

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Powerful speeches, population control and Isabel Oakeshott

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And me, Alistair Campbell.

Very good. OK, now here we are. Joe Erwood to start us off, Alistair. Joe Erwood asks, what decides an election? So he says, or she, maybe? Oppositions don't win elections, governments lose them. Discuss, Alistair.

I think you need both. I think you need both. I think that if you go back to 97, the country was fed up with the Tories, no doubt about that. But to get the sort of big win that we got, there had to be the sense of the opposition also winning. I think the reason why David Cameron, for example, didn't win in 2010 is that he was relying too much on the government losing and didn't actually do enough to get the opposition winning. So you definitely need both.

So just to talk that through a little bit, and because this is obviously relevant to how Kirstama, who's 20 points ahead in the opinion polls and looks like he can barely lose in the run against the Conservatives. But I suppose what you'd say is the lesson is David Cameron was leading strongly in the opinion polls, not by that amount, but leading strongly for two years and looked like he was going to win a big majority. And then when the event came, he didn't really break through against Gordon Brown in 2010. What was your sense about the weakness of that campaign? What was David Cameron not brave enough, not clear enough? How was it he got that wrong?

I don't think that the public brought into the idea of there being an alternative government there. I think they're quite like Cameron. And I think they thought he was quite a credible figure. But I just don't think there was a sense of him being, he was all the talk was about him changing the Conservative Party rather than the country. And I think there was a, there was a sort of just that sense of them being against everybody. And that's sort of the country just decided, well, let's just sort of throw Nick Clegg into the mix and see if the coalition idea kind of works. But I so I think it was that whereas I think we did in 97 have a really strong positive agenda. And the reason, you know, we talked last week about Keir Starmer's five missions. And actually, he's written a quite an interesting long piece in the new states from this week, where he's, he's building on some of the things we talked about last week, where I think it really is about sort of, you know, he's leading to get into a place when the election comes of those people who at the moment maybe aren't thinking too much about shifting vote, that actually when they get to the election, he wants there to be absolute clarity about what he wants those people to be thinking Labour stands for. So I hope that's the plan. And I think at the moment Labour's lead is I said this in this speech I made the other day, I do think at the moment Labour's lead is largely driven or primarily driven by people being sick to death of the Tories. But they've got to keep going with the positive agenda and they've got to develop it and pound it because that ultimately is what will take them over the line. Here's one for both of us. Stephen Clark, what was the best speech you ever heard?

Well, I'm going to give a bit of a shout out if I'm thinking about parliamentary speeches

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Powerful speeches, population control and Isabel Oakeshott

to a very short speech which Tom Tuggenhardt gave during the Afghan withdrawal. It was, and if people want to see it, it's easy, successful on YouTube. It was a really extraordinary example of a modern parliamentary speech at a time when I was beginning to lose faith in parliamentary rhetoric because it had a little bit of informality. It had raw emotion.

It had a very serious argument, both a sort of argument about the character of Britain and a policy argument about what we should have done. And it was delivered with real kind of sincerity and force. How about you? What's your favourite speech?

I'm going to go for, if it's in Parliament, I'm going for John Smith against John Major. If people want to look it up, just look up The Man with the Non-Midgers Touch. It was one of the funniest but devastatingly brutal speeches I've ever seen. And it was so funny that the Tory MPs were all laughing, but basically the sense they were giving was they were laughing

at the road divide, at the road decline. I think the other one, I do think Neil Kinnock's famous militant speech when Eric Hefferer stormed out and Derek Hatton, the militant leader from Liverpool, was sort of angry and gesticulating in the crowd. That was a truly brilliant speech. I mean, Neil was a great orator. And then I once saw Bill Clinton make a speech in Belfast that I remember thinking, God, this is good. I still think big speech is really, really important. And I wish we had more of them in our politics now.

They can be incredible, can't they? And humour can be so incredibly important.

I will look up the John Smith one, honestly. It was so funny. It was the time when we'd just had the Grand National, which had to restart. A hotel had fallen into the sea in Scarborough. I shouldn't be laughing at that. But he just sort of made all this cocktail of stuff going wrong. He made it all like it was John Mayer's fault, but he did it with such wit that, yeah, that was powerful.

Well, you get these tiny, tiny moments in the House of Commons. I remember it was very unfair to Jeremy Corbyn, but it was an extraordinary moment. I was in the House for this, where Jeremy Corbyn had said very, very solemnly. He was talking very slowly. It was during the Brexit thing. I've just been to Brussels, and I went to see the European Commission and I went to see the officials. And do you know what they said to me? And then one of the Tories shouted across, who are you? And literally the whole place fell about, including all the Labour MPs behind Corbyn couldn't stop laughing at him. And it was an extraordinary kind of reminder of the fact that you can't be too pompous in the House of Commons. It's a very, very dangerous place to sort of try to be too slow and grand.

Yeah, yeah.

Question for you then. Very large cabinet. Francis, why is the cabinet so big? How can the PM manage over 20 people? And I'd love to come in after you on that one.

Well, the number of people who can take cabinet salaries is limited in law. But what seems to have happened in recent years is that people who aren't necessarily bunged into a cabinet job, attend cabinet. So whenever you have those photos of the cabinet, particularly when Johnson was there, it's like standing room only. Look, I think that a cabinet of roughly 20, you build the government according to government departments. I think 20 is manageable.

And I think the way to manage them, you do have to prioritise. You prioritise according

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Powerful speeches, population control and Isabel Oakeshott

to governments overall objectives and strategy to meet those objectives. But I think 20 is about right.

So when I was in the cabinet, there were, I guess, 23 secretaries of state. And then there were about seven other people who'd been invited along, more junior ministers, the chief working people. So there were nearly 30 around the table. And it was pretty dire. Essentially what would happen is the Prime Minister, who was entries may would set the agenda for the day. And then every one of us would talk. And but there wasn't any back and forth. It was like a little statement from each one of us, usually with Michael Gove quite kind of cheekily coming in towards the end, trying to make a witticism in summer. But it wasn't a sensible way of getting a discussion going. It was a lot of opportunity for us to grandstand. All of us would make some grand comment, often not on our own departments subject.

I haven't got the relevant telegraph article in front of me, but one of these WhatsApp exchanges from Matt Hancock's phone is Hancock saying to Michael Gove, what is this meeting for? And Michael Gove saying, to allow everybody to express invent, then you and I will decide the policy.

Well, that's very much the way that they approach it.

That's obviously that's the way he operated.

Yeah.

No, but I mean, I remember talking to Ken Clark about this. And so Ken Clark, obviously, had father of the house eventually when he left. He'd been in the House of Commons since the early seventies. He'd been minister under Ted Heath and Thatcher and Major and Cameron. And he said that cabinet had really deteriorated over his time, that he remembered that cabinet meetings used to be two or three hours long. They were very significant opportunities for conversation where people could really get into things and prime ministers took their cabinet minister seriously. And certainly by the time he returned to David Cameron's cabinet in 2010, he thought they were very short cursory affairs where David Cameron was trying to keep to a clock. Obviously wanted to get everybody out the door pretty quickly. And certainly from Ken Clark's point of view, he didn't think that the country was really being run by the cabinet anymore. Now, of course, he and others to some extent would blame you and Tony Blair for the move away from these long three, four-hour cabinet meetings towards what was known as sofa government, wasn't it?

Yeah, but Tony would always say, if the first time I know that somebody's got a problem with something we're doing is when it's discussed at the cabinet table, we're not managing things properly. Look, when Harold Wilson was prime minister, you had cabinet meetings that went on for days and Tony Ben made sure that they went on for, I exaggerate, very long cabinet meetings. And so I think it is about political management. And I know what you're saying about that thing. I can remember, particularly when we used to have political cabinet meetings where the civil servants would have to leave and sometimes they were away days and you just got everybody feeling they had to tell an anecdote from which you were meant to take some broader strategic point. And the fact is, as you know, within a cabinet, there is a hierarchy, there is a power structure, the, you know, the chancellor, the home secretary, the foreign secretary, the GOVs, the people who have kind of got political power, whatever

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Powerful speeches, population control and Isabel Oakshott

job they've got. And then you have everybody else who's kind of they're chipping in from time to time. But I think that, and you know, you also know that the cabinet committee structures, that's where a lot of the decisions are actually made. And I think that's a good thing. Yeah, although even those were pretty grim. I was on the grandest of those committees, which was the National Security Council, which was a Cameron invention. And that was a pretty dire and miserable thing. Right. Here we are. Advice to teenage Alastair, Luke Blazegerski. If you could go back to your teenage selves and say, don't do that, do this, what would it be and why?

I would definitely say, don't smoke. Because even though I stopped smoking 35 years ago, I still think I have a bit of an overhanging my health from that. Certainly, I would have said, stop drinking so much. I actually, I know people think that you and I read a lot of books, but I wish I'd read a lot more when I was younger. I really wish that I had. I look back now at my, even though I did well at school, I did okay at university, but I look back and think I had all those years when I really could have read and I didn't. So I would say, put the drink down and read a book. What about you?

Yeah, I'm with you. I sort of agree with that one. One of the things is that I'd read a lot when I was at school, but when I got to Oxford, I basically stopped reading, partly because I felt guilty because I was never working on the work that I was meant to be doing. So I never felt that I could read for fun around the edges. And I think I would have said, look, even if you're not getting your essay done, use the opportunity to read. Don't spend your whole time pathetically trying to take girls out for a cup of tea.

A cup of tea. Is that what you did? A cup of tea. Lovely.

Well, that was... There we are. Let's maybe draw a veil into a cup of tea.

I had a much better chat up line. I said, you know, do you want to come to a burdly game? There we are.

James Thomas, who would you rather trust your phone with? Isabel Oakshot or Xi Jinping? It's very, very good. Very good. I like it. Okay. Well, I think Xi Jinping is probably already got it.

He's got it. Got it all. I think I've complained to you before. One of the things that really annoyed me as a minister is I'd leave my phone, for example, when I went to Saudi Arabia, as I went into a meeting, they'd want to take it off you. They claimed security reasons. I'd come out and they would have put so much spyware on my phone that the battery would last about 45 minutes before I'd have to recharge it because it was just transmitting my banal nonsense to the Saudi intelligence service all the time. Eddie G, you both have an appreciation, the importance of arts, literature, et cetera. What's one thing you read, watched in your youth, which had a profound impact on your worldview?

Oh, God. That's a good one, isn't it? I don't know why. The book that just popped into my head was *This Sporting Life* by David Storey. David Storey, I think. It was a book about a rugby league player in a northern working class town. I don't know why that book had such an impact on me, but it did. It wasn't just the fact that it was about the sport. It was about the kind of... I think it is one of those books that really got me interested in this whole theme of class in British life and British history and so forth. I'm going to go for that one.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Powerful speeches, population control and Isabel Oakeshott

Very good.

What about you?

For me, I think it was a biography of, predictably enough, of Lawrence Vorabia by an American academic called John Mack, written in the 70s, called A Prince of Our Disorder, which was an incredibly sympathetic, complex account of Lawrence's struggle with trying to be a hero, trying to live in the 20th century, trying to make sense of his life, trying to make sense of Arab nationalism and his own failures. I took that book very, very seriously. It's still in print. I still think it's probably the best, most sympathetic biography I know by Mack.

Okay.

So, let's take a short break.

I'm going to give you two questions. They go together. John Brown, I've asked a question before on perhaps one of the most controversial topics no one dare raise. What do we need to do to reverse population growth on our planet, given that every aspect of the mess we're in is a direct or indirect consequence of it? James Morgan, why isn't Rory focusing on population control and contraception in Nigeria as well as lifting people out of poverty? There are too many humans.

Goodness. It's very interesting because, of course, there's a big move in many, many countries - Japan, the US, Germany, Russia - to increase populations because Africa is unusual, being one of the few parts of the world where the population is growing and where we're probably going to end up with 40% of the world's population in Africa by the end of this century. Whereas, of course, in Japan, you've got the problem of population collapse, and even in Britain, our population will only continue to grow almost entirely through immigration, will be the reason why our population grows. It won't be through our own birth rate because

...

Well, Soella Bravham is going to have to go for that term. Sure. I mean, how are we going to get any immigration? No, but population growth, as you say, population growth is happening in parts of the world, but our countries require it because we've got so many old people and so few young people.

Well, this is the problem, isn't it, that we're in this very, very unstable situation.

On the one hand, people don't want the populations to endlessly grow. Britain has a denser population

than most countries in Europe, denser population than India. But you're absolutely right.

If you look at Japan, if you don't bring in young people, you end up in a very, very bad situation. I mean, the Japanese economy is paralyzed. Japanese society has basically become senile and sclerotic, and it's very, very difficult to look after the elderly in Japan because there just aren't enough young people. But equally, the answer to this, of course, has to be eventually to get to a stable population with the right shape.

What you don't want is either endlessly bringing in more and more young people to try to look after your elderly, or on the other hand, a collapse in population, which carries its own problems with it. By the end of the century, the world population map will be very different. The populations are places like Russia. Population is China. We've discussed that. Chinese population

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Powerful speeches, population control and Isabel Oakeshott

dropped by 10 million this year, and it's going to start dropping very, very deeply. Why am I not in favor of population control in Africa? I think the answer is that the best solution really to population growth in the end comes through rising living standards, that as you get wealthier, people have fewer kids, and one of the reasons why in Mali or northern Nigeria, people are still having average children's size of 7.2 per family is because poverty and insecurity and infant mortality makes them feel that they need that number of kids to help them survive.

What about the contraception point?

Well, I'm very much in favor of contraception. I mean, I think family planning organizations are really important, but there is an issue which is that in Uganda, for example, the president's wife is a very active Christian, hasn't been supportive of this, and this is true of many countries, sadly, that there are religious objections to doing what needs to be done to really help control population.

Now, Rory, we got a bit of flak last week. I don't know if you noticed, but in some of the comments and questions that although people admired our honesty in saying how useless we were around the house, there was a suggestion that we had to commit. Emma Atkins, following the discussion of sharing the domestic load, which both of you admitted was important, but neither of you do 50%, could you commit to taking over one activity in your household? It was disappointing to hear the problem of knowledge, but no action, change comes from small steps. So I actually have been saying to Fiona every day, is there anything I can do to help? And then happily, she usually says, no, I'm fine. But I've decided I'm going to ask every day. So that's my clip. What about you?

That's good. And it's just like a sort of North Korean reeducation camp. We've got to make a series of commitments that way. Tough, tough listeners. Tough listeners here. Really tough listeners. Okay. I think the commitment is to take over much more of the admin around the kids. So take over more, in my case, I've got to be taking over more of the burden of things like booking travel, accommodations, sorting out holidays, and not letting the burden of that falls so much on Shoshana, who's got 300 other things to be doing.

Okay. I thought for a horrible moment, I thought for a horrible moment, you were going to talk about applications to eat.

Luckily, luckily, they're not quite old enough yet.

So Leslie, that's not a no. Leslie, what do two men, that's us, think? How have women's rights improved over your lifetime? What do you think are the most important things to tackle for women? We'll see if we agree.

Oh, goodness gracious me gone.

I think women are in the, well, I think women are in the next stage of equality. I think they've won equality, a lot of equality in lots of parts of the world in terms of legislation. But I still think women have got a fight to, you see it in big organizations, you see it in terms of the jobs market and particularly the top jobs. And I think there is still an awful lot of misogyny around. And I think you see it in places where frankly, you shouldn't, you talked about Hancock's WhatsApp messages, how it was all very sort of blokey and sort of a bit clubby and so forth. And I think that is still the norm in an awful lot of major organizations. So I think women have still got a long way to go.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Powerful speeches, population control and Isabel Oakeshott

Yeah. Yeah, I think that's right.

We're coming towards the end, but here's an interesting, challenging thing from Sean, who's come in from Ireland. So he's helping with a right to be forgotten campaign for cancer survivors. So the campaigns to regulate the insurance industry, to make them ensure cancer survivors for mortgage protection. So at the moment, one of the things that prevents people getting on the housing ladder is the insurance industry won't provide mortgage protection if you've had cancer. And the political system in Ireland has blocked this reform. They've not blocked it by saying they don't like the idea, but by delay. So they find it much more palatable to say they agree and are working on it while they're actually doing nothing. And the consequences of delay for the individuals involved is life changing. So Alistair question, any tips for getting around this death by delay in a campaign? We have to find, as it's a legislative issue, you have to find the politicians that really want to make a go of it and make an issue of it. We have the same issue here with mental health. I have higher insurance premiums because I've been open about having had mental health problems because people assume that, you know, they might recur. Now, I think that's wrong. I think what this is about is we're encouraged to be much more open about things, mental health being obvious, but I think cancer is the same. But the openness comes with a price if you actually cannot get properly insured or you can't get access to things that you should normally be able to get access to. So my tip would be to find the politicians who think that this really, really matters. And I think in Ireland, as in the UK, you ought to be able to find them.

Okay, very good.

What about you?

Very good. Yeah. I mean, I think that's right. I mean, I do sometimes get approached by charities and others to do this stuff, and you're quite right. I mean, it's about, yes, it's about the campaigns, it's about the media, but it is in the end about getting the members of parliament, getting the key government ministers and making them really want to do this and feel that you're holding their feet to the fire from the public, but also there's a bit of drive from the people themselves.

Go on, over to you.

In the book I've just done, I've got a whole section about campaigning and where people outside parliament have wanted to make something happen. And then they've found the right person inside parliament.

And actually an interesting one is one that a campaign that Fiona was involved in, which was about civil partnerships, so that she and I, who are not married, have the same rights as a married couple, given that, you know, we've been together so long. And it was a young couple who tried to test it in the courts and they failed and they didn't get the same rights, even though they weren't married. And you may be surprised about the MP who actually, they are lighted upon, who became their champion in parliament and really helped make this thing happen.

It was Tim Louton who just felt it was an issue of equality. So finding the right person who's got the access to government, who's got the power, who can make an argument, etc. that's the key to it.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Powerful speeches, population control and Isabel Oakeshott

So I wish Sean well. Now listen, why don't we close on this one, because I've got a very funny story I can tell about this.

Okay.

Let's go back to the Hancock, the Hancock Oak Shot stuff. Ian McDonald, what's your best private message that has ended up being published? Now, have you got any of those, Rory?

God, blimey. Best private message, no, luckily not. Luckily not. I don't think so.

Okay. Okay. I've had a few, but I think one of the best rights. So I don't know if you remember, but when Michael Howard was leader of the Conservative Party and Oliver Letwin was your shadow chancellor, he was certainly on the kind of, on the financial side of that.

Yeah. Yeah. He was shadow chancellor a bit and then later he was around the cabinet office for Cameron.

Yeah. So they had this line that basically they could increase public spending and cut tax. Okay. Yeah. So actually absurd, almost trussonomics. And so we did this kind of online poster campaign, right? It wasn't even a proper poster. It wasn't, didn't go on billboards, but we were just trying to sort of, you know, make a, make a point. And so we had Howard and Letwin, their heads on the top of pit, on the front of pigs, and the pigs were flying. And it was the classic sort of, you know, pigs will fly before these two cut your taxes and increase your spending. Okay. Now had not even crossed my mind that both of them are Jewish. And it became, it sort of got picked up as this great sort of anti-Semitic thing. And we were being accused of anti-Semitism, right? And we were having to defend ourselves and then the, some of the Jewish camp charities got involved and it just sort of went off in a terrible direction. Trevor Beattie was our advertising executive. And he, he, he sent me a message and said, I've got bloody news night outside my door, doorstepping me to give my comment about this bloody poster that I had nothing to do with. What shall I say? And I said, I typed back, why don't you fuck off and cover something important and you twat? Okay. Just me talking to Trevor in a sort of, you know, Trevor and Alastair friendly kind of way. Unfortunately, I copied it accidentally to the editor of Newsnight. And it, and it led their bulletin led their program that night. Basically, the lie was, you know, is Alastair Campbell finally going mad? So that was, that was one that was not intended for public consumption, which, which got out and did me a little bit of damage. Very good. Well, I think, I think on that, on that happy memory, we'll, we'll bring it to an end, but lovely to talk to you and see you soon. Nice to talk to you. Did I hear this? Did I hear the sound of a crisp being in there?

You did towards the very end. You, you, I am to explain, to justify myself, I've been flying through Addis Ababa overnight. I've just, I've changed planes. I think three times just got hit about Malawi, about to set off to Rwanda. And I need a bit of popcorn from time to time to keep us going because we, we've been at this than longer than many of the listeners will be aware of. This has been quite a marathon session.

I know. I know. I know. We've had it. We have had a lot of issues today. And was that some nice wildlife I heard in the background? Did I hear some birds?

And you also heard some beautiful wildlife because sadly, I haven't managed to get out

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Powerful speeches, population control and Isabel Oakeshott

in the daylight, but the evening is coming. The light is just fading and there's been amazing sound of, of African birds. And you can, I hope maybe listeners listening carefully will have picked up on the, on the pot, a little bit of the amazing signs of long way here, here in the evening.

I did hear them. That's good.

All right, we'll have a nice trip.

All right.

All the best.

Bye-bye.