

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Democracy under threat, rampant sewage, and campaign songs

Thanks for listening to The Rest is Politics. Sign up to The Rest is Politics Plus to enjoy ad-free listening, receive a weekly newsletter, join our members' chatroom and gain early access to live show tickets. Just go to TheRestIsPolitics.com. That's TheRestIsPolitics.com. Welcome to another episode of The Rest is Politics Question Time with me, Alistair Campbell, and just finishing a mouthful of crisps is... Rory Stewart. You always get very offended by my crisps, but there was a very important reason for that, which is that I landed at 1.30 in the morning here in the US, and if I don't have the crisps, I can't keep awake. I don't think they do you much good on the nutrition front. Always, when in doubt, eat a banana. Now, Rory, I know you're in the States, but I'm going to ask you a very British question. Tom Gorman, I listened to you discuss Ofsted on your last podcast. Do you think it is right that public schools like Eaton College do not fall under the remit of Ofsted? It's a bit odd, isn't it? I don't understand the story behind that, but I would have thought that Ofsted should be inspecting all schools. There was an interest, and given our interest in different cultures in Europe, there was a negative inspection, I believe, of the French lice in London. Yeah, fascinating kind of culture.

By Ofsted.

By Ofsted, yeah, cultural tension there, where some of their criticisms to the French lice sounded a little bit like criticisms to the French educational system. Complaining about rote learning and not enough creativity and stuff, and others about questions around safeguarding and protection. But if the lice, which I believe is partly fee paying, is being inspected, I'm not quite sure why private schools are not being inspected.

So Rory Stewart agrees with Alistair Campbell that private schools should be subject to the same inspections regime as state schools. I have to tell you, the state's primary school to which all three of my children went, one of the early Ofsted reports revealed chronic poor week leadership as a result of which, after a long, long struggle, we managed to oust the then leader of the school who got a pretty big payoff to go, because sometimes that's the only way you can do it. And do you know what he did with the money?

No.

He went and bought a private school.

Ah, very interesting. On the other hand though, that should mean that, I mean, I know you're sometimes a bit skeptical about Ofsted, but in that case, it sounds like quite a good story that Ofsted combined with the parents exposed a serious problem and dealt with that. I think that is a good thing, but I think where they've gone too far now is in the whole sort of grading and the tick boxing and the process that has become horrendously pressured for headteachers and teachers and governors.

Right. Okay. Now, here's a question for you, Julian. In the year or so before the 1997 general election, I often used to pick up Alistair, pick you up where, outside of

...

I don't know, carry on.

I'd drive him to Tony's house and all the house of commons. I remember one day, Alistair eagerly passing me a cassette tape and asking me to play it. Sitting in traffic on White Hall, we both listened to things can only get better. Asking what I thought about it, I could sense his disappointment in my lukewarm response. However, my lack of enthusiasm was

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clearly not enough as Alistair used the song for Labour's campaign. What tunes do you think the Labour and Conservative parties should use for their next general election campaigns?

I'm going for simply the best for the Conservatives.

What are you going for?

Tina Turner.

Tina Turner.

Yeah. She'd have to give her permission though, wouldn't she?

Is that true with all these songs? They have to give their permission.

Well, Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones tried to stop Trump using... You can't get it, always get what you want. He carried on using it. When I talked to Bjorn from ABBA recently, he said that... I think it was John McCain who was using... I guess it was Winner Takes It All and they got lawyers and they didn't want it used by anybody, let alone John McCain.

Did that guy leave a name?

Yeah.

What's his name?

His name is Julian.

Julian? What a taxi driver called Julian. I mean, is he going to be offended if I don't remember him?

He's not a taxi driver. He sounds to me like he's a government car, working in the government car service. He's regularly taking you to Tony's office.

But Tony had a driver called Terry. I don't remember Julian. I do remember trying out the music on a number of people and Julian may well have been one of them.

Do you try talking about Rolling Stones? Did you try Mother's Little Helper as one of your tunes?

No, I don't think that would work, would it?

No.

My favorite, I think I've said you before, my favorite campaign song was Clinton's Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow, Fleetwood Mac. I love that. I don't know what you'd do. I don't know what Laban the Tories will do. I think the Tories are, the Tories has got to be, you know, Millwall strategy. No one likes us, we don't care.

Millwall song.

The only way is down.

What's the Millwall song? Do they just chant that?

Do you really want me to sing it to you?

Yeah, go on then.

We are Millwall. We are Millwall. We are Millwall from the den. We are Millwall. We are Millwall. No one likes us, we don't care. I didn't get a tune right, but they are the lyrics.

So, you think we could just insert Tories instead?

Yeah, we are Tories. We are Tories. We are Tories from the South. We are Tories. No one likes us, we don't care.

No, the news strategy is we are Tories from the North as well.

Sorry, I beg your pardon, yeah. Well, the thing is, Burnley see that song as well, where they are Burnley from the North.

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Oh, okay.

Yeah. I don't know what Labour's song is going to be, but I might have to write one for them and make it a bagpipe song to try and help them in Scotland.

Very good. Okay, question from you.

Dolly, after returning from Barcelona this week, I realise I want to mess the UK is.

What do you think the Europeans have got so right and what are the most important things the UK can do in the next five years to improve our quality of life?

I mean, do you hear that when people come back here that they just sort of feel things don't work?

Well, sometimes do, sometimes don't. I was talking to a Jordanian who'd been talking to the ex-French ambassador to Jordan and the ex-French ambassador had said very smugly, you know, two months ago, the UK is such a mess and isn't it wonderful being French and this Jordanian just returned from Paris and was like, I'm not so sure about that anymore.

I actually think London is in a better place.

There's a wonderful video doing the rounds in France on social media of this guy singing about wonderful Paris's, but he's always hated the fact that he had to take his bins four stories down. So he's seeing in his apartment that he just opens the window and pulls them into the street on top of this mound of bins.

It's the old Edinburgh tradition, isn't it? It used to shout, Goddiny Lou and then it shot the poo out the window.

I forgot what the question was.

Well, it was a question, it was just a general post-Brexit.

Oh, yeah, yeah.

Yeah.

But it sort of does feel, and do you know what really, really depressed me last week was this whole thing about sewage and, I mean, I don't know how we, yeah, and you have Therese Coffey, who's the Secretary of State in charge of it, and she sort of says it's nothing to do with her, and farming is nothing to do with her, and the supermarket prices have nothing to do with her.

Well, that's, you see, that's an interesting thing, isn't it? That goes so hard as something we talked about in our Palladium show, Crisis Management, which is, I genuinely believe that politicians must say, this is to do with me. I'm taking responsibility for this.

And even though, of course, it's true that Secretary of State are a very long way removed, and of course, there's a privatised water system. And, you know, in prisons or in flooding, you can often say the chief executive of this agency is responsible, not me, in the end.

I think it is the right thing to do to say the buck stops here, and I'm going to try to sort it out.

And the sewage thing is something that I was very involved in as an environment minister. Was that part of your brief sewage?

Very much. And one of the issues running through it all the time was the extraordinary cost of these legacy systems. So we did build, and I walked through it, this super sewer under the Thames, which is almost 20 miles long. It's an incredible thing. I walked through it when it was dry, not when there was water and sewage running through it. But

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that was trying to deal with our legacy Victorian systems. But so much of our infrastructure was built, effectively, that when there is excess, heavy rainfall or something else, the overflow gets released into the rivers. Now, there has been progress. The Thames is much, much cleaner than it was in the 1970s. You remember the stories that came on the first salmon were found in the Thames. But the question again and again, how many tens, how many hundreds of billions is the government prepared to spend on really cleaning up this horrible legacy infrastructure and getting stuff to the quality that you need to achieve bathing quality water?

There was a report on the BBC News about swimmers in a river in Ilkley and also that they would never, ever, ever put their head under the water and then sort of seeing this stuff go in. And I've got to say, it's interesting how, you know, certain people rise to the moment. That guy, what's his name, Fergal Sharkey? Yeah, that pop star, Fergal Sharkey, he's been absolutely brilliant on this. I mean, he's really, really, really taken it to the government. But look, Theresa Coffey's a very, I don't know if you know her very well, I don't think I've ever met her, but I'm not a met her once. But she's, she honestly strikes me as somebody who's there, she's, she's in office, but seems to spend all her time saying that whatever problem might be on her brief, it's not actually her problem. Yeah, she's, well, Theresa Coffey is somebody who was very close to Liz Truss. They did these karaoke parties in Westminster. She joined with me 10 years ago, 12 years ago, I guess now. She was made deputy prime minister by Liz Truss. She did a doctorate. I'm cheating here by reading off Google on the structural and reactivity studies of Bissa Mido complexes of Molly Bdenum. So she is a challenge to the cliché that nobody in front bench politics knows anything about science, that everybody's just a spud or a lawyer, or someone's done pee pee at Oxford who's come in. And she took over my job at she in DEFRA. So back in 2016, she was, I was her predecessor, I wasn't able to do a handover with her. But she's been in that department for a very, very long time or in and out of that department for a very long time. But you're right, she isn't somebody who, without being unfair to her, I don't think she's really found the, the knack of the communication.

No. And also she went, she went to the farming, the NFU, the National Farmers Union Conference. And we talked about it at the time where she was there as the same day, same day as Kier Stammer and he got a rather good reception. She got a terrible reception. She then attacked farmers weekly. And she was sort of, which just seems a bizarre thing to do. She sort of went and said, they just rubbished the whole time, nobody really cares what they say. I think a lot of farmers care what farmers weekly say. No, it's all very, very, very, very odd. But I wonder if it's partly her libertarian approach to life.

Yeah. She's somebody she's, for what it's worth to give her credit, she is somebody who was popular with colleagues, people liked her. She's not at all pretentious. She's very down to earth. I think she's somebody who people trust and think is serious.

Hmm.

Okay, Jacques.

Jacques.

Question for you. I was wondering if you had any explanation for the right turn in Nordic politics with Finland, Sweden and Denmark, now all with far right elements in government.

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These countries amongst the richest, happiest and most educated in the world with a long tradition of sober social democracy. So why the change? What's your answer to that?

Well, I hate plugging my own book as you know, Rory, but I have said in my next book out on May the 11th, Penguin Round the Mouse, that we now have in virtually every European country around 20% who will vote for, if you like, the most right-wing option or a kind of a nationalist right party. And I suppose the question is asking, have we sort of felt that the Nordics and the Scandis have, have we seen them as different for too long? Now, they are still very happy countries in the main, but they do have, I think they do have these problems. Denmark, by the way, I think their election slightly bucked the trend, but certainly Sweden and certainly Finland at the weekend with the Finns party coming ahead of the ruling social democrats who are now out of power. I think that the hold of populism and nationalism and, you know, using immigrants and immigration as a driver of that as a political force is very, very strong there as elsewhere.

I was talking to an Estonian yesterday. We had a long two and a half hour conversation and he was talking about the struggle within many northern Nordic countries to remind people of their own history in terms of their German heritage, their Russian heritage, the different forms of indigenous heritage and how important it is to communicate that to people at a time when there's a temptation to resist migration and try to insist, particularly from the nationalist parties, on this false idea that somehow there was some kind of pure race that lived in these countries before any immigration happened and how painful it's been in much, particularly in the Baltic countries, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, to come to terms with the incredible transitions from a German elite rule in the early modern period through to Russian domination, through to independence, the incredible population movements, the fact that whole German communities

disappeared, many Russians left on the ways in which people have now had to come to terms with new forms of immigration coming in.

Now, here's a question, Rory, which I genuinely want the answer. Because I think this is something that you've looked into more than I have and it's something that's sort of slightly keeping me awake at night. Mark Ridgewood, do either of you worry that as a society, we're walking blindly into an age where artificial intelligence will disrupt all aspects of our lives massively, but we appear yet again to be quotes, leaving it to the markets, close quotes.

Well, it's certainly an extraordinary moment. Chat GBT, which we've been talking about over the last few weeks, is making such extraordinary strides. I mean, within, as I say, I've got a close friend who is right at the heart of this and is sharing different versions of chat GBT with me. Every two, three weeks we talk, it's getting better and better. This large language model is training itself, but also spinning off, we've talked about. It's hallucinations, the fact that it will produce these incredibly plausible essays, which include completely invented facts. It's become an amazing medium for the generation of very plausible conspiracy theories. If you wanted to train it to start generating stuff against a politician, which really sounded as though you got chapter and verse on their poor behaviour, and then you can discover that actually a lot of the information it's feeding in is the product of its hallucination. So I think that's one problem. I think the second problem is that policymakers and politicians particularly are not talking about it at all. We've talked

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about this in the podcast before that our politics continues to be stuck really in the 1980s. We're having the same conversations around strikes and deficit and debt and the balance between the market. What we're not talking about is the way that the world in 10 or 20 years will be completely different and millions of jobs will be eliminated by AI and nobody's on top of that. And Elon Musk and Noah Yovel Harari and many, many others have signed this open letter asking for a six-month pause.

What is behind that? I mean, the Musk, I'm assuming there's a sort of commercial competitive thing going on. Am I being unfair?

Well, 1,300 people have signed it. Elon Musk is interesting. I mean, it's true that he was originally an investor in open AI, which generated chat GPT, but you will have seen him on Twitter increasingly saying he's scared about its consequences.

And also, I've seen other people saying that they think it's going to destroy humanity.

And I'm trying to make that leap. How is he going to destroy humanity?

Well, the sentence from the letter is, should we develop non-human minds that might eventually outnumber, outsmart, obsolete and replace us? Should we risk loss of control of our civilization? And this is stuff that Noah Yovel Harari has written about an enormous amount in his books, which is that as AI develops, it clearly has the capacity to do almost everything that humans can do much more quickly.

So you could be an army. You could build an AI army.

Not just an AI army. You can build AI lawyers, AI doctors very, very quickly. I mean, one of the first professions that people are predicting will disappear is the profession of medicine, because it seems as though these AI models are able to stay up to date on the latest research can have, obviously, far more information than any human could possibly hold in their brain and are much more likely to be able to bring the latest medical bests practice to a village in Uganda compared to any remotely plausible human doctor.

So we would look at that in isolation and think that was a good thing.

So there are incredible benefits. I mean, and I think this is the challenge for the policymakers. Whether you like Eric Schmidt and Henry Kissinger fundamentally say the positive potential benefits for humanity are so unbelievable, and it would be cowardly not to embrace this in an optimistic mind frame. Or whether like Elon Musk and others, you say this is completely out of control. Nobody understands that nobody's regulating it properly. Let's take a pause and try to get a grip.

There's a question here from somebody called Holly and the EV, real name James.

Should the government consider appointing a cabinet level minister for AI to deal with the issues surrounding the impending technological revolution? Sounds to me like probably yes is the answer to that, isn't it?

Absolutely. But you'd have to have somebody who not only knew what they were talking about, but had real political heft and weight. Something we've talked about a lot in the podcast. There's no point bringing in a cabinet minister, even a cabinet minister, with serious technical expertise if they don't have political heft.

So that would be... Give me your dream person to do that job. Are you talking about somebody that you literally bring in from outside and say, look, you really understand this world.

You're now going to go to the House of Lords, be a cabinet minister and tell us how to do it.

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Well, I think to get things done in government in a way, you need to have a bit of a whiff of power and elected legitimacy and threat to you. I think, as you've said before, that was one of the secrets to how Michael Gove, even in relatively junior cabinet positions, is able to throw his weight around. So you might be looking more, although it is not a Therese Coffey who is the only person with a scientific doctorate in the House of Commons, you might be looking more at a sort of Michael Gove or George Osborne figure who has the political weight to really drive this through, as well as some of the intellectual capacity to try to master the details. Welcome back to the rest of

politics question time. Before we get going, quick plug for my new book, but what can I do? But more

than that, a quick plug for an opportunity for you to get a signed copy. All you've got to do, go to our Twitter page at [restyspolitics](#). You can sign up to all sorts of things there. You can get the newsletter, you get a link to the book. And if you remember, you can get a discount. And I'll be making a little trip down to the publisher at some stage to sign lots and lots of them. Lots of you sign up already, the more the merrier. Right, question here from terrible Tim. As the local MP and mayor have tried to silence and intimidate the Yorkshire Post and its editor, Jay Mitchinson, over the dead marine wildlife on Saltburn Beach, do you think this is symptomatic of a weakened local press that doesn't usually investigate as thoroughly as it used to?

And another question that Jeff Nicholson, do you think the decline of regional newspapers has allowed local politicians to get away with more questionable dealings? I'm asking this from T side, where we have more than our fair share of dubious local politicians. Is there an answer, or is it going downhill from here? And I should, maybe we can put in the newsletter, I was driving down to a bagpipe event at the weekend, and I was listening to any answers with Anita and Anne. And there was a wonderful, wonderful contribution from a 75 year old woman called Maggie. That's all I can remember. I think that I don't think we heard her surname. And it was about what's happening in, in T side with the dredging and the effect of wildlife and all because of this free port, which private I go on about the whole time, but very, very, very, very few of our national papers do. And I think what this terrible Tim refers to is that the Yorkshire Post has done a big front page kind of investigation into the effect on marine wildlife on Saltburn Beach of this bit, these operations that are going on. And Simon Clark has sort of, you know, gone to war against them. So first two things really, your views of local and regional press and whether they're in peril. And secondly, whether we are underplaying this whole, you know,

effect on wildlife of dredging, which Maggie on any answers described in the most graphic and horrific way. Well, let's start on the regional press. The regional press is in sharp decline. It's very difficult because they rely heavily on advertising income for many small local newspapers continue. That is a threat to democracy I had in Penrith and the border, a newspaper called the Cumberland and Westmoreland Herald. And during my time edited by a man called

Colin Morm, who'd been with the newspaper for many, many years. And it was able to do everything from produce micro stories, looking at school groups and small towns like Applebee or Kirby Stephen, right the way through to covering environmental problems. The Penrith Pong, for example, which was a horrible smell from a meat rendering plant on the edge of Penrith.

But most of all, what it did is it coincided its readership with my constituency boundaries and allowed people to really take an interest in what we were doing on broadband or what we were doing

on affordable housing or challenges around the national parks in a way that would never have been possible with bigger newspapers. And as it got into financial trouble, and as other regional newspapers around began to collapse, what you got is a culture that you must be very aware of, which is the culture of press releases. You get into a world where because the journalists are so understaffed, you can simply write a press release, send it to them, and they'll print it, and you go away from the real act of journalism. But you started, is that right on local newspapers? Yeah, I did. And Tabasco Times in Devon, very small staff. But we did kind of, we did take, for things like sport, we would sort of, you know, the local football teams would bring in their own reports and we'd put them straight in. But, you know, and sometimes you might do that with some of the local parish councils. But generally, you try and do your own stuff. And I agree, the other thing, of course, is that, you know, the online advertising now is taking so much of people's budgets that local papers aren't getting so much. And of course, what happens is that local councils can become very, very important to the survival of a local newspaper. That puts them under political pressure not to do stuff about the council. And I do think on this tea side thing, maybe it's something we should look at in more depth another time. But I think there's something going on there with regard to these free ports that is not getting anything like the scrutiny that it should. Well, it's going to the heart, isn't it, of this debate about deregulation and growth, which was at the heart of Lestrassé's Temporal Premiership. And an idea that countryside China are able to build rail lines and airports much more quickly than countryside Britain because they don't have to worry so much about environmental regulation. This was part of the whole drive for Brexit, wasn't it? Yeah. And I guess the free port is really seeing this in action. I think we're coming towards an end. I've got one last question for you. Yeah, gone. Tom Seisman. Oh, yeah. Question for Rory, it says, do you accept there is a clear media bias in favour of the Tories? If so, how can labour work to balance the playing field?

Well, I think I know where you're coming from on that. I mean, there's definitely a right-wing press. I mean, of course, for my type of conservative, I think the problem is that it's often actually further right than the moderate bits of conservative parties. So I was often under attack from the Daily Mail Telegraph. Some of it, though, I think is... We were both under attack from the papers recently, Rory, as part of this new... Apparently, we are the new elite. That was amazing. Yeah. You and me, Gary Ninnaker and Carol Vorderman and Emily Matles, we are running the country. It's very, very weird, wasn't it? Particularly since half of the entire elite peers come from Gold Hanger podcast. I was also very struck that this guy, Matthew Goodwin, who's the professor who's promoting himself by writing these books, yeah, is... It started to try to hang himself off the Gary Ninnaker issue by trying to suggest that Gary Ninnaker was somehow the epitome of the kind of Oxbridge-educated elite, which was a kind of really weird way of describing somebody who left school at 16 to enter... Become a footballer, yeah. And also, Fiona did say about me. I don't know whether... I don't think this was mentioned as a compliment. She said, what earth is on about? She said, you're the least London person I know. Yeah, I'm not very London, either, although I did run to be there. He's also... I think that those who do sort of drag

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him onto their programs to talk his nonsense, they should at least point out that he works for the Legatum mob, who are this sort of very right-wing, Kiwi billionaire-funded thing operating out of Dubai. I do think on the media, it'd be a very big, bold thing to do. But I think if Keir Starmer were to come out and say, look, as per... As this is the case in the United States of America, there should be British ownership of British media. You'd see quite a lot of people scarpering because they'd have to. Maintaining friendships, Rose. You're both very busy, jet-setting people, yet appear to have a lot of friends from your professional past.

Do you have any tips or advice on maintaining friendships in a busy life? How were you able to do that when you were fully in there in number 10 from 97 onwards?

Oh, sorry. What was the name of the person who asked that question?

Rose. Rose. Rose doesn't know me very well.

No, I do. I think friendships are a fascinating subject. And we all say, oh, so-and-so is a good friend of mine. Oh, so-and-so is a good friend of mine.

I think if you've got half a dozen really, really, really good friends, you're lucky.

Yeah. I've got hundreds of people that I can, you know, I know that I get on with, that I like spending time with. But I think really... And the other thing, I actually wrote in my last book about depression, I wrote about all the list of close friends I've had who've died. It's quite a long list. And so I sort of feel I've got fewer friends than I had, but they're friendships that matter.

And it gets worse as you get older.

Yeah, it does, definitely. Definitely.

I remember my father basically saying that, oh, he actually felt that most of his close friends had been, along with his brother, had been killed in the war. So he spent a lot of his life.

I feel that one of the things I hated about being a politician and I don't like about my current job is that I do not spend enough time with my friends. And when I see them, I'm often fitting them in between meetings or I'm just coming through London for a couple of hours.

And it's rude, it's disrespectful. But how many close friends would you say you have?

Something like you, maybe half a dozen. And if I think about it, I'm thinking about my friend Felix that you've met, who's probably my best friend. I do feel that I haven't got it right, that I'm running around too much and that above all, you need time. And one of the problems definitely about being a politician is you're always saying, oh, I can't come because I'm voting or I'm flying board. And I don't think that's good for friendships.

No, but if something really terrible happened in your friend Felix's life tomorrow, and he phoned you up, would you drop everything to go and help him?

Yes.

There you go. That to me is the definition of friendship. It's actually, would you put them ahead of all else when that was required? I think the other stuff is kind of topping up and it's quite important. Friendship's tricky. Friendship's tricky.

Well, I think we need to start with a memory of course, you're the person who I think treasured your friendship more than anyone who of course was Diego Maradona.

Yeah, RIP. RIP. I wonder if his last words were, you know what, I won this plate without us to gamble.

I always say. And on that, I think we should finish our question time.

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All the best.
N-A-P-C-O-M.