

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / France on fire, fake Korean cash, and a new Scottish nationalism

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And with me, Rory Stewart.

And we'll be talking about the new First Minister of Scotland. We'll also be talking about Tory MPs getting caught up in rather silly stings. And we'll be talking about France and the continuing protests over rather modest reform that Emmanuel Macron is trying to bring forward. And we're also going to be talking about what Rory assesses as the appeal of authoritarianism in the Middle East, although at the moment Mr Netanyahu is looking less and less appealing all the time. But Rory, I think we've got to start with something that didn't cross my mind when I was filming you dancing at the playdium. But that is the many, many people who have suggested that this was your first step towards trying to get an audition for Strictly Come Dancing. Is that right or wrong?

Well, it's of course completely wrong because I've been very, very heavily trained by my co-podcast presenter, Alistair Campbell, that you and I should never be going on Celebrity Jungle or Strictly Come Dancing. Given how rude we were about Matt Hancock, I think that would be a very bad thing.

So what was it that made you want to dance on the stage?

I think a very similar thing to what drew you to want to play the bagpipes to the tune of Match of the Day.

I've been playing the bagpipes all my life. Have you been dancing to Max Miller all your life?

Have you?

No, no, but I dance. I do a lot of Scottish dancing.

Yeah, that came through.

But if you played a real, we could do an eightsome on the stage.

Okay. Well, you can't do an eightsome on your own. You'd have to get seven other people up there.

A Harrogate could be our opportunity. This could be the big, big moment for us. But anyway, at the moment, yeah, I'm very keen for people who want to see my ridiculous dancing to see it free rather than being paid Alahancock to go on Strictly or even to dance for a Korean consulting company.

Yeah. Well, we can put it in our excellent Rest is Politics newsletter. We should make sure that people have the opportunity to see your dancing, both me filming from behind you and from those members of the audience who filmed you in front. I've got to say, I was moderately impressed.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Also, a bit of a plug for our newsletter. We've got a chance. I do think it would be great if people wanted to sign up, totally free. But it is a chance for us to put in some more thoughtful, long-form essays, pieces, videos. And I think a lovely way to maybe stay on top with some of the details of politics that we don't manage to cover in the show.

We'll treat the link. We'll put it in the episode notes and people can sign up. And

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yeah, I think we should kick off with the SMP. I must read you a couple of things first.

So I was in Singapore airport this morning and I picked up a copy of...

You were in Singapore airport this morning. Is that why you're wearing a rather sort of touching batik shirt? That's like your South East Asian look.

It's my attempt to sort of to merge in. Yeah. But listen, just listen to this. I picked up a copy of The Times of India. Okay. And the headline is from Punjab to Scotland First Minister, Humza Yousaf to be first Muslim to lead a country in Western Europe. And the intro goes as follows.

Pakistani origin, Humza Yousaf is the new leader of the Scottish National Party, will be the first Muslim to lead a country in Western Europe when he becomes Scotland's first ethnic minority and Muslim first minister on Tuesday at a time when the UK as its first Hindu Indian origin prime minister, which is pretty amazing, isn't it?

It is pretty amazing. And it's interesting that you're reading that from The Times of India because you're absolutely right. Obviously, Humza Yousaf is completely Scottish. She was born in 1985 in Scotland. He grew up completely in Glasgow, went to school in Glasgow, went to Glasgow University.

I do want to point out, I thought it was good and positive that when he called out all the different aspects of his identity, he did include European. And I think that that was music to my ears. He was Punjabi, he was Scottish, he was British and he was European. And I'd like to hear a bit more of that from our Labour friends.

The other thing which I think we should say is that he is in this position because of you, Alastair, because it is the Iraq war that led him to join the SMP. He was Glasgow University Muslim Student Leader working for Islamic Relief. And it was Alex Salmon's speeches against the Iraq war that led him to join the SMP. And he said that he concluded that he was a Scottish nationalist because independence was the only way to stop Scotland going to war.

Yeah, I read that as well. But actually, somebody said to me today who'd sort of seen an interview with him and said, I don't quite understand why this guy's not Labour. He seems very kind of Labour in the way that he talks. And I don't know whether that's just the way he comes across in his kind of public profile. But I didn't know that he's given that as the reason. I think there's lots of reasons why people join parties.

Look, I think we said at the start that we thought he probably would win. I think we said in the first time we discussed this that we thought on balance, Kate Forbes would damage herself with some of her socially conservative views. But actually, it seems maybe that wasn't quite as damaging as we thought. But it is interesting that Ash Regan, the third very close to Alex Salmon disruption candidate, that in the end, he did need some of her votes to be transferred to him to get him over the 50%.

Which was very surprising. He got a third of her votes. I mean, it's one of these systems like the old London Merrill race or the French presidency where you have to clear 50%. And if you don't, the votes reallocate it. So the hope was that although he was leading hard, I think he got 48% in the first round. The hope was that he might be pipped in the second round. But in fact, he got a third of Ash Regan's votes. He's somebody who has been very, very impressive politician. I mean, he was the justice secretary. He was then the

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health secretary during COVID, which of course meant that he would have had a lot of the visibility that someone like Matt Hancock had in Britain. Obviously, his opponents lay into his record as justice and health secretary as you would expect. But he was a parliamentary assistant to Alex Salmon and Nicola Sturgeon and seems to have really won the affection of both of them. Then he was a comms officer for the S&P before being elected to parliament. Very, very young, became a junior minister in a year. So he's clearly seen by the, as it were, the S&P establishment, which is now, I guess, defined by the group of loyalists and Nicola Sturgeon as very much safe pair of hands, highly competent in their tradition in a way that they saw the other candidates as being quite disruptive.

One thing I thought was really noteworthy was the turnout was just 70%, which I find really, really odd. I mean, what is the point of joining a political party if you're not even going to vote in the election to decide who's going to be your leader? And I did get a sort of slight horrible feeling at the 52-48 because, of course, it was exactly the same as the Brexit referendum. And that should be maybe a bit of a warning to him. 52-48 results tend not to go well for the project that got them there. But he is, you know, he was run close. He did have the support of the establishment. Nicola Sturgeon didn't formally come out for him, but everybody knew that she was supporting him. And I think that, you know, it also shows that we've had that period where the S&P has seemed very, very united and together under Salmond, and then that fell apart and then very united and together under Nicola Sturgeon. It's really interesting given that we talk so much about polarization. The debate in Scotland has become polarized to some extent around this question of national identity as opposed to delivery. And in normal politics, the delivery of a government and that's a government that's been there for some time becomes the kind of defining issue. I just wonder if that will change now. It's obviously in Labour's interest that it does change and that people start to focus much more on, you know, whether the health services function as it should, whether the schools are as good as they should be, whether they met their pledges on drugs and so forth. It'll be harder, I think, for Humzi Yousuf to own that independence debate, not least because one of the divisions that's emerged is this question about the extent to which the next election becomes a de facto referendum on independence. And I see him walking away from that already. His leadership campaign has at least in the short term seemed to be quite damaging because of course, Kate Forbes really laid into his record in government. And there's certainly Labour friends in mind in Scotland think that they may really benefit from this and that they could pick up as many as 20 seats in a general election. To what extent do you think that fights and leadership elections are damaging? It was a problem actually just before I sort of come to you. It was a problem I found when I was running against Boris Johnson, which is the Conservative Party's terrified about the ways in which these leadership elections, which they call going blue on blue, discredit the brand of the party as you take bits out of each other. And definitely the same was felt when Rishi Tsunak ran against Gains Les Trust. Do you think there is lasting damage done to Humzi Yousuf by the attacks of Kate Forbes? I think there could be. I actually think that Rishi Tsunak has managed to move on for the time being from a lot of those attacks that were made upon him and by him during the Tory leadership election. I mean, before he actually

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won the second time around, there was an awful lot of stuff circulating film on social media and rather well put together packages, one of them by the Labour Party, I remember, that was essentially just saying, if this is what they think of themselves, why on earth should we think any better? And I think that does have some strength. And I think that it's interesting how Kate Forbes pulled back a bit. She had one clip in, I think, the first televised debate that was really, really strong. And I think it actually in the end went down badly. I think it could have cost her votes within her own electorate. That may be part of the reason for the 30% who didn't bother to vote. Some of them didn't particularly want him, but didn't like the way that she conducted herself during the debate. I don't know. But I think that it all depends on whether or not he can succeed in bringing people back together afterwards. So for example, I think the fact that Boris Johnson and Les Trust both voted against Rishi Sunak's Windsor framework, the legislation to try and clear up the mess of the Northern Ireland protocol post Brexit, I think that is ongoing damaging for Sunak. It reflects badly on Trust and Johnson, but I also think it gives the message that Sunak can't quite hold things together.

And a lot of this has also got bound up with questions around Nicola Sturgeon's legacy, the allegations against her husband and the finance, the SMP, the debates around transgender recognition, which is another cleavage within the SMP, where you have big figures like Joanne Cherry, who's a lawyer and somebody who I knew quite well in the House of Commons, taking very, very strong positions, which also becomes strong anti-Nicola Sturgeon positions. So well, I suppose the question is, what would you advise he does in the first 100 days? What's the key if he really wants to make a success of this to overcome all of that? Well, I think he has to decide whether the top line of his agenda is going to be about the continuing battle for independence or actually about trying to, as he put it, represent all Scots and to focus much more on public service delivery. Now, both of them carry risks for him. I watched, I managed to watch one of his interviews after the announcement. My sense was he was moving away a little bit from this, the election being de facto independence referendum. I sensed that he was wanting to focus much more on the public service delivery, but that again, then carries risks because frankly, the record isn't as good as they would like it to be, isn't as good as it should be. And I think the other thing he's got to be very wary of is you say, I think the Labour Party feels there are huge opportunities here. So he needs to work out how he's going to tackle that because the driving narrative in Scottish politics for some time now, from a period, as you've mentioned many times where it felt like Labour was always going to, as it were, politically own Scotland, that's gone and a new narrative developed, which is frankly that Labour can never win back Scotland. And while the Labour Party can never win back Scotland, it means that the Tories can never lose in the UK. And I think this changes that dynamic. So the opportunity this represents for the Labour is that they can win sufficient seats in Scotland to be able to say to the Scottish people, look, we can get rid of the Tories in London. And that, I think, if they can balance that right, the dynamic can change pretty quickly. It's not a guarantee though. No, there are obviously quite a lot of voters in Scotland who would vote Labour if Labour embraced independence. Do you think there's ever any temptations in internal discussions to take the side of Scottish independence? Or do you think Labour will always remain

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passionately unionist?

Well, certainly, it seems to me that Keir Starmer has, you know, closed a pretty firm door on that. Now, I have said to you before, I get quite a lot of grief from Labour friends in Scotland because they think sometimes I'm a bit too, you know, leave the door open, as it were, at least to the possibility, some time down the track, that there's another referendum. So I'm not conscious of those discussions going on. And if they are, it seems to me that they've been pretty effectively shut down. So that is all saying that Labour has to make, in a sense, remove the independence question from the centrality of Scottish debate and make the Scottish debate much more for a general election about what kind of United Kingdom we want.

Apologies. You're in Singapore and I am in Jordan and you can hear the call to prayer in the background.

I'm loving it. I'm loving it.

Yeah, exactly. It's Ramadan at the moment and that means more volume coming in on the call to prayer at the moment. Now, Alastair, you will, like the rest of the world, have been watching this Led by Donkeys video. And just to quickly explain before I get your reaction, Led by Donkeys set up a fake South Korean consultancy company and contacted a number of Conservative MPs, I think something like 16 Conservative MPs, four Labour MPs, a couple of Lib Dems and an Independent, and wrote to their parliamentary email addresses asking whether they would be interested in a conversation about becoming a consultant for this fictional South Korean company. And rather bizarrely, only five MPs seem to have got back to them. And of those, one of them, Gavin Williamson, Sir Gavin Williamson, dropped out of the running. I think he probably smelt a rat and decided to not continue.

I think we should make clear that all of them were Tories. None of the Labour people, none of them were Tories. All of them were Tories. All of them were Hancock, who's the Independent. I'm assuming Hancock is the Independent. I think Hancock is the Independent. And the people that were caught on camera, certainly on the clips that I've seen, are Matt Hancock, quasi-courting, Graham Brady, who's the chair of the 1922 committee. And Led by Donkeys is a social media company, right? Campaigning social media company? I first got to know Led by Donkeys during the People's Vote campaign, and they did some brilliant stuff. I remember they came down to one of our big rallies, and they said, why don't you unfurl a flag over the whole crowd? And I said, well, how the hell do you do that? And so we'll show you, and they just did it. Absolutely brilliant. They're very innovative and very creative. And this is the sort of thing. It's funny how journalism is changing, because this is the sort of thing that you kind of expect Sunday Times insight teams to do or whatever. But these are people who are not necessarily journalists, but they're exposing wrongdoing in public life in a very dramatic way. I watched the clips of Hancock and Quarteng and Brady in particular with a sort of sick feeling in my stomach. I mean, part of me wonders, you've got to be pretty stupid, haven't you? You've got to be pretty stupid to not even to sort of check whether this company is real, haven't you? Yeah. Well, I mean, I think particularly when you should be aware that this is, regardless of your morality, I think you should probably be aware that this is something that somebody might be tempted to do. If you've just been the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who was alongside a short serving Prime Minister who crashed

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the economy, or if you've just been the Secretary of State for Health who lost your job and then lost a lot of credibility by running off to the jungle, you might think that therefore you might just get somebody to check it out a bit more. Or is the desire for anything that's offering you money just so big that you can't see beyond that?

Well, I think this is the basic insight, isn't it, of the Biden case, which is that people's greed will often lead them in odd directions. Within the House of Commons, the rules are still very, very strange. They emerge from a world in which originally MPs were not paid and continued in a world in which traditionally, before I came into the House of Commons, we changed the sitting hours when I came in in 2010, but before I came in, House of Commons would generally not meet till 3.30 in the afternoon and often continue to sit till 1.00 in the morning, and that meant that many, many backbench MPs were able to do effectively full-time jobs provided they got to the House of Commons by about 5.00 in the afternoon when the voting started. Many of them were lawyers, many of them had businesses. That began changing partly because MPs were pushing for more family-friendly hours instead of being in the House of Commons

from 3.00 until 1.00 in the morning. You could get back and see your family in the evening, so it votes till 10 at night on a Monday, I think 7 on a Tuesday, 6 on a Wednesday, etc.

But as part of that, we're still left with this strange universe that MPs can still have second jobs as well as being members of parliament. I'm not sure how long that's likely to last. Do you think that's sustainable in the long run?

I can see the advantage of somebody who is a doctor, who carries on doing a bit of medicine. I can see the advantage of a lawyer keeping their hand in. But I think if people use parliament as the base for their own corporate financial interests, I do think people have a real problem with that. No, they didn't in the old days. In the old days, of course, MPs didn't have a salary and that was one of the arguments for changing. It was to make sure that people who weren't wealthy could become representatives. But what the thing said to me, and I think will say to most people, is that there's nothing wrong in talking to people who want to try and pick your brains and why have you. But it struck me, unless led by donkeys have sort of edited it very, very carefully, it struck me that the only thing that they seem to be interested in was the question of money. And that bit where quasi-quarting, who obviously we now know doesn't have much of a grip on the economy, but where he suddenly morphed from dollars into pounds, because he worked out that the pound was still just about worth a little bit more than the dollar. I mean, it was pretty cringe-making, wasn't it? And Graham Brady, Graham Brady just looked so sort of stuffed up and puffed up with his own importance.

And also, he at least struck me as being a little bit embarrassed about asking for whatever it was. And when he said 60,000, I think the woman he was talking to, the fake consultant, was thinking, is he going to say an hour? Is he going to say a day? And eventually he went last for a year. You could see him thinking in her reaction that she was a bit surprised that it wasn't more than that.

I was struck by this, because remember, we had this with Owen Patterson and the lobbying scandal and Owen Patterson's effective claim that he was being paid by this company not really to do lobbying, but just for his advice. And there is a sense, I think sometimes when

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I talk to MPs about this, that there's a sort of double contract going on. There's the question of what you say to your constituents. There's also the slight suggestion that in some cases, they are slightly taking advantage of these companies. It's not quite clear what benefit really the South Korean consultancy company would get from having the geo-strategic advice of quasi-certain being shared with them.

So this is sort of odd. It's an odd business. And it's a business that many MPs, including senior labour figures, have gone into, after they've left politics, the sort of generic question of giving sort of consultancy advice to companies. And I often wonder whether it's not a bit oversold anyway, whether these companies are really getting their monies worth. Yeah. I mean, look, I do consultancy work, but I don't do lobbying. I advise on strategic development and communications and crisis management and that sort of thing. And the money can be very, very, very, very good. And I think actually even the former MPs, I think you've got to be, I just think you've got to be a bit careful. And I have this golden rule, if the choice is between cash or reputation, go for reputation every time. Now, it could have been, let's imagine this was a real company. And let's imagine that Matt Hancock had got his £10,000 a day, whatever it was, £1,500 an hour. And let's then imagine that actually the company had decided that he really was being useful. He really was giving them good ideas. He maybe was giving them access. I don't think it's that long before there's a kind of, there's a potential for a scandal not far down the route. I think I just think you've got to be a bit careful. Yeah, yeah. Shall we take a break? Yeah.

When you hear from experts in the media, have you ever considered their gender? Her voice, a podcast from ESCP Business School's media, The Choice aims to contribute to women's visibility in their domains of expertise. We're talking business and science will power to change the world and ambition to have a decisive impact on the future. Join in our conversation and learn from the journeys of these inspiring women.

The Financial Times follows the money to find business stories in unexpected places. We found a surprising one in the porn industry. I'm Alex Barker, co-host of the FT Pushkin podcast, Hot Money. Through the series, we reveal the real power behind this secretive global business. You can check out our podcasts and read selected articles for free at [ft.com slash insights](https://ft.com/slash/insights). Welcome back to the Restless Politics, who's

me, Alistair Campbell. And with me, Rory Stewart. And one of the things I think has been very popular this week, which we'd like to encourage people to listen to is our interview with Gary Lineker. It's the first interview with Gary Lineker after the great scandals around his comments about the boats. And it's on our separate podcast, which is called Leading. So if you haven't had a chance to listen to Leading, Leading is where, for example, we did a big interview with Bernie Sanders. You'll be able to go through the back catalog. Very interesting interview, which Alistair did with a leader of the Weeger campaign against Chinese genocide in Northwest China and many, many other valuable infuse, but perhaps Gary Lineker won a good one to start with.

Shall we have a quick, let's listen to a quick extract from the interview with Gary.

One of the things that you pointed out in terms of crisis management is knowing how it's going to end. And what became clear as everybody began boycotting match the day and nothing was going on that this was not going to end well, but it was funny. I was

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in a restaurant in the back of the car. Firstly, when Ian Wright pulled out the show, and then when Alan did as well, I must admit, I had a tear in my eye. Did they not tell you they were going to do it?

Ian Wright, when it first happened, said, why is this an issue? If they do anything, I'm, you know, I'm not going on. And, you know, it's one thing saying that in a moment. But then actually to carry that through, they didn't need to do that.

And then Alex Scott and then Jermaine Junis and Micah and then and then all the commentators and then the match reporters and then even the footballer said they weren't going to do any and it was like, my goodness, this is this is kind of not doing it. I think they're doing it for more for the cause, but they actually, you know, to get that kind of team spirit, that kind of camaraderie and togetherness. I mean, it just moved me. It was just, it was beautiful.

So that was a little clip from the interview with Gary Linnicka. It's about an hour long. I hope you enjoy it and any other next up is David Bedeal. I can tell you that and we'll keep ticking them out as well as doing the main podcast.

And there's a big scoop. There's an amazing bit of news on it, which hasn't yet really broken over the papers the way I expected to do. But it's about just a clue. It's about Alistair's education.

It's not a great scoop at all. It's just, it's given you

Don't spoil it for them. Let, don't spoil it for them.

Okay.

Let them listen to it.

I'm not going to spoil it. I'm not going to spoil it. Once they watch, they go to leading wherever they get their podcast, they listen to it, they can come back to me and let me just say this, Roy, without giving away this great scoop that you're so happy about, if you or they think for one moment that it will stop me banging on about the iniquities of private education and in particular the role of Eaton College in our society, you and they are wrong. Now, shall we talk about France and what's happening there because it's pretty amazing what's going on there. I mean, I go to France a lot, like France a lot, know that the French have this habit from time to time of really rebelling and really protesting. But given ultimately how pretty modest this reform is, it is pretty amazing that so many people, they've got 13,000 police out today.

It's incredible. So between one and three million people have been protesting different protests, depending on how you count it. And this is because Emmanuel Macron had proposed that the retirement age in France be increased from 62 to 64. And the reason he's proposing it is that France is spending an extraordinary amount on pensions, 13.6% of its gross domestic product, which puts it just third after Italy and Greece and the OECD and the OECD average is about 7.7%. Even Italy has raised the pension age, like I think it's even higher than ours now. And the Italians have not really gone crazy.

No, no, no. And I mean, in the UK, when I come to retire, by 2037, the retirement age will be 68, five years before I come to town. But in France, the fight is about whether it should go above 62. So fifth of teachers been on strike, trains on strike, regional flights cancelled. And it is incredibly popular these protests that the majority of the French

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population want the protests to continue. 70%, according to an oxapole, say the government provoked the violence. So what's going on here?

Well, I think there's a lot of things coming together. First of all, is the issue. The issue where I think in particular, those people who are doing tough, manual jobs think actually that 64 is too old and 62 is when they should be allowed to retire and get a decent pension. The second thing that I think is going on is the Macron having been reelected for the second time in part because he wasn't Marine Le Pen. I think there are elements of the French population who think that they, I don't know what they expected to be different, but they expected Macron term two to be very different to Macron term one. And I think it is worth pointing out that he could not have been clearer during the re-election campaign that he was determined to do this. And then I think the other thing that's happened is that trade unions in France, they're pretty good at organizing demos and marches and so forth. And you know, that's absolutely, they're entitled within their rights to do that and they're very good at it and they have an important part in the French democratic debate. But there has been a latching onto it of violent elements from both the extreme left and the extreme right. And in fact, one of the protests at the weekend, the police said the most difficult thing they had to deal with was the violence between the extreme left and the extreme right to sort of, you know, kicked off at each other. But then Macron, because of, as you know, I've never quite got this why he's so hated by so many people because I think he's got something, you know, pretty impressive about him. But he has become a sort of a hate figure in a way that I don't, even though Hollande had very, very low ratings at one point, I don't think he was despised by so many people. And Macron's adversaries, I understand you're a friend of Macron and so I understand you're quoting other people, but what is the most negative account of Macron? How would they describe him when they're being negative? Well, the basic, the thing that they try to pin to him all the time is that he's a friend of the rich. He only cares about the rich. And which I don't think is true, but, you know, that's the line that gets run. And of course, with the hard left in particular, the fact that he worked for Rothschild and that all gets thrown in as part of the thing. And then he did this broadcast. I mean, I thought it was absolutely incredible that, you know, even on the BBC, the second story on the news the other day, was this story about Macron's watch, that as he was doing an address to the nation, he removed this watch and there was a whole debate about how expensive it was.

Well, there was all this fake news on Twitter, which was fascinating. People, you know, saying it was an 80,000 euro watch. And of course, you see that on Twitter and it's such a funny story and such a funny clip, the temptation to retweet it was enormous, right? Turns out it wasn't an 80,000 euro watch. I mean, it turned out it was a 2,200 euro watch. But the story ran around.

Which is still a lot for a watch. Yeah, exactly. Because that, but that's what happens when you get these sort of, you know, these moments where somebody's seen in a certain way. Now, the truth is, I think he took the watch off because it was clicking on the table as his wrist was on, you know, he was doing his address to the nation. I think that's the reason. I've got no idea. I don't know. But it's now got into a place where I don't think he can back down now. But it's also leading to this new debate now about whether actually the structures

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of the Fifth Republic have had their day. There should be a sixth republic. Because the tipping point, the thing that took it from being very big and very difficult to manage to huge and giving the sense of almost of ungovernability a few days ago, the thing that tipped it was this thing of using this, you know, this presidential decree effectively, that you don't need a vote of parliament to get your key legislation through. That's what seems to have tipped it over. So whether that, you know, whether he has to sort of have some kind of review longer term of the political process and so forth. I mean, when we did the interview with Francois Hollande, I don't know if you remember, but I said, you know, my sense of France is always that the French people keep electing presidents who have very clear programs and they get elected and the minute they try to implement the program, the French turn against them. And Hollande, he's just sort of, he's just sort of shrugged as if to say, well, yeah, that's kind of what it's like. But that's, you can't govern a country on that basis.

It's pretty amazing, isn't it? On the watches, there's an extraordinary blog post on IFL watches called Watches of World Leaders, pointing out that the, the consen, the Prime Minister of Cambodia wears a watch that may be worth over \$3 million. That Vladimir Putin has been seen with a watch that's worth at least \$100,000 called a chronometer bleu. And that Joe Biden has been pictured wearing his Rolex, his Omega Speedmaster Moon watch and various other things. So in fact, according to this article, Macron is very much at the low end of world leaders in their watches.

Well, can I just say, Rory, I, I have not worn a watch, any watch, since the advent of mobile phones, because as far as I'm concerned, watches are there to tell you the time. And I have the time here on my phone or on my laptop or on the clock on the wall. So I don't feel the need for this incomprehensible challenge. I just bought a watch for the first time. And I was like you until about four months ago. I agree with you. Basically, it's a bit of jewelry now, isn't it? And I don't quite understand why have you bought a watch? Why have you bought a watch?

Because I think it looks pretty. I mean, it's not to do with telling the time at all really. I think the, and it's interesting whether watches can really continue. Yeah, my watch. How much did it cost you?

Oh, I don't know. I'm not going to get into that. Thank you. It's at the lower end.

I think it should. Sorry, Rory, if you're going to read out the three billion...

I'm not a public figure. I'm not going to comment on the value of my watch. I'm happy to speculate. But I do think there's an interesting question about whether this industry is really going to be able to continue. I went through Switzerland. And as you can imagine, all the posters in Geneva Airport are huge pictures of more and more complicated watches as they try to make people spend a fortune. And they don't often have much of a resale value, I believe, for many of these watches. You can't quite sell them for anything like what you bought before. Anyway, off the question of watches, one of the things that Macron's tried to do is, of course, try to comply with the EU rules around deficit. So to be serious, remember, we talk a lot about austerity and talk a lot about the conservative's obsession with the deficit and the debt. And of course, many people have blamed the European Union, the Greeks in particular, when austerity was imposed on them have been very, very critical

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of the EU targets on deficit and debt. So France is meant to be meeting a target of only 3% GDP on its deficit. And it's currently at 5%. And it's looking for a way to reduce its public expenditure. S&P, Standard & Poor, is threatening to downgrade them. Their interest on the national debt in France is now the second highest expenditure item. And so he was hoping by changing the retirement age up to 64 that he could save 17 billion euros a year. Because even in the UK, pensions are half of our welfare spending. We spend 100 billion pounds a year on pensions. And one of the reasons this is a problem is, of course, demography. Because when the old age pension was introduced in Britain by the Liberals before the First World War, there was something like one person over a time of age for every 20 working members of the population. And it's now one person over a time of age for every two and a half members of the working population. So it's a really big problem for every government to manage. And of course, it gets more extreme when you get to Japan or China now with its population shrinking by over 10 million a year.

No. And also, it's one of the reasons why governments, and this is very difficult in the UK because of the debate that we've been having on asylum and immigration. But it's very difficult in France as well because of the rise of the national front. But the truth is, these economies are going to have to have more immigration, more people coming in so that they can function, make that society and that economy function.

Well, except the challenges. And this is what slightly went wrong, I'm afraid, with the levels that you were hitting in the late 90s, early 2000s, is that you can't continue to bring in more and more and more and more every year. Otherwise, there's no stop to it. So what you've got to do is try to work out how to do demographic planning where you have a stable population rate. Because if you keep bringing in enormous numbers of young immigrants in order to pay for the older population, those young immigrants eventually become themselves older and then you have to bring in even more. So you can't keep running the thing like a pyramid. You've got to try to get a stable population, which we are very, very much struggling to do across the world. Either we have short-term expanding populations which deal with the problem in the short term or cause the problem in the long term, or you end up in the Japan situation where you simply can't pay for your state.

I looked at the International Monetary Fund's latest analysis of France and I think it's already a little bit out of date. Well, it may be it's not. It said France is building resilience through bold reforms and further measures to strengthen public finances could curb the budget deficit and check rising debt. And of course, this is not remotely helping. Should we put it that way?

No. And it's interesting. I mean, this is something for which George Osborne was very strongly criticised, but it has been very, very important for the public finances in Britain, which is the raising of the retirement age up to 68 by 2037. It means that the UK is right down there with New Zealand and Canada spending only 5.6% of its GDP on pensions compared to 13.6% in France. And we need to remember that because...

We're still paying a lot more in debt than George Osborne ever told us that we would. 100%.

So I don't think we should let George Osborne run away with the idea that he ran the public finances well.

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But there's often a debate going on, particularly in conservative circles, about are we being too generous to pensioners at the expense of the young? As a percentage of our GDP, we're right at the very bottom of the OECD on how much we spend on pensions.

Yet, one of the themes that I'm quite keen to promote is I do think the reason why more and more young people need to vote, whatever they think of the politicians, is that politics, I think, does skew itself towards thinking that pensioners can't really be touched.

So raising the pension age, we didn't have anything like the protests that you're having in France because people felt, well, that's going to affect a future generation. It wasn't sort of instant. And so I do think that the British public are much reddier to accept change to something like pension age levels or even pension arrangements themselves.

But the politicians are less likely to want to do that because the truth is that older people are more likely to vote. Now, that's a political fact that young people ought to bear in mind when they decide to turn their back on politics.

Yeah. Well, of course, there was a big protest. You remember the Waspy movement? So the Conservative

government in 95 under John Major first put forward the idea of increasing women's state pension age from 60 to 65. And Waspy have been really against this because women born in the 1950s feel that they've been hit particularly hard because their retirement age suddenly increased by four, five or six years. So the work protests and people have been, I think Jeremy Corbyn has been out on some of those protests, but you're right, it's nothing like what's happened in France.

We said last week when you look at the scale of the protest in Israel and the scale of the protest in France, I don't think we've really seen anything with that mix of anger and bordering on violence probably since the Poltex riots.

Yeah, Poltex and then there were big demonstrations obviously against the Iraq war and big demonstrations on Brexit.

But they were demonstrations. They were broadly peaceful.

100%. Yeah.

And by the way, I know you want to talk about the Middle East. What do you make of the way Netanyahu is handling the protests there because he sacked his defence minister for daring to speak out against this policy of reform of judicial reform. And that led to a kind of, because it was unexpected, it led to an instant and massive mobilisation of protest, which does seem to have sort of clipped his wings a little bit. But my sense is he's just going to kind of plow on and get through this because he sees it as his way of staying out of jail.

That's extraordinary, isn't it? It's absolutely extraordinary. And it's not as if the man that he sacked was exactly a sort of great sort of raging liberal. I mean, it's, no, many Israeli friends working in the Israeli government say that it feels just like their memory of when American colleagues of theirs were working for Trump, that a lot of civil servants now feel that they've got a leadership that they find very difficult to relate to and above all very difficult to predict. So when they talk to foreigners about the direction of government policy, they no more know what to say than their American colleagues would

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have known what to say about what Trump was going to do next.

Yeah. Yeah. And I see also one of the, was it the New York consul resigned in protest at, so okay, it's maybe not the biggest member of the government, but there's obviously that sense of civil servants starting to think I actually just can't support this anymore.

Yeah.

But he seems determined to plow on.

Seemed determined to plow on. Me, well, just to finish, so here I am in Amman, you're in Singapore and that should be nice to hear a little bit about Singapore because it relates to what I wanted to finish with, which is one of the stories over the last 17 years that we often talk about is the drop in the number of democracies in the world, the drop in human rights standards in the world, the shrinking space available for civil society to operate and the rise in the prestige of authoritarianism. And that's partly driven by the incredible economic success of authoritarian China that it has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. It's creating an enormous middle class without democratizing. It's partly to do with the appeal of the country you're in now, which is Singapore.

And it's extraordinary how so many of the leaders I knew in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere had Lee Kuan Yew's book very prominently displayed on their bookshelves and looked to Singapore as a model. But it's also now here in Jordan and the region here, the increasing reputation of Saudi Arabia. So Mohammed bin Salman, who is often known in the West for, for example, his association with the murder of Khashoggi associated with brutality, in this region is often known in a much more positive light as somebody who's led an extraordinary social revolution in Saudi Arabia, which has combined with very strong economic growth and a very clear sense of direction. So, you'll be aware, Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince, pushed ahead with extraordinary liberalization in terms of social attitudes towards women, not just driving, but women's appearance. And in fact, you go to Riyadh at the moment, it looks totally, totally different. Famously, small things like rock concerts are now happening and they are incredibly successful. His support amongst young people is very, very strong. And he was able to achieve it because there was such a conservative society, there was such timidity around confronting the clerics. He did so and he's opened up this huge social revolution. At the same time, the economy in Saudi grew by 8.7% this year. It's the highest growth in the G20. It's extraordinary growth levels. I mean, that's above and beyond places like China. Oil exports up 25%. And he has this thing called Vision 2030, which is about renewables, industrial manufacturing, mining and tourism. And the idea is to move away from being overly dependent on oil. And some of the figures are naturally extraordinary, not just in Saudi, but in UAE. They're committed in Saudi 266 billion to renewables. UAE putting in 340 billion into renewables. And all of this sadly means that people in other parts of the Middle East are increasingly saying to me when I go out to meet people for dinner or get in a cab are increasingly saying, isn't this great? You know, what countries need is a very strong ruler like Mahmoud bin Salman with a clear vision who's knocking stuff through. Give me a sense of Singapore. Give me a sense of how things feel in Singapore and how it's changing.

Well, you mentioned Lee Kuan Yew. I'm going to say Lee Kuan Yew was, I met him with Tony Blair in, I think first when we were in opposition and then when we were in government. He's

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without doubt, one of the cleverest people I've ever met, just a breadth of wisdom and information and analysis that was kind of extraordinary. When you think of what Singapore came from to what it is now, it is one of the most remarkable development stories I think of all time. And it's so interesting to hear you talk about them in the context of this debate about authoritarianism, dictatorship and so forth.

Because what I sense happening here is actually you've got one of the most efficient governments in the world, not corrupt. They pay their ministers very, very well.

They pay their ministers a million dollars, is that right?

Yeah, they pay them a lot. I don't know what the exact figure is, but the ministers get paid and they go out and try to recruit the best and brightest people from business, from the healthcare system, whatever it might be. And so the PAP, the ruling party, which has been in power for a long time, but there is a pretty vibrant opposition and the government, you see that opposition kind of grow election by election, still got a very large PAP majority. And it's interesting when you talk to some of the people here about how they share some of the concerns that you will not be hearing about in China, for example, they worry about the spread of social media and the impact that it's having upon the democratic fabric and this kind of thing and the sort of forces of misinformation from around the world that try and infiltrate our debate. So I think they get a deservedly good reputation for the scale of transformation. I think they get an unfair reputation because of the fact that Lee Kuan Yew was without a very, very, very strong firm leader who did some pretty difficult things, particularly when the country was being established.

It remains, though, still from the point of view, certainly from my point of view, a troubling place. The way in which, for example, the rights of migrant workers are protected would be deeply, deeply shocking to people in the United Kingdom. They are paid at very, very low levels and Singapore is a very wealthy country, got one of the highest GDP per capita in the world. And the salary of domestic workers is arranged according to which country they come from at incredibly low levels. They have almost no rights at all. So I think also, given that you've been very outspoken about the interests of migrants to the UK and are actually towards asylum, that is not something that Singapore is remotely meeting global standards on, nor is it really meeting global standards on freedom of the press.

No, but what they would say about that, particularly in relation to freedom of the press, is actually if you do, when you are here, you don't get the sense of a press that's being repressed in terms of what I can get access to, in terms of what I can see on social media and so forth.

So all I'm saying is I think they're developing into a place that doesn't really merit the levels of criticism that it still gets in terms of its democratic development, and particularly when you think where it sits in the world. Because the big thing that sort of I think keeping them awake at night is the difficulty of feeling that they are a pretty small country, a city-state who have got very, very strong close relations with the United States, that are related to security and economy and so forth, also got very, very strong trade-in relations with China. And politically, kind of sit somewhere between the two, and that is a difficult place to be.

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. I mean, the stuff I mean, it's worth, we'll share some stuff on press freedom in Singapore. There has been a lot of recent legislative action against press

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freedom in Singapore. And there's a very, very, I mean, Human Rights Quarterly does a very good article on this. The Singaporean leadership talks about straightforward reporting, simple journalism and straightforward reporting that press must accept its subordinate role. And it's introduced these fake news laws in 2020, it's got these internal security acts, official security acts, the addition acts, which also used. I think you would find if you were a journalist operating in Singapore, you, Alastair, would get yourself in a lot of trouble pretty quickly.

Hmm. Hmm. Okay. Well, I'm here now. So, you're saying this.

Let's see how much trouble I get you in.

We'll not be stopped. We'll not be stopped.

Yeah, try to get... Anyway, just to finish on this, I think it is, it's very interesting.

The right saw wrongs a bit aside, and I, you know, obviously on record, I think the Saudi regime has an enormous amount to answer for its curtailing of civil society and human rights is deeply troubling. And one of the great sadnesses really since 2003-2005 is the extent to which the Western democratic model and ideals of human rights and civil society have been eroded all over the world, Hungary, Poland, et cetera.

Well, the Freedom House, the Freedom House report on the world this year said that there had been a decline in freedom around the world. But I think a lot of that was related to China and America, particularly during the Trumps last year. But I think that if you look at Biden's State of the Union speech, where he made the point that, you know, he felt that the dividing line in the world now was between democracy and dictatorship and authoritarianism and autocracy. So, that is where the world is kind of on the axis at the moment.

Yeah. Okay. Good. Well, something to return to. And let's bring it to a close. Thank you very much.

See you soon.

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