

[Transcript] Leading / 42. Sayeeda Warsi: Britain and the Muslim World

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So welcome to The Rest is Politics' leading with me, Alistair Campbell.

And me, Rory Stewart.

And today we're joined by Baroness Saida Varsi. And though this is very much a leading interview, we also do see it as part of the debate that we've been having about the dreadful events in the Middle East. And we're trying to give a balanced assessment, provide a platform to people that we believe have got something interesting and worthwhile to say about what's happening, but also to try and help educate, inform and debate within the framework of our motto disagreeing agreeably. So Saida, born in Yorkshire, to Pakistani parents, a lawyer, then a member of the Cabinet when Rory was a rising star on the Tory backbenches. Indeed, when she and I co-presented a Channel 4 programme, *Make Me Prime Minister* last year, she confessed to me that she'd wanted Rory to beat Boris Johnson, so a woman of sound judgement. She was the first Muslim member of the British Cabinet under David Cameron. She was the first woman to chair the Tory party, but she resigned from the government in 2014 over their handling of a previous crisis involving Israel and Gaza. And she said this, support for Israel's attacks and official language surrounding the crisis in Gaza was morally indefensible, not in Britain's national interest, and will have a long-term detrimental impact on our reputation internationally and domestically. So what about now, almost a decade on when the death toll is already even higher. In recent days, she's been expressing similar concerns at the horror of what was inflicted by Hamas on October 7, and the support offered by world leaders to Israel is being taken by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a green light to commit atrocities himself. She fears that ordinary Palestinians will pay the price and fears too that around the world, whilst a rise in anti-Semitism is well understood. Crisis moments such as these also lead to a rise in Islamophobia, but that we take it less seriously. Said is not new to this debate, she wrote a book *The Enemy Within*, a label thrown at her when she was part of the National Security Council, at a time it was dealing with Islamist terrorist attacks here. And last week she delivered a speech, a video of which we'll put in the newsletter, to which she gave the title *Muslims Don't Matter*.

Businesses may remember our interview with David Bedeal and his book *Jews Don't Count*, and just as he argues that anti-Jewish racism is real and often all too casual, she argues the same from a Muslim perspective. And just as his book is worth reading, so is hers, and so is her recent speech worth viewing, even if she takes a few swipes of new labour. However, Said, let's start right at the very beginning, where you were born, who your parents were, and how that shaped the politician you became.

So 1971, second of five girls born to Pakistani immigrants who came over in the 60s, following on from my grandfather who came in 1958. And at the time I was born, dad was working in the ragmills, mom was a housewife. And my mom said things started looking up because dad got a job as a bus conductor. So he was going up in the world. And I think probably being born into an all-female family with the Muslim faith, working class background, Yorkshire town, there were so many different influences very early on. But I think what we knew, because I think we were five girls very early on, was that we had something to

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prove. I just remember this statement from my mom consistently, you've got to be better than the boys, you've got to be better than the boys. And I think there was a sense certainly culturally at that time that an all-female family, well, there were five of us because I'm sure my mom and dad kept trying for a boy. And an all-female family was really because they'd failed and they hadn't produced this male heir.

Said, one of the things that has been quite striking in British politics is the rise to prominence of people from Pakistani Muslim backgrounds. There was always these jokes between Siddique Khan and Sajid Javed about, you wait for one father as a bus conductor and then two come along at once and now we have a third.

I have a third. My dad was a bus driver actually, eventually, when things started looking even better for him.

So, I mean, what is this story? I mean, you know, obviously you're very, very different people from very different backgrounds, but there's a sort of strange echo that three very prominent famous British politicians, all in some ways fathers on similar paths. What does that tell us about Britain? What does that tell us about the Pakistani community in the 60s?

I think there was a clear sense that our parents and our grandfathers came over as workers. They came to improve their lives, to make a life for their family, but they were really aspirational. And the one thing they wanted for the next generation, all of us myself, you know, Sajid, all born in the UK, they wanted us to have an education. We were going to be the first generation to go to university and they viewed the university as something that was really quite achievable and was a bare minimum. And for us, it was particularly unusual because we were girls. So at a time when there was still a conversation going on in some of these conservative communities about whether or not girls should be going to university, the one thing that my mom and dad decided, my mom particularly very early on was that we were all going to go to university.

And again, a very odd reason for that, her view was that, you know, you don't have any brothers, there isn't going to be anybody there to pick up the pieces if something goes wrong. So you better be strong enough to be able to earn a living.

One thing that Alistair and I often talk about, Alistair's very, very serious linguist speaks very good German and French. But of course, presumably you took for granted growing up in a multi-lingual background in a way that other British people might not have done. And you grew up with parents speaking presumably fluent Urdu and...

Well, we didn't speak a word of English when we went to school. So we learned English when we got to school. So I think we must have been about four or five years old. And before it was Urdu and Punjabi and Gujarati and all these other languages that were being spoken around us. And my parents tried really hard to make sure that we kept those languages obsessively. I mean, mom even bought us books and we had to do Urdu classes at home. And I only saw the value of them, interestingly, when I was in cabinet and I did my first big visit to Pakistan. And I remember being in Islamabad and there was a press conference between myself and the Pakistani foreign minister. And he started off and he gave his kind of spiel in English. And then the journalist turned to me and I did my whole thing in Urdu. And he said to this day, you know, Shama Munkarishi said, you didn't need to embarrass me like that. But the phrase that I used at the time was,

you know, if you want to speak to somebody's head, you know, you could use any language. But if you want to speak to somebody's heart, you'll use the language that feels most familiar to them. And after that, I didn't get any difficult questions from the journalist. It was like, right, done. And did you, as a child growing up in Jewsby, did you, did you feel welcome? Did you feel you were part of the community? Did you experience racism?

I did, but you almost accepted it as the way things were. So being chased after school, I mean, look, it's a phrase which people find offensive, but it was a phrase that was used. Pakhi Bashin was something that was a normal part of your life. You would know that at certain times

of the year, you know, there would be violence. And we were quite lucky because my mom had a car and she learned to drive very early on. So she would come and pick us up from school in the way that some of the other kids didn't get picked up. And we were also slightly more protected because we were girls and not so much in the, in the thick of it. But also, I mean, remember that after the busses, dad went on to become a taxi driver. And I remember still vividly Sunday mornings were the worst because he would invariably get beat up on a Saturday night. He would come home

bruised and battered. We remember waking up on Sunday mornings and knowing that dad had been beaten up again. And I think my parents' generation just accepted that because to some extent, they felt it was, they would say things like, well, you know, it's their country, isn't it?

And these things are going to happen. And then my generation grew up and thought, well, it's not their country. Who's theirs? Our country. And we're not prepared to tolerate this. And I think the question for me is, when I look at racism now, do I get beat up in the street? Well, no, I don't. But almost that kind of, you know, packy-bashing was easier to deal with. You know, you knew who you were dealing with. It was in front of your face. It was violent. It was immediate. And it was clear. What I find much more difficult is the kind of racism that I face now, the stuff that I talked about over a decade ago when I said Islamophobia has passed the dinner table test, I call it respectable racism, the stuff that you find in think tanks and editorial newsrooms and conversations in politics, which is far more pernicious and difficult to deal with. What you were describing, interestingly, is the time when what Soella Braverman says now, when she says multiculturalism isn't working, sounds to me like it maybe wasn't working then, but I feel works a lot better now. I mean, what's your sense of multicultural Britain and how well it works as a multicultural nation? It depends on how you define it. If multiculturalism is people from different backgrounds, different religions, different races working together, well, look across the country, look at, you know, interfaith marriages, look at interracial marriages, look at interracial and interfaith business relationships, look at the way in which we get along, you know, when we go out for a walk and, you know, we talk to people of all backgrounds, people out walking their dogs, the way in which people rub along works incredibly well. Far better. So multiculturalism has worked and is working, but there are definitely people in politics now and in the editorial newsrooms and in think tanks who don't want it to succeed. And that's why we've got to push back on it. I mean, the phrase that I've used consistently is that we have people who dress up as patriots, but they are arsonists, and they use language and policy, which sets our country alight, and they divide us through this divisive culture wars. Can you give us, give us a sense what this is? I mean, it's difficult for me to understand any, I mean, you're talking about people like Michael Gove writing his book on

Celsius 77? Yeah, I think that is an example of it. But I'll give you an example of what we saw in government Trojan horse, the Trojan horse scandal, this so-called scandal of where we were in Birmingham, where effectively we felt that extremists had taken over schools and they had, they were radicalising the kids there. And a huge inquiry was started off the back of a letter, which subsequently turned out to be a complete hoax, and the, and was found to be bogus. And without questioning any of this, this letter, which interestingly had the same title as a chapter in one of Michael's book, Trojan horse. And then suddenly off the back of this letter, we went into these schools, we destroyed lots of lives, these children still live with a stigma of what happened. We sacked teachers and just just to explain to listeners who don't remember this, my memory of this is that the allegation, which then proved to be false, was that these were somehow breeding grounds for extremism. Yes. And they were taking over the schools. So if you take my generation, who basically said to, you know, migrant communities, you have to play your part, you have to be part of the school system, you have to be part of the local charitable space. So many people, when they saw that their schools were failing, became governors. And the allegation was that these governors were all linked, and they were taking over these schools, and they were putting in place a radicalized idea, and therefore radicalizing the children. And yet interestingly, most of these schools were doing incredibly well academically. So whatever the schools were doing was working for, from an educational perspective, but this Trojan horse letter then triggered this inquiry. And this made you presumably increasingly uncomfortable with the Conservative Party, and even with David Cameron, you don't felt that he supported you strongly enough. She loves David Cameron. I have a huge amount of time for David, and it's very difficult not to like David, and anybody who's worked with him will understand that. But you know, one of the things I joke with him all the time is I genuinely believe that Michael Gove radicalized David Cameron and took him down a path where he made him believe in ideas which had no evidential basis. Look, I'm a lawyer, first and foremost, and I always say, you know, show me the evidence. I'm happy to be convinced. But you can't just make things up. I remember a conversation in government where we were talking about madrasas and mosques, and halfway through this conversation, I remember telling to my colleagues and saying, have any of you ever been to a madrasa? Have any of you ever been to, you're having this conversation from such an ill-informed perspective. So what was the agenda? What was the agenda? Something like Michael Gove, who people keep saying has got a, you know, brain the size of a planet. What's the agenda going on there? You know, there was this really fascinating moment, which is now in the public domain, and actually I write about in my book, where when we were talking about madrasas, somebody said, you know, if if we can't do them for extremism, we can always do them for health and safety. There's always the Al Capone method. And that disturbs me deeply because it's about saying we need to kind of shut down this space. What I was saying in my lecture last week was the silencing, stigmatising and stereotyping of British Muslims has deeply disturbed me over a period of now, you know, 15 years where tiny, tiny little changes were made, where we end up now in a situation where the government doesn't engage with the vast majority of British Muslim communities. It doesn't engage with any group which is considered to be a representative or a body on

behalf of Muslim communities. We can't have a conversation about issues around extremism. We now have a second class version of citizenship. I mean, you know, my children and your children could commit the same crime, and my children could have their citizenship stripped because their great grandfather left a country somewhere, a country that they may never know, may never have visited, have never taken up citizenship of. But because there is a rare potential probability or a prop possibility that they may be entitled to a second citizenship, this is the Shamima Begum case, what concerns me. And again, to remind us, so Shamima Begum went off to join ISIS and then was not able to return to the United Kingdom because actually her citizenship was stripped by Sajid Javid, wasn't it? Yes, it was. So you've had Sajid Javid, Preeti Patel, and now Swela Ravaman. And I get this feeling from your speech that you don't think much of Swela Ravaman. But what do you think about, you've had three home secretaries there who are all non-white, and yet you seem to identify as contributing massively to this problem that you've identified. I agree. Because if we think that diversity of thought is based upon the colour of your skin, we've got it horribly wrong. I'm not just saying this because Rory's a white man, but probably has more understanding of large parts of the world, including the Muslim world, than many of my colleagues in government who would profess to be Muslim. So I don't think that this is an issue about understanding, and it's about an issue of the rule of law, and it's an issue about equality, and it's about looking at your country and thinking which other ways in which I can make policy where in the long term I create a sense of ease. The anxiety and the fallout of the Shamima Begum case has been horrific. One thing you said in your speech which really kind of took my breath away was you talked about, you used the word totalitarian in the context of how British Muslims are treated by the state. Do you really mean that? I worry that that is where we are going, and I wanted to sound the siren, and I wanted to stop and make people think about the consequences of the way in which we are dealing with this matter. We have to change course, and to do that, I have to stop people in their tracks. If I stopped you in your tracks, Alistair, it worked. Well, I watched it twice. So what have you had to, I guess, learn as a politician about how to communicate this issue? Let's say you're communicating this issue to elderly white conservative voters. Have you found it's difficult to do? Have you discovered ways of finding that empathy and connection, or is it just impossible to do? Well, the book that I wrote was written with Doris and Devon in mind, because I wanted to write this for somebody who probably hadn't come across many ethnic minority communities, probably didn't really know much about Islam or Muslims, probably read the Daily Mail, and therefore I wanted to make sure that the book was really well evidenced. There are pages and pages and pages of citations. I got obsessed about citations. You're sure that's the way to Doris's heart is lots of citations? I know. Doris wouldn't necessarily read the citations. She wouldn't read the citations, but what I wanted her was when she was reading the book and thinking, surely that can't be true, for there to be some evidence where she could look back and think, oh, okay, so it is. What I find really disturbing is that we're in a stage of politics where almost evidence and fact doesn't seem to matter anymore. This isn't just a problem for the things that I care about. It matters in so many other areas. Michael Gove was the man who said we'd had enough of experts, so that's part of the same thinking. I also sometimes wonder in British politics whether there isn't a problem that nobody likes people being too earnest or too engaged in

something,

that people don't want people raising problems. They want everybody to be quiet and grateful and relaxed and that people get irritated if you say there's something wrong with the country.

They do, but then change never happens if we all had to accept the status quo because we'd still have slavery, wouldn't we? You have to be a disruptor and you have to challenge the status quo for change to happen. What you can't do is you can't bring all your difference and your expertise to the table and then just reinforce the status quo. I used to say this to David all the time to say, there's no point in giving me a seat around the cabinet table if you don't want me to bring my authentic self to the table. I'm not going to be your nodding dog brown-eyed girl because that's not what I signed up for. Anyway, why would anybody join the Godforsaken world of politics if it wasn't to make a difference? If all you want is a job or you just want a bit of attention, there are better ways to get it than giving up your life and being scrutinized in the way that you are and being vilified as we often are as politicians, you've got to be there to make a difference. I made a decision very early on that one I wasn't going to try and just fit in and fall into line that actually my country and making my country better mattered. If that meant I upset sections of my party, then so be it. Now, you've identified Michael Gove as one of the arsonists. Is Seola Braverman the chief arsonist at the moment? Listen, I haven't identified anybody. I don't want to make this personal because I think you take away- But you have said you've already said, you're already on record as saying she's unfit for office. I think she's unfit for office and I think that the rhetoric, I mean only recently when she talked about, you know, so-called Pakistani grooming gangs which she then had to retract from because the statement she'd made turned out to be

false even based upon the Home Office's own assessment and, you know, newspapers had to correct their records off the back of it. I just think language is really important. If you genuinely care about your country and you genuinely want to create a situation where, you know, the majority of people in that country feel like they belong and they matter and those are really important words to belong and to matter, then you don't constantly create divisions and make people feel like outsiders. No, I fear as a fellow ex-conservative that we're allowing- I don't have an ex-conservative, I still take it for a wee bit.

So I feel we're giving too much opportunity for Alistair to basically suggest it's all the horrible old Tories. Do you think Labour and New Labour are completely exempt from criticism? No, she does not. Absolutely not, which is why in the speech-

So tell us a little bit about that because you haven't heard about that. We've heard about Michael Gove and Seola Braverman. We haven't heard you criticise Labour.

If you go back to the new Labour years, the policy of disengagement, and I'll explain what this policy is, basically, New Labour decided that you had to be a certain kind of Muslim to be engaged with, that you had to effectively acquiesce, you had to say what we wanted to hear. And they created these non-representative fictitious groups, one of them was called the Quilliam Foundation, one of them called the Sufi Muslim Council. They thought this was the answer to Muslim engagement. Both of them are now defunct. Both of them were run by people who are now incredibly interesting and believe in the fact that Trump won the last election and conspiracy theories about COVID. But anyway, at the time, Tony clearly thought these were trusted people to which he used to engage with the British Muslim community. And however much we screamed about it at the time and said to New Labour, no, this is not the way to do it. It was patronising,

it was not real, it was not authentic. And I think there was a lack of disrespect. You know, I have a lot of time for Tony Blair, I have even more time for his wife, Sherry. But actually, Tony became quite enamoured with what was coming out of the US, this kind of odd, neo-conservative thinking. He became really ideological. And I think he started what I now believe is this rot which we're seeing today. And I know that's difficult for you to hear, Alistair, as a fact-based person, you know, I find that. And I give lots of evidence, actually, in my speech and from why this happened. You do, and I've read it, and I listened to speech, but I think you're being harsh. And I think you're also not necessarily understanding the context in which he was operating. But I'm not here to defend Tony Blair. I do that enough on the main podcast. I do want to ask you, though, about you said that Rory's not a conservative. You still consider yourself to be a conservative. But where do you see the conservative party now? I mean, you don't have a vote because you're in the House of Lords. But would you vote for a conservative party that's going to keep on Suella Braverman, possibly being your next leader? Well, I don't have a vote at the general election, which makes it easier. And I don't have to deal with that question. And like, you would advise every cabinet minister to say, when you're a communications director, I don't answer hypothetical questions. But the point is going back to- In which case, you just said you wouldn't vote Rory, is that what it has? I won't answer a hypothetical question, and you would not expect your cabinet minister to keep saying that. But I think for me, what disturbs me is often people say to me, you know, how is it that you've fallen out of love with the conservative party? And I say, well, because the conservative party has fallen out of love with democracy and the rule of law. And when you get to a point where your cabinet colleagues start behaving in ways- Well, why are you not a cross-bencher? Why are you still taking the conservative whip? Because I want us to come back to the center ground, Rory. You know, we have to stay and fight. Remember the cabinet that I sat around the table with? Ken Clark, Dominic Grieve, Justin Greening, you know, William Hague, David Willits. These people were, even when you disagreed, were serious figures who you could have genuine conversation with. And I failed to accept that that party has gone, and I failed to accept that that party can't exist again. And that's why I will continue to hold the line, but I will continue to hold the party's feet to the fire. And what is it in your values that made you a conservative in the first place? What makes you conservative, not labor? Why wouldn't you join the labor party? We had this conversation, you know, Alistair and I were having this conversation about whether Jesus was a socialist, and I said, well, Mohammed was definitely a conservative. Listen, he believed in a two and a half percent rate of tax, Zakat. You tell me which socialist party is going to give you a two and a half rate of tax. And then he incentivized you through good deeds to give him many other ways. He believed in a small state. No, no, you said that. Do you accept he was a state? I'm not convinced. I'm not convinced. I'm holding court on Muslim theology. So tell us where you're a conservative. I think because I fundamentally believe in a small state and a bigger society, I think the state should not interfere in people's lives. I believe that the state should be a safety net of last resort, that you should help and incentivize people to stand on their feet, on their own two feet in the way that you can. Hard work, aspiration, changing your life through education. I would say, you know, with the only religion whose profit was a businessman, right? That is everything about the way I was brought up conservatively, you know, socially conservative whilst growing up, importance of family, those

family ties and community. I think everything that I grew up with when I started looking at Labour, I thought, well, this doesn't really represent me. And what I found interestingly, you know, in the early days was that my connections and my kind of meetings with Labour people really

early on felt really patronizing. Because in the Conservative Party, right, either they were racist and I thought, okay, I see where you see me. Or this homie is an equal. With Labour, it was very patriarchal. It felt very inauthentic. And it just didn't feel like a comfortable. One of the earliest politicians who I absolutely love was Neil and Glynnis Kinnick. And he always said to me, we missed the boat because something just didn't feel right for me there. I felt that with you that we missed the boat. When we did that program together, I could never understand why you were a Tory. She believes in business. Is that what it is? I believe in a landscape that she believes in business. I believe in a small state and I believe in the state getting out of your way. And I believe in the state giving you the freedom to be able to become the best possible version of yourself. And I believe in hard work. I just felt the Labour Party definitely saw me as a bit of a kind of a victim community in the way that the Conservatives didn't. Saida, Rory, let's just take a quick break.

So Saida, to move us on to where we are. And actually, we're here at half past night night because Alastair, who always wants to be on top of the story, was keen to get you and particularly wanted to get you this week because we are interviewing you in the midst of all the events in Israel and Gaza. So I wanted to try to get something that we often talk about on this issue, which is the tribalisation of pain, the sense of the difficulty that people are having empathising with the other side. And I wanted to give you a chance to talk a little bit about how the Jewish community in Britain is feeling at the moment. I've been very struck that Jewish friends of mine over the last 10 days have felt very scared. I mean, they really have seen some of these crowds in the streets, seen people chanting messages about death to Jews, and they feel like a very small minority. And really, for the first time, these people I've known for 40, 50 years, they feel scared in their own country. And obviously, we will especially go on and talk about the other side. But could you talk about that first for a bit? Yeah, many years ago, I sat down with a very senior member of the British Jewish community. And in fact, I was speaking to him earlier today. And I said to him that we need to have a space where British Muslims and British Jews can have a conversation. And it needs to be an honest, open conversation, because I deeply worry about the fact that you are a small community. You're not a growing community. But you are a powerful and influential community in all aspects of our public life. And when I look at the British Muslim community, it is not particularly powerful or influential, but it is a growing community. And we need to find a way in which we can talk openly about antisemitism within Muslim communities

and Islamophobia within Jewish communities. In fact, I did a speech on it in which I talked quite frankly about these aspects of our communities. And let's just, can you talk a little bit about antisemitism? It is a real thing. It is a real thing. And it's, for me, and Alice and I were talking about this earlier, when I was brought up as a Muslim, before I could love Muhammad and his teachings, I learned to love Jesus and his teachings and Moses and his teachings. You cannot be a Muslim in my world, unless you understand and love the teachings of the people who came before him. And there's no way that I can be brought up loving Jesus and Moses and not loving the followers of Jesus and Moses, those great faiths. And for me, I've always referred to

the Jewish community as my cousins. And when I've spoken to members of the British Jewish community and particularly those whose families have been kidnapped by the recent terrorist attack by Hamas, you know, we held each other in Parliament and cried because the sense of loss and despair and anxiety that they must be feeling right now in the middle of this attack is something that you can only comprehend when you understand the humanity of them as people and as individuals within that community. And, you know, for this to succeed, we have to find a way in which we can understand that humanity and we can also understand the humanity of the other communities that make up Britain. You know, what's really disturbed me and you know, I've called this out. There were two marches that went on this Saturday. One was the pro-Palestinian march and then the other one was the Hizbet-e-Hareer march. One was the kind of main march and one was this march outside the Egyptian embassies and the Tunisian embassies. And this group, Hizbet-e-Hareer, is a group that was protesting outside Muslim embassies that's attacked British Muslims for most of their life. That's attacked people like me for doing what I do. And therefore, am I surprised that they're saying vile things about British Jewish communities? Not at all because they say vile things about British Muslim communities. And do you think the police should have been more vigorous in acting? I mean, do you think it's okay for people to be able to walk through the streets saying death to the Jews? I think it's absolutely appalling. No, of course you can't. Why should we allow that on our streets? And why should any Jewish person in this country feel threatened or scared or feel like there's no future for their children? I mean, the whole point of my speech last week was I failed to accept this position that my grandchildren or their children will not call this place their home. And I've spoken to Jewish friends where I've said to them, where do you think your grandkids will be? And they've said things like New York. And they've said, where do you think your grandkids will be? And I said, I don't know, Dubai. And it can be tragic that successful British Jewish communities and successful British Muslim communities are making plan Bs. And so until we understand the humanity and the fear of the other, and until we work together rather than against each other, I mean, one of the things that's really disturbed me this week, and I've called it out on Twitter, is some of the stuff that was written by the editor of the Jewish Chronicle and the Jewish news, really awful stuff about Muslims being part of some sort of blood, yeah, blood cult. And, you know, and thankfully when I challenged it, and I spoke to, you know, friends within the Jewish community, they managed to get these things taken down. These kind of overt attacks on Jewish communities by Muslim communities and overt attacks by Jewish communities upon Muslim communities, it's going to stop. And we've got to stop having this kind of sense of us and them, and which is why one of the things I'm trying to put together this week is get the same heads on both sides together and say we have to do this in a joint way. Your speech last week, which I watched twice actually, I found it very interesting. But there's a lot of anger in there because you feel actually that there's a kind of, for all the anti-Semitism exists, it's kind of always been out there, it's been challenged, it's been attacked, whereas you feel there has been a kind of anti-Muslim feeling that has just been allowed to grow and grow and grow and grow. And the people that you represent have maybe just kind of moved away, just keep their heads down because they they kind of feel it, it's insidious, but it's happening all the time. So just maybe

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just explain what you were trying to say in that speech, because am I right that you were angry and making the saying what you said? I think I was hurt, Alistair, more than angry, because as I said in the speech, both my grandfather served in the British Indian Army. Our relationship with Britain goes back long before they came to these shores. They were prepared to give their blood and lives for fighting against Hitler's armies and fighting fascism. And I now have a child back in the armed forces in uniform. I have a father who broke his back in the mills, building his life and building Britain's industries after the Second World War. And I served my country at the cabinet table. And I'm tired of being put in a place where I'm othered. I'm tired of being seen as part of a community, which is having its loyalty questioned. And do you feel that even now, even having been a

cabinet minister, nor is it you still feel that you have your loyalties, Britain question? When I was in cabinet, and I used to sit on the National Security Council, we had a terrorist attack on the streets of London. Drummer Lee Rigby was killed. And I was part of the task force that put together a response to that terrorist attack. And at the time, somebody who actually the Cameron government considered to be beyond the pale, and this individual who's recently swelled a braver man stood at the dispatch box and said he was somebody who had mainstream views, which shows

how far our party has moved, said a paraphrase, how can we deal with the war on terror when we have her Baroness Varsie the enemy at the table? Who was this? Douglas Murray. And it was that blunt and brutal. That is having my loyalty question. That is suggesting that somehow

I am part of the problem at the heart of government. And articles were running newspapers effectively accusing me of entryism. You know, this was kind of that haunting McCarthyistic approach of saying, well, who is she? Where does she come from? Who are her friends? What is she trying to do? And yes, I did feel like I was, you know, during my time in government, it was difficult. But I think it's not so much about how I feel personally. It's the fact that I hear from young Muslims who feel like they're being silenced, who feel like they can't be themselves, who feel fearful, who are looking for exit routes. And that really saddens me.

So one of the things that has been surprising, I think over the last sort of 20 years is the way in which for a long time the issue of Israel and Palestine was pushed to the side. Whereas in the 70s, 80s, early 90s, it was the very center of the conversation around the Muslim world in the Middle East. There was a sense in which the central gravity moved to Dubai, to Saudi, to the Gulf. That's where the money was. That's where the energy was. And that the sort of old Middle East, Egypt,

Palestine, Iraq, Syria were sort of marginalized. And you almost got the sense that the rulers of those countries cared less about Palestine than they did in the 1990s. What was that? What happened

there? How do you reflect on that period? And why did the Muslim world disengage or seem to disengage from Palestine for a bit? I think the failure of the Oslo Accords was a big part of that. I think the assassination of exact Rabin and the consequences that flowed from that. There really hasn't been a serious peace deal on the table since then. And what people forget is that Rabin, who was probably, I mean, he got a Nobel Peace Prize alongside Yasser Arafat, two years after those Oslo Accords, he was assassinated by a far-right Israeli extremist because they didn't want those Oslo Accords. There was a section of Israeli politics and society that didn't want those Accords to succeed. But since then, there has been no serious attempt other

than a small attempt, I think, in 2016 by John Kerry to have hope. Therefore, I think we disengaged, the UK disengaged, the United States disengaged. And the only time we re-engage is when there is a terrible tragic act of violence, as we've seen this month. And then after that, when everything calms down, and we saw this in the 2014 Gaza conflict where I stood down. And the reason I stood down at that time was because, one, I was appalled at the fact that our stated policy was not being followed, that our values that we say were part of our foreign policy were not being followed. Do you mean the commitment to the two-state solution and both sides of the argument? Both sides of the argument, international accountability. There was a moment where we were talking about a resolution before the Human Rights Council, which would have held both Israel and Palestinians to account for any war crimes that may have been committed. And we abstained. You know, when we start abstaining on international accountability, we get ourselves into some really murky territory. And there was also no commitment to rebuild Gaza, post the conflict. And I seriously thought about it long and hard. You know, a working class girl from Dewsbury doesn't wake up one day and find herself at the cabinet table. This was one of the best jobs in the world and I was serving my country. But I also could not put my name to things which fundamentally were against what I think are British interests and were fundamentally against my own conscience. So really fast forward, that was almost a decade ago now. So you had a situation at the weekend, for example, where you had the King of Jordan, senior people within Saudi Arabian government, essentially saying that as far as they're concerned, Israel is engaged in committing King Abdullah said war crimes. And yet both the British government and the British opposition are clearly wanting to signal real solid support for Israel. So how do you feel about that? Where are you on that kind of scale? And what would you be wanting the British government to say and do now? I think war crimes are not adjudicated upon by the Jordanian King or the British Prime Minister. War crimes are adjudicated upon by the International Criminal Court. It's why we've set it up. It's why we fund it. In the past, we've been one of its biggest funders. So the question I ask is, why don't we allow the Palestinians and the Israelis to go before the International Criminal Court? If we want to operate in a world where there is a rules based system, then why don't we allow that rules based system to take its natural course? Because what is the hope that we're if we if we genuinely believe in a two state solution, what are we doing to bring that two state solution about? Do you think anybody does believe in a two state solution? I mean, I think one of the things I've noticed stuff over the last 10 years is increasingly people saying, yes, of course, we say we believe in a two state solution, but we don't think it's possible anymore. I call it the fig leaf that justifies our inaction. You know, I've said that on numerous occasions, I feel that the opportunity for a two state solution is closing or has closed unless we're prepared to take that initiative now. For listeners, remind them why it's closing or might already have closed because for two states to exist, they both have to be functional and they have to have enough land mass to operate as a state and the way in which the legal settlement building has expanded over the West Bank, which is the occupied territories, means that it is almost impossible for a physical Palestinian state to exist unless we went back to the 67 borders and the political will in Israel to go back to those 67 borders is zero. And therefore, when I argue this with my colleagues and I say, I would stand up and take issue with

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anybody who said that the right of Israel to exist, it shouldn't exist. You know, we question that and we call it out for what it is. But what about those people who deny the right of Palestine to exist by not questioning the reality on the ground, which basically means de facto, we are denying the right of Palestine to exist as a state.

So when we were, as you were both saying earlier, the international community took it off the ball anyway. In the meantime, the settlements were going on and eating further into the space. So do you now feel that the two state solution is something that is unlikely to make any meaningful progress? And how could it happen? Presumably, Israel would have to remove

almost all its settlements, which as you say is almost politically inconceivable in Israel.

And Israel built those settlements knowing that it was illegal and it was an occupied territory and was continuously told by the international community not to do so. So the two options that look, Israel needs the two state solution more than the Palestinians do.

And the reason why I say that is because the alternative to a two state solution is a one state solution with equal rights for all people who make up that one state,

which would effectively make it a majority Palestinian state. And therefore, I cannot understand at a time when there was peace between Israel and all of its Arab neighbors,

practically, the Abraham Accords basically showed a clear recognition for the state of Israel amongst the Arab world, at least the ones that mattered. Why, during that period,

when the effectively it was peace times was when Israeli settlements were expanded at a rate we had never seen before. And over and over again, we have seen Israeli politics move further and further to the right with the most extreme right wing politicians like Smotridge and

Ben-Govir now at the heart of Israeli politics. I guess we're sort of coming to the end, but one of things, I mean, you're incredibly well informed on this subject and you keep referring to yourself as Pakistani girl from Jewsbury. When did you become so well informed about

Israel and Palestinian politics? What time in your life? How do you keep up to date on it? When did it become central to you? I think foreign policy was central to every conversation we had

around the dinner table from about the age of five. My dad's a great storyteller. We knew everything about partition, post-partition, the 71 war, the creation of a first-science

people, everything. We were taught this. It was just an integral part. And Israel and Palestine was just an integral part of that conversation. And the Oslo cause were within our living memory

when I was a young lawyer. And then, of course, it framed my whole politics because I gave up one of the best jobs in the world because of what happened in Gaza.

Do you worry that what is happening now with the justified support that Israel has been getting morally and politically and diplomatically, that Netanyahu is just sort of pocketing that and taking it and essentially feels now that you can do what the hell he likes?

So one of the most disturbing quotes that I've read from, you know, all the reading that I've

done over the recent years is one from March 2019 when Netanyahu told his Likud colleagues, and this is a quote, anyone who wants to thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state has

to support bolstering Hamas and transferring money to Hamas. This is part of our strategy to isolate the Palestinians in Gaza from the Palestinians in the West Bank.

Divide and rule. He needed Hamas to succeed to ensure that there wasn't the case

for a joint Palestinian voice so he could say there was nobody to negotiate with.

And if you look at the coalition agreement that Netanyahu signed when he got into bed with these

far-right extremists, he talks very clearly that all the land between the river and the sea is all of Israel. So he denies the right of Palestine to exist as a state as part of his basic politics and their coalition agreement. This is why I have a worry that if you are a genuine friend of Israel, you do not support those aspects of Israeli politics that in the end are committing deep self-harm to the state of Israel. So how do you feel about the way that both the UK government and the UK opposition have handled things in the last few days?

I think they have been naive. I think they have been ill-informed.

And there's so much difference between them. Are they pretty much on the same song sheet?

I think they're pretty much in the same space. You see, the thinking with Israel has always been that even when we're dealing with people like Netanyahu, we hold our nose and we deal with him because as long as we keep him on side, we will have some influence in the way that he manages these situations. But my experience over the years, both from within government and outside, is that we never have any influence over him, that effectively he has us jumping to his tunes.

And that's why in the end, when thousands of Israelis took to the streets in Israel to say he's not good for Israel and actually took to the streets here in London when he came for his official visit when they were saying to the Prime Minister, he's not good for Israel, they were right. Those Israelis were right. So we should always stand with Israelis, but we should not be standing with an Israeli government who is as harmful to Israel as it is to the Palestinians. Well, I just want to say thank you. I feel in the way sorry that we're so focused on this because you have so much more to talk about. I'd love to get more into your politics and your youth and your professional life.

But I think that was also a very, very powerful testimony. And thank you very much indeed.

Thank you. Thank you.

So, Rory, I felt fellow formatory.

Yeah, I'm not quite sure why I'm giving all my views, why she's still a member of the Conservative Party, although she provided a good account of her Conservative principles and why she's not Labour. Thank you for that. For listeners who didn't understand the full context, you may or may not have picked up that my co-worker here is something of a workaholic. And so when he saw an opportunity to do a recording that ran to nearly 10 o'clock at night, he seized it, took her out to dinner and got us into the studio.

I thought she is very interesting. And I think for some listeners, some of her conversation around Islamophobia will be quite challenging and hard listening.

She's got very, very strong views. I said we'll put the speech in the newsletter.

It was filmed. It leads university and it's very, very strong speech, particularly in this context, because although she made clear when you were asking about, well, how do you think Jews and Israelis feel at the moment? She is a very empathetic person, but I think she just feels that Muslims have had it so hard for so long. It's been totally normalised. She clearly absolutely despises Brabham and what she's doing. I thought it was interesting that when you said to her, why are you still a Tory? She actually was saying, because we've got to fight back at some point. It was interesting afterwards. One of the guys who'd been on the tech team had been listening to her. He said that he was really impressed. There was no arming and aring. Very articulate, very clear in what she says. And I think she has a point about Islamophobia. I think that when you look at the history of how she was trying to get the conservative party to take it seriously and it didn't.

And in the speech, she talked a lot about the stalling on the inquiry, then getting rid of any sense of independence around it. And it's a difficult argument to put in the current context because there's so much focus on anti-Semitism. I think that the issue became very tightened for her after 9-11, because I think it's that moment that she began to feel that Muslims were being increasingly characterised as terrorists. And this was, I think, the point that she was trying to make about Tony Blair and the organisations which New Labour engaged with, which is people who were branded moderate Muslims, were not actually represented for the full community. She's trying to say that I think that there is a very rich, mainstream, full Muslim tradition, which is neither represented by the terrorist, nor by the people who say the kind of things the governments want to hear.

Yeah. And I think that's a fair point. And I think it was a bit harsh on my boss, because I think the context of 9-11 did change a lot of these debates.

But where I think she's absolutely got a point is that a lot of the Muslim community have kind of just felt like they have to disengage. It's not even that they want to disengage, but they feel they have to disengage because they're always having to get through so much undergrowth in the debate before they can even be heard. But of course, the danger of that is it does lend itself then to the more extremist voices to be the ones that are heard.

And again, speaking to Jewish friends over the weekend who were so horrified by these demonstrations, as she says, I mean, it included groups like Izby Tahrir who are real extremists associated with real horrors around the world. But there is also that sense, and I don't know whether it's something that's morally relevant, but it's definitely something that's psychologically relevant, which is that the Jewish community feels they're a very, very small community. And the Muslim community in Britain is a much larger community, and they therefore feel that there's a particular type of threat that they're experiencing by seeing large crowds of people saying death to the Jews. A Jewish friend of mine made a really interesting observation, which was that when you see pro-Palestinian rallies and marches, you see people of all generations and all walks of life. And she said that when you go to an event that is about speaking up for Jewish people, you tend mainly to see Jews. And they do feel, I think, quite beleaguered and isolated on that. I think on the marches, though, we should be careful, because several members of my family who went on both of the Palestinian marches who said, actually, that the media coverage bore no relation to their experience of it at all.

So the first one, I think you saw the mail on Sunday, I think it was, when they spotted two people with hang gliders on their back. And that became representative of the whole thing.

And this week, the big thing became about people shouting Jihad and why weren't they arrested and so forth. And they were just saying it just didn't feel like that as people just...

But of course, presumably, if you're feeling very frightened and troubled, it's the media that you're seeing. I mean, it's not as though the Jewish community is on those marches. What they're seeing is the media reporting. And you can see why people feel very, very frightened.

It's a very odd feeling because these are people that I've known all my life and who I don't think at any stage that I've ever known have felt so troubled and frightened about being in Britain, so under threat. No, listen, there's no doubt there is an existential feeling attached to both sides at the moment, which is what's driving the pain and the hurt. But equally, let's be absolutely frank about it, we have large parts of the media who want to take it to these streams, because that's what they think is going to make people more interested in the

story. In the story. Yeah. So we saw her at a very, very dark moment. But I think we forget that she was an amazing sort of symbol of David Cameron's government. She was very proud to be a conservative, as you heard, happy to speak about why being a Muslim and a conservative connected, which was incredibly important, as you can imagine, for David Cameron's government. She was flamboyantly charming. She wore very striking clothes. She was made chairman of the Conservative

Party, which was, again, quite a radical thing to do, because the Conservative Party members are generally older, more right-wing than the general population. Chairman. What is this woman chairman thing? I think it was so-called chairman. It still is. It's so-called chairman. And I really warmed her when I first met her. And of course, she has become very unpopular with bits of the Conservative right. But I also really like the fact that she's sticking with the Conservative bit, sitting in there saying, I believe in the Conservative Party, I'm fighting for it, and I'm not letting you guys have it. Well, I spent a lot of time with her last year doing that Channel 4 program, and she's a very, very empathetic, kind, very kind woman, actually. And I think has got a handle on what's happening inside the Conservative Party. And I think you're right. It's good that people like that are sticking in, because when she listed the cabinet that she sat with, it's very different to what we've got now. Although there's one common link, Michael Gove. It's the greatest survivor. Michael Gove, who keeps saying he will come on the podcast, but we never quite managed to pin him down on that date. There we are. Michael, you're always welcome, so that we can challenge some of your views and actions. Very good. Well, thank you. Thank you for making that happen. See you soon.