

So, welcome to another episode of The Rest is Politics Leading and I'm absolutely delighted to be in Dublin and I'm very happy to be sitting opposite somebody that I've known for over a quarter of a century now and who was fundamental to the delivery of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement coming up to the 25th anniversary. Welcome, Bertie, your own.

Thank you very much, Alistair. It's an honour to be on your programme.

I've got to tell you, Bertie, the first thing I'm going to tell our listeners is the fact that Bertie is not your real name. You're like a kind of Irish Boris Johnson, Alexander Boris de Pfeffel. Now come on, tell our listeners what your real name is.

Well, Bartolomew is the real name, but I think my grandfather was a Bartolomew and I think my great grandfather was a Bartolomew, but none of them were ever known as Bartolomew.

I don't think I would ever call that. It was Bertie from the time I was born, I think.

And tell us a little bit about your childhood and about your parents. Your parents were pretty political, weren't they?

Yeah, they weren't in the political party, but my father was an active member of the IRA. The old IRA, as I said, back in the 20s.

And what did that mean, being an active member of the IRA back then?

Well, he would have been in, he was in Cork, and my father and mother were both in Cork, so he would have been in the War of Independence and he was too young in 1916, but in the War of Independence he was active and he was jailed, he was in three or four jails during his time, so he was out in active service, he was out with his gun.

Were you killed, people?

He rarely, rarely spoke about it. I don't know, but the unit he was involved with were in the, they were in Cork, so it was the heat of the battle against the Tans. My mother and father used to call it the Tan War, and they would have been certainly in the thick of it, and my mother, my mother was a staunch, staunch Republican. She, they lived in the mountains in a very rural place, and they were forever being raided, and the Tans came and her father had very bad arthritis, arthritic, he was in bed and they dragged them out of the bed looking for information, because where they lived was into the forest, just on the edge of the forest, so what happened, the IRA used to go out that way and hide in the forest, and of course nobody could catch them then, so he didn't give the information, so they threw them over the ditch, and they left them for dead, thankfully he didn't die, enough of problems, but what they did is they went out and they had a whole lot of geese ready for Christmas, at that time people, the turkeys of geese for Christmas, so the soldiers went out and shot all the geese, which was their livelihood, so I can tell you my mother never forgave them.

And just tell us about the Tans though, who and what were they?

The Black and Tans, you know, what happened was they were brought over from England, we were all brought up believing they were all taken out of jail and brought over, but I think there were people who were probably in trouble in England, brought over to Lincoln and give back up to the military.

And you felt that they were, as it were, your parents felt, and presumably you felt the same, that they were essentially like an occupying force?

Totally, I mean, if you take where, you know, my father's end would have been a bit of a richer, better land than Corkdom, my mother's place, and they were seen totally as an occupied

force coming into the most ruralist places in the country, and I mean, they did terrible things, I mean, they burned places out and they killed people, and they saw us, they were back up to the army, but you know, obviously the native saw them as totally the opposite. And were you ever tempted to go down the IRA route?

Not really, like my father moved on from, he would have always been, you know, a united Irelander, meaning he never changed his attitude and I always would have wanted to see a united Ireland, but certainly he went to Devalere route, and when Devalere went into, you know, set up Feenefall, went to Peaceful Road, my father supported that, but he would have been very much against partition, very much against the land borders, we call it today, and he would have been quite extreme in his views, but never supported the sectarian attacks on civilians and bombings and that, he couldn't understand that, people of that generation, he totally understood going into the fields and the mountains and having the gun battles and fighting it out, putting bombs in shops and cafes, he just found, he...

And what about taking out British soldiers?

If it was out in the middle of the frontier, straightforward battle, you know, IRA guys against things, that was the way he would have fought in his day, so you know, that was the view they would have had, but civilian targets or, you know, shooting soldiers and lodgings or in beds or that, that wasn't war in their views.

And you mentioned Feenefall there, just for listeners that aren't rooted in Irish politics, just give us a sense of what the main party is, what's the difference, really, between Feenefall and Feenegal?

Because you're not like a left-right spectrum.

No, it's not left-right at all.

What happened was, if you go to the 1918 election, Sinn Fein were the party, Michael Collins and Devalier and Arthur Griffith and all these people were all in Sinn Fein fighting for Irish independence.

The Civil War, which are not before the Civil War of Independence, which my father was among, they were all together, you know, fighting the British.

And then there was the 1921, there was the truce and the agreement.

And then what happened?

They divided on the terms of the agreement in 1921.

And what was the basic difference between them?

The basic difference was really over-the-oat, you know, it wasn't actually on partition, which most people make the mistake, it was actually the oath of allegiance, which they should have been able to resolve, you know, but they couldn't resolve it.

And how would you define the difference today?

Well, now, for years and years it came on, you know, what side your parents were in the Civil War.

That was the difference.

And that continued on because economic policies were probably very similar.

Social policies would have been different because Finnaval tended to be small farmers, small businessmen, you know, blue-collar workers, as you described, Finnageal were the legal class, the medical class, the professional class.

Now that blowed through the decades, but it lingered on like Finnaval supported in my

time, you know, it would have been big working class support.

If you were British, if you were in the British system, would you be Labour?

Labour, yeah, no questionably Labour.

I mean, Finnaval supporters would be Democrats in America, Labour in Britain, you know, so that was the same.

Would most Finnageal people be Tories?

Most Finnageal people, I think probably nowadays, in the old days, it would have been far likely to be Tories because the legal class and the medical classes, nowadays I'd say probably a lot of them would be Labour.

Right.

It's amazing, but you find a lot of them when they go to America and, you know, they make money, they tend to end up being Republicans, Finnagealers managed to go.

So there is that DNA distinction.

It's only fair to say, but in recent times, and particularly probably in the last 25 years since they go, I think it's probably harder to see the differences between Finnaval and Finnageal.

Do you think there's been a benefit to Sinn Fein as a political force?

Massively.

Right.

Finnaval have lost a lot of that vote.

They've lost two pockets of vote.

They've lost the Republican vote, quite a lot of it, and people who wouldn't go near Sinn Fein once there was trouble, but now that there's peace, they vote for them.

And then the more working class, you know, people, I mean, Finnaval traditionally would have been the party that had huge activists, you know, people out.

But Sean Mass, one of the former T6s said, you know, that the real Labour Party in Ireland was Finnaval, you know, and that was having to go with the Labour Party in Ireland, rather than...

Yeah, yeah.

But, you know, even today, you know, the president who won the biggest unions here is a member of Finnaval in my local area.

So, I mean, there still is that...

That link.

That link.

Yeah.

And just give us a sense of how much Ireland has changed in your lifetime.

It's a very, very different country.

It's a totally different place.

Even if you go back, I mean, I'm 71 now, but even if you go back, say, you know, when my first real campaign working, you know, I helped out as a kid because a school teacher in 61 elections stood, so I was out putting up posters and climbing trees and things like that.

65, I was beginning to give out leaflets, and 69, I was doing my exams, so I did a bit.

But in the first real campaign that I took part in, it was to join the EEC, European

Economic Unit, and we were a community.

So we were...

That was my first campaign.

But if you go back 50 years, you know, that time, the industries in my area, just take my area in Droncoundra, it was a button factory that implied a lot of people, mainly women, but a lot of people were very proud to have it there.

There was a plastic, like, max that you'd wear at a football game.

There was a max factory that implied a lot of people, and lemon sweets, which implied hundreds of people.

Like, if those jobs are all gone, now, all those people in those kind of things are working in IT, you know, they're working in financial services, you know, I was in Google, it was just in too far from me last weekend, a place called Barrow Street, you know, the five different buildings there, about 8,000 workers, and now 8,000 workers maybe in the UK style doesn't sound a lot, but in Ireland, 8,000 is enormous, enormous.

You need to put the multiplier on, you know, you take a population of 5 million, so 8,000.

And these young people are all good jobs, and, you know, even though there's a few redundancies, it's very small now, and, you know, we have 19 of the top pharmacy companies.

We've practically every, you know, TikTok has just made new announcements have taken on a huge amount of more, you know, Microsoft, all the tech companies are here.

What about the role of the church in Irish life and society?

It's totally changed, totally changed.

Your mother was very...

Yeah, my parents would have been, you know, very strong Catholics.

Mass everyday?

My mother, my father would go on Sundays, and you know, I'd still be a practising Catholic, but I mean, my mother was a, could be a tolerant person as well, I mean, she, funny enough, the role that I was, the avenue, the small avenue that I was born into and still live quite near to it, it had a Protestant church, a Protestant graveyard, rector's house, a Protestant school, because when it was built back in 1860 or something like that, it was a Nordram Presbyterian group that had built the place.

So it had very strong, you know, church of Ireland tradition in the area.

So a lot of my mother and father's friends would have been, you know, of Protestants and a lot of the people that we would get messages for on the road were old people that, you know, were Protestants.

So my father very much believed in that, you know, Republicanism tone, the thing of Catholic Protestant and the center, and some of his best friends in Cork when he was in the Republican movement were also Protestants, J goes and gashes.

So the idea of sectarianism of the North didn't rub with him because it was a different Republicanism.

And that, you know, that is the distinction, I think, to this day in a way with, you know, you can't argue that you're a true Republican and have been out killing your Protestant neighbor.

I mean, that was not the definition of Republicanism, you know.

And when did you know in yourself that you would end up being a politician yourself?

I probably...

You loved campaign, didn't you?

Yeah, I loved campaigning.

I loved campaigning and probably like a lot of politicians who don't like elections and like campaigning.

I enjoy campaigning and, you know, when you're out there, you build up a big, big crew and we were in an area which was, you know, middle class, I suppose, but not upper middle class, certainly lower middle classes.

And, you know, I had built up, I ran, I was elected to parliament in 25 years of age.

I'd already been in the party a long time and we'd built up a big support base, young support base at the time.

And your parents weren't disappointed that you chose that route rather than...

No, no, no, they weren't quite, I think they were quite happy that I ran.

Once I was running for Fina Fall, if I had ran for Fina Gale, I probably wouldn't have been thrown out.

Yeah, I think I can see that.

And as a, so you're very, very young as an elected politician, pretty quickly building a reputation for yourself.

And I guess if we go into Charlie Hockey, one of the most famous Irish t-shirts, and he was the guy that I got to know a bit when I was a journalist because he was kind of up against Maggie Thatcher the whole time and I really mean up against her as well.

But how would you describe him in your life, a hero, a mentor, what?

Yeah, he was a hero for us, you know, growing up.

I mean, he was my local TD for a while and then constituency boundaries.

We have this awful thing of constituency boundaries change you.

And you know, he was kind of a hero.

I remember I probably met him first and I was about 10.

After an election, we had a children's party and in those days, we didn't have many parties.

We didn't have parties for your birthday or maybe Christmas, but it was very little money around those days.

But he came down to the party and had given a whole lot of sweets for the party.

So we were all kids, but we'd been out doing leaflets.

Could he get arrested for that today?

Yeah, you probably would, you probably.

So I would have grown up being a strong supporter of him and of course when the troubles in the North happened, we tended to take very much of his side of things.

And he once said of you that of all the young politicians rising, and this was a praise from him, you were the most skillful, the most devious, the most cunning.

Yeah.

Is that fair assessment?

We really appreciate him saying that.

Of course, that quote came from a certain circumstances of negotiations that I was involved in with another political party where it looked as if it was impossible to get an agreement.

We got an agreement.

So that is where you did a lot of training for your Good Friday Agreement days.

Yeah.

And indeed, well, most of my negotiations there were almost with trade unions and employers, with Ibeck and Congress of Trade Unions and others.

So that's where I learned to trade.

I should jump in and say that Bertie's just won a bet because we're actually in the building of Ibeck and we were challenged to get a mention of Ibeck and he's just done it.

That's one little to you.

Senator Charlie McCreevy, he said of you, I know 25% of Bertie Herne and that's 24 more than anyone else.

So there's this sort of image developing of you as a bit of an enigma and the people not quite sure how to work you out, which I've never really understood.

I've always seen you as being pretty transparent, but where did that reputation come from?

I think it came from negotiations that I was involved in because I was involved all the time in political party negotiations, internally and with other parties, formation of governments. And from very earliest age, Charlie High, Albert Reynolds, had me involved in fairly senior negotiations.

And I never did it purposely, but I think just your sense of things, I wouldn't show my hand until I had to show my hand.

And even some of the guys negotiate with me wouldn't be quite sure which way they were being led, but so I think that's where you get the reputation from that.

And when you were growing up, did you, or when you even when you first became a politician, did you always feel that you might get to the top?

No, not really.

I mean, my intention, my interest in it and growing up, it was sport.

I had to go with every sport, probably master and all that was a problem, but I would have had everything.

My sisters played tennis.

I played tennis.

My father loved handball and hurling.

And my father came from hurling in the cork, was all hurling.

He taught the best game.

The world was hurling.

He's probably right in that.

My mother was football, gaily football.

I grew up in an area where soccer was very strong.

League of Ireland, we had our own League of Ireland team, John Conrad, and it was fortunately gone now.

I played a lot of school by football.

I was probably a far better soccer player than I was gaily player, but I played both up until I was 35.

My older brother was involved in the athletics in running and all his life still involved in the national stadium, Morton Stadium.

So I was involved.

I used to do a lot of cross-country running.

So did you become a politician because you had failed at sport?

I came politician when I ran for so many people from sport, knew me, and I got elected.

I don't think it was because the banner that I had in my name, I had been involved in so many sporting organisations in my area, I think they all knew me.

You've always been seen as a kind of man of the people.

And you're one of those guys who, I remember your famous anorak that people were always telling you, get rid of that bloody anorak and get yourself some proper clothes and what have you.

And you're always kind of in and out your local pub.

Is that you or was that a bit of image going on?

No, no, that was me.

I mean, I was very much, I mean, I was brought up in an area where, like, after training you went to the bar, you know, and so all the guys, I know all the people, most of the people came with me, worked with me from a very young age, were people I knew, you know, true sport and organisations who would have had the same politics and many of them wouldn't have had but joined up to the crew.

So that was very much our life.

I mean, I could never understand, I mean, I was a bit of a security nightmare from my security guys because, you know, they say, well, you never go to the same place.

You should go to different places and you shouldn't do this and I did all that.

I did the opposite and that's the way it was.

And I couldn't have functioned, I mean, my view of, you know, hanging around Parliament bars and painting the neck and, you know, same old stuff, same old story.

So I go back to my, to my local, to my local area, go into places that were considered not to be the places to go.

What did you learn from Charlie Hockey as T-shirt, when you became T-shirt yourself?

I think he was very, Charlie was very bright, extraordinarily bright.

His parents hadn't got a lot of money I don't know, his father had been ill all his life but he got first place in his chartered account and see, you know, he got through all his educational system on scholarships and he was looked down on because of that.

Now afterwards he got into all kind of troubles but he ended up in a huge house and things but I think a lot of it came from that, you know, from his back well.

But what I learned from him, he was extraordinarily driven and he was efficient and he'd meet everybody, meet every group, now he could be quite abrupt, you know, you could go into a meeting with him and he'd barely say hello, you know, I'd be the opposite, maybe too short or a phone call, he'd ring when I was Chief Whip, you get a phone call and he said, organize that something, you know, he wouldn't say good morning, good evening, good night, what happened at a football game yesterday so it would be very much his style, I wouldn't have, but he was very efficient, he went in with every meeting known, what was the objective for what was I doing here, you know, was this all a little nonsense or so you learned that efficiency of using your day, you know, getting out there and meeting people so he was very good from that point of view.

Remember when your book came out and I just looked at the day, it was 2009, I can't believe

that.

Long ago.

And I interviewed you at the Cheltenham festival and I read the book and I was going to look at it again yesterday on the flight over and there's a small number of people, you come over as a very nice guy and you get on with everybody and what have you, there's a small number of people and things about whom you are absolutely vicious and they're a really interesting collection, Norman Lamont, former British Chancellor, the German Bundesbank, Oliver Cromwell and Dana, you see her, what is going on there?

It's a bit of a cross and raise, but I remember Lamont and the collapse of the whole E.R.M. and the exchange rate mechanism back in 1992 and 1993.

And he just didn't give a damn about Ireland.

No, no, and the problems that caused those currency problems, we were far weaker country at that stage, we were on the narrow band of E.R.M., we were trying to tie in with, you know, tie ourselves to the German market or export market and overnight bank rates after that collapsing were here 100% and it really, really caused us endless, endless problems and we didn't have big resources to fight.

And the Bundesbank didn't help?

The Bundesbank did nothing to help us in those days, I mean we were pushed out, we ultimately in January 1993 had to devalue.

Now we got, the only good thing was, and I give the Bundesbank the credit from Brussels, we did get help in so far as we got a decent evaluation, which meant that we only devalued once for a lot of the other countries that time had to devalue two or three times, which would have crucified us.

But it drove, the reason I was so annoyed with them, it drove them on employment sky-high. You must have been happy when Lamont said unemployment was a price worth paying then. Yeah, well I can tell you.

Now, Cromwell, I kind of understand, but there's a bit of time when you're recalling Robin Cook showing you around his office and there's a painting of Cromwell and you get absolutely venomous and you say, this murdering bastard, was he dead on the wall?

He asked me what did I think of Cromwell, of course he was winding me up and I said a murdering bastard and I remembered the civil service there, you all got under the table. But he also said in his memoir that I then refused to stay in the room, that wasn't true.

That wasn't true.

And what about Donna?

What did Donna do to defend you?

Well, Donna was some of the battles.

We tried to make some of the changes.

I was trying to deal with the abortion issue and we were trying to get peace between the Christian churches and the politicians and we'd almost got so.

But Dana took up, who I got on with very well, but she took up an extreme position that abortion couldn't happen at all in any circumstances.

And that defeated the referendum, so Dana was left to another generation to deal with.

Now you mentioned Charlie Hockey getting into financial troubles and do you think that's

one of the reasons why people kept going after you?

The one thing that comes through in the book, the only time where I feel that you're really, really angry with anything was through that whole man tribunal process when they were going for you.

It was because, you know, the man tribunal was about corruption and planning and there had been quite an element of corruption planning.

Maybe it wasn't huge, but it was happening, mainly to do with land zoning in the councils. So the man tribunal, I set up easily and gave them a lot of powers and left them off to do their job.

They then later on, they did get some successes, I have to give them some credit, about some of the planning issues.

But then two developers, who I had little or nothing to do with, came into the equation and then they came after me, which was fair enough, I suppose, to see if I got any money from these guys.

They then proceeded to make me, you know, by judicial orders to go back to 1984 in every account that I had, which included a period where I had gone through a separation and chase everything for, and then I became nearly the central figure.

And you know, as they made millions, they investigated me, but anyway, it was a nine. So what was the, give us a bit of the context on the sort of corruption we're talking about that they were investigating.

Money for planning applications and zoning, that the counsellors, the value of the land you're on.

The counsellors were rezoning land, and of course, land went from agriculture prices to stuff.

Now, they didn't find one eye out for it to do with me and all of that, and neither could they because they never got a penny from these two central figures.

But of course, like a lot of these tribunals, they're set up for one thing and then they go off in another tangent.

And then they, even though, you know, I had forensic accountants put all this stuff together and everything, but they still just kept after me.

And of course, I became probably the teacher of your prime minister.

So I became probably the media.

This was a good media game.

So the media tended to go on their side.

But they also measure in your finance minister, you didn't have a bank account.

I think most people did find that bit odd.

Yeah, no, no.

Well, what happened was I had too many bank accounts, maybe I had several bank accounts, but they were all joint accounts that were in my wife's name, my name, and I wasn't using them because obviously I was going through a separation.

That's where the problem went.

We had several bank accounts.

As a result of it, what happened then, though?

You resigned from the party.

Yeah.

You've been in a foil.

Yeah.

And you've now rejoined.

I've rejoined the local area back where I'm.

What made you leave them?

What's made you rejoin them?

Well, I think probably it was becoming impossible.

It was just so divisive within the leadership of the party that they, every time they did a press conference, they were asked why I just resigned.

Some people said I might have been thrown out today if I didn't, not too sure that would have happened.

I mean, if I think if I had went and defended myself, God knows what would have happened. I didn't do better than that.

I said, there's no point in putting more hassle on myself.

And the reason I continued while all the 10 years I was out, I continued to help the party locally, work with the party.

We did all the commemorations for 1916 in the party, so I was involved.

So there's no big deal and we rejoined in my old buddies and I've met them every month for the last 10 years.

And this talk that it's about lining yourself up for a picture of the president.

Yeah.

I mean, I never brought that into it at all.

And it's just a media and not only the media, I suppose, in public opinion, said, oh, this is a big grand plan.

Now, I said that issue doesn't arise, it might arise in a few years time and then I'll have to answer the question whether any interest or not.

So you wouldn't rule it out?

I don't rule it out, but neither, I ruled it this out that I haven't done any thinking about it, whatever.

I haven't talked to my kids about it, I haven't talked to my best friends about it.

We haven't had a meeting of a lot of my old campaign team are dead, so I can't have a meeting with them.

And I've had literally no discussion.

There was a few of them there at the launch last night of your podcast.

I should tell our listeners that we have a rival podcaster in the studio because you've launched this rather splendid, I have to say, I shouldn't really be plugging someone else's podcast in this way, but you've done this podcast series, Nine Hours, as I remember it, talking about what happened in the making of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement.

You talked to Clinton and George Mitchell and Tony Blair and lots of other people.

And I just wondered whether you felt the, or whether one of the parts of the reasoning behind that is that you worried that the whole story is being forgotten somewhat and maybe taken for granted.

Yeah, I think, you know, there's no, you were there and I was there, but unfortunately

a lot of the people that you and I got on well with and didn't get on well with over the period.

Unfortunately, we're becoming a bit of a dying breed and a very dull story.

We've lost a lot.

Mo Mo Lom.

Mo Mo Lom.

Alan McGinnis.

Yeah.

David Irvin.

Yeah.

Seamus Malin.

David Trimble.

John Hume.

John Hume.

John Hume.

Yeah.

A lot of other people, you know, Albert Reynolds is gone.

So I decided what we should try and do while the rest of us were alive to get, to interview them, you know, long interviews, which we're putting out the long interview as well, because mainly for history, for historians and it's now, it's now on the curriculum for the leave and search, which is the, you know, the 18 year olds here at 18, 19 year olds.

On the curriculum in Ireland.

In Ireland.

So they weren't around, they weren't born and a lot of their parents would have been young at that time.

So I think what I've tried to do is to get everybody involved and Tony kindly, you know, gave me a long interview and Bill and George Mitchell and, you know, the other key people across all the parties of what, where they were at at that time, you know, what the thinking was within their political movements and, you know, the compromises that were made.

So it's mainly, I think people like you and I who have been involved throughout, we remember most of it, but there's a whole generation that just don't know.

They know about the Good Friday women because they've been listening to Brexit every day for the last 15 years.

So they know that it's there and it's agreement and it was meant to bring peace and, you know, it's meant to help the political progress, but they don't understand how it was all put together.

And these are people who by and large don't know much about the troubles as, as, as all of us did.

Well, we'll take a short break and then we'll come back and educate people about the Good Friday agreement.

So welcome back to Leading with me, Alistair Campbell, talking to the former Irish t-shirt Bertie Hearn about the pretty momentous times of Easter, 1998.

When you and Tony arrived in Belfast at the start of what led to the Good Friday agreement, did you think something like that might emerge?

If you recall, Alistair, Tony and I had been working at this since our opposition days. And, you know, we said we'd give it one big push, but I think it's that, you know, we started really the negotiation September 97.

But as we drifted into 1998, you know, it wasn't looking good.

We would have the meetings in London in January and there were people killed in the North and we had to put one party out, the UDP.

And then there were more people killed and we had to put Sinn Féin out because the IRA were seen to have responsibility for that.

And then we came up to March, we're going to America and that was a tricky enough period of Bill Clinton was being very helpful and encouraged us to go with it.

And then, you know, the chief coordinator of it all, George Mitchell, he said, listen, I'm not going to give this three more weeks, so it was 17th of March or around 17th of March, he told all the parties, you know, another three weeks and I'm out of here.

So all of a sudden, all the talking we had done and all the issues we had done and, you know, just to remind people, we're dealing with that release of thousands of prisoners, how we're going to handle arms, huge amount of arms, including the IRAs, Libyan arms, you know, how we were going to reform the RUC into a new police force, how we were going to be in legislation, demilitarized in order to watch towers and all the security.

There was a lot to do.

There was a lot to do.

So all of a sudden in three weeks, we said, well, we've done a lot of talking about these issues, now can we kick them together?

And then, it's actually a question that I think we could do all that in the last few weeks and no, I didn't think we could knock them together in three weeks.

And then in the middle of that period itself, you had the additional pressure of your mom dying.

Yeah.

And I think I've got to be honest, that was when I grew from sort of liking you to have a kind of respect that was beyond anything because of the way you handle that.

I think most of us would have just, I don't know, you went off, you dealt with your mother, you came back, you went back to the funeral.

And at the same time, I should say, as I recorded in my account of the peace process, you were taking even during that period quite a lot of abuse, quite a lot of attack, but you just sort of kept going.

Yeah.

And listen, we had put so much into it for a good few years before it, and particularly that last 10 months.

And I think the way I looked at it, Alistair, was that if we didn't complete that and the amount of effort that Tony Blair put in, I was conscious, Ireland is a very important country to us, but we're not a huge country.

And I knew you could not get a British Prime Minister to continue on, to be at this every day and meeting all kind of strange people and bringing them into your number 10 and you know, it couldn't go on, it couldn't go on.

So I was conscious that if this didn't work, it was probably gone for a decade and maybe

more.

And, you know, seeing what I've seen now, I think it would have been gone for more.

Do you think it could have been done, if it were not for the fact that both you and he had recently been elected and had a lot of political capital in the bank?

I think we had the political capital in the bank and then both of us were prepared to put in, you know, the time and the effort.

And on the basis that it might have worked, because kind of both of us were being told, I wonder, is this thing impossible?

Remember, you know, the last agreement had been 1921 and that didn't go very well.

So like there was no precedent of success.

There had been plenty of presences of failure and I always say, I don't take anything from the people who tried in 1974 with Sunningdale or they tried very hard, 95, but they failed.

So what Tony and I were trying to do was to have a comprehensive, inclusive process with two governments, 10 parties representing unionists, lilas, republicans and nationals, which had never been done before.

And probably, and it's not for me to say, but by and large, considered by UN people and others around the world, probably one of the few that has worked and that was a tall order.

Of the main characters involved, as you say, quite a few are dead, but just give me a very briefly, if we run through some of them, your assessment of some of the main people.

David Trimble.

David Trimble was difficult and he was a difficult person, a complex person, but ultimately deserved as Nobel Peace Prize because at least three times in the process when we needed somebody to stand up, he did it, against horrendous odds in his own party, not to mind in the wider public.

John Hume.

John Hume, one believe, same message from 1968, tree-strand approach, solved the problems in the north, north, south, east, west, failure of sweat, natural blood, never changed, always optimistic.

Adam McGinnis.

Adam McGinnis, Jerry was a hardball, Martin, he always knew where you were.

If Martin said something, you tended to say, well, that's what he meant, that's what will happen.

But ultimately brave and Martin probably was on the hit list of people who were against him more than most and people sometimes forget that.

And when he and Ian Paisley ended up as the Chuckle Brothers, I always saw that as one of the defining moments, really.

Yeah, I mean, the sad thing about that is that probably that Ian, if he had been a bit better health and been younger and had been around for a bit longer, he had great people like Peter Robinson behind him, and he continued on that relationship.

We were lucky enough on that, but losing Martin was a huge loss, I mean, Martin's health and that went down rapidly in only a matter of three or four months.

So we lost, and Davey Irvine as well, Brian Hemmichur, like James Mannen.

They were...

Mo.

..Jever Giants, and Mo went into the prisons when the tide was against us.

I know, we weren't happy that day, and then it worked.

Well, everyone was worried about us, I mean, no good saying it wasn't, but it was one of those risks that we're talking, you know, Mo was as tough as leather, but she took the risk.

But if you take together, and I think the reason, if you look at that group, we were all used of listening to the troubles, you know, the thousands of people who had died, tens of thousands of people who were injured, the huge amount of bombs, it was horrific what was going on.

And I think we all kind of said, well, then you have to stretch yourself to try and find a solution.

Nowadays, people, you know, there's been another incident here and there, terrible incidents, we all condemned those, and everyone agrees now to condemn those.

But in those days it wasn't so easy, and I think it was the fact that that group of people that you've mentioned, those that are dead and those that are alive, were all prepared to knuckle down together.

And both Clinton and Mitchell still with us, George Mitchell, the senator who was chairing the whole thing, and Clinton played an important role at various points, and you spoke to both of them.

So how would you assess their contribution?

Yeah, well, Clinton was very upset when George Mitchell decided to leave Capitol Hill, and George had a young wife and a young child, and he wanted to get on and make some money, I think, to have to be in politics all his life, so he's joined up a lot of boards.

But he did say to Bill, if you ever need me for something, give me a call, I hope you never would.

So Bill said, well, listen, we need to go over and help those Irish for a few months.

And a few years later, the poor man wasn't home.

Still here.

Yeah, I think he went across the Atlantic a hundred times during the remaining number of years, but he was terrific.

He took dogs abuse at the start.

I think you'd learned so much from him of, you know, the way you get people in life, they say, oh, you have to be tough, and you have to be aggressive, and you don't get anywhere if you don't go in and do this, that, and you're right.

He was the opposite.

Like, he had the patience of Joe.

He listened to everybody, didn't agree with any of them, I think, but he had the ability to just handle that, and he was an extraordinary, extraordinary good guy.

And he articulates, I think, the whole thing so well.

And he had the support at the present of the free world, and that ultimately gave him that command and position.

Like you couldn't turn around and not see his sincerity, and at the same time understand that if you want to keep the present of the United States with us, which we did, thankfully,

and you know, as you recall, we used him extensively in those last few days.

And personal relationships in politics, do you think it could have happened in the way that it did if you hadn't had the sort of gelling that went on between you and Tony and Tony and Clinton and you and Clinton, and there was a sort of gelling there that worked.

Do you think these relationships mean something?

It wouldn't have happened.

If this was left to the process and to the system, and even all our good people that we had with us, and they were all great people that we had with us, it wouldn't have happened. I mean, at the end of the day, it was that we worked together normally in that kind of negotiations.

Tony and I should have been adversarial, you know, we should have been fighting our causes and lines.

And that's what always goes on all over the world.

And I've been involved with a few processes since and different places.

And you see why they don't work very quickly.

No, we were lucky that we got on well together.

And, you know, can I quickly add that that relationship wasn't just 98, I mean, Tony and I had to live with this till 207, till we really got the institutions up and running.

And it was that permanent meeting, you know, meeting European meetings, several European meetings, you know, informal ones, formal meetings, being able to go back and forward between Dublin and London, I don't know how many times, I think I definitely would hold a world record of Prime Ministers that were in number 10, nobody could get near me, I'd say.

But I mean, so that...

More days than Liz trusted, I think I was there about 50 or 60 times, not a bad record.

And where do you think we are today?

So we're meeting on a day when just being a shooting of an off duty police or an OMA, as you say, people saying all the right things, but just, you know, a worrying sign, you've got Rishi Sunak trying to get some sort of deal over the line in relation to something that will replace Johnson's mess, and maybe just a feeling that, you know, we're going to have to normalise the idea that these institutions in Northern Ireland aren't up and running, they've been down and not running, more than they've been up and running.

So just give me your rough take on where you see things now, and whether you're optimistic, I guess.

Yeah, I am optimistic, but if you ask me, am I very optimistic now, but I do think this is doable.

And we have a short window of opportunities, you know, don't ask me what that short means, but it's not months, that's sure, I think we probably have a few weeks, but no more than that.

And again, your face with...

And what happens if?

If that doesn't work, I think it's gone again for a considerable period of time.

And that means the institutions are down, the direct rule?

Institutions are down, and I fear, I hate saying this, but I fear that the European Union will say we'll come back after the next election in the UK and maybe the next election in Ireland, you know, so we're gone for a period.

That's why I'm optimistic, because I just don't want that to happen.

But at the same time, we desperately need the institutions up in me, Northern Ireland has a whole lot of difficulties, a whole lot of problems, and it desperately needs to have people running the place day by day, even if it's not perfect.

You and I were at dinner last night with Ibeck and Deirdre Heenan, academic.

And Eminence academic from the North, and she said, she got very emotional and she says to me, very, very powerful, I thought.

She said that through all this talk now of the DUP this and the DUP that, we in the North are basically collateral damage.

How much do you think this is about, has been about the Tory party, the current problems?

And also, I don't remember anybody back in 1998 ever suggesting that maybe one of the factors we had to think about going forward was that would the United Kingdom leave the European Union?

How much of the problems we've got now, do you think, are the direct consequence of that?

Yeah, well, you're right, nobody ever did.

I don't think anyone even dreamt it, not to mind, say it.

So you can blame Brexit on everything, but it's certainly destabilising for the last six, seven years.

There's no doubt about that.

We all tried collectively here, former leaders, present leaders, tried to make those points in the year before the Cameron referendum, and nobody really listens.

Anyway, we collectively failed to get that through into the equation, but all those fears have come true, and it's really been difficult for the last few years.

Now, we can blame Brexit because different things brought down the institutions, but the momentum that we had gained over the years and businesses doing better, more exchanges between North and South, East-West relationships going well, Irish officials, British officials working together, and then it all stops.

The one that I think really was the horror show for me, that people sometimes say, were the institutions good enough in the good, by the way, when it was what you designed good enough?

And I said, well, they were perfectly well, but what do you do when we couldn't get a British minister even to turn up to an East-West meeting for a decade?

And I don't be criticising anyone, but I mean, it took a huge effort even to get a British minister next to go to that black bloke before Christmas because I think he got it or at least somebody got it.

He was like the first in 10 years.

First since Gordon Brown.

And so somebody says, well, were the institutions not up to it?

Well, if he couldn't even get the people to the meetings, and by the way, I didn't expect a British prime minister to be turned up every month, if he turned up once a year, it would have been enough.

But not once a decade, and then an awful lot of hours.

So that has been hugely negative, and then all the arguments, like we talked, you and I talked, we're finished with the border, land border, and sea border, and Europe had got rid of borders.

There was no borders.

We would not have been talking about the sea border or the land border, except for Brexit.

I mean, and what has created all the difficulties?

The land border, the sea border.

So I'm afraid that end of it, nobody can argue that it wasn't Brexit.

And then what does that start?

The argument about Irishness and Britishness, and what do we try and solve in a good fight agreement that you could be Irish and British in most?

So I'm afraid any fair commentator has to say that the killer blow towards this last seven or eight years has been Brexit.

Where do you think we are on the possibility of what you like to call a New Ireland, and most commonly described as a United Ireland?

Yeah, I think.

Do you still want a United Ireland?

Yeah, but I rather call it a New Ireland, because I think the idea United Ireland is linked to my dad's time, you know, where it was, they get out and we take over, you know, and that's the last thing you want now.

I mean, the fear sometimes of unionist people is that Sinn Féin will come back and do what they did on them, and that's all stuff that we need to consign to be in, not to mind history.

So in favour of the work going on, looking at it and examining it, having Erdogan Bardipoles would be a disaster, and it won't happen.

I think really what we want to see is a sustained period of the institutions working, and we have to be conscious that the promise to Republicans at the time was that there would be from time to time a Bardipole, but I'm afraid time to time has to mean when you have the institutions up and running.

What happens if, I mean, it's really not impossible, Sinn Féin won the election in the north, and it's looking likely that that's going to happen in the Republic as well, and Sinn Féin presumably will have to promise a Bardipole as part of the referendum.

Yeah, I think they will promise a Bardipole, and there's nothing wrong with that, but they will equally have to say that the preparatory work has to be complete, and then when people understand what they're voting for.

The problem that we've learned from REXIS and the problem we've learned from the Scottish referendum is that if you haven't got your preparatory work done, you should save your money and not have a poll, and our position is probably even more complicated because we're dealing with 102 years of history, so unless there's a clear question put to the people with the backup arrangements, like if you were to have a Bardipole, you wouldn't pass it in the south because people would say, well, how's that going to work?

Forget about the money.

So you think you're telling me that the Irish would maybe ask the questions that the British didn't necessarily ask in the way in which they did on the Brexit?

I think, you see, the problem with Brexit was that nobody had worked out what it actually meant.

I remember in the referendum was what, June 23, 2016, remember that day?

But I remember in 2017, when Theresa May went set out to terms, it was January 2017, she set out to terms for Brexit meant, and the single market I reckon was going to go, she was going to say single market would be it.

But when she said the customs union was out, and I recently got on to the research and all that, and I asked, would anyone find any reference that was made in anywhere, anywhere of the customs union in the campaign?

They denied it.

It would have happened.

And they came back and said, anytime it was ever raised, people said, what's that got to do with the referendum, nobody said, and then all of a sudden, that's what created, because as soon as that happened, I remember what Pascal Lamé, who was headed at WTO and head of commissioner, he had all this time said, as soon as you create a land border, wherever it is, unfortunately it happened to be in the island of Ireland, but wherever it is, you're going to have to deal with all these issues.

And he said that immediately after she made that statement, and here we are six years later, grapple with us.

I guess there is a theory, because the other great success of your time as T-shirt was you were president of the European Union, you get in the rotating presidency at the time of the biggest enlargement of the European Union, which in turn led to a lot of the problems we had with immigration within the European Union, which then led to Brexit parties.

We could make the case that it's all your fault.

But I tell you, the one thing that the UK and we did on the one day was in May 2004, we opened up the borders so people could come.

But as you know, Alistair, in Dublin today, and throughout Ireland, we now have huge multi-nationals

that have come in since then.

We were the biggest exporters of software in the world, I think probably still are, even a small country, but what's the reason for that?

It's because all of these research groups and all these companies have people from every country in the world.

You go in to say go down to Google or any of the big ones here, they're all around implying thousands of people, thousands of people.

You go in and you'll meet Indians, you'll meet Latin Americans, you'll meet people from every country and you're all working together on the projects and that's what's made us.

We all have the problem of immigrants coming from some place and trying to give them accommodation

in the UK.

That's a challenge, but the pluses on the other side of it is amazing.

In that period, we have, I think our economy has doubled in the last 10 years, but it doubled in the previous 10 years, so we couldn't have done that without the European Union and what was in it.

I could never understand.

I know that was the issue in the referendum, which you can see already now, most of the industries are looking for people and they're all making cases, they should be the exception. I think that was fairly obvious at the time, but instead of people who should have known better in my view, arguing the case why that wasn't a bad thing, they joined the bandwagon and argued the case the other way and that was the sad thing.

Well, let's not ruin a wonderful hour spent together by even mentioning the word BJ.

I think that's who you have in mind at that point, Bertie, it's been absolutely lovely talking to you, lovely spending time with you as ever and good luck with your podcast and thank you for appearing on ours.

Thank you very much and have no chance of knocking you off your number one spot, but I'll try and do okay in Ireland.

Thank you.