because, you know, if you lead and go too fast
and you're not taking people with you.
And as you say,
we represent across all land areas or commodities
from upland farming to lowland farming.
And this is a massive time of change.
So it's, yeah, it's not easy to get it right.
And can I just drill in on one of those things
that mattered a lot to me as a constituency MP?
I often felt maybe unfairly
that the NFU was often speaking for slightly larger farms.

They were often talking about productivity, efficiency, big agribusinesses.

And I was representing farmers who were, you know, had 60 cows in some cases, were farming 100 acres of land.

They were incredibly proud, resilient, small family farms that really needed the investment in the uplands.

And they shouldn't be compared to big agribusinesses on flat land in East Anglia.

And I wondered whether that's something you're conscious of as they had at the NFU, that you sometimes are representing people with slightly different interests, that the language that East Anglia farmers projecting, which is all about efficiency and scale, actually contradicts with what my farmers are often thinking, which is they don't want a whole system based on efficiency and scale.

They actually quite like the fact that the French and other Europeans were standing up for small family farms and trying to make very small units work.

I hope above all else that I am living proof that you can get to the top of the NFU and lead the NFU.

I am a tenant farmer.

I don't own any land and I farm 300 acres.

So I hope that's proof that anybody can lead the NFU.

And I think the great strength of us is that we represent all sizes of business.

We do represent some very big landowners, but our average member is below 500 acres.

So our average member is ultimately a small farmer.

And I think what the people love about this country and certainly what I love about the country is the diversity of farming operations right across the country.

And the fact that even large operations are usually a family unit and small ones like mine and the farmers that you're talking about in Cumbria, you know, they're often very small grassland farms, but it's about representing everyone that gives us, I think, great strength.

Now, you were vice president of the NFU from 2014 and you became president in 2018.

And during that period from 2014 to today,
there have been five prime ministers
and there have been how many agriculture ministers?
I've worked with seven in total.
Okay.
So what has that been like?
There's you staying in post
and you have this never-ending carousel at the top level
where you're trying to have influence
and you're expecting leadership and direction from them.
So how's that been?
It's been beyond extraordinary.
When I came in in 2014, David Cameron was prime minister.
The referendum wasn't even really being talked about.
In fact, the first day I was in office,
we headed off to Brussels for meetings with member states.
Then obviously we had the referendum.
And even in the last year,
I've worked with three different prime ministers,
all of whom I can say they could have come from different parties.
They have had different priorities.
And so it's been hard work, if you like,
trying to keep up with them.
There's always a fine line,
which I'm sure you're both sympathetic to,
of remaining at the table,
not annoying anybody too much that you get kicked out.
No matter how much they're annoying you.
Well, that's always a bit of a challenge,
but it's about holding them to account,
again, trying to be pragmatic,
but solutions forward.
But ultimately, and this is where we've had to work with the media a lot,
holding them to account.
And sometimes perhaps the opposition hasn't held them to account
in a way that I would have liked,
particularly on trade deals,
our relationship with Europe.
The implications of importing food that will be illegal to produce here.
You know, these are massive issues for the country,
and we've had to challenge a lot through the media.
I like this comment that you made,
that it's as though they were from different parties.
I mean, I think the weird thing about the Conservative Party,

and you see it very clearly in agriculture,
is it's a sort of coalition of completely different beliefs.
And it seems to me in agriculture,
there are three different Conservative beliefs that contradict and clash.
There are people like me who are deeply committed to the idea
of defending small family farms,
and the tradition of small family farms,
even if it involves subsidizing them and not following economic principles.
There's a second group around Michael Gove at Goldsmith,
who are very tempted towards rewilding
and very dramatic environmental policies.
And then there's the third group of kind of free market absolutists
who want to open up trade deals to Australia,
flood the country with cheap food,
and really couldn't be less interested.
That's what I felt with Liz Truss in small family farms.
Is that right or are there even more dimensions to the weirdness of the Conservative Party?
Is that the three or the moral?
I describe it very similarly, really.
I mean, they sort of fit into three camps, really,
sort of boring technical government,
you know, trying to do the right thing, but boring.
Then you have the Nationalists,
who were all about Brexit was pull up the drawbridge,
make everything here.
And then you have the Liberalisers,
who it's made anywhere but here.
So those three things do not go together at all.
And we've almost seen that play out in real time.
You, I know, were for remain.
Not all of your leadership was for remain.
And the NFU sort of stayed out of the debate in terms of you put forward facts,
you put forward data and so forth.
Do you wish that you had been able to persuade the entire NFU to come out
and actually really make the case for remain?
Because I get the sense from watching you,
hearing you, reading what you write,
that you do you're almost on a par with me
and thinking how big a disaster it's been.
It didn't need to be a disaster.
And indeed, it can still be put right.
So I did, you're right.
I did take a public remain position.
But that was on the information that we had.

So the information that we had was it's going to be the easiest trade deal in history.
Trade deal with the EU.
There will be a lot more money
because we won't be paying that money into the EU
and there will be a bonfire of regulation.
So if you are out there farming hard, working all hours of the day and night,
those three things was quite appealing, wasn't it?
There was no more information.
You literally would have fitted it onto one side of a four.
So on the information that we had,
we took a decision and a position that it would be better
and in our interest to remain in the EU.
But it was purely based on the lack of information.
But the Brexit side essentially went round the country
saying the fishermen and the farmers are backing us
because your voice didn't really get heard.
And I just wonder whether you felt you were,
whether you regret that or whether you felt that your hands were tied up behind your back.
You know, when you have a blank piece of paper saying life is going to be better
to the boring old, well, you know, it's going to be really difficult
and everybody else knowing the challenges that lie ahead.
You can see why, you know, we got to 52-48.
I think we could have campaigned as hard as we liked.
We could have thrown everything at it.
And actually, I think it would have made things worse.
So we have left, but I don't think that needs to be a deal breaker.
What we've had to fight off and the worst thing I think that has happened
is being this sort of double standards approach.
But all I'm interested in is fairness.
And the deals that we have struck previously,
giving everything away to Australia and New Zealand,
the potential of a U.S., U.K., free trade agreement,
which would have imported Hormone Free to Beef.
And those deals you mentioned, you would say were bad deals.
New Zealand, Australia, bad deals.
It wasn't a bad deal to do a deal with Australia and New Zealand.
It was a bad deal to give everything in a way.
So in 15 years' time, we will be fully liberalized.
That was the bad deal.
It's a catastrophe, isn't it?
Because we know this because if we go back to the days
where Australian beef and ultimately Argentinian beef were coming in,
they wiped out British agriculture in the late 90s.
I mean, these places can grow things more cheaply at lower standards than we do here.

And certainly for my farmers in Cumbria, that is a catastrophe.
I mean, yeah, you've made progress in trying to put in legislation for future trade deals.
But Australia and New Zealand alone,
I don't know how you are supposed to compete on sheep farming.
You're right, they have a completely different system.
They have massive feedlots, grain-fed feedlots of 70,000, 100,000 animals in one area.
The average size of a beef suckler herd in this country is about 40 cows.
It's incomparable.
Where they went wrong was putting dates in the diary.
So you remember Boris Johnson agreed to shake hands with Scott Morrison at the G20 in June?
Bullied and outmaneuvered, essentially overnight.
Scott Morrison was like,
I'm not going to shake hands with you and best of sound.
And he just conceded it all.
For any negotiator, you don't put a date in the diary.
So of course, the night before the G20, the discussions were taking place.
There were the dying embers of that trade deal,
whereby they could have hung on to safeguards.
They would have made Australia have to work out its carcass balance,
bring in frozen bone in, wouldn't be able to unbalance the carcass.
All of that really matters.
It's pretty dull policy stuff.
But of course, Scott Morrison was able to say,
look, if you're going to keep that stuff in, the deal's off.
We won't be shaking hands tomorrow.
So we had to capitulate.
We didn't have to, but Boris Johnson felt he had to.
Well, he wanted to shake hands the next day.
So he did capitulate.
So I have always felt and always will feel very angry
that Liz Truss and Boris Johnson gave so much away.
We could have done a deal whereby it was in our interests
and it was in our farmers' interests
and the people of this country's interest to do a deal
that respected all of those things and we didn't.
We gave it away.
It's probably not wise to trigger either me or Rory
with the words Boris Johnson,
but you appear to be yet another casualty of him constantly
saying that he'd rather die than do damage.
He actually said,
I would rather die than hurt British farmers.
But he's hurt British farmers.
The manifesto commitment in 2019 made it very clear

that Britain's farmers would not be casualties in trade deals.
We always knew and agriculture always is the first chapter
to be discussed in any trade deal.
And it is always the last chapter to be agreed.
We're a service-based economy.
We always knew that agriculture was going to be the pawn
in these deals and it's played out in real time.
And the terrible thing about it,
which I think wasn't communicated enough to the public,
is it's devastating for farmers,
but actually it matters to the whole public.
It matters in terms of our food security
because as we've learned through Russia, Ukraine,
we can be very, very answered COVID.
We can be very vulnerable to not being able to import food.
It matters profoundly for our landscape.
I mean, almost regardless of what people are eating,
the British public are deeply in love with this farmed landscape
and the way that our traditional landscapes
and places like Cumbria look and feel.
And the conservatives who are meant to be protecting things
have basically taken an axe to that
and are going to cause a situation in 15 years' time
where less now,
where we're not going to have that food security
and where we're not going to have this landscape that we treasure.
As I say, it's not all done yet.
I mean, this is the thing.
And I mean, if I just briefly look at the difference
between the administrations,
Liz Truss literally would have completely liberalized.
So the CPTPP, the Trans-Pacific Deal,
beef as an example,
they were going to open negotiations at 100,000 tons.
That would have been a fully liberalized deal with Canada.
I mean, we're talking about Australia,
but that would have done damage instantaneously.
The deal that under Rishi Sunak's leadership,
and he's keen to prove and show,
and in many cases he has done,
put in writing that we will not now,
not ever be importing hormone-treated beef
or chlorine-washed chicken.
Now, if someone had told me that in 2020,

I would have thought it was the biggest win we'd ever had.
The deal with the Trans-Pacific Countries
is now 13,000 tons on beef.
So you can see the differences.
Had we continued with the trust's government,
we would have liberalized totally with those other countries.
And actually, they have stuck to their word this time,
and this is a very different deal.
What's your assessment of where agriculture and farming
stacked up in political priorities,
going over your career both as a farmer
and as the leader of the NFU?
And also, I'd be interested in your sense of their knowledge.
I mean, I've talked to you before about,
and you feel free to say as much or as little as you want,
but I've talked to you before about during the Brexit thing,
about some of the sort of facts of life in agriculture
that are very, very basic,
that you seem to me were having to educate politicians about.
That's pretty scary.
It's very scary,
especially when you rip up all the old rule books
and you haven't written a new rule book as to,
you know, what this means not only for farmers,
but what it means for each and every one of us.
What's in our kids' packed lunches?
What's in our fridges?
What are we going to buy at the pub to eat?
You know, it absolutely affects everything.
And we've had, you'd look back to the repeal of the Corn Laws
and everything that's happened in between that era and now.
And it has been continual embracement and abandonment
of whether food production matters.
You know, the 1947 Agricultural Act,
it was actually a labor government that said,
we cannot face starvation and rationing again.
We are going to produce much more of our food here.
We are at that moment in time now, right now,
whereby we've legislated targets on the environment
and we are saying we have to do the same on food production.
I've actually seen that committed to that on the leadership campaign trail.
It still hasn't happened.
It really does need to happen.
I think we should take a break back in a minute.

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beers, and ciders.
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Please drink responsibly.
Let's maybe get into this question around the environment properly.
So one of the big standoffs that you're facing,
you've committed to net zero by 2040
and you've got these very prominent figures like George Monbiot
saying that a lot of the carbon emissions in the country,
particularly methane emissions, are coming out of agriculture.
You've got him saying that in the uplands,
he refers to sheep as kind of, I don't know, woolly slugs.
And he believes that these areas should be rewilded.
That's not just the reintroduction of wolves and lynx,
but the return of those areas to completely unfound landscape.
And he seems to have a vision of a very intensively farmed lowland
and essentially abandoning a lot of the agricultural land
in the rest of the country.
So you're right at a very difficult moment
where many environmentalists now have you in their sights.
How are you going to navigate through that over the next 15 years?
I don't think George Monbiot is a fair contributor
for the environmental NGOs.
I mean, George Monbiot is an animal rights activist.
So he is wholly opposed to eating meat.
And that's fine. That's his opinion.
But he wants our food produced in factories.
And I think most people out there, indeed,
there's a huge amount of peer-reviewed science
that even looking at the NASA work, you know,
our diet really matters.
And the nutritional benefit of food that's grown in soil,
meat and dairy as part of a healthy balanced diet
is absolutely critical.
And that shapes the countryside that we have,
the iconic areas of where you're from
is literally been shaped for millennia by farmers

and farming and hefted flocks.
So I think when we committed to net zero,
this is a really exciting opportunity
for a UK government to lead the world
on how we do get to carbon neutral food production.
And we've got to do that.
We can't do that without farmers.
We can't do it here and we can't do it anywhere in the world.
I guess just to push one more time,
some of my farming friends would say
the NFU's been good on the targets,
but it hasn't been very good on laying out the steps
on how we're going to get there
because that's a hell of a target 2040.
And of course you're not going to be head of the NFU
when that date comes along.
When are we going to see the real steps
and what's involved in getting to that target?
So we've absolutely introduced the steps.
There are basically three approaches for us.
We're working with a farmer panel.
Now you easily get farmers across all commodities,
across all land areas to come together,
but we are benchmarking everything
that that farmer panel is working on
with the scientific and academic community.
And give us a rough sense of the kind of things
you'd need to do to get to net zero
because it sounds a really big lift.
So a lot of it is focused on those sort of jargon words
that you started off with, efficiencies, productivity.
I would say it's climate smart farming.
It is about decreasing your food production footprint,
but it's about producing more on the back of it.
So really focusing on how do we tread lighter
with our food production?
You've got in livestock now, you've got probiotics,
you've got feed additives,
you've got different breeding genetics,
shorter finishing times,
all of those lessened the footprint.
And indeed, if every cow in the world
was as efficient as one in the UK,
we'd only need half the number of cows.

So we're leading already with our emissions.
And don't forget that farming here is very much
part of the natural carbon cycle,
grazing grass that we can't eat,
producing a high quality grass-based protein
that is really good for the soil
and really good for us with the high quality meat and dairy
that it's producing.
Then you've got nature-based solutions.
So that is definitely hedges, trees,
locking down, pulling back more carbon into the ground.
And then you've got renewable energy effectively.
And to a certain extent, the bio economy,
I've got members who are, got bio refineries.
So they are tomato businesses
breaking all of the packaging out of the tomato plant,
hugely exciting stuff.
So this is an exciting time,
not just with what we eat,
but for green energy, for fibres,
and it can happen.
What was your reaction to Richie Sealeck's
recent speech about climate net zero?
I think there was a lot of misunderstanding,
or for me anyway, and how it was presented.
So there was talk of,
well, we're not going to be having a meat tax.
Well, I hadn't realized that they were going to be having
a meat tax.
So there were things like that,
that I just didn't quite get,
because we hadn't heard about a meat tax.
And you hadn't heard she was going to get it.
You just saw the head of the head
if you would have heard about a plan to put tax on meat.
And would have had a lot to say.
I think so, yeah.
So it was strange, but what we want to happen
is the right policies, the right incentives in place.
So we can get to net zero,
so we are not taxing people.
And this is absolutely within the art of the doable.
And that is what we've been working on,
the policy solution for how we achieve it.

And if you and King Charles,
I have always seen him as being a really interesting advocate
for nature-based solutions for farming in Britain,
for small farmers.

Do you reflect a little bit on what his legacy has been
over the last few years
and the ways that he's thought about farming
and supported farmers?

It was interesting, wasn't it?

The Royal Visit to France and the reception that he got.

I mean, I do think he's been an extraordinary leader
in this area, because he was talking about it long before
it was trendy and fashionable
and actually faced a lot of ridicule.

I've been to High Grove, I've seen the changes
and it's difficult farming up there on the Cotswolds.

You know, it's brash, it's hard yards of farming.

And he has never deviated from that path.

And so of course, when he talks now,

it is with total sincerity,

but not only sincerity,

it is with complete knowledge of what he's talking about.

And I think that is what now is putting him

in such a good place as a leader in this area

because not only has he believed it for his entire life,

he has acted on his beliefs

and delivered on his own land.

He needs to tidy up the swimming pool at High Grove though.

I've swam in that, it was a bit murky.

I didn't get to see that.

I saw the cows and the sheep, that was all.

Can we talk about COVID

and how that was for the farming community?

And also clearly this sort of is a health crisis.

Do you think the government understood

that it could quite quickly have become

a food supply crisis as well?

And did you worry about where that was heading?

So there was a moment,

I'd just been elected into my second term

and we went into lockdown.

So we'd had our elections at the end of February,

went into lockdown in March.

And I think there was absolute panic across government

that supply chains were going to grind to a standstill.
This is 70 million people very nearly on an island,
pretty reliant on imported food from Europe.
And when it looked like food supply chains
were going to break down
and we weren't going to be able to get food in here.
And indeed, you know,
it wasn't just panic buying of loo rolls.
People were panic buying many things.
So we were running out of flour.
We were running out of milk.
So the early days were tumultuous
and we were on a war footing.
Effectively, we were working very closely
with DEFRA colleagues.
Of course, a big lack,
I think of commercial experience in departments.
We, you know, obviously worked as members of the EU.
Who was the charge of DEFRA at that time?
George Eustace.
And George Eustace is quite an interesting figure here, isn't he?
Because he was in DEFRA with me.
So even though there were a lot of turnovers and change,
I mean, he was there for a long, long time.
And I guess he was hanging around on and off for seven, eight years,
which is very unusual.
He was in there for a long time.
But of course, nobody saw this coming.
And it was pretty scary.
And I think there were many in government.
And I certainly had some messages from some of them
basically saying you can have whatever you want.
Did you take it?
I did.
Of course, it ended and things changed.
And actually, it was a huge credit to everybody
that food supply did come back on track.
Distribution did work.
And a united effort from farm to fork to feed the nation.
You know, we were, as farmers, we were the key workers.
We were never the NHS, but we were feeding the nation.
And we did together, I think, extraordinary things.
And for a time, it brought people so much closer and government
so much closer to the importance of food.

But these things never last long.
And that lesson mustn't be forgotten.
Rishi Sunak's non-existent tax on meat notwithstanding.
How do you see the future of meat?
Are you encouraged or worried by the kind of trend towards veganism and vegetarianism?
Do you think we actually understand what that means in terms of food production within the UK?
So here in the UK, people's diet will be what people's diet is.
The medical advice right now is meat and dairy is a really important part of a healthy, balanced diet.
But none of us, whatever age we are, are eating enough fruit, vegetables and pulses.
So it's absolutely the case that meat and dairy is part of a healthy, balanced diet.
And here in the UK, when we don't have feedlot systems, we're not feeding mountains of grain to our animals.
We should be exporting what we're not consuming.
And that's really, really important because, you know, if we put in reduction targets here, don't forget that was another focus when Henry Dimbleby was leading the Food Strategy.
You know, it was about reduction targets.
We were absolutely saying, look, we can get better here.
We can be climate smart agriculture, but we mustn't restrict what we're doing here.
We can do it better, but let's export to other countries that don't have the luxury of the maritime climate that we do.
One of the weird things which is typical of British approach to environment policy is that we offshore our problems.
We feel smug about ourselves, but what we actually end up doing is pushing the problem onto New Zealand farms, Australian farms, or pushing the carbon emissions off to China.
And then we continue to consume the things here.
Absolutely.
So I remember having this argument with the Chief Executive of the Lake District National Park who was saying, you know, be much better if we don't have our sheep on the grass here.
I'm thinking, well, what else is the grass going to do?
And we end up importing New Zealand lamb in and doing enormous damage to the New Zealand landscape
so that we can feel smug about our own landscape, but we're still eating the lamb.
So I think one of the nice things about on-shoring is that we're taking responsibility for our own production rather than just consuming other people's production.
But you know, many people listening to this will have faced the rationing of eggs.
We had a billion less eggs produced last year compared to 2019.
And yet the British medical advice is if you're elderly, if you're young, if you're pregnant, eat British Lion Mark eggs.
And yet we've been importing eggs from Italy.

So we need to get our egg numbers back up.

Salad shortages.

I mean, everybody remembers all the talk of, you know,

Jerez coffee saying we'll have a turnip and eat seasonally and don't have a tomato.

But people want rightly so to be able to buy what they want when they want.

And we can produce a lot more of that here.

So that's the key thing.

What we're good at, you know, it isn't just about proteins.

The real challenge right now is being so reliant on Spain to produce all of our salads.

So reliant on Morocco, a weather event in Morocco.

None of the salad got here.

We should be producing it here.

And I visited a glasshouse not that long ago.

Totally sustainable, pulling hot water out of a city using heat pumps and not reliant on gas.

We could be producing all of the nation's peppers, all of the tomatoes pretty much all year round.

Why would we not want to do that?

And where do you stand on meat that's getting manufactured synthetically?

It's unaffordable in the first instance.

So it's very costly.

And I think there are huge concerns with the health implications of things that have been modified that we are not genetically keeping up with.

So our food system has changed so much in the last 50 years.

And as we go to the next level of synthetic meats, stem cell technology that is producing these synthetic meats,

this is our bodies.

There is nothing more important that we do than feed ourselves.

And what we eat is what we are.

And it just appalls me that the lack of work that has gone into what is this going to do to our bodies?

We face huge challenges now with type 2 diabetes with cancer.

A lot of it linked to highly processed food and the fact that we are eating too much of it.

So there are big health implications here.

And it's all about taking food seriously and really understanding and educating our kids and our schools

to be passionate about what they're eating.

What I've heard in pretty much everything you've said is a sort of sense of real frustration

that people in power and people in politics generally don't really get this stuff

despite all the debate that goes on around it.

And I'll be honest, I watched part of your conference this year

because I was quite interested because Keir Starmer was going to be speaking at it.

And I've been interested in your impressions on him, but I couldn't believe Therese Coffey's speech.

I sort of felt that she's in charge of your sector.

I don't know, what was she doing?

And did Therese Coffey just remind us that she's in charge of this sector?

And I just thought, is she deliberately being insulting by not taking it seriously or what?

[Transcript] Leading / 40. Minette Batters: The Most Powerful Farmer in Britain

It was a weird time.

I met with her two days later and she said, could I come and have a drink and a chat and go through things?

And that was good and that settled things down, but it did feel a very odd time.

Remind us of the speech.

I don't think all listeners will have heard it.

Alistair's more of an NFU geek than maybe some of our listeners.

What happened in that speech?

What was it that was upsetting for members?

I think the challenge was that we'd faced this extraordinary situation with eggs.

So it was front page news and that day we'd faced literally every newspaper out there was talking about salad shortages and rationing of salads.

So Asda was the first one to say, you can only have two bags of lettuce effectively and six tomatoes.

And so we were facing rationing of salads and there was no nod to any of that at all.

And actually in the Q&A, I challenged her on market failure in the egg sector and said, what were they going to do about it?

Because within the agricultural act, there are powers given to the UK government to deal with these issues.

And she said, well, she didn't see it was market failure.

And I said, well, there's a billion less eggs clearly.

It's market failure.

And I've got members that are going out of business because they are not getting a return back to the farm gate for what is costing them.

So it was a very odd time.

Can we bring you on to Kirsten?

So what is it that you'd really like to see?

If you were writing a manifesto for labour, given that at the moment it looks likely that they'll win the next election,

what would be a great manifesto from them for farmers?

What would you like to see for farmers out of labour?

So the big thing that is missing is we've legislated targets for the environment, clean water, tree planting,

taking land out of production, water quality, all really important things.

And I'm absolutely fully in favour of what's happening.

But we've got targets on housebuilding.

Labour's got targets on housebuilding.

It's got targets on green energy.

What we don't have a target for is food production.

And so the first thing I would like to see them do is say, look, producing food matters, feeding the people of this country matters.

We are going to set a self-sufficiency target and we are going to make sure that that we stick to that. And we're not going to be producing pineapples and lemons here, but there are many things that we should be producing here.

If they do that, then we need a comprehensive food strategy that delivers all of that.

And we'd also like to see presumably something more on subsidies.

And as the Lib Dems have come forward so they put a billion pounds into Elms, is that enough?

Sorry to explain to people, this is part of the environmental subsidies.

This is part of keeping the uplands alive, part of the story that we're talking about with upland farms.

It's not just about food production.

Often the food production doesn't really help a small family farm in the uplands because it will favour the more efficient.

What would you like to see in terms of commitments to these subsidy schemes from Labour?

Well, obviously, it's to be appreciated and applauded that the Lib Dems have come out and offered more money.

I think, though, when you're not in power, offering more money is quite easy to do.

Who are you, the Lib Dems?

No comment, we're apolitical and we have to work with everyone and enjoy it too.

But, you know, it's about the plan.

The plan has been what's missing and we need a plan and a strategy.

And that has to start with saying food matters.

And, you know, we have to treat environment and food production as two sides of the same coin, not separate them.

They're continually being separated.

We've got to have both.

That's what I'd like to see Labour do.

And just tell me what the sense that from your members at the conference that Keir Starmer emanated, what your perception was?

Well, the extraordinary thing was that his announcement was actually one of Rishi Sunak's policy proposals when he was on the campaign trail.

So he talked about 50% in public procurement.

That's our hospital, schools, prisons, military, 50% of that being British.

And that was what Keir Starmer announced because conservatives have failed to announce it.

So that seemed quite odd, but it's appreciated.

But we still don't have those things that Rishi Sunak committed to.

And I think he, knowing the man that he is, he will have gone into it with a lot of thought, a lot of detail behind it.

So he committed to 50% of British.

Don't forget, this is not new news for the London Olympics.

We were 100% British.

I mean, that's what a lot of countries do.

And it's an important marketplace.

So four billion pounds worth of marketplace.

And Keir Starmer announced it because the conservatives hadn't.

So as I say, I'd like to see Keir go further and announce a target.

But he was empathetic.

The audience liked him.

What is lacking with Labour at the moment is policy.

You know, we need to see more policy.
We need to see a plan, a proposal that is meaningful.
These are businesses that I represent.
And just on that, because, you know, I sort of said, do you see yourself as a union leader?
But you are the leader of a major organization that is trying to influence public policy.
How do you approach something like a coming election?
How do you try to get the ideas that you've just outlined to Rory?
What do you do to try to get the parties to do that?
Because, as you know, even despite Boris Johnson basically burning his own manifesto, manifesto still do matters.
So how do you get stuff into the manifesto?
I think the really exciting thing now is that everybody is recognizing that the rural vote matters.
The farming vote matters and the people who are associated to rural constituencies.
They are feeling hard done by.
They are feeling left out of a sort of metropolitan urban policy portfolio, if you like.
So I think it's an exciting time in that the rural vote matters.
It will be competitive in the run up to the next election.
So we are the moment producing our own manifesto.
Now, yeah, I don't run a dictatorship.
So this isn't and can't be, can't be my manifesto.
It will be literally across all land areas, across all sectors.
We will bring that manifesto together.
We are and always do engaging with Labour, with Lib Dems, with the Green Party, and really trying to tick the boxes off.
Will you sign up to this?
You know, we've got huge implications with trade, with access to people, with the future policy.
So we will have done and are doing a huge amount of work on our manifesto, and then we will be trying to get it off.
And our conference next February, which will be my last, there will be a hustings between all parties.
And that will be, you know, we'll have well over a thousand members in the ICC.
That will be my members' chance to really challenge politicians about what their plan is.
Farmers often from the outside seem to have these very strange kind of almost enviable lives.
I mean, there's a real heroism to farming.
And I think, I guess, Jeremy Clarkson and everyone has already given much more prominence to these issues.
But it's also a tough and quite lonely job, isn't it?
And I sometimes felt my constituents that we underestimated some of the stress and pressure on mental health, on suicide.
Do you want to reflect a little bit, along with all the great successes in farming, which are enormous amount, what some of the stresses can be?
So I think probably my saddest and lowest moments in this job are hearing stories effectively from our members about men and women that have committed suicide.
It is a lonely job. It is an isolated job. And it is a stressful job.

[Transcript] Leading / 40. Minette Batters: The Most Powerful Farmer in Britain

Help us understand what makes it stressful.
What are the kinds of things that often bring stress to farmers?
I think, you know, if you imagine, you've got your office outside.
So you are at the mercy of all weather events.
And you are, if I look at my own business, you are on call, we're a livestock business.
You are on call 24-7.
And there could be debt in a small farm.
Absolutely. I mean, not just small businesses, but farming is long term.
So you are planning for a long term.
You're obviously planning often for the next generation to be coming into that business, whether you're a tenant or a landowner.
So I think it's isolated.
Certainly at the moment, huge pressure because there's been such lack of plan and there's been such differentiation effectively between different leaders.
So lack of plan hasn't helped.
Uncertainty is the last thing farmers want.
And you are working in a very isolated and lonely environment often.
So it is a big issue.
And we need to do much more to get help into rural areas.
You know, we are always talking about it's okay not to be okay and to speak up.
But, but what then?
What's the next steps?
How can we provide the help that is needed?
And we've got great charities, the farm FCN, the Farm Crisis Network does a huge amount RABI and others to help in this area.
But there's much more we can do.
Can I just with my mental health campaigning hat on say that commit suicide, suggest suicide is still a crime or a sin?
I think that's absolutely right.
And I've been working with an amazing couple, Andy and Linda Eden, whose son, Len, took his own life, age 22, and Andy talks about achieving positive mental health all the time.
And so our language really needs to learn from people that have been through what the Edens have been through.
And they've just driven a tractor right across the country and hearing them talk about their son, but they continually say don't talk about mental health negatively.
What we're all striving for is positive mental health.
Can we talk briefly about Ukraine?
Because I know you've also got connections out there and have been involved in what's going on with farmers there.
So just talk us about that.
It's hard to sort of put into words how challenging the situation is.
So Maria Dudak, who's the Ukrainian agrarian forum director,

I've had a lot of conversations with from day one.
We helped bring Maria and her sons over to have a holiday in Wales,
as she said, to get them out of a war zone and, you know, all the thoughts
and the, you know, you can't imagine what it's like
when you are living effectively in shelters
and she's still doing her job as a director.
So everybody's feeling the impact of Russia invading Ukraine
and what it's done to cost inflation of farm inputs and food inflation.
But when you hear firsthand from what these farmers are facing,
they're facing, you know, farms that have been targeted by the Russians,
cows that are literally burnt alive,
fields that are mined
and they are continually as a nation working through,
working through, working through.
And, you know, they are still planting, harvesting,
doing everything they can to keep farming
in a situation that the rest of us cannot even begin to contemplate.
So what I've heard from Maria,
it really makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.
It makes me feel enormously grateful to be here.
And you've had the most extraordinary life.
You've, you know, completely, presumably blew away your father's expectations.
He was never expecting you to lead the NFU.
You've, you've gone through so many different changes in your life.
You're now coming to the end of your time.
At the NFU.
At the NFU.
At the NFU.
You're not planning anything.
Sometimes.
It's just that we already did talk of the podcast recently
about how he was having a dream about just about to be guillotine.
So I don't know whether that's still in his subconscious.
There's too much dreaming going on in the podcast.
No, and you're young as Alice is pointing out.
So give us a sense of how you think about closing off 10 years,
how you think about legacy.
And I guess most interesting for listeners,
what does someone like you do next?
What do you do if you've made it to the top of this very interesting thing?
Had I think an incredibly interesting and fulfilling life
and then suddenly in your mid 50s find yourself thrown off into a different world?
I never set out to have a role in the NFU.
My passion was to farm.

And so I've been effectively 10 years not being able to farm in a way that I would have been.
So I really look forward to going back to the farm to continuing to build my my business.
There are things that I desperately want to get over the line in the next five years.
And, you know, when I came into this role,
it was so frustrating for it all to be about the first woman as a woman.
All you want to be seen as as the best person to do that job.
So my focus and probably what matters more to me than anything else
is I want people at the end of my tenure to think, you know,
she was a woman, but she did as good a job as any of the men.
And, you know, it'll be great to have another woman.
The thought of ever dropping a ball or ever doing anything wrong.
And people sang, oh, don't you remember that time when we had a woman leading the NFU?
I mean, that for me, I will do and have done everything I can to avoid that.
Success will be when it's not newsworthy to be a woman.
That is what I want my legacy to be.
Will you try to have any impact upon who succeed you all?
Will you step aside in that process?
We are proudly democratic.
So there's lots of organizations claimed to be so.
Yeah.
So I have been elected into this role for my third term.
I had to get 75 percent of the vote.
So the next president of the NFU will be elected into that role.
But whoever the next president is, you know, the NFU is an extraordinary,
dynamic, diverse organization.
And, you know, it's been around for well over 100 years.
I'm very confident it will be around in another 100 years and doing what it does.
Well, listen, thanks for all your time.
It's been lovely to talk to you.
Thanks for having me.
I've really enjoyed it.
Thank you very much.
Well, if I were a member of the DEFRA team or the shadow DEFRA team,
I would listen very, very carefully to some of that.
Because I thought she had some very interesting analysis and ideas.
I mean, I've obviously known her for some time because I was a DEFRA minister
and it's amazing seeing how much the NFU has moved and what it's had to adjust to.
I mean, she's talked about COVID.
She talked about Brexit.
There's also been a massive revolution in its approach to environmental policy.
The stuff we didn't get into.
I mean, 40 percent of our rivers are in bad condition.
There are a lot of questions around, you know, how much polluters should pay,

how much farmers should be responsible for the state of our rivers.
But goodness, she's come a long way.
And it's really interesting things.
She's not quite a politician, but she's got to act almost quite heavily.
She's pretty political, I'd say.
I think she knows how to influence.
I actually do think if, you know, she said that we're going to sort of produce a big document and call it their manifesto.
I think they probably should do that.
They have to do that for their members.
And I think they need to really crunch it down and just try and say to the parties, you know, if you want to deliver on your promises, this is how you're going to do it.
And you were saying, I mean, I'm being a bit unfair because you were saying just off air to her. But I think you were absolutely right.
But what she needs to do is she needs to read the party manifesto, to realize that it's a page basically on agriculture and she needs to write that page of A4.
What are the seven or eight bullet points that they need to deliver?
Maybe what she should do is put the podcast when it comes out, put it into chat GPT and say, if you had to turn this into a one page, well, with the current labour leadership, what would it say?
But I wonder if she would have been there because she was a very successful jockey.
Yeah.
You know, she ran, she wrote quite a lot of winners.
And she trained with one of the most famous trainers in Britain.
Yeah.
Huge flat successes, jump successes.
No, I think that's another thing.
I wonder whether part of her focus and part of what's made her, she didn't have a conventional academic career, but I think something you write about in your book on leadership, the way in which in a very high level elite sport can actually be amazingly good for forming character and confidence.
Oh, Rory's moving on to sport.
Oh, we'll get you, we'll get you interested eventually.
No, I thought she was, I thought she was very, very good.
Whoever follows her, I think she's quite hard to follow.
And it was a big thing.
I mean, she wasn't when I was in death for a scene as the front runner.
She was the slightly surprised candidate to come through.
And as she says, she comes from a smaller farming background.
But goodness, she's got a problem.
I mean, you know, she's being polite, but at the heart of the NFU,

a massive standoffs between different interests
and every decision she makes.
If she says one of her phrases,
we're going to produce more food on less land.
That has big implications for farmers up in the uplands
who are then going to end up facing rewilding.
I did debates with her.
One of the reasons I know her is we did a debate
against George Monbiot together a few years ago
on this whole rewilding debate.
I wonder whether she's right.
I mean, she's sort of saying, well, you know,
George Monbiot is out in the extreme and most of the British public are with her
and want to see a farm landscape.
But it's difficult to know, isn't it?
Because I didn't get enough into how they're going to appeal to the next generation.
I suspect people in their teens, early twenties,
are a constituent she's really going to have to reach out to.
And I think they're more skeptical.
They're much more sympathetic towards more radical environment,
climate policies, which can be difficult for farming.
Although she is a big sort of pro-tor of fruit and veg.
Maybe this is me misinterpreting what she said.
She's not an evangelist for more old fashioned traditional farming.
I think she's kind of moved with the times pretty, pretty well.
It is also, I mean, I don't, you know, it's obviously a cliché that she bought her,
but I do think that Jeremy Clarkson's program on Amazon
has transformed sympathy and interest in farming in Britain.
I think it's incredible.
Really?
Media impact.
Yeah, it's, I mean, if you haven't watched it,
it is the greatest, funniest program.
But what he does is by mocking himself,
just show how difficult a farmer's life is.
Interesting.
Jeremy Clarkson.
Jeremy, I know you listen.
So you welcome any time.
We'd love to have you.
Rory, thanks a lot.
Thank you.