

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Iraq: the fallout, Scotland at a crossroads, and 'sneaky beakies'

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Welcome to another episode of The Rest is Politics, with me, Alistair Campbell.

And with me, Rory Stewart.

We're in an amazing place, we're in the Palladium.

And I've just walked past a poster, which revealed that in this very building, not that many decades ago, was one Max Miller.

The cheeky-chappy.

The cheeky-chappy, your comedic hero.

Yeah.

That's because you've not been to see Grace, my daughter, perform yet.

But so we are in the Palladium and it's, I felt a bit weird walking down Argyle Street from Oxford Circus Tube and seeing these big, what do they call them, sort of electronic visions of us up above the Palladium.

If I feel like I'm becoming here, I'm like becoming a second Max Miller and that really excites my vanity.

Which of the big stars of the Palladium that you've seen up there are more exciting to you?

We see, I have a bit of a love-hate relationship with being all over the place like that.

I like the platform that fame gives you, but I don't particularly like.

I felt when I walked in, I was desperately looking for a side entrance, as I didn't have to be seen walking through it.

Maybe that's just, you know, conservatives are just a bit more vain.

It's definitely my vanity, but I suppose I was trying to get out of you more.

Is it Nat King Cole or Tom Jones, or which of the performers here do you admire?

Well, I don't know who's been here, whether it's Dino Ross been here, the four tops ever been here.

I'm a kind of, that's my sort of thing.

I don't know the comedians, I mean, I only saw Max Miller, it literally was the first name I saw when I came in.

Oh, well, we'll have to get you to look at the list then.

No, there's a whole list just outside, we'll go and have a look.

So we're here because we're doing two live shows, one tonight, Tuesday, one tomorrow, Wednesday.

They sold out Rory faster than the Foo Fighters.

Very good.

Hey.

Who's the Foo Fighters?

Foo Fighters, that's the nickname for Lester City.

Very good.

No, it's not.

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No, it's not.

The Foo Fighters are quite a well-known band.

So listen, we've got loads to get through.

You've just been to Turkey to look at the fallout from the Earthquake.

We're also going to talk about a little bit about Iraq, not least following the reaction we had to the two podcasts we did on that.

I'd like to talk about what's going on inside the S&P because this time next week we're going to have a new Scotland First Minister, and we haven't really done much on that.

And then I think we want to have very foreign affairs, second half, China, Russia, Macron's problems, and I know you want to talk a lot about Israel and what's happening there.

So first of all, tell us about Turkey and what was it like?

Thank you.

So I was down on the Turkish-Syrian border, and I think a couple of things.

The first is that 42,000 people were killed, and many of them in about two minutes.

And it's beyond imagining those kind of numbers, those kind of casualties.

When we're talking about bad floods in Britain, you're talking about 18, 19 people killed and the whole country comes to a halt.

This is so horrifying, and a loss of the places around the epicentre of the earthquake that I visited looked a bit like Mosul after the fights between ISIS and the Iraqi military.

The buildings looked like they'd been hit by bombs.

I was talking to an old man in the street who had been woken up by his building shaking.

He'd run out at, it was four in the morning, run out into two feet of snow in his pyjamas.

First thing he thought about was calling his family, didn't get a reply, ran around the corner to his son's apartment block, which is about five minutes away, to find that the top four stories of the apartment block had fallen sideways.

The bottom three had fallen right into the earth.

He's screaming and shouting, and eventually he hears in the middle of this snowstorm the voice of his four-year-old and eight-year-old grandchildren.

They were in the third story building, which is now a ground level because it's fallen into the earth, and the top's fallen off.

He gets in and he finds his son dead, his daughter trapped under concrete, and the two grandchildren, apart from his daughter, the only people left alive in a seven-story building by a miracle of the top falling off from the thing falling to the ground.

The thing I hadn't realized is that the tremors were still continuing.

There were two tremors when I was there, smaller tremors, but there was a big five-on-the-scale tremor last Monday so that people go to bed and their room starts shaking again, and they think the whole thing's about to happen again.

This has been going on for five weeks, and many of the people I was talking to are Syrian refugees who've been driven out of their homes by war.

They're already there as refugees?

They're there as refugees.

They've run away because there's been this horrifying war, and one of them said to me that the earthquake was actually worse than a war because, at least in a war, they felt

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there was some degree of early warning, some they could understand, even though they hated it, roughly why Bashar al-Assad was shelling them, but with an earthquake completely indiscriminate,

totally no warning, and completely unpredictable, one building will fall, the one next to it's still standing.

What were they saying about the response and the reaction of the Turkish government?

I saw a lot of the Turkish government.

I sat with one of the governors, and governors in Turkey are senior civil servants.

They're not elected officials.

He was actually the governor of the neighboring province who'd been sent down to help out, and it was pretty impressive.

He was sitting at the head of a table, he was running a meeting with the Turkish military there, with the local officials there, the maps were out, his sleeves were rolled up, supplies were coming in.

There was a lot of action with bulldozers clearing buildings.

There had been a lot of tents set up for children.

There were temporary schools operating.

One of the things, though, that isn't happening there, which is what my charity gift directly is doing, is supporting Syrian refugees, and particularly people who are running small businesses.

Are you looking at the refugees?

Absolutely.

I was focusing not on Turks, but on Syrian refugees, partly because I think their lives have been so blighted even before they got there, and partly because some services they're not receiving from the Turkish government because they're not Turks.

We're trying to provide immediate financial support.

One of the things that these catastrophes show is how powerful cash can be because every family has a different need.

The problem with traditional aid, which sends food, or sends shelter, or sends toys or clothes, is that often isn't what they need.

It's really interesting because the reason that I did the leading episode this week with Rahima Mahmoud, leader of Stop Wiga Genocide campaign, is that you were there in Turkey. She was making the point that only the United States have denounced what's happening to the Uyghurs as genocide, and that Erdogan at the start was very, very, very strongly for on the side of the Uyghurs, but was kind of pressured by China not to be.

She was nonetheless making the point that Turkey actually has got a phenomenal record at least taking refugees.

Absolutely.

The refugees that you were talking to from Syria, do they feel that they do get properly supported by the Turkish, and also more broadly, because it's interesting, at the time it happened, the earthquake was like massive news around the world.

It's kind of falling off the radar immediately, hasn't it?

Yes, and it's extraordinary given just the extent of the devastation and how much suffering

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remains, and the economies of all those places are completely shut to pieces.

All the businesses have closed.

Many, many people who can have fled.

I think the challenges of refugees, the Turkish government has, of course, been very generous.

They took in almost 3 million out of the Syrian catastrophe, and they've continued to host many people who would otherwise have gone to Europe, and these are part of the agreements which were struck by Europe and Turkey, and another million being hosted in Jordan and another million in Lebanon, but the Syrian refugees in all those places, I think, have many, many, many complaints, particularly Lebanon, where they really feel they've been treated as second-class citizens and they haven't really been able to access services, but these are countries which have huge strains.

This earthquake, we talk about Brexit knocking 4% off British GDP over seven years.

This knocked 4% off Turkish GDP in about two minutes.

The damage is beyond a matching of hundreds of billions of dollars to fix, and so the resources to Turkish state are not that great, and I think one of the other things the refugees would say is that if you are Turkish, you have a whole network of friends, relatives that you can go to, you can return to your mother's village, you can go and stay with a cousin in town.

If you're a Syrian, you're a stranger in the country, you simply don't have those networks which are supporting people.

I've got to say, listening to you now, talking about it and talking about the scale of it, it doesn't make me even angrier about Ms. Braverman and what she's up to in relation to refugee and immigration policy here.

I don't know if you've followed much her visit to Rwanda, but I found it horrific.

I found it absolutely horrific that two things, really.

The first is her demeanor.

She's definitely caught the list trust disease of loving herself and thinking that getting photographed in the most glamourizing settings, one of which is a refugee camp that's being built and her making jokes about the interior design being so good she wants to see the interior designer.

The second was the fact that, which I think is a breach of the ministerial code, not that this lot care about that, this business of only taking those media that, as it were, from the right wing of our... Was that something you never did? You never, when you went on trips, selected journalists who went with you?

No, if we went, when we went on trips, we had arrangements.

Sometimes you took pools, you might be doing a visit and you have just the BBC, but they're doing it for everybody, or just Sky, but they're doing it for everyone, just PA.

You might take a pool, but no, and the other thing I'd say is, if we had even tried to do that, there would have been an absolute outcry.

And I actually think those journalists who went and their bosses are a disgrace to journalism.

They should have said, no, I'm sorry, if this is about taking us because you want us essentially to be an extension of your press office, we're not going to play. But they did play. And so, for example, the Mail on Sunday, the Sunday Express, the Sunday Telegraph, all had headlines

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that could have been written by Soella Braverman, the special adviser. Soella vows, Soella promises, Soella will, pictures of her, you know, and there's one picture which I'm glad to say the new European have put on their front page with the headline, We Can Be So Much Better Than This, where she's, she's literally just laughing. It's not okay.

It's a bizarre image.

It's horrible.

It's very, very odd. And I don't quite know what she's doing. She's sort of, it's sort of almost like a slightly manic, isn't it? She's leaning back. We should share it with if people are interested in the newsletter, but it's a very odd image. She's sort of leaning back her mouth open, grinning as though she's sort of...

Well, somebody did one of those montages of Edmund Muncher's The Scream of Fred. And then the other thing I thought was interesting was that when she's here in the UK, she talks about illegal immigrants. And when she was there, she talks about this is going to be a great place for the refugees to live. And I just find the whole thing sick. And yet, you know, the Tories will be looking at the fact that the polls have narrowed a bit. And you know, the policy and for certain people is going to be very, very popular. I think though that when they get, what's his name, the vice chairman, Lee Anderson, he did an interview the other day where he said, like, we won the last election because we had Boris, Brexit and Corbyn. We've got none of those next time. So it's going to have to be about culture wars and trans.

You actually said that. That is their strategy. So this is not about you being there to Turkey to try and help resolve an incredible problem. This slot, I try to exploit it.

Well, particularly the Lee Anderson, Swiller-Bravman edge. And that was, I think, a conscious part of the way that Boris Johnson was doing government. It's much less part of what's coming from number 10. That's more the right to the Conservative party.

Number 10, the Home Secretary does not go on a massively high profile visit like that without Rishi Sunat saying yes.

No, 100%. 100%. But what they've inherited from Boris, I think, which is much less part of Rishi's personality, Boris Johnson, much less part of Rishi's personality is Boris Johnson was very explicitly making every single cabinet minister get involved in these cultural wars. You'll remember Oliver Dowden on statues, speeches in America. I mean, really relentless. That's policy of trying to do this. And I think, I don't know whether this began with Dominic Cummings or whether this is something that followed his thing.

But definitely began with Steve Bannon.

Definitely, Swiller-Bravman and Lee Anderson are very, very much out there on the right of the path.

So did you leave Turkey more or less hopeful?

I was very, very in the end impressed by the range of response because the problem is beyond imagineingly awful. I also left with a sense of something that we don't get so much in Britain, which is the incredible fragility of life.

And I was talking to a Syrian who had been a wealthy businessman. I mean, he'd done his degree in Italy. He spoke fluent Italian. He'd had a business as an ophthalmologist making ophthalmic products in Syria, one and a half million dollar factory near Aleppo,

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completely destroyed by rocket fire.

His family all locked up because he'd gone on one demonstration against Bashar al-Assad, goes across the border, tries to start again running a small Italian restaurant because he, when he was studying in Italy, he'd learned a little bit how to make pasta and lasagna. And that has now been taken down by the earthquake.

I guess it is a reminder that we in Britain are very lucky that for many hundreds of years we haven't lived in a world where these sudden eruptions of war and earthquakes can, because it's something that the Jordanians are very, very strong on saying, because they really feel that Syrians are so close to them, they can see so directly the sense of their but for the grace of God go high.

Well, let's stay in that region, Iraq. I don't know about you, but I was kind of a bit stunned by both the scale and the tone of the response to our two episodes on Iraq.

Yeah. What did you think? So you felt that you were feeling quite tired when you went into them because you've been actually very much involved in Gary Linnaker and the BBC all week. And then suddenly I pulled you into those two things.

No, I think it's, I think I was tired because, yeah, I hadn't been sleeping for all sorts of reasons, but I was tired and I was exhausted. It's funny because I've done several inquiries on Iraq, you know, including, I think the hunting quarry was like eight hours or something. And likewise, the Iraq inquiry was there all day. But I think because I was so tired, by the end of two hours with you, I was kind of exhausted. I remember Fiona took the dog out for a walk when she listened to it and she came back and said, has Roy Stewart turned into your therapist or what? Because she felt I was much more, I don't think I said anything that I haven't, I feel like I've said a thousand times, but she felt I was much more kind of open. Maybe tonally. Maybe it's a question of tone.

Yeah. But it was interesting. Like yesterday, 20th anniversary, and I posted a picture of myself and Rihima Mahmoud on the podcast and said how amazingly brave she was and courageous and that genocide, et cetera, et cetera. And got an avalanche of, we were back to the kind of, you know, you're a war criminal, fuck off, hundreds and hundreds of those.

Whereas the response to our podcast was like, one of my relatives, Jackson from Scotland, said, I was really worried for you. I thought it'd be the usual social media avalanche. And she said, it's 90% wow, that was amazing and 10% war criminal.

I think it's also that you were prepared to give two hours to a pretty serious detailed conversation, which doesn't happen in the media. I mean, I'm sure, this is a general theme, but I'm sure if you try to pitch to BBC or ITN, two hours of you and me just talking about the details, the Iraq war. And as it was, you know, extraordinary, I can't remember what it was, but Dom said something like 800,000 people listened to it, 800,000 individuals. And it's sort of mind blowing. And I think that it's really encouraging that people are prepared to give the time. And I thought you were actually more open than I've heard you before. And I thought you, one of the reasons people say that you were quite brave is that obviously people know that there is an entire massive group of people out there who, as you say, see you as a war criminal, a liar and all this kind of stuff. And you did your best to try to talk your way through the issue and help people understand it.

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I listened to the BBC one, Gordon Carrera, which I listened to on the drive up to Manchester City Burnley, which I'm sure you're watching, Rory, where we, we played really, really well. We were the better team, but they just scored six goals and we didn't score any. So one of those games were the better team lost. So I was listening to it and actually I was so enjoys the wrong word, but I was so into it that I ended up, this is the last 20 minutes of the last episode inside the stadium with the noisiest match buildup going on in the background. But I thought Gordon Carrera did a good job. He told a very complicated story as well. He obviously spoke to a lot of the key players, not all of them, but a lot of the key players. And I think ended up in the same place as you actually, very, very, very critical of, I think I got, I sensed in his questioning and I sensed that Richard D'Lubb in particular.

Richard D'Lubb, who was, who was head of MI6.

Who was head of MI6.

Yeah.

Yeah.

And that the intelligence and then, and also it was, it was quite jarring for me to hear because we talked a little bit about how the Americans were so kind of up for it, certainly with the Cheney side and that very much came through Gordon's interviews as well. And there were Americans there essentially saying that nobody could stop them. But I thought it was, it was interesting.

It was also an interesting thing. I mean, probably more upsetting for you, but there was an interesting article in The Guardian by Amando Iannucci, who did the thick of it, which, you know, in a sense gave you a huge burst of fame as you were reinvented as this character. But he wrote a very, very angry piece saying that actually he'd been driven to create that series out of his anger about the Iraq war. But again, he's not, one of things he says in the article is it's not so much about the individuals. He's not really particularly having a go at you or Tony Blair, but the entire system and the way that bureaucracies and systems get themselves in these surreal positions. I mean, I felt this with COVID that the first weeks of COVID from end of February to the middle of March, so almost exactly I guess three years ago now, how the British government again got itself in the most incredible, totally irrational knots that anyone from the outside could see were mad. And yet Chief Scientific Advisors, Chief Medical Officers, Secretaries of State for Health, Cabinet Meetings were saying things which were patently bizarre. You know, I was being attacked by the Deputy Chief Medical Officer for suggesting people wear masks. She was saying there's absolutely no evidence that masks make any difference. People were saying the fact that people...

I remember that. She did that bizarre little photo call in the Downey Street green room with Johnson and Sainter, you know, and people going to tell them should they wear a mask or a mask and all of it will sort of get them, you know, hands to nose and make it worse. And she said, no, I think there's considerable evidence that wearing a mask can spread the virus.

No, it was...

It was looking back. It's like crazy.

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It's extraordinary. And there was a lot of that stuff and, you know, strange stuff. Like, you know, a lot of people already in a very bad situation in Milan and the hospital is filling up, clearly just two weeks ahead of us and seven flights a day coming in from Milan and nobody doing anything.

Now, I think we should close on a wrap and just say that one of our many, many listeners inside the Conservative Government already, Johnny Mercer, felt we didn't focus enough on those who lost their lives.

I think he maybe has a point on that. What I think I was struggling with last week was I feel a pressure, particularly from the media. I don't get it with the public. In fact, in front of yesterday, I was at King's College, London, where there's now a master's degree course in the Blair years. It's been going for a few years now. And I went along. There's about 40 people all doing different aspects of the Blair government.

And all of whom you said in the tweet, almost knew more about it than you do now.

They were amazing. They were amazing. But it's interesting how, even on the 20th anniversary, very few questions actually were about Iraq. There was a lot about public sector reform, a lot about election strategy, a lot about Tony and Gordon and their relationship, a lot about Ireland. So I feel the pressure less from the public and less from academia, but within the media in particular, I feel this pressure that what they really want me to say is it was six or one half a dozen the other, which I'm just not prepared to do.

And I feel that if I do, when I am talking about veterans and loss of life and so forth, I sometimes feel that I'm heading in that direction. And so I think we should just both of us put on record that we accept we didn't focus that much on veterans. But it doesn't mean that we don't feel it very, very deep. And actually, I don't know if I've told you this, but I've been writing a novel about a veteran, which I suspect is your brother was a veteran. Yeah, connection. I mean, the I think it's a very, very powerful, painful problem, because soldiers are risking their lives and being killed. But it is a double edge sword that because what it can mean, I found as somebody who became a critic of the Iraq war and then a critic of what we were doing in Afghanistan is that the horror around the loss of soldiers lives meant it was very difficult to criticize. So many politicians would say to me, you can't say this because you would be implying that soldiers died in the campaign. And even with people like Johnny Mercer, I find it quite difficult to have a really clear sighted policy conversation about what we were doing in Iraq and Afghanistan, because he will be so conscious of the sacrifices he made.

I think he agrees with your overall assessment, though, that the intelligence people got it wrong, that the military top brass got it wrong, and the senior people in the conservative party grow. So I think you and Johnny Mercer are very close on this worry.

So it's a problem actually, particularly with military officers of all sorts, because one of the issues is that the military unfortunately shares in some of the blame of this, because it is often the very can do attitude of the military that says to the politicians and the policymakers, we can do this. We went into Helmand in Afghanistan partly because the military wanted to do it. And one of my biggest problems arguing against what they were doing was not paradoxically with the politicians, because often the politicians are very insecure when dealing with military. They don't know much about military affairs.

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They don't feel very comfortable challenging them. If a general and the classic example, it's most extreme example was that Obama was very reluctant to get involved in the search. And General Stanley McChrystal, who's a friend of mine, but is a big guy like you with medals all over his chest, walks in, says the present and then leaks to the Washington Post effectively, I need 40,000 more soldiers. And it's then almost impossible for Obama. And it's the same story in a sense that if I really try to say, which I did have to say in Helmand, you guys are really not making things better. Things are not improving. You're creating more enemies. You're killing a lot of people. That is very, very uncomfortable for people, even junior officers on the ground who want to believe that what they're doing is worthwhile. And I got a nice note from Major General James Cowan, who was a key player as a regimental commander of the Black Watch when they went into fluture in Iraq. But he is still pushing back a bit on my criticism. He wants to say, Baghdad's changed a lot. There are elections. There's now a gay bar in Baghdad. It's a different place.

Those things are true.

Those things are true. But boy, last time I was in Baghdad, it didn't feel like the kind of place you were going to nip out to a gay bar. I mean, you're stuck behind a lot of big concrete barriers, barbed wire, humvees in the streets, militia everywhere. It's a terrifying place still in Iraq, I'm afraid.

Okay, well, listen, let's take a break and we'll come back and talk about SMP, China, Russia, a bit of France, a bit of Israel.

Inspiring the next generation of dreamers and doers, APX and Portia present Karol Masiklat and Heming Luan.

Humanity is always benefited from different types of thinkers. Children shouldn't feel that because they're different, they just have to get through another day.

The Founders Initiative by APX and Portia.

This week's Restless Policy is sponsored by The New European and as regulars as well know, I am the paper's editor-at-large and I've been a big fan of the paper since it launched immediately after the Brexit referendum. This week, I have been incredibly proud of the way it's conducted itself. It's called out the Stop the Boats legislation in a direct bold way. Great example of how important independent press is when so many of the mainstream titles

have just become PR machines for this government, not least those who went to Rwanda with Mrs. Braverman.

Now, the T-shirt they produced with the slogan, It's People, Not Boats sums up, I think, rather cleverly, everything that's wrong with Svela Braverman and the awful legislation she's trying to force through.

And I saw you had us a modelling one of these T-shirts on the way to that football match, which you don't want to talk about too much.

Sorry, we don't want to mention that football match.

I normally complain the New European doesn't have enough football, but this week, there's no such thing as it.

We're not going to talk about that Burnley match, Burnley match, the city has just taken out.

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Okay, okay. And when I, having posted that photo on Twitter, I've had many, many requests from people asking where they can get one. Well, I'll tell you the way to get one for absolutely nothing. You subscribe to The New European and for just £1 a week, you can get full digital access to all their journalists and for £2 a week, you can get the newspaper delivered to your home every single week. And these are the best deals you're going to get.

And every new subscriber will get one of the T-shirts that Rory so admired with the slogan it's people, not boats. If you went to a shop to buy it, you'd pay £24.95.

And you went for the one of the Burnley-Claret colours.

I did, I did, but we played in black, which is how I felt at the end of the day. Anyway, let's go to www.TheNewEuropean.co.uk forward slash T-R-I-P. That's www.TheNewEuropean.co.uk forward slash trip.

So welcome back to the rest of this politics with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

And here we are live, as it were, in the London Palladium. And you, I think, have been having sneaky-beaky secret meetings with the SMP, is that right?

I think I have conversations with people that I know.

Very good.

I mean, sneaky-beaky. Is that an Etonian phrase?

No, it's a sneaky-beaky.

It's a spy.

It's a spy.

A beak.

A beak.

Got it.

Got it.

So now, if you think about it, Rory, you live in Scotland when you're not in June.

And within a week, we'll have a new First Minister after a long period of absolute dominance by First Alex Salmon and then Nicola Sturgeon.

And I think this is a pivotal moment for Scotland, but also, I think, possible implications for the general election as well, because I do feel that a lot of what's happening at the moment could open the door to Labour and really strengthen them in Scotland.

Which would be amazing.

So just to remind you, listen to this again, Scotland was a huge Labour heartland and was all the way from the Second World War through.

And when I came into Parliament in 2010, Labour still had a very commanding position in Parliament and was mocking the Conservative Party for the fact that there were twice as many Pandas in the end of Brazil as there were Conservative MPs.

There was only one Conservative MP, David Mundell, just north of the border.

And then there was a catastrophic collapse of the Labour position almost overnight in Scotland so that they ended up back in the comical position of the Pandas in the end of Brazil.

And then Murray was the 50% of the Pandas.

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From which they've been trying to build up, again, with some interesting things, like Douglas Alexander, your friend, the veteran Labour cabinet minister, now prepared to stand for a seat in Scotland.

But it will be very helpful to put it mildly for Keir Starmer if they can really rebuild the position in Scotland and really helpful for the cause that I believe in deeply, which is keeping the union together.

So we've got three candidates, and what my sneaky beaky is, is that the disruption that is being caused, that a lot of it has been driven by Alex Hammond, that Ash Regan, who was this third candidate that nobody really expected, essentially is very close to him, independence fundamentalist, I believe they call her.

And that's an interesting one because, of course, she, her supporters listening to this will be very angry about this because, again, to remind us that Alex Hammond is not exactly, although, you know, both of us are quite fond of him.

It's a bit of a political liability to be seen too much as Alex Hammond's candidate because he is, well, he got himself in real trouble and he's got it.

Yeah, he kicked out and said to be his own party.

So she's not going to win, and I think even her supporters would accept that.

So the choice of first minister is going to be between Kate Forbes, who is very socially conservative.

Yeah.

I mean, she's a, we free, so she comes from the free Church of Scotland, which is generally seen as a more socially conservative end of the Church of Scotland, Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

And probably closer to that salmon wing, as it were, than the progressive wing.

She's certainly anti-Nicholas Sturgeon, I mean, she is very much campaigning as the change candidate and trying to portray Hamza Youssef as the continuity candidate.

And that's because four of the existing cabinet have already come out for him from a very small cabinet of whom two of them are actually running and Nicola Sturgeon will declare.

So he's very much.

Well, interesting.

I don't know if you saw Nicola Sturgeon's parents have come out for Hamza Youssef and her sister, Gillian, did a Facebook post that said, I would rather vote Tory than vote for either of these two, meaning Forbes and Regan.

And she said, we all know what their game is and we all know who's pulling the strings.

Well, this is all part of the whole thing.

So basically there, it's a huge fight within the SMP and Hamza Youssef is the establishment candidate allied to Nicola Sturgeon, allied to her husband, who was the chief executive of the SMP.

He's just had to resign.

He's just had to resign.

I mean, just before we get back to the race, I mean, there is something very, very strange about that whole thing.

Now that Nicola Sturgeon's left and now things are coming unraveled, we're beginning to see

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how very odd it was.

He continued as the chief executive of the SMP, married to the leader for years and nobody seemed to see any conflict of interest.

Nobody thought it was weird.

Nobody suggests he should stand down.

And it's now becoming clear that there's an investigation about 600,000 pounds of donations, the SMP, which nobody seems to be able to track down.

He lent the SMP 107,000 pounds of his own money short for his step down and the Sunday Mail produced the story saying that the membership of the SMP had collapsed, that it collapsed by 30,000, at which point the chief press spokesman for the SMP came out and said, the reporting is not just wrong.

It's flat wrong by approximately 30,000.

Having been given the figures by, it would seem, Peter Morel.

And he's now had to resign because it turns out the Sunday Mail was right.

Yet the membership of the SMP has collapsed since 2001 by about 40%, and they were trying to cover this up.

It was quite refreshing, though, that somebody fairly senior in a political party and a government chose to resign, unlike others.

He seems to have real cross-party respects, actually.

Money foot.

Yeah, he does.

People seem to like him.

Well, let's just quickly on this because this is very much your world.

What does it feel like, and how do you get yourself in the position of going out and saying that brutally to the Sunday Mail, this is a lie, this is complete nonsense?

Because you go, as the press officer, you would go to the people who you assume have the knowledge of their fingertips and you take their reaction as gospel.

Some of the worst situations we got into were where you ask the people who are at the center of something what the facts are and you rely on them because that's the only way you have of establishing the facts.

In a sense, he felt he had to resign.

Why?

He felt he had to resign because he had fundamentally misled a reporter who had asked him a specific question.

He could have said, I don't have the figures.

He could have said, I don't know, but he'd obviously gone to check, asked the people who knew and was misled.

Now, of course, he wasn't knowing who he was leading and blah, blah, blah, we're into the semantics.

But I also think it was interesting that it happened at a time when we have this incredible charade of Johnson when I don't believe there's a person on the planet who doesn't think he's a liar and that he lied to Parliament, but that he's got this taxpayer-funded lawyer

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telling him how to get out.

Did you see the wonderful cartoon today?

Of the Bear in the Woods.

The Bear in the Woods, yeah.

Oh, my God.

That's what you want to tell us about.

So the Bear's sitting on his loo in the Woods reading his paper.

And it said, Boris, I didn't lie.

Is Boris Johnson a liar?

Yeah.

So I think it is very, very, it's very hard to call, but I think the other thing, there's a lot of anger in the SNP membership that particularly Kate Forbes, actually, I think people have been surprised, she really went for him during one of the debates.

She pulled back later.

Yeah.

She basically said he was a useless minister.

Yeah.

And she's called Nicola Sturgeon's government a mediocre government.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Because first Sam and then Nicola Sturgeon have been so dominant, the next leader is not going to be able to bring things together easily, very quickly.

And meanwhile, by the way, very quietly under the radar, Kirsten has been up there literally every week at the moment.

Well, and also the generational change.

So I was thinking about my own little political career.

So we've gone from a world that I first knew of leaders like Blair and Theresa May who were born in the 1950s, to then the world that I went into 2010, 2015 of leaders born in the 1960s, like David Cameron and Keir Starmer.

Then we shot with the conservative leadership race, with Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak until leaders born in the 1970s, Kate Forbes is born in the 1990s.

I know.

I know.

I mean, it's a real shift, which means that all the things we assume are part of the living memory from the fall of the Berlin Wall, the financial crisis, all this stuff is stuff which is, you know, either before she was born or part of her childhood.

I did an interview yesterday with BBC, they're doing lots of stuff in preparation for the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement.

And I did it at King's because I was about to do these students, apart from the mature students, not a single one of them was born before we came to power in 1997, not one.

And we're making the point that for a generation that's grown up in Northern Ireland, say, I mean, there's obviously collective memory of the violence, but there's no actual memory for a whole generation now.

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So, yeah, Kate Forbes will be one of the, if she wins and, you know, she might well win.

She'll be one of the youngest political leaders in the world.

Good.

So let's talk about two leaders who are, shall we say, at the other end with the political longevity scale, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping.

So China is really pushing to portray itself as it moves into a position of being a major global power, also as a peacemaker, so the first big news, which was genuinely astonishing. Saudi and Iran.

Yeah.

China brokered diplomatic relations between Saudi and Iran and to remind people that split between Sunni Islam represented by Saudi Arabia and Shia Islam represented by Iran has been fundamental to all the problems in the Middle East, certainly since the invasion of Iraq, but of course a long time before that.

And British foreign policy for my whole time in the foreign office was all about what can be done to try to build bridges between Sunni and Shia populations.

And Saudi Arabia has a very large minority population of its own.

Bahrain is torn apart by Sunni-Shia conflict.

Yemen has seen a group called the Houthis who are related to the Shia being funded by Iran attacking Saudi Arabia.

And these fights, these proxy wars in which missiles supplied by the Iranians are being fired by UAE or Saudi, drove the Abraham Accords where Israel had a reconciliation with Saudi and UAE, which was anti-Iranian.

So China pulling this off has pulled off something that the Europeans have completely failed to do, the United States has completely failed to do, and it changes a loss of the mechanisms in the region.

And it is all that if that had been an American president, say, who had been at the center of that, it would have been like a huge global thing.

And actually, even you and I, who follow it quite closely, I was trying to work out what is the actual nature of the deal, what has actually been agreed, and it's quite vague.

But what they have done is managed to get to competing, essentially warring powers, real powers to say, we'll stop.

And it is quite an achievement.

It's exciting.

So they've reopened diplomatic relations, embassies will reopen, ambassadors will be exchanged. Israel will now be very nervous because they'll be worried that Saudi is no longer going to be a reliable counterbalance against Iran.

Saudi will be hoping this will give them benefit in Yemen.

Iran will hope that this is going to give them more security guarantees, and they will hope that Saudi will begin cooperating with them on trying to do what Iran now claims it wants to do, which is civil nuclear power.

In the meantime, the tragic story of the demonstrations against the Iranian regime, which we've covered, and where I was under so much criticism as maybe you were too,

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my inbox full of angry Iranians, because I'd said that I thought that this revolution wasn't going to be able to topple the regime, and they really wanted to hear that we were going to...

This was the one that was going down.

The Iranian regime may well see that, and the fact that the Russians are now providing the Iranians with fighter jets as all part of the Iranian regime's stabilizing situation.

The whole thing is also part of this bigger picture where China is asserting its own power and strength and authority on everything, and they've done it economically, not least in your part of the world and in Africa.

They've done it politically and geo-strategically, and that's why I think that I'm not sure that she and Putin will necessarily even have seen their visit through the lens of Ukraine.

I think they see it as a much bigger...

So here, and I suspect in the United States and most of Europe, it will have been covered as this is China showing its, whether tacitly or overtly, its support for Putin in relation to Ukraine.

But I'd say the bigger message that they're showing is the Americans are no longer the big show in town, and these authoritarian powers, you take it seriously or you don't need your peril.

I think you put your finger on the main thing, which is America.

What binds them together is that both of them are now feel that America has seized them as a leading adversary, as we've talked about in the show.

All the US Congress and Senate wants to talk about is anti-Chinese rhetoric at the moment. So it's not very surprising if both China and Russia are being targeted that hard by the US, that they will be looking for any number of ways to reassert a world where America is marginalized, and that's what in the end this will be about.

One thing, of course, to relate back to our Iraq pods that's quite striking as a statistic is that the US spent over \$3 trillion on Iraq and Afghanistan, and that is almost exactly the same amount of money that the Chinese spent on their Belt and Road Initiative.

And it's a really interesting two different choices over 20 years, and the Chinese would say they don't get involved in these military interventions.

Instead, they save their money, and they have created this extraordinary economic infrastructure and power base through the world with the same amount of money that the US spent on war.

The Americans will be worried that the signal from what she did in going to Moscow and this kind of really ostentatious display that they put on together, that the next step might be military support.

Yeah, I also encourage people to listen to your leading pod interview about the Uyghur issue, and just to remind people there that this is the Muslim population in Northwest China, a huge way that Northwest China is stretching almost towards Afghanistan's Central Asia, an area called Xinjiang.

And these are not traditionally a Han Chinese population.

In fact, they have links to Turkic groups, that's why there was a lot of support from Turkey originally, and they speak a language with Turkic connections.

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They had originally an independent Buddhist civilization there, amazing place to visit, but at the moment, very, very sadly, another example of an area of which Tibet is a more extreme example, where the Chinese government has pursued a very deliberate policy of moving Han Chinese populations in marginalizing the local community, demolishing a lot of the historical remains of places like Kashgar, which is this legendary caravan city.

It was interesting, Reema, she said that the point at which she realized this is literally as they're going to try and wipe us out completely, was when the official who had been in charge of the Chinese Communist Party in Tibet was moved to Xinjiang and took over.

I found, funny enough, at the swimming pool this morning, there was somebody who'd been listening to it, and actually said, I felt, actually, it's a real pity you weren't there, because I felt of all the interviews we've done, though she's the least known person I found in the most moving.

And I mean, she told this story about a father and a son who were trying to flee, got in league with people traffickers.

The people trafficker said, well, only one of you can go on this flight, we've only got one seat left, but the second one can come later.

So the father said to his son, will you go?

And the next time he heard of him, his son was in Syria with ISIS as a suicide bomber.

And the way she told us the story about her last phone call with her brother, who basically said to her, look, just never phone us, it's just unbelievable.

And the point she was making about China as a power, she was arguing that the only government that has actually called it out as genocide is Trump's America.

And that, of course, is part of their battle with China, as opposed to any luck in the week.

So she's now exiled in the UK, and she's trying to persuade our government to come out and call it as Israel.

Which brings us to the incredible question of Israel, and many, many things that would interest you in the story.

So fundamental story is that there is an attempt by Netanyahu's government to try to undermine the position of the judiciary.

Back to the basics, Israel has got a system a bit like the traditional British constitution with a very, very dominant parliament without a great deal of checks and balances, no written constitution, no federal structures, no upper house.

And it's got a judiciary, however, which is independently appointed, not by the government, and which has tended to take some pretty liberal measures.

So the Israeli courts have, for example, stopped some settlements.

They took a big decision to exclude entirely one of Netanyahu's ministers because he was a repeat offender on tax, in fact, he was in jail for two out of three years.

All of this has made the Israeli right very angry, and they are introducing laws in the parliament so that the government can appoint the judges or have more control of the judges and so the judges can't interfere in this way.

And it's led, and this is where I thought it would be of interest to you, is actually led by a right-wing think tank, not in this case, based in Tufton Street, but funded by

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big US billionaire money, very peculiar money, a guy who made his money gambling and whose training process for his hedge fund investors involves months of playing Texas hold them. Anyway, this guy, who's made many, many billions, supports this think tank which is called Kohelet, which is the Hebrew word for ecclesiastics.

They always have good names, don't they, the right-wing think tank?

You're always asking me, actually, I think I've been mean to you, you're always asking me questions about it.

My normal conversation with Alastor's listeners will now involve some saying, who's Peter Simpson?

And I go, I don't know.

And he goes, you haven't heard of Peter Simpson.

So this thing's called ecclesiasties.

What's ecclesiasties?

It's a chapter in the Bible.

Yeah, and what's it about then?

I've never read it.

So ecclesiasties, you will have heard of because it's the one that begins vanity of vanity.

It's always vanity, very kind of gloomy.

Did you read this last night or do you know this?

No, I do know.

I know about ecclesiasties.

I hope the Archbishop's not listening.

I pretend I know about the Bible when I read the Archbishop.

And anyway, since then, there have now been huge demonstrations in Israel, essentially.

They have been, let's just put it in some perspective, they have been massive.

They've been almost French style, and they do seem to be having an effect because they started to water down the bill or they sort of slowing down the process.

Yeah.

Well, it's very, very odd because Netanyahu, who's the prime minister, has had to recuse himself apparently from the process.

But well, he's got a few judges on his case already, hasn't he?

Well, so he, yeah, exactly.

So to remind people of the conflict of interest here, he was facing the most extraordinary series of corruption charges.

He was accused of taking 300,000 in bribes and gifts in exchange for helping somebody sort out their American visa and their tax situation.

He's accused of getting positive coverage in one of the Israeli newspapers in exchange for using law to take out their rival.

And while all this has been going on, driven by the judges, he's now coming in with a platform to try to remove the power of the judges.

Do you think he wants to do this or is he being pushed to do this by these very, very, very right-wing people who he's had to take into the government as a result of the election?

Well, I think he was somebody who was traditionally made polite noises about the judiciary.

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But I think since they've turned on him and he's in danger of going to jail, his sympathy for the judges has gone.

I mean, but this right-wing people, I mean, I don't know whether you followed Smotrich, the finance minister, who is absolutely extraordinary.

He's worse than the guy that was being dealt with before by the judges.

Yeah.

So Smotrich is on record saying the gay pride parades as bestiality.

He lives himself in a legal settlement.

He's just been in France in front of a map claiming the historic state of Israel includes Jordan.

He says the Palestinians don't exist.

He shouted in parliament that Ben-Gurion should have thrown all the Arabs out of Israel.

And this guy is the finance minister.

The thing about protests is interesting, isn't it?

So I was looking at some of the pictures of the protests that were really impressive.

And then likewise, we've had in France, poor old Macron literally just tried to raise the pension age from 62 to 64.

And he's had to do a presidential decree to get it through.

They've had massive trouble on the streets.

They've had rubbish piling up.

And it's not going to go away.

In fact, it's probably going to get accelerated.

And in parliament, to my right, the deputy speaker got shouted down by the entire parliament singing the Marseillais.

Absolutely.

They're singing the anthem.

The poor private minister, Elizabeth Bourne, she had to go up there really without knowing whether by the end of the day she would be in a job.

He came very, very close to losing essentially a vote of confidence.

So you've got the Israelis protesting against changes to the judiciary.

You've got the French out on the streets with this.

Now, fair enough, our public sector work is actually put on a very impressive march on the day of the budget.

But at least there's no coverage, by the way.

I didn't see it until I was watching the German television news that evening.

But that was a pretty impressive thing.

But what is it about Britain?

Because I get the feeling that, I mean, our government, I'm not saying Sunnah's on a par with Netanyahu, Johnson certainly was, but, you know, there's so much bad stuff going on in this country.

And yet, well, well, well, well is what it is.

I think the other thing that's striking about Israel is that the situation amongst the Palestinian communities is horrifying.

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Oh, yeah.

The Palestinian Authority has lost all credibility.

It's got an aging corrupt leadership.

And power is breaking into these very fragmented areas, which are surrounded by barbed wire and walls, all with their own fragmented leadership, increasingly radical.

And in Jordan, certainly many, many of my Jordanian Palestinian friends are now concluding that the two-state solution is finished, which is so sad that they no longer think

there's a credible two-state solution, they're now pushing the argument to say, let us move the argument onto human rights for Palestinians within a single Israeli territory and demand the vote within a single Israeli territory, which they're not going to get.

And they're doing it because they think that if they can move the conversation onto rights, they will be able to portray Israel as an apartheid state.

But the people demonstrating against Netanyahu are not demonstrating on the Palestinian cause at all.

Because the old Israeli left has disappeared.

And actually, this demonstration doesn't have party banners.

My friend's been on these demonstrations commenting the difference from the 90s.

It's not...

There's no visible organization.

So what is it?

Is it the silent majority coming out?

It's a sort of Facebook revolution, it's like the Arab Spring, there's no clear leadership, there's no clear party organization.

It's just a temporary coalition of protest and disgust against what this right-wing government is doing to the constitution.

And it's a fight between, in a sense, between secular Israel and the founding socialist origins of Israel, and this new right-wing, more settler-dominated identity that's beginning to emerge.

Well, that's very, really interesting.

Look, this has been quite depressing, hasn't it, today?

We've got to get our mood lifted before we go and do the Max Melanthal.

I'm going to give you something quite nice to end on, though, Rory.

We've got the builders have come in.

So I've had to clear out my office at the top of the house.

And it's just, honestly, it's just full of old rubbish and stuff, but I've actually discovered some really, really interesting stuff.

They classify documents.

No, this is actually a press-cutting, Rory.

It's press-cutting from the Daily Telegraph, I don't have a date on it, but it's written by somebody you may have heard of called Boris Johnson.

And the headline is, just you wait, Campbell.

And the subheading is, are we really supposed to believe that the media will remain forever brow-beaten by one former mirror hack, I think that's me.

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Anyway, the final piece of this not very well-written piece, trying to take apart my tenure as the Chief Press Secretary to the government, is, Alasdair Campbell will look back on these months as his golden epoch.

Let him enjoy his hour in the sun while he can, for already the political landscape is changing.

The skies are darkening.

Alasdair Campbell knows the iron law of Fleet Street as well as anyone.

It applies to him and his master as much as anyone else.

The higher the media build you up, the further and more terrible your fall will be.

It will be a grisly spectacle when it comes, but grimly satisfying, of course.

And I see that you're reading that with some grim satisfaction yourself.

I feel more than grim satisfaction, I feel happy satisfaction that the putrescence that is Boris Johnson and his wretched alleged leadership of this country is finally, I hope, being flushed down the toilet.

So there we are.

I have to go and lie down and rest and meditate and have bananas and drink lots of water and get ready.

And if you've heard some banging and noise in the background, we're right in the heart of London.

I think there's quite a lot of building work going on.

There is, yeah.

Thank you.

So, see you soon.

See you soon.

Thank you.