

## [Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / But What Can I Do? (Extract)

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Hi there, it's Rory Stewart here. I really hope you enjoy the episodes of trip, question time, and the George Osborne episode of leading. As a Friday bonus, here's an extract from Alistair's new book, which you might have heard from me, is called But What Can I Do, and which you may have heard from his and my impeccable plugging skills is being published this week. Anyway, the point about the book is we all grumble all the time and we grumble quite a lot on this podcast about all the horrible things that are going wrong, populism or authoritarianism, global economic collapse, and the rest of it. And the question that comes out of it is in the but. But what can I do? And this is Alistair's attempt to really engage with what it will take to get people, particularly young people, more engaged in politics. And it's a rather lovely combination, if I'm going to be pretentious for a second, of what Gramsci calls pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will. Anyway, if like me, you might enjoy the audio version of But What Can I Do, you'll be delighted to know that the audiobook is now available from all trusted audiobook retailers and even some that aren't very trusted.

So without further ado, please enjoy this extract of But What Can I Do, read by the famous voice of Alistair Campbell. I'm dedicating this book to the people who write to me day after day in they come, people's views, experiences, anxieties, and above all, their questions.

They come by letter, by email, to my website or in reaction to the Rest is Politics podcast that I do with formatory cabinet minister, Rory Stewart, or the newspaper I write for, The New European. They come in their droves too, amid all the bot abuse and troll insults on social media. And if I had to boil down the essence of the questions to just one, it would be this, but what can I do? Hence the title of the book. And hence the dedication to those who write to me in such numbers, for it is they who have inspired me to help them find the answer so that they just do it in whatever way they can. Because if we do not get new blood flowing into our politics, then I fear for the worst, a country already in decline could spiral further and further down. Where I'm optimistic is that amid the anger I see in all these comments and conversations, I also witness so much passion and potential that unleashed really could change things fast. Unfortunately, that potential all too often threatens to be overwhelmed by a deep sense of frustration and powerlessness. People feel powerless not just to fight for the changes they think we need, but powerless even to confront the barriers preventing them from trying. That feeling of powerlessness in turn swiftly becomes one of hopelessness, which all too often not only makes people give up the fight, but threatens their mental health too.

As human beings, we are nothing without hope. Hope that we can make a difference and so have a sense

of purpose in our lives. Hope that we can improve life for ourselves and for others we care about. The questions I receive come from people of all ages, but many are from teenagers and students. It strikes me that if a young person is getting in touch with a man in his mid-60s like me, not a politician but in the political arena, not a journalist but in the media world, with strong views I'm always prepared to defend, with lots of experience of campaigns and trying to make change happen, and lots of experience of managing poor mental health and still going, it's because they haven't yet reached the hopeless stage, but they might be heading there.

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I try my best to come up with answers, but I confess there are times when I share their sense of hopelessness. After all, I'm living in a world facing the existential threat of the climate crisis, and in a Britain, defined by austerity, then the lies and failings of Brexit, then the mayhem of Boris Johnson's morally corrupted and corrupting leadership, then the economic chaos and

incompetence unleashed by List Trust on a scale never before seen so early in a premiership, and now, with Rishi Sunak, the UK's fifth Tory Prime Minister in six not very good years. He's the second in a row who has lacked the mandate of a general election, and yet, here's ushered in a second wave of tax rises and public spending austerity that nobody voted for. As for Labour, the party I've supported all my life, it's true that they are much stronger under Keir Starmer's leadership than they were under Jeremy Corbyn's, but Labour's sustained lead is as much due to a loathing of the Tories, as it is to floating voters flocking enthusiastically to a compelling alternative.

More generally, I sometimes worry that the tide seems to be running against constitutional and democratic government, not just in the UK, but across vast swathes of the globe.

Despite its transparent failings, populism has taken a grip in countries both large, such as India, Brazil, the Philippines, and small, like Hungary, while across the Atlantic there are plenty of voters who believe that Donald Trump should get a second go at confirming his political at confirming his position as the worst and most divisive president in US history.

Almost everywhere, evidence-based politics is under threat from a politics based on gut reaction and deep-seated prejudice, distorted values, and culture wars.

As democratic values come under attack from within, it's no wonder how often and how easily and effectively dictatorships exploit democracy's weaknesses. How is it that Vladimir Putin can keep getting away with his crimes and misdemeanours after more than two decades in power? Are we

really as helpless as it seems in the face of the rise of repressive, domineering China?

And while I can and I do find hope in the passion and enthusiasm of the young,

why is it that surveys show that more and more young people

proportionately way more than the old are giving up on the very notion of democracy and supporting the idea of strong man leadership or even military rule in its stead?

It's a chilling thought that when Trump was American President, Johnson UK Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, and Xi Jinping, the hugely powerful General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, it meant that of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, only France, with Emmanuel Macron as President, had a leader who was non-populist, non-extreme, non-dictatorial. And we wonder why our major international institutions are failing to hold international support. One of the most worrying recent trends has been highlighted by the former Venezuelan politician and Executive Director of the World Bank, Moises Naim, in his brilliant book, *The Revenge of Power*. He analyses political leaders who gain power through reasonably democratic elections and then set out to dismantle the checks on executive power through what he calls the three P's, populism, polarization, and post-truth.

As they consolidate their power, he writes, they cloak their autocratic plans behind walls of secrecy, bureaucratic obfuscation, pseudo-legal subterfuge, manipulation of public opinion, and the repression of critics and adversaries. Once the mask comes off, it's too late, he says.

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I'm sure we can all recognise the likes of Putin, Trump, Modi in India, Orban in Hungary, Erdogan in Turkey, Duterte in the Philippines, Chavez and some of his successors in Venezuela, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Obrador in Mexico, Fujimori and Castillo in Peru, one from the right, one from the left, both currently in the same jail, among the three P autocrats Naim describes. For a British citizen, the shaming thing is that Boris Johnson features so large among the rogue's gallery of lying, anti-democratic, rule-of-law-defying leaders analysed by the former Venezuelan minister. But what can I do? It's the butt that signals the sense of powerlessness. So many people seem to be saying, I really care, I want to make a difference,

I just don't know how to do it. There is so much fear and anger about the state we are in, yet whenever I look at my inbox or visit a school or college or chat to fellow passengers on a train or a plane, I also sense so much energy, so much commitment, so much passion for better causes and ideas. But what can I do? Even how you ask the question gives a different sense of the challenge. When people ask me that question, some are saying, but what can I do with the emphasis on them looking for a role but feeling they're small and powerless in the face of enormous challenge? Others ask something closer to, but what can I do which carries with it a sense of yearning for ideas rather than merely agency? In this book, I want to try to answer both forms of the question, because frankly, if too many of us decide that the only way to deal with the anxiety and anger that politics creates within us is to ignore it and do nothing, we are part of the problem too. What's more, we leave the feel clear for those who might blame for the problem in the first place. We cannot afford to stand on the sidelines. If we think things are wrong and we want to change them, we have to get involved. And we includes you. Introduction. I've worked in politics and media all my adult life. I've never felt greater despair about both. Our country is an MS because our politics is an MS. But it doesn't have to be like this. Politics can do so much good. Political leaders can do so much good. I worked alongside Tony Blair and saw him achieve real progress, not least helping to bring peace to Northern Ireland. I saw Gordon Brown deliver record investment in schools and hospitals and lead the world in managing the horrendous fallout of the global financial crisis of 2008. It's not just labour leaders that I can respect. For years as a journalist, I covered Margaret Thatcher, and though I disagreed with a lot that she did, I never once doubted that she was driven by a real vision, her own deep values and convictions, a phenomenal work ethic, and genuine commitment

to public service ahead of personal gain. Then there was John Major, who, sick of scandals within his own party that were damaging the reputation of politics as a whole, brought in and legislated for the principles and standards he believed should govern public life. Honesty, openness, objectivity, selflessness, integrity, accountability and leadership. These principles have been comprehensively trashed in recent years, especially though not exclusively under Boris Johnson.

We must find the leaders who can bring those standards back and so help to take our country forward. With those words in what the producers potentially called and addressed to the nation, complete with the union flag behind my left shoulder, I launched Last Autumn's Channel 4 TV series Make Me Prime Minister. No, not Make Me Prime Minister, though I've often wondered whether I should have stood for Parliament and become a politician in my own right instead of being the guy helping the ones out front, and I shall explain later why I haven't.

Rather, the series focused on people often described by politicians and journalists

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ordinary. Several, as my co-presenter, the Tory P. S. I. E. D. Warsi and I soon discovered, turned out to be anything but. Hundreds of applicants were auditioned, a short list of 12 were selected, and by the final, after they had been tested on a range of policy issues, as well as crisis management, media management, campaigning and head-to-head debating, there were just three still standing. And then there was one, the winner, Natalie Balmain. As I stood in the wings watching those final three, all strong, passionate women, the youngest 25, Natalie the oldest at 36, I felt proud to have played a part in finding them, giving them a platform, and hopefully launching them on a political journey that will give real purpose to their lives and bring hope and improvements to our country and beyond. Don't let anyone tell you that people don't care about politics, they do. I see, feel and hear it everywhere I go. But there is widespread loathing and disgust at much of what politics has become, and a widespread sense of powerlessness that anything can be done to change it, that all too easily can lead to a sense of despairing apathy. That suits the chances and the charlatans. It also suits them that there are so many barriers preventing so-called ordinary people getting into politics in the first place. Can anyone seriously look at the House of Commons, let alone the House of Lords, or the broadcast studios and newspapers from where the story of our national politics is told and say, that's modern Britain right there. It's why the barriers need to be taken down. As Natalie set out her plans for a new tax system that would finally tackle multinational tax avoidance so that public and community services could be properly funded, as Holly Morgan explained what was needed to end institutional racism. As Kelly Given argued for a housing revolution that would end homelessness and redesign the housing market and housebuilding rules to benefit the young and the poor, a cameraman muttered to me, why do we have Pretty Patel, Liz Truss and Nadine Dorries in the Cabinet, when we could have women like this? This was recorded, I should say, shortly before Liz Truss went on to even hire things, before catastrophically crashing first the UK economy, then her own career and 49-day premiership. It's a good question, and it's one that reminded me of something the LBC broadcaster Nick Ferrari told Saida and me after he interviewed our semifinal candidates one of the many challenges we put them through. He said, they had better ideas and explained them better than any of the ministers and shadow ministers I've had in here recently. There are a few things wrong with Britain that we don't have the people to fix. The passion is there, the ideas are there. It's just that too few of the brightest and the best, the passionate and the committed, are even thinking about going into politics. They can't see the point or they can't get into the system and that's the problem. Purpose and system won't change by themselves. People have to get engaged, they have to get involved. The populist leaders who've been dominating politics at home and abroad are a symptom of rotten politics and media cultures as well as a cause. People with values, passion and real commitment to others are the cure. We must all do what we can to find such people, inspire them, build them up and get them into the political arena so they can deliver the massive kick up the backside, dare I say, revolution that is needed. They are the future. My generation of people and of politics, we are the past. What we should now be doing as Saida and I did with the candidates in the TV show is to help support, aid, assist so we can pass the baton on. At the time of writing, two of those three finalists, despite the reservations about politics they expressed, have indicated they hope to become candidates in parliamentary elections, Natalie for Labour,

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Kelly for the SNP, while Holly is already getting engaged in the continuing struggle to defeat racism. All three admitted too that during the making of the series, they developed a better appreciation of how hard political life and decision making is, which makes it all the more encouraging that they've chosen to stick with politics and go further despite the challenges, setbacks and pressures they experienced. If I have one simple goal for this book, it is this, to help people who want to make a difference, to do so. That means, first of all, getting them to believe that they can and should. But it also means getting them to understand what politics involves or rather, should involve. There is the simple definition of the word politics, the activities of governments, politicians and political parties. That is the part that people all too often turn away from. But then there is the broader definition, based on the original Greek word *politika*, which involves all the activities and relationships associated with making decisions in groups, such as the distribution of money or status, and which ultimately takes you to more or less everything that matters in our lives. Politics, by its broadest definition, is the place where we have to campaign and be active if we really want to affect the change needed to make people's lives better. Getting people engaged in this way means persuading them to resist cynicism, despite their so-called betters and elders and maybe some of their friends too, providing so many reasons to be cynical. There's a popular assumption that politicians are all the same, they're not, or that they're in it for themselves, not all of them are, or simply that they achieve nothing for the people who elect them. Some achieve a lot. I'm very critical of a number of politicians, but I have direct experience of a sufficient number of others to know there are plenty of good among the bad. It's also important to get people to realize that it's precisely because the political process does feel so remote and irrelevant to so many that it so badly requires the input, energy, and activism of new people. Protest is good. People power is great. Ultimately though, we need individuals with intelligence, energy, and ideas to enter elected politics. Because if we don't achieve this, we're condemning ourselves to drawing our leaders from an ever-narrowing gene pool with more than its fair share of the fanatics, incompetence, and mavericks who further alienate normal people from politics. As I'll argue, there is always going to be an enormous role for good old-fashioned campaigning, and I would never dissuade anyone from fighting outside parliament for a cause they believe in. However, if I am pleading with people at least to think about going into politics, it's because of the fundamental truth that if you want to change opinion, you can do so as a campaigner. But if you really want to change the course of a country, and certainly if you want to change the laws of the land, you have to get into government. Oh, go on, I'll admit it. I have an altogether more ambitious hope that there is someone now in their teens, twenties, or early thirties listening to this, and so inspired by something they hear, that they decide to embark upon a life in politics. Someone who one day becomes an outstanding prime minister, is in office on the day I die, and posts a selfie with a doggie-ed copy about what can I do, and says, this was the book that convinced me I could change the world. Allow me, my idle fantasies, they might help you fulfill yours. My call to action, though, is to people of all ages, to anyone who is worried about the state of the country and or the state of the world, to people who are developing political awareness and understanding and trying to find their place in the political arena. It's also aimed at people on the cusp of political engagement and activity, but perhaps needing that extra push to move from thinking to doing, from complaint to commitment.

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I hope too that there are parents and teachers who read this book, and who are inspired to encourage their children and students to take an active interest in politics. Politics is the area I know best and which currently worries me the most, but I hope there are thoughts and ideas in here that will help anyone who has it within them, as we all do, to do something special. Science, medicine, invention and innovation, enterprise, architecture and planning, music, writing, culture, art, the law, charities. There are so many ways to change the world. It's up to us to change it, and every one of us can play a part. I want to raise your hopes as we go through the book. I also want to show you, without going all lifestyle guru on you, how important it is to look after your physical and mental health, whichever path of action you decide to take. But first we need properly to analyse and understand the extent of the crisis we currently face. That is what part one is all about, where it all went wrong. It's important to understand why and how we got into the mess we're in, and identify some of the deeper forces at play, because unless we really understand them, we cannot defeat them. And defeat them, we must, as soon as possible, and hopefully in my lifetime. Part one, I confess, is pretty depressing, scary even. Populism and polarisation are withers, threatening democracy around the world, and fascism is a real threat. Inequality within and between nations is growing, the climate crisis is an existential one. But stick with me. By the end of the book, with any luck, you'll be in a mood to understand that as the song went and can go again, things can only get better. I'll share some thoughts on how to make this happen. That D-ream song, Things Can Only Get Better, provided the soundtrack to New Labour's first election win in 1997. Despite the inconvenience of having been expelled from the Labour Party a few years ago, I remain Labour to the core. But that doesn't mean I'm speaking only to those who share my political views. I genuinely hope to offer ideas and insights that help people of all political persuasions, including those who are unsure what they believe in as yet. The book is for supporters of democracy everywhere who feel their political way of life is under threat. It's for those who believe in international cooperation rather than narrow national self-interest. It's for Tories who perhaps want to see their party return to being a serious national party rather than a populist Brexit tribute band. It's for Scottish nationalists who want not merely to campaign for independence, as is their right, but who also want their leaders to answer rather than will away, the really tough questions at the heart of their project. It's for climate campaigners who want not only to save the planet, but don't we all? Well no actually, there are some very powerful right-wing forces who couldn't give much of a dam, but it's also, as some have done in other parts of Europe, to advance to a role in government. And though I doubt I will ever see Brexit as anything other than a catastrophic act of national self-harm, if there are Brexit true believers who see and hear ideas that can help them fix some of the issues they know in their hearts need fixing, that's fine by me. I hope too that current politicians read the book and reflect that they and their parties are a big part of the problem. They need to change or be changed. They need to open up to new people and ideas, new structures, new ways of being funded, new ways of doing politics, or risk becoming irrelevant. That is the challenge to them and they need to confront it head on. Ultimately though, I'm most interested in the millions of individuals who are not currently fully active, engaged, who have a feeling they might want to get involved in changing things for the better. I hope people who've never thought a political party or a political campaign might be for them are persuaded otherwise. At the very least, I hope they will take on one big issue,

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something they really care about, where they really want to make a difference, and that they will find things here that will help them to do so with power and conviction. So before I go, my top 10 reasons to think about going into politics.

1. It needs shaking up a lot now.
2. It really matters. Politics, good and bad, touches all parts of our lives.
3. It is really interesting.
4. Sometimes it is even good fun.
5. It doesn't matter how old you are, what qualifications you have or haven't got, or where you come from. There's no fixed route into politics. You do it your way.
6. Politics doesn't have to mean just government or parliament.
7. It gives you the platform to turn your ideas into action.
8. It offers you the chance of really changing the world. I'm not saying there aren't other ways to do that, but that political context will always be there.
9. It's in constant flux, always changing. No two days are the same.
10. If you make it to the top and do it well, you're talked about and written about forever, and your ideas and legacy outlive you.