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Welcome to The Rest is Politics, Question Time with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

Very good. And let's maybe start on Australia, our award. What are your thoughts about the New South Wales state election on Saturday?

Means the Labour Party now holds power at the federal level and in every mainland state in Australia. Labour's pledge to scrap the public sector wage cap was instrumental in delivering the party majority government.

There's something else very interesting about the election in New South Wales, Rory. I wonder whether both the main parties listen to our podcast because there seemed to be an outbreak of agreeable disagreement. Australia is amongst the roughest politics in the world when it's rough. It can be really, really rough. But it seems that the new Premier, Chris Minns, when he took office, the guy he defeated thanked him for the nice way that he campaigned, urged all New South Walesians to get behind him. And it just seemed all a bit strange for Australia. And I just wonder whether it's a sort of belated reaction to the fact that they had the sort of Morrison populist politics for so long, and maybe they feel that it did a lot of damage. But it means that all the mainland Australia now is 100% Labour. Tasmania is the only part of Australia that now has a non-Labor leader at federal or state level.

Very, very interesting, isn't it? And I was struck, I was in Australia about nine weeks ago now. And I was very struck there by how proud people are at the moment by Australian politics. I had Australian students when I was teaching at Yale towards the end of the Trump era. And I remember feeling exactly what you were expressing, which is in Britain we often had a sort of cliché about Australian politics that it was quite sort of coarse, almost populist in turn. But my Australian students were incredibly proud of the moves made, for example, by Howard on banning guns. And certainly in a US context felt very, very proud of how moderate Australian politics was.

Yeah. Yeah. There was also, it was interesting how within the debate now in Australia, there's a debate about whether ultimately it helps states that have the same party in power as they have at the federal level. And there's quite a lot of interesting stuff in history to suggest that it doesn't always work that way. And I guess you could, you know, I guess it's a question that at the moment, Sadiq Khan, Andy Burnham in Manchester, Steve Rotherham in Liverpool, the other kind of labor, big labor councils as well, there's an automatic assumption is going to help. And you understand why? Because they're basically on the same side. But of course, what it means that they then have to, you know, they just have to negotiate and they have to deal with the federal government. But at the same time, they don't necessarily have the ease of being able to blame the federal government if things don't quite go their way.

Yeah. And we should encourage people who haven't heard it to listen to our Julia Gillard interview, which had a lot of reflections on misogyny in Australian politics, compulsory voting and a great deal else. Anyway, over to you on questions.

Yeah. Right. What about with this one for you? Norma Rigg, I want to know why OFCOM can deny that GB News is a news program. And if there is a higher body than it to whom

we can address the question of why GB News has given license to broadcast if it's not what it says it is. Are you across this one?

Yeah, it's got to tell us about why we're on the idea that it's not a news program.

Well, because they've said that they can't be treated the same way as say the BBC or ITV because it doesn't project itself as a news program. But the fact is it calls itself GB News and it says it wants to be Britain's main news program. And what's more, John Nicholson, the SNP guy is across this in a big way. I keep seeing him sort of push stuff out about why he thinks this is a scandal. And I think that I think people should be a bit wary of this because Labour should definitely be wary of this because what I think GB News is doing, they've got you had a situation, for example, where Jeremy Hunt, who you know, we both would accept is, you know, trying to be quotes the grown up in the room. And yet his big pre-budget interview was on GB News with two Tory MPs. Now, that's a clear breach by the broadcaster of an Ofcom rule. If Tory MPs, you can't present your own program unless you have a balance of views across it. And yet Ofcom seem to say, well, it's kind of nothing to do with us because they're not a news program. I think that's what the question is getting at. So they sort of classify themselves as an entertainment program. They were able to pull up Mark Steen for saying wrong stuff about the third vaccine booster claiming it was causing higher infection hospitalisation and deaths. So Ofcom did an investigation on GB News on that.

Fair enough. But I mean, I think the Tories are pumping stuff onto GB News because they're collecting stuff to use for their election broadcasts and, you know, they get all these ramps so they can pretend it's like a sort of independent commentator on the television.

Well, we should talk us a bit more. I mean, it's a very, very sad thing going on in the Conservative Party at the moment. They really, I think, basically have given up on winning the next election. But the big question is really what follows the election. And I'm increasingly worried that we're going to end up with a right wing leader coming in because that's what the Conservative Party members want. Remember, they voted in a 58 per cent for Liz Truss against 42 per cent for Rishi Sunak last time.

Well, I've got to say by historical standards, I'd say Rishi Sunak is pretty right wing.

Yeah. But boy, oh boy, if you look at the Conservative home polls, the people who are now seem to be leading amongst the members are Soella Braverman, Kemi Badenok, and not amongst the cabinet, Jake Riesmog, pretty pretty popular. So I think that one of the big fights really is, I think, and for the good of British democracy, I think we should both want a Conservative Party that was led by a more moderate figure. Otherwise, you end up in these very divisive cultural wars as the polarization increases. I know there's a, you might think there's a short term benefit for Labour for having a lunatic right wing leader in for the Conservatives, but I think it'd be very, very bad for our democracy.

Well, it might not be bad for our democracy if it went literally the way of, you know, wipeout. It might not be bad if something else new emerged, but you're saying that the right will never be a rump now. The right is now where the real Conservative Party lies. Well, I would almost want to explore whether one could convince people to start joining the Conservative Party simply to vote for more moderate candidates to stop this lurch to the right.

Somebody just sent me a list of the Tory MPs. This relates to your point about the Tories

thinking they can't win. Now, I being the eternal pessimist from the Labour perspective, I am always convinced that the Tories can win. And I imagine that Rishi Sunak has to get out of bed in the morning, has to think that he can win. But when you see this list, Mark Porsi, Sajid Javid, Douglas Ross, Deanna Davison, who's only 29, William Ragh 34, Chloe Smith 40, Chris Skidmore 41, Andrew Percy 45, Charles Walker, Nigel Adams, Adam Afri, Crispin Blunt, Mike Penning, Gary Streeter, these are all people, Matt Hancock 44, Edward Timson 49, Joe Gideon, Nadine Dorries, Paul Beresford, Stephen MacParlane, Robin Walker 44, Graham Brady 55, he's obviously going to join the board in career, Pauline Latham 75, Nicola Richards 28, Stuart Anderson 46, that's a long list of people, many of whom are young. And from every side of the party, I think that is partly, and there's actually a number of Labour MPs leaving as well, despite the fact that it's almost certain that Labour will come into government. I do think that this is partly the phenomenon that we've seen with Nicola Sturgeon and that we saw with Jacinta Arden, which is that modern politics is becoming increasingly brutal. And whereas people in their late 30s, early 40s would have been proud to have a political career, would have fought tooth and nail to cling on to it, it's increasingly becoming something where many of those people, people who joined with me in 2010, are feeling after 13, 14 years that they just can't bear to do it anymore in terms of the impact on their lives, the impact on their families. And it's from every part of the Conservative spectrum, there are people there who were, people I was very fond of, who on the left of the party, there are a lot of people from the right of the party. But it's very striking because many of those people are in very safe seats that it'd be very unlikely that they would lose, even if Labour did very well in the next election and they're still leaving. Where's the excitement? Erica Maas, I remember the 1997 election and the elation many felt, not unlike 1966, the prospect for Labour government turning over New Leaf, feeling that things were really getting better. So my question is, why am I not feeling the same level of anticipation and excitement about the hopefully next Labour government? Is it age? Is it they haven't chosen the campaign music yet? Is it because they're just not a very exciting party anymore?

I feel quite excited at the thought of a Labour government coming back. But I don't feel there yet. And I think that's a good feeling to hold on to because I don't agree with you that it's a done deal. I don't agree with you that it's a foregone conclusion. And I think Labour has to maintain that. I think the reason why Erica is not feeling the excitement is twofold. I think one, there is such a powerful feeling now, you get it everywhere, that even if Rishi Sunak and Jeremy Hunter are trying to be better than Johnson and Trust, which isn't hard, but even if you set that, just the feeling that they've been around too long, the election ought to come sooner rather than later, we've got to get rid of them. That's a very, very powerful feeling in our politics and our country at the moment. But at the same time, Labour are pursuing a strategy that I think is directed to the point of ending, the point of the election itself. So they're not coming out with the detailed policy that maybe people want, not least because as we saw the Tories try to do on childcare, we talked about this last week, there's a danger that the Tories kind of nick it. And secondly, I think the fact is that people, there's a dichotomy going on here in that people constantly say, you need charisma in politics, you have to sort of have a bit of pizzazz and all that stuff. But actually, I think what Keir Starmer may be doing is suggesting something different.

We've had enough of that. We've had enough of Johnson, we've had enough of Trump, we've had enough of that style of politics. And I'm going to be, I am going to genuinely be the serious guy in the room.

My anxiety is that it's not exciting in part because it's not specific enough. I'm all for serious. But it's the lack of content. I mean, we did see this in the playdium again.

We did our classic questions to the audience.

Yeah, we did. We did. Yeah.

What was it? Sort of two and a half thousand people and everybody agreed. Remind us of the three stages of Keir Starmer again.

No, I was very struck by this as well. And you're absolutely right. I'd forgotten about this. The first question we asked the audience was of the three stages of labor strategy for this election, the first phase was decontaminated the labor brand. Do you think they've been successful? Yes or no? It was virtually 100% for yes. Tick. Second stage, show that the Tories are unfit to govern. Do you think they've been successful? And it wasn't far off the same 90%, I'd guess. And the third stage, setting out a bold, compelling alternative agenda for the country. And I don't know, what was a third, if you're lucky?

Oh, less, less, less. I mean, it was very quarter. Yeah. I mean, it was very striking that certainly that audience, which I would imagine is basically a center left audience.

Yeah. Don't feel they've got a clear, exciting agenda out of labor yet.

No, but that was why that was I actually went out. I thought it was a great night and we enjoyed it and all that. But I actually went home feeling a little bit down because I thought, God, if a very sizable chunk of that audience that is clearly interested in politics, otherwise why they're listening to us, clearly engaged in politics, otherwise, why are they coming and paying decent money to hear people talk about politics? But they don't get really what the Labor Party is saying. So that's the bit that has to be filled. And I think that's where you're right. I think that's where the excitement needs to come from.

My point, the point I was making is the excitement is not going to be about campaign songs or razzmatazz. The excitement has got to be about people feeling changes coming and this is what it is. Okay, Rory, loads of more questions to get through. So let's take a quick break.

Right. Here's one for you, Rory. If you were to add two more regular guests to the podcast, one to the political left of Alistair, or one to the right of Rory, with whom you could still disagree agreeably, who would they be and why?

Well, we've had a bit of a go at this because any one of the things we talk about is shortly before I came on this podcast, I was approached by somebody suggesting that I do a podcast with Jeremy Corbyn. And I believe you were also thinking about doing a podcast with Dominic Cummings. Is that right?

No, I wasn't thinking about it. But the goal hanger, the Gaffer, Gary Lenaker, his people were thinking about it. I did talk to Dominic Cummings about it. I think we both agreed it wouldn't be a good idea.

What do you think would have happened if we'd ended up me and Corbyn?

Well, one would he have done it? I don't, I'm not sure he would. I think he'd still see you as a sort of bit of an out and out rancatory. You might do it. Do you want to get rid of me and get Jeremy in?

No, I like you. I like you. Although we do have a question gone as a segue. Why is Stammer

blocking Corbyn, Aliellis? What's to be gained by Stammer blocking Corbyn from standing at next election? I'm not a Corbynista, but this does seem petty unnecessary and likely to alienate his significant number of Labour votes. Why is he doing this?

Well, I guess he, I mean, from the strategic point of view, it goes back to what we'd said about the first question at the Palladium, decontaminating the brand. So, getting him kicked out of the party because of the feeling that he hadn't dealt properly with anti-Semitism and didn't accept the findings of the, you know, of the inquiry into that, that is a, you know, he did that. And if you've kicked somebody out of the party, it means they can't stand as as a candidate. And it's, it's what I think if soon I get any sense would happen to Boris Johnson. So, that's the kind of, that's the sort of specific explanation. And I guess strategically, it confirms that. Then the risk, I suppose, is, well, if Jeremy Corbyn does stand as an independent, how well does he do in his LinkedIn? And I guess the calculation is that he doesn't win. And the election, by the election, it doesn't become about Jeremy Corbyn. Added to which, I guess, I don't know why there's always keep banging this drum about, you know, one minute you served in his shadow cabinet, now you're, you know, it underlines the fact that the Labour Party has changed. So, I guess that's why it's doing it.

Ofsted. Daniel Woodruff. Following the tragic suicide of headteacher, Ruth Perry, after an ofsted inspection that downgraded her school from outstanding to inadequate. Do you think ofsted should have paused inspections? Is it fit for purpose? And what changes to the inspection process would you make?

But I think to have paused the entire ofsted process because of one absolute tragedy would have, other than maybe if you were doing it literally as a tribute to somebody who died, I can't see that that would have actually achieved much. But I do think the final point in the question, what changes to the inspection process would you make? And I think this is part of a broader assessment of how we educate our kids and what we expect from our teachers. And I do wonder whether we don't need to move away from the set. The parents have a right to know whether schools are good. They want to know everything about the school. And ofsted has been the vehicle for that for some time. And by and large has probably done a reasonably good job in maintaining standards. But I think particularly now, when you talk to teachers and headteachers about the pressures that they're working under, about the lack of resources that they feel about the problems of pay and the problems of retention, I think to add in the way that ofsted operate. I mean, Fiona, my partner has been a chair of governors of more than one school and has sat on the board of governors of several schools. And you know, the whole off, the way that ofsted done it, it feels like, you know, when, when they get the call that ofsted are coming, it really does sort of send a chill through schools now. Now, you could argue, well, if they were running the schools properly, then you know, they wouldn't have to worry because everything would be running perfectly. But they don't feel that when off said come in, that they're looking at the school as it operates day to day, they're looking at the school according to tests that they're setting. And there's a process now that people feel they have to go through to get a good off said out.

Yeah, it's just it's very difficult, isn't it? Yeah, because I first faced the same as the prison's minister with the prison inspectors. And prison governors were often prison officers very, very angry at the reports they got from the prison inspectors. But of course, as

a minister engaged in policy, it is absolutely invaluable to have an independent eye of experienced inspectors going in and trying to provide an objective judgment, which is almost impossible to get from within the system. I mean, one obvious reform that offset could make is to focus exclusively on schools, not get involved in questions such as care become off school as opposed to off stead. And it's impossibly difficult, particularly at a tragic time when someone takes their life. And I'm sure that a lot of improvements, but you do desperately need to have clear independent view coming in. You can't really allow any institution governments, schools, police, prisons to purely police themselves, you do need outsiders coming in regularly to check what's going on.

Well, I'd say the one institution where that doesn't really happen is parliament. I mean, yes, you get people coming in every few years to decide whether they want them to stay on. But there is something a bit rich, I think about some of these, you know, a succession of absolutely hopeless ministers who go around sort of parading telling everybody how badly they're running the public services when, you know, they've delivered a mess in the political management of our public services. And I do think that the kind of the absolute focus on schools being about the, you know, exams and the results, the results of the key, I think sometimes teachers don't understand what they're meant to be teaching, what the quality is meant to be. And I think that there, for a lot of children, the fund is staying out of education. I think for the teachers that I speak to, just I think feel absolutely ground down at the moment. And I've said, so I think thinking, you know, I get what you're saying, but I think what we actually need is a commitment and understanding of the importance of education on national life and the sort of support for teachers, which will enable them to teach well without constantly worrying that they're going to be marked down the whole time. That doesn't mean you don't have inspections.

It's very difficult, isn't it? And you're in Singapore, where I believe teachers are often paid well and have, I mean, that's another problem. We don't pay our teachers enough.

They're also hugely respected.

And hugely respected, yeah. I think, but equally that there is this uncomfortable fact that we've talked about, which is that since 2010, by putting more focus on literacy and numeracy, Britain is doing much better in the international tables on literacy and numeracy. It is possible to drive up standards in schools. And one of the ways in which that happened was by setting very, very clear targets and holding people accountable to those targets as with any organization. Well, I'll have to consult with Fiona, but I do remember the last time you mentioned the piece of the tables, Fiona said, will you tell Rory? It's not all about the piece of the tables. And then she meant to say something else, which I've forgotten, but I will come back with the next week.

Now, BBC Chair Change Under Labour, Nick Teague or Tiger, if Labour gets into power, are they able to change who sits at the top of the BBC immediately? Or do they have to wait for contracts to expire, et cetera? That's a good question. I don't quite know the answer. I think ultimately the Prime Minister points to the Chairman. And as we discussed on the leading episode with Gary Lineker, I think we all agree that's an absurd situation. It was absurd when we did it and it's absurd that the Tories do it. I can't understand how that guy Richard Sharp is still there. But I suspect he's not going to go. Soon that's not going to sack him.

I think the only way you can get rid of the BBC doesn't get rid of the Chairman. I think this is right. I think the government has to get rid of the Chairman.

Yeah. Well, he's been appointed for a four-year term, 6 January 2021. So he'll run through to 2025 at the current rate. But in practice, whatever the theory is, you cannot remain as the Chairman of the BBC if you have no confidence from the government. So it's what has also been discovered for the head of the Metropolitan Police and other organisations like that. In practice, if a Prime Minister came in in a very determined way and said, the Chairman of the BBC know that has my confidence, they would be able to get rid of them. The challenge, of course, is making sure that Labour behaves better than Boris Johnson did and bring in a figure who will ideally follow what our gaffer said.

Or a new process. Yeah, exactly. Exactly what in the leading pod you can hear Gary Linnick talking about, which is making sure that we move away from a system in which politicians appoint the Chairman of the BBC.

Yeah. Theodora wants to know, Roy, do you prefer to read fiction or nonfiction, which is more important? I'm reading David Bedeal's book at the moment, which is nonfiction.

Yeah, I love fiction. I think it's nothing is comparable in its ability to open perspectives.

I mean, I feel it's very interesting hearing Gary Linnick talk about his admiration for Maradona and Messi and his sense that they're in a completely different category to him.

And obviously, I've got no way of judging that in football. But in reading, because

I write, it is that sense of war that I feel with Tolstoy or Henry James or even someone like Norman Maynard, the sense that their minds are so extraordinary, that sense of humour, that irony, that eye for detail, that empathy, their moral courage. So I'd sell novels at the moment. Okay. I, of course, can talk about Maradona,

because I play with them, but I can't talk about Messi. I never played with Messi. So

I think we just have to couple of small suggestions for me on what I'm reading at the moment.

I'm reading a wonderful book called Winters in the World, which is about a journey through the Anglo-Saxon year. I'm reading an extraordinary novel, a detective novel whose central character has Tourette's by Jonathan Letham called Motherless Brooklyn. I'm reading Salast's account of the conspiracy of Catalan. And I'm reading Henry Mantel's Wolf Hall trilogy at the moment.

There we are. That's the new section. You're reading all of those books now?

Yeah, because I'm very weird. I move between them. I usually read three or four books a day. Depending on my mood, I jump from one to the other.

Hold on. You don't read to completion three or four books a day?

No, no, no. I don't read it.

You are reading. You are at the different stages of reading thrift.

Exactly.

Well, I'll tell you, I'll tell you the book I picked up at the airport and to read on the flight home is the Midnight Library by Matt Haig, who's a very good chap on the mental health agenda. And as I say, my current nonfiction, I always have one novel and one nonfiction book in my bag and unlike you, I don't have a Kindle. And my nonfiction is currently David Bedeal, The God Desire, which I don't think is out yet, but he very kindly gave us a copy when we were interviewing him for leading the other day.

Now, listen, why don't we close on these two related questions, which they're kind of for me, but I think they can open up an interesting discussion with, with both of us, given we've

talked about the gaffer two or three times, which I guess is about the role of celebrity in the political debate.

Callum Swanson, Britpop and Cool Britannia, were Labour Tony Blair's attempts to cozy up to Britpop brands in 97 effective? What was the thinking behind the strategy? More generally, can endorsements from musicians, actors and sports people actually make a difference? And related to that question, I want to answer this because I did almost reveal this last week, but then I stopped. Jeff Lewis is obviously a very, very careful listener.

Alison started a story about Blair meeting David Bowie within the car afterwards in last week's question time. Please come here the rest of the story, what happened next?

Oh, quickly on celebrity then. I've always been struck in politics that celebrities make much less difference in a political campaign than you would have thought. Stormsea, for example, came out and this was a big, big thing for Jeremy Corbyn, but I don't think it had much impact on his voter turnout. I don't think the celebrities who endorsed the Democrats in the US or endorsed the Remain campaign during Brexit made much of a difference. And I think it's partly because people admire, generally, celebrities for what it is they're good at. They admire them as a musician or a footballer, but they don't necessarily follow their lead on politics. But what do you think?

I think it helps to mood music. I don't think people necessarily would say, I'll vote such and such a way because, you know, Dua Lipa told me to. But I think people can be influenced by that. And I think it helps to kind of the music. So for example, certainly during 1997, this is maybe goes back to the early question from Erica about excitement, the sense that people like Oasis and Blur and some of these other bands were clearly indicating that they quite liked the look of this guy Blair and the look of new labor. I don't think it harmed us at all. But I agree that I don't think it sort of shifts the dial in a big, big, big, big way.

The David Bowie story well spotted Jeff because Jeff's obviously spotted that I deliberately stopped in mid senders because I didn't necessarily want to complete the point. But as he spotted it, I will complete most of the point. So basically what happened is in the car afterwards, Tony turned to me and said, God, wouldn't you just love to be a rock star? And then went on to explain if we had a discussion about the elements of being a rock star that we would quite enjoy.

I'm sure it was something as clean as throwing televisions out of windows. On that, we're going to come to an end. Bye-bye, everyone.

See you later.