

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

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And with me, Rory Stewart.

And Rory, lots to get through. We're going to talk about Labour's, is it ad gate or graphic gate or something gate? There's definitely got to be a gate by now. We're going to talk about Russia and Ukraine. We haven't really talked about our friend Vladimir for quite a while.

We should probably talk about what's happened in Nicola Sturgeon's garden. And I think we should also look forward to the Good Friday Agreement celebrations, which you and I will both be attending because we've been invited to do A Rest is Politics live as part of the official event.

We're looking forward to going to Belfast very, very much. So maybe let's start with Labour. They put out an ad, the Labour Party, an official ad with a picture of Rishi Sunak smiling. And next to it, the sign, Rishi Sunak doesn't think adults convicted of sexually assaulting children should go to jail. And underneath the statement that under the Tories 4,500 people convicted of sexually assaulting children had not been sent to jail. And then they put out an ad following that saying Rishi Sunak doesn't think adults possessing guns intending to harm should be sent to jail. And then Rishi Sunak doesn't think thieves should be punished. So the general tenor of the whole thing is that Rishi Sunak is somebody who really believes that adults convicted of sexually assaulting children possessing guns and intent to harm and thieves shouldn't be punished and shouldn't be sent to prison and under Labour, everything will be different. And the thing I think that disgusted people most, and this was all the way from writers like Philip Pullman through to senior Labour figures like John McDonnell, was that first ad that he doesn't think adults convicted of sexually assaulting children should go to jail.

There was a lovely statement at Shibaya, a historian called Robert Saunders, who I admire enormously, who I think put it rather well. He said, one of the reasons we need a change of government is to break the hold of a grotesque political model, one based on vile personal smears, manifestly false claims and rancid dividing lines. Labour needs to find a way to defeat that model, not capitulate to it, that dire tweet should go.

Now, what was your thought about this?

Look, it's one of those things that is kind of my initial reaction was, oh my God, I don't like that. I really don't like that. Because the truth is, I don't much like Rishi Sunak, I don't much care for his politics, I really don't care for his politics, and I'm not sure he's that great as Prime Minister. I also think, by the way, and this is one of the reasons why I think Labour has done this, I think Rishi Sunak is gearing up for a very, very, very, very tough election campaign. So I didn't like it. The thing I don't like about it actually relates to a discussion you and I have had many, many times about the failure of our criminal justice system. And it's the fact that they're playing into this message that, you know, all we need to do to sort out problems for people on crime is to put more and more and more people into prison. And I fundamentally disagree with that.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

I also think that one of the strengths that Keir Starmer has been developing is that he's got this steady, methodical, honest, decent approach. And this kind of risks people being able to say, oh, look at them, they're all as bad as each other. And I think that's a risk that you take at your peril. The next thing that I don't like about it is that Keir Starmer is a lawyer, his background is in law, and therefore it's wrong to project yourself so much as the political campaigner in a sense that you push that to one side. Okay. So they're the reasons why, if you like, I don't like it. And by the way, we should put in the, in the newsletter, the secret barrister, I don't know if you're aware of the secret barrister. Well, he wrote, wrote a wonderful book called *The Secret Barrister*, which was the most chilling expose of the British justice system. And his point is that there is so much that is wrong with the criminal justice system. There is so much that the Tories have done to damage the criminal justice system. And that is where Labour should be attacking. And he does a very, very, very long explanation as to why he really, really doesn't like these ads. And a lot of that is about the fact that this is to do with judicial sentencing. Yeah, exactly. In the end, in the end, the reason why these people have not gone to jail is because judges have decided that they shouldn't go to jail and that's their job. So the reasons why I think I have a better understanding as this row has kind of developed over the last few weeks. The first thing is, I remember when Keir Starmer, you know, Keir Starmer's missions, one of the missions relates to crime, and he made a big speech about crime and criminal justice a few weeks ago, which I read, I read it for, and I thought, that's quite a good speech. That's a really interesting, thoughtful speech. I don't think you got into a single news bulletin. So here's the leader of the opposition, trying to make crime and criminal justice a big issue. And it didn't even get on the news. So the first point about this is they have decided that if they're going to get hurt on these issues, then they're going to have to go a bit over the top. And now they're going to get hurt on other issues. The second thing that I think this relates to is that the Tories of now what they've had five Prime Ministers in six years, and Light Trust, Light Johnson, Rishi Sunak is trying to say, I'm a new Prime Minister, therefore, what goes before me doesn't count. And part of what this is about is trying to pin the whole record of 13 years on Rishi Sunak as the leader of the Conservative Party, which has been in power for 13 years. And I think the next thing I'd say is I think that we operate in our politics by such double standards, largely because of the way our media is. But for example, in the House of Commons recently, I remember sort of almost leafy out by chair watching it, when Rishi Sunak said to Keir Starmer, we're on the side of the British people, you're on the side of people traffickers. So in a way, it's kind of they're allowed to do it and get away with it. And it's not a big deal.

I don't think they're allowed to do it, do it and get away with it. I mean, this is where I agree with Robert Saunders. The reason why people like me are so angry with the Conservatives

is because they do that. And we've talked about almost nothing else in this podcast for the last year, how disgusted we are by the polarization and post-truth. So I really feel the main reason why many people will be voting Labour is because they're disgusted by that stuff. And not that the Tories get away with it. It's precisely because the Tories

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

do that that people are now more sympathetic to Labour.

Okay. But in which case, why was there not an outcry when Rishi Sunak said to Keir Stama, you're on the side of the people traffickers?

I remember so many episodes of huge outcry about all this sort of stuff. Huge outcry about the disgusting comments by Boris Johnson trying to compare Keir Stama to Jimmy Saville. That was a massive story. Huge disgust about that. I mean, I think what they're doing here, and this is like the 350 million on the side of the bus, which Dominic Cummings deliberately did, knowing that it would anger people so much because it wasn't true, that it would get more press by people expressing their disgust. And I contributed to this. I was one of the people who, because I was horrified by what Keir Stama said about Rishi Sunak, I ended up retweeting the image with the result that it's now had something like 20 million views. I mean, it's a classic sort of populist move, isn't it?

The way you phrased that said to suggest that as a result of your retweet, it had 20 million views. You don't say that, are you?

No, but the main reason it's had 20 million views is I'm sure majority of it is driven by people like me disgusted by it. Talking about it in their horror has given it much more visibility than the tweet itself.

I had a message from a friend of mine who I recently persuaded to join the Labour Party, who sent me a message saying that she'd actually been out canvassing and quite enjoyed it and meeting people and talking to them about politics and blah, blah, blah. And she said, I'm disgusted by this and I'm not going to do it. This is not what I want to get involved in. And I think there are people like that. But I think you have to differentiate between people like us, who are in this world, who are constantly thinking and talking about this, and the people that Keir Starmer's trying to reach, who are those who are not necessarily plugged into politics the whole time, and who are not hearing Labour. And that's one of the criticisms that keeps being heard about Keir Starmer, is people aren't hearing. As you know, I'm obsessed with football, I'm obsessed with sport. There's a thing in rugby in particular, but also in boxing, also in football. If you get the start of a match, you kind of lay one on somebody. You lay one on your opponent to make sure that they know you're there. And if they're going to come at you and play dirty, then they need to understand you're going to be able to play back. And I'm hoping that what this is about doing, because the Tories are going to do this stuff. There's no doubt about this. And so Labour, I think, has decided this is the local election campaign, which we often would use as a sort of dummy run for some of the tactics and strategies you might use for a national campaign. And I think they're basically saying, listen, if you are going to drag this down, we're going to be prepared, we'll fight with you. But at the same time, they'd rather not. Now, I'm hoping that's what this is about.

To be fair, there have been no comparable conservative ads of this sort have been put out at all. What has Rishi Sunak put out about Keir Starmer? Remotely comparable to saying that he thinks that adults convicted of sexually assaulting children shouldn't go to jail. I've already given you an example of standing in the House of Commons and saying that he's a friend of people traffickers.

That's not an ad campaign. Many offensive things have said about House of Commons.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

Let me just tell you something about these ad campaigns. It's a tweet with a picture. The other thing I did to try and find out how this is going down, I phoned around a few Labour candidates to see how they were reacting to the way that this is going on. It's very interesting. My sense is that people who are in safe Labour seats, a bit queasy, a bit squeamish, don't like it, people who are fighting the Tories, who've really been struggling to get a message heard, were less squeamish, I would say.

The other thing they all say, Rory, is we're feeling quite confident because we don't see any of the Tories knocking on doors. The Tories are not knocking on doors because they're fighting digital campaigns. Like you mentioned, the Cummings campaign, they're pumping out social media stuff. After the event, we like to see what it's like. I don't think you can pretend that because Labour has done this tweet with a picture that's frankly taking the piss out of social media.

It's not just a simple tweet taking the piss. Let's just go through this again. Do you think it's true that Rishi Sunak doesn't think adults convicted of sexually assaulting children should go to jail?

No.

Do you think that's true?

No. What is true is that he talks to talk about being tough on crime and the record of the last 13 years is bad. What I've already said to you is I would prefer that Labour were campaigning on fixing the criminal justice system. My point is the reason I think they are doing this is because they can't get heard on that and this is their way to get heard. Interestingly, I've watched some of the interviews that Labour people have done since then and they have been able to talk for the first time about the record, about the Tories record and then about what they do. Now they've moved on to the economy. There's a very personal ad that apparently is doing the rounds now. By the way, when we talk about ad campaigns, this is the new world that we're now in. An ad campaign in the day that I was running the Labour campaign meant you were trying to raise sometimes millions of pounds to put posters around the country. This is a tweet with a picture and the point I was making about taking the piss out of Sunak was actually, Sunak has partly made his name by these very personal look at me, look at my signature, look at these nice bright colours. That is what he does on social media the whole time and under the radar, there will be lots of stuff going out now about Kerstarma. Let me tell you this, when the last local elections, if you remember the whole beer gate thing, that was a campaign. That was a campaign in which the Tories were working hand in glove with the Daily Mail to lead that paper for 13 days. Now, I don't want Labour to go down that route, but I do understand why defensively they need to show that they've worked it out, they've worked out that's why the Tories are going to campaign and if they're going to do it, they're going to get it back.

So, obviously, I think it's completely disgusting and I think accusing somebody of supporting sexual assault of children is about as low as you can possibly go in politics. I mean, really, really low and whoever Labour thinks they're appealing to there, whatever this voter group is that they think they can convince that Rishi Sunak is in favour of sexual assaults on children, I'm really disturbed by. Let's step aside from that for a minute.

No, but I think you're taking literally what ultimately they are doing as a pretty high-risk

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

campaign tactic, I would say. And I think they're showing that if the Tories, because I think you're being far too kind to the Tories in the way they campaign, I think for Sunak to stand there and say, you're a lefty lawyer, I'm a man of the people standing with the British people, you're a lefty lawyer. This whole lefty lawyer thing is about basically saying unless you support what the government does, you somehow are illegitimate as being a lawyer.

There's a difference, Alistair, between calling someone a lefty lawyer and accusing them of being in favour of sexual assault on children. Let me quote, Rishi Sunak doesn't think adults convicted of sexually assaulting children should go to jail. Let me now try to move on to the policy because that's the thing that worries me most about this. So, Steve Tree, sexual state for justice, is an impressive person. Keir Starmer was the director of public prosecutions. He spent decades of his life professionally involved in this justice system. So this is a law, the sexual assault law is a 2003 law brought in by a Labour government and our sentences for sexual assault on children are incredibly harsh. We impose in Britain longer sentences than in Europe or even in the US. It's a very, very harsh law. The only categories under which you can't go to jail in the sentencing guidelines are nonviolent, short length, not planned, not naked, and taking into account whether the person doing it is disabled, mentally ill, their age. In other words, the 4,000 people who have been given community sentences instead of being sent to jail are people who judges who have thought very carefully about the individual case have concluded. Perhaps in this case, the individual is mentally ill. Perhaps in this case, this was a nonviolent interaction. And the anything that involves touching naked genitalia, penetration, all these things have an automatic custodial sentence. The reason that I'm getting so wound up is that I think the reason I left the Tories is I was hated this kind of politics. And we talk a lot about post truth and polarization. And these ads are post truth and they are polarization. And I would prefer so for example, I read somewhere that one of the people involved in the team that's put this together has advised the Australian Labour Party. I don't know if that's true. But the Australian Labour Party, interestingly, we mentioned recently the New South Wales campaign.

They fought a very, very positive campaign. They had the Murdoch papers trying to destroy them. And they won. And at the end of it, the outgoing Liberal, their Tory candidate, and the incoming Labour guy, they shook hands and said that was a great campaign. And I'd love to be able to think we could get back to that. Okay. I don't think that's going to be possible with Lee Anderson type politics running the Conservative campaign. And I think Labour is signaling if you go down that route, well, regrettably, we're going to go down with you. And I hope this is a warning shot on that rather than an indication of the sort of election campaign we're going to have because if it is, then I'm with you. Should we talk about Russia?

We disagreed there fairly agreeably, I'd say fairly agreeably. Now, the reason I wanted to talk about Russia is that we haven't really talked about Ukraine for a while. And I was trawling through their spiegel, which I do every day. And I came across this week to really fascinating pieces of journalism. The first is that my favourite podcast after our own, obviously, is Ach Milliarden, which is the Spiegel foreign policy podcast. And

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

they had an interview with a guy called Kirill Martinoff, who is the, he's a former philosophy teacher, he now lives in Riga in Latvia, from where he runs Novaya Gazeta Europe, which is, and the Novaya Gazeta is a well-established Russian newspaper. The editor, the founder of it, it's been going for about 30 years now, he won a Nobel Peace Prize for his kind of contribution to democratic debate in Russia. They've obviously like everybody else where it's now legal to call the invasion an invasion or to say that it's a war, it's a special military operation. So these guys have decamped to Riga. And it was fascinating to listen to this guy. And by the way, although it's in German, the interview itself, if people want to listen to it, is in English. And the guy then, the Olaf Hauser, who's the presenter of the podcast, he then translates it, but the interview itself is in English. It's a fascinating listen, not least because he talks about how he assesses Russian public opinion. He basically thinks there's a third of people who are very, very, very concerned about what this is doing to Russia and the world. They're against the wall, but they have to keep their mouth shut. The majority he thinks are people who just want to live their lives and be left alone. And then there's a, there's a third minority that is passionately supportive of Putin. And his description of these chat shows or current affairs shows, he talks about this guy, Savaliov, who he gives this chilling account of the, the formula of these programs, show a Putin speech, then have six men, nearly always men, he says, sitting around discussing who loves Putin the most. And it's sort of like a show of strength for Putin. They talk about him in terms that, you know, most people will talk about God. And then finally, they get to a discussion about nuclear weapons and how we need to, you need to use nukes. They often talk about London as being the place they ought to nuke first. It's a, I really recommend people listen to the guy because it's, and also it's just such courageous journalism as well. I mean, you know, so many, we slack journalists quite a lot on this podcast, but this is real courage. These guys do what they're doing from Riga. Part of this extraordinary macho culture is revealed in Dmitry Medvedev, the former Russian president, president from 2008 to 2012. Extraordinary tweet, which, which you may have seen. Oh yeah, I did. Yeah. You know, why will Ukraine disappear? Because nobody knows it. And it's written in this very, very weird sort of combination of kind of 1920s shock horror, cheap pros, you know, permanently put the Nuvo Ukrainian bloodsucking parasites on the decrepit EU's arthritis, crippled neck. And then the military and sanction campaigns are attempted for PR by political blabbermouths who long ago attest attested to their impotence and imbecility. It's really, really weird. Russia doesn't need Ukraine, a shred bear quilt torn shaggy and greasy. We don't need unto Ukraine. We need big, great Russia. Nobody on this planet needs such a Ukraine. That's why it will disappear. It's very kind of weird language, particularly from a former president, but it's sort of, there's a sort of scatological element to it, kind of horrible, kind of gruesome delight in language.

One of the things this guy, Martinov, talks about is that is that Putin is surrounded by people constantly looking for his approval, telling him the things he wants to hear. And the second, the second thing, which I, it wasn't a spiegel product, but I read about it there, is an interview with a guy called Gleb Karukolov. And it's an interview with the dossier center. And if people want to check out the dossier center, warning alert,

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

this is just in full disclosure. It's owned by Mikhail Kordakovsky, who is a sort of anti-Putin. But Der Spiegel and some of the news agencies have checked this guy out, and they're sure that he is who he says he is. And it's an interview with a guy who was in the presidential guard, and he was essentially responsible for the security of communications around Putin when he was traveling. And he's now defected. He went to Kazakhstan on a business trip and he fled to Turkey with his family. And he calls Putin a war criminal. He calls him a genocidal terrorist. But he gives some fascinating insight into how he lives. He says he's never, ever, ever seen Vladimir Putin with a mobile phone. And that could be because of security. He says that everywhere they travel, they travel with this 2.5 meter high cube. And the cube is a place that is wherever they are in the world, they know that Putin can communicate from in there, they believe securely. He doesn't use the internet. He gets all his information from his closed circle. And he thinks that explains why he underestimated the difficulties of the Ukraine invasion, because everybody close in his circle was telling him what he wanted to believe. This is a fascinating detail. I should have laughed, but he's got these various residences around the place, and he works in these residences. And he's often filmed in these residences, but they're identical. So he's got the same residency, the same office in St. Petersburg, St. Petersburg as he has in Sochi. And sometimes he says they will send out planes and motorcades that are empty of Putin, because he wants the world to think that he's on the move, but he's not. He stays in the same place. They say he said he's paranoid about being attacked, paranoid about being betrayed. He's got his own train. I didn't know that one. He's got his own train with it, which is gray with a red stripe. If you or I were called in to see him, Rory, then for 20 minutes, we'd have to go into quarantine, full quarantine for two weeks beforehand. It's a fascinating listen. It's about an hour and a half long. You can get it with subtitles, or there's a printed version as well, which we'll put in the newsletter. But it's very, very interesting.

I've been reading an article by a guy called Alexander Matovsky on Putin's popularity, and he says that there are some very well-respected independent polling companies in Russia. You shouldn't assume that all polling in Russia is fake, and there are reasons for that. One is that these companies are often under a lot of pressure from Putin, and also because they often report things which are unflattering to Putin. But the one thing that has been consistent is his extraordinary popularity, and just how enduring it's been. Net popularity ratings between 60 and 80% compared to the normal US president who has a net popularity rating of 20 to 30% to put it in contrast. This is one of the reasons why, actually, he has been winning elections often with much less coercion than people would expect, and he tries to get into the question of why Putin is so popular. And bizarrely, it's nothing to do with his performance. It's to do with two things. It's to do with the trauma of what happened after the collapse of Soviet Union. So the Russian economy went through a collapse twice as bad as the impact of the Great Depression on the European and American economies. It lost half its GDP and, of course, lost enormous amount of its territory. So that humiliation, and secondly, a sense that they need a strong man to give them hope, and what he's somehow projecting and has managed to keep going astonishingly for decades, is I haven't delivered much for you yet, but I'm the only guy who's going to be able to

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

deliver for you in the future. And how on earth he does that, I think, is a real mystery. Anyway, I think, surely, I have not read this article, I'd like to read it, but surely he accepts that in what essentially has become, and this guy, Kirill Martinov, he describes it as now a fascist state, can you really get into proper polling? Can you really expect people to say what they think? Well, what Matovsky points out is that in the same polls, when they do blind polls and ask them about things like corruption, they say corruption is very bad in Russia. When they ask them about Putin's economic record, they say it's not good. When they ask about inequality, they say it's getting worse. But they like him.

I found out of the former security guy who fled Karukolov, he said that what tipped him from feeling a little bit uneasy about Putin to an absolute sense that this just is unacceptable and I have to do something, was when he went on a trip to Crimea with Putin after the referendum, I think it was 97% or something, backing the annexation. And he said he went out and started talking to people and he found actually there was an awful lot of opposition. And he said that's when his alarm bell started ringing. He believed that this was real, a real referendum. And he said he went home and he started discussing it with his parents and said he was really worried because he felt that Putin was just lying about all this stuff. And he said rather than them being supported parents, they were incredibly angry with them. And they accused them to his face of being a foreign agent, which of course is a crime. And he said that they're actually not he's changed the word since he fled. And he ends the interview with a big appeal to his former colleagues who are looking after Putin. And he accepts by the way that Putin in his closed circle has about 100% support. These are people who are absolutely firm believers in the whole Putin project, whatever that may be. But he appeals to them that the only way this is going to be stopped is if the people close to Putin stop being silent.

Well, here's another little plug for a book. So book by Joshua Yaffa called Compromise in Putin's Russia. So that tries to focus in on particular individuals and look at how they manage these kind of tradeoffs in their personal life. As you say, how the captain relates to his parents, how he relates to his workmates, one of the central characters in a book is a zookeeper in Crimea, trying to talk through the way that he engages with Putin's Russia and thinks about it. I mean, there are some it's interesting. I don't know, maybe it's the deep investment in Soviet studies in the 70s and 80s, just how much high quality work there is on Russia. I mean, there are dozens of books out there, good book by Timothy Snyder called Road to Unfreedom. But dozens of really good books looking at this very, very odd phenomenon, which is how Russia, which in 1989, 1999, 1991, the plurality of the population, more people than not really wanted to move in a liberal democratic direction, how that's shifted towards a world in which they think Russia needs to be ruled by a strongman. And how all these individual stories have got there. The journalist guy, Martinov, he's asked by the Spiegel guy whether whether he thinks that Putin believes the propaganda that he puts out. And he says, I'm pretty sure he does believe in his own narrative because he doesn't understand the country he rules. He's surrounded by artificial view about what that country is. There's no real he gets no real information. He only gets information from his advisors.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

Maybe your point there is an interesting one, isn't it? That when you don't have a phone and you don't connect to the internet, that protects you from people hacking into you. But it means that you simply can't be reading social media, Googling, doing any of the things that most of us are doing to stay on top of what's happening out there.

Nobody's also, it's worse than that. He's being told by everybody that he's an absolute genius and people think he's doing marvelous things for the country and for the world.

Yeah. All right, let's take a quick break and we're back in a minute.

We love him.

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

And me, Alistair Campbell.

And Alistair, you've just been interviewing Brian Cox, not the astrophysicist, my friend, but your friend, the star of succession, the man who plays the kind of Rupert Murdoch figure in that great television series.

Yeah, although he does say he's not based on Rupert Murdoch. What I love talking to actors about characters, they talk about them as though they're real people. So I enjoyed the discussion of what he really thinks of his children. And he's almost like he's sort of telling you what you don't know from watching the show. And in the end, I said, Rory, Brian, you do realize this is not a real person, don't you? Yes, of course, I know that.

But I think he's a great actor, but I also do think one or two people said, why is this guy on leading? He's just an actor. One, I think he's a leading actor and he's a leading cultural figure. But also, I do think he's got an interesting political story to tell.

Brought up in a pretty poor family in Dundee, labor all his life and was honest enough to tell me that the Iraq war turned him against labor and he discovered the SNP and has since become an absolutely committed nationalist and still is. The interview was done just before the tents started to go up in Nicola Sturgeon's garden. So, but I think even that won't have changed his view that Nicola Sturgeon's sort of, you know, he talks about her in very, very glowing terms and he says he remains as committed to independence as ever.

So, if people want to hear more of Brian Cox, wherever you get your podcast, just get the rest of his politics leading. One of the things that I thought listening to it, and I haven't reflected on in the past, is the weird relationship between London and Scotland. You talked, you made a joke during the show about how you sometimes wonder whether London and Scotland don't have more in common, partly because the way they voted on Brexit, you imagine a sort of joint country, but how different that is from the U.S. debate. So, in the U.S., obviously, people who live in what's sometimes called the flyover states, states in the middle of the United States, often have a very hostile relationship to the coast, the East and West Coast. And you can get a bit of that in Scotland and Northern England in relationship

to London, right? But it's also very interesting that many people in Scotland feel a huge amount in common with people who live in London in terms of progressive attitudes towards immigration, votes on Brexit, embraces of Europe and the world more generally. And many Scots, as you point out, like to move to London in a way that people in the flyover states, the U.S., with their suspicion of what people are now trying to call the liberal metropolitan elite, would not want to move to New York. There's more sympathy. It's a more complicated picture

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

than the U.S. picture of the liberal elite against the rest.

Interesting. Talking about immigration, by the way, I think the story that most annoyed angered upset me this week wasn't the Labour ads. It was the schoolchildren being turned away and rock bands being turned away from the UK because they didn't have the right papers,

or they did have the right papers, but the border force decided that they didn't want them anyway. I mean, school trips, it seems to me that school trips are going to become a thing of the past, if we're not careful. School trips from European kids coming here.

Where were they from, these children? They were in a school in France. They had identity cards from France, but their passports were because of their parents' nationality. I think one was Georgian,

one might have been, I can't remember what they were, one was Africa, one of the African countries. Because they weren't EA nationals.

Yeah, exactly. But up until now, they've been fined to come as school parties, but now that's all changed. And it's sitting massively in tourism now. There's a thing in one of the papers at the last weekend about how the big museums in Paris are talking about a Brexit boom with Chinese and Japanese tourists, because they're finding it so difficult to get to the UK now, to go to Paris and put themselves there instead. So that's Brian Cox. He was very critical of your friend, Prince Charles, King Charles, I thought, feudalism, talked about feudalism. I did slightly listening to it, wish I'd been on the show. I think you gave him a little bit too much of an easy time. I think he had some bonkers ideas there. One of the things I thought was maddest was his idea about dividing Northern England from Southern England. And that goes to the heart of my basic problem with him. On the one hand, he really loved London and felt it had been the making of him and created him as an actor. On the other hand, that North and South England divide sounds like he's just got a massive problem with Southern England. He wants nobody to have anything to do with it. Roy, I have to tell you, as I was leaving his very nice flat in Primrose Hill, his departing words were, do give my regards to Roy Stewart. I met him a couple of times. I think he's a very, very good chap. So now here you are just slagging the guy off. Now, I think, Roy, I think your big problem with him is actually that he talked about our obsession with the Royal Family being a form of feudalism. Well, I definitely am a big support for the monarchy and unashamed support of the monarchy. Right. Let's come on to Peter Morrell. So this is just again, for listeners outside the United Kingdom, this is Nicholas Sturgeon's husband, who spent most of his 20s and 30s as relatively junior staffer, parliamentary assistance to MPs working for the SMP, famously Alex Salmon, the leader, and then became the chief executive of the SMP and ended up in this very odd position that he was the head of the whole political party and married to Nicholas Sturgeon, who was the leader in Scotland and remained a pretty obscure figure. People don't often concentrate much on the people behind the scenes. So he's not an elected politician. He's running the political party, but ran it for a very long time. And the problems began to emerge over a £600,000 donation that came from some lottery winners who gave £600,000 the SMP and are now asking for their money back in the course of which Peter Morrell, Nicholas Sturgeon's husband, lent £100,000 to the Scottish Nationalist Party for an unexplained reason. And since then, there have been a series of scandals. There's a scandal about him lying about how many members there were in the SMP, which led to his

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

resignation.

The police have then taken him in for questioning. His mother's motorhome, which is worth over £100,000,

was taken in on Wednesday morning. And Joanna Cherry, who was somebody I knew quite well, who was an SMP MP in the House of Commons at the same time as me, said this is absolutely par for the course, that she's never in all her life seen such lack of transparency as she saw in the senior figures, the SMP, that she served on many boards, but the total lack of transparency amongst the SMP went a long way beyond just the chief executive being married to the leader, that it was a very, very opaque system. And what are you picking up on it?

Well, you've mentioned that several times before. The oddity, as you see it, of the leader of the party being married to the chief executive. And I think somebody told me, and this is right, that if the chief executive, for whatever reason, becomes unable to carry out their functions, that those functions pass to the leader, it might be the treasure. I know there's some sort of weird setup there. I mean, I think the images of a lot of policemen and women charging into the sturgeon's home, and then putting up that tent, I presume that the tent was put up because they would bring out evidence, and they're putting the evidence there, and they knew that there'd be media there. But it did, I mean, somebody said on Twitter, it's all going very Fred West up there. It didn't look like a sort of like a murder scene, rather. And then there was all this sort of,

I don't know, why would they need to inspect the barbecue? Is that about burning evidence or something? And what was the significance of his shovel at his hoe? But I think it's impossible not to feel a little bit of sympathy for Humza Yousaf, who has taken over as the new leader.

And since when, I've not been aware of a single thing he said that has not actually been about trying to keep up with this, which I think does pose a huge problem for him going forward, and a massive opportunity for the Labour Party. Because what it feels like to me is this is maybe what the kind of thing that happens when one party's been in it, had a lot of power for too long.

And they start to think that actually the normal process of political management don't really apply. And Humza Yousaf in trying to differentiate himself has said that there has clearly been a lack of transparency. There clearly have been problems in the way that the party's been run.

And whether that then plays into what we talked about last week, whether people start to focus more, well, if they can't manage their own finances properly without the police being called in, what does that say about their running of the things that we rely on, public services and so forth? And it will also inevitably cast light back on Nicola Sturgeon's own resignation. People

will begin to feel that she resigned suddenly in the way that she did, because she would have been aware that some of these allegations might have been about to come out about her family.

Even if that's not true, I don't know whether that is why she resigned, but it certainly will begin to look a bit odd that all these things are coming out a few weeks after she resigned.

And Kate Forbes, who was the challenger who ran Humza Yousaf closest to become the current leader,

she and some of her supporters are saying that, look, he was the Nicola Sturgeon continuity candidate, they clearly decided to have a very, very truncated election because they knew something was coming and therefore the whole thing should be rerun. So, I mean, the thing is a complete and total mess on so many levels. I think I need to apologize just to listen to this. You'll hear the call to prayer. Never apologize, Rory. Never apologize for his wonderful lunchtime call to

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

prayer coming. I think it's got a very beautiful voice. I was saying this to a Jordanian friend of mine who disagreed, but I think the was in here has a really, really beautiful voice. Is it the same? Is it a live thing or a tape? Yeah, I've got a live guy here. When I lived in Afghanistan for three years, I lived next to a mask with a man with a slightly less beautiful voice who cleared his throat very, very nicely and loudly in the early hours of the morning. While we're on local and regional culture, I got a pretty stinging email from a friend of mine up in the Highlands, Rory, Peter Newman, who's from Ardenmerckin High School, saying that I was talking

quite a lot of bollocks and you were talking total bollocks. These are my words, not his, by the way, when we talked about Gallic last week. And we were failing to differentiate when we were talking about the Welsh language between Gallic and Gallic learning. And they're two separate subjects. And in many, many local authorities, subjects are being delivered through the medium of Gallic, which aren't necessarily in those figures that I read out. So there we are. So I think he wants us to say that actually Scottish Gallic speakers are not that far behind Welsh Gallic speakers. They're somewhere behind, but... Because the Welsh accounting people who are learning Welsh. He says, nationally, over 5,000 children were educated through Gallic in 2021. And then there are these children who are learning Gallic, much as they might learn French, German, Italian, Spanish, whatever. So we stand corrected on that. Peter, thank you for that and give my very, very fondest regards to TJ. Now, should we talk a little bit about Ireland? Yeah, absolutely. We should move on to that. And just quickly, just to finish on Scotland, I think you made a number of interesting points. One is that this may be an opportunity for Labour. One of the things that is difficult in one party... It's not quite a one party. Obviously, it's not a one party state, but it has had a bit of a feeling of that. The S&P have been so dominant in Scotland for so long that people do begin to make strange mistakes. And of course, Scotland can feel compared to the United Kingdom, as though its elite is quite small. You often feel in Edinburgh that everybody knows each other, the judges know each other, the senior police officers know each other, the politicians all know each other, even more than people would suggest the United Kingdom.

And I think the final thing is this thing we haven't talked about much on the podcast, but I'd like to do more, which is this whole question of conflict of interest and us beginning to be more honest with ourselves and with others that you can't have your husband or your wife in an important position professionally related to you, that it's very, very difficult. However hard you try to be certain there isn't a conflict of interest that you're not doing favours in odd directions. Well, it's certainly a massive interest to see where the polls head in the near future. And I think I said a few weeks ago, Keir Starmer has been making a lot of visits to Scotland, because part of the route to Downey Street for Labour has to come through a revival in Scotland. Very good. Now, good Friday agreement. This is something where I want to not talk, but ask you questions because you were very, very strongly involved. Just before I do it, just to set it up for readers, just to listeners, sorry, my people. Good Friday agreement was signed on Good Friday 10th of April 1998. It was the products of a Northern Ireland peace process that began in some ways in the 1980s, got underway properly in 1994, but really reached its final stages and its critical final stages when Tony Blair and

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

yourself win. And of course, the Good Friday agreement was signed with you very deeply involved, along, I guess, with the European Union, with Bill Clinton, with Senator Mitchell.

And it was really remarkable. Just one figure before I start questioning you. In 1997, a Queen's University Belfast poll found that although 90% of the population, both Catholic and Protestants, supported a negotiated settlement in Northern Ireland, only 25% thought there would

be a settlement. And that was only one year before, actually a few months before the Good Friday agreement actually came through. So can I step back to the first question? What do you think the secrets were of this thing? What made it work? And how has it, with all the challenges and messes, what's made it probably one of the most successful peace agreements that we've seen?

Oh, Lord. It's interesting you mentioned Queens there, because that's where they're hosting the event that we're going to be part of next week, which is going to be three days of commemoration, celebration, remembering the people who are no longer with us. And but also, I hope, trying to work out how we can keep the thing moving in the right direction.

I mean, there's lots of things that come to mind when you ask that question. But I think if there's one, I think it, to be absolutely honest, there's a sense of fatigue on both sides.

And I think without the, without Sinn Féin, and particularly Adam's and McGinnis moving the direction that they did, and without the Unionists moving the direction they did led by David Trimble.

And then throw into the mix, you mentioned Clinton, you mentioned George Mitchell, I think throw into the mix two young, popular prime ministers of the UK and Ireland, elected roughly the same time, coming together with this as a priority. And then having the understanding of the importance of these big strategic polls, principle of consent, absolutely no change to the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the people, but an understanding that there had to be a genuine commitment to equality for the nationalists. And then the ambiguity, I guess, I think the ambiguity, there's a lot of the phrase constructive ambiguity kind of runs through the Good Friday Agreement. And allowing people to identify as British or Irish, I think became very, very important. And then the rest of it was just, frankly, it was just negotiation. And people talk about the Good Friday Agreement or the Belfast Good Friday Agreement. There actually were two agreements. There was two agreements, was an agreement agreed by the political parties, that was called the multi-party agreement. And then there was the British Irish agreement, which was the agreement between the British and Irish governments. And the whole time during negotiations, this focus on strand one, strand two, strand three, strand one was about how the Northern Ireland was governed within the United Kingdom. Strand two was the so-called North-South, which was the relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic. And then strand three was East-West, which was the relationship between the Republic of Ireland and the UK. And I think it was just the ability of this incredible collection of people. I actually think we talk a lot about how the characters in politics, I'm afraid they do matter. You might not want them to, but the personalities really, really matter. And there was something about those personalities that sort of made it work. And to this day, I can't really understand why it did, but it did.

It's fascinating. I was part of a commission called the Principles for Inclusive Peace. And I spent two years, just actually over the last two years, working with various people from around the world

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

trying to work out what the lessons were on building peace. And we looked at Northern Ireland and other places. The fashion at the moment, as you know, is not really to focus on leaders. A lot of the focus at the moment is on grassroots activism, on the involvement of civil society, the involvement of women. And people are a bit skeptical about the role of leaders and outsiders. I think they were very, very important. And I'm really pleased, actually, that one of the big themes of the Queen's University event is actually the focus on women. And not just the women that we all know, Mo Mollum and Hillary Clinton, who's going to be there, because she's now the chancellor of the university. But, you know, some of the women's groups and the women's coalition in particular that really did provide that sort of sense of grassroots support. So now I agree with that. There's a lovely line that Tony Blair has written in an article, which has appeared in the Jordan Times, which I was reading this morning. And it's got a good line where he says, I suspect that's a syndication situation. I don't think he didn't. He may have done, he may have done, he thought, I must get a message to Rory. I felt very, very flattered that Tony Blair wrote an article in the Jordan Times that reading this morning on Northern peace process. But he says that you should use outsiders and that insiders often feel that outsiders don't understand the dispute. And Tony Blair has this rather nice line. He says, sometimes outsiders are key because not understanding the dispute is the key to resolving it. And I think his point there is that if you're an insider, you're just too caught up in too much knowledge about all the horrors that have happened over the previous decades. It's very, very difficult to step apart from that. And in a sense, it was a strength for the British government, the EU, the Americans that they weren't as closely involved. It was impossible to be there and not get very, very caught up in that sense of the history and where it came from. And, you know, I wrote a piece for the iPaper the other day and I recall this talking to Ken McGinnis, who was one of the leading Unionists, also Unionist politicians, and trying to persuade him that he needed to try to see things better from the perspective of Sinn Féin, where they were coming from, try to understand where they were coming from. And he said, well, it's all very well for you to say that. But it's quite difficult wandering around this building and you keep bumping into people who've been trying to kill you for the last X number of years. And that's the fact of it. That's what we were very conscious of a lot of the time. And I think that, you know, the role that I think Tony in particular was able to play partly because of his youth and the job, partly because of his commitment that both sides accepted was real, but also I think partly because he's just very good at that sense of taking somebody else's point. And maybe it's the lawyer in him taking somebody else's point and then going to the other person. So I wrote in this piece about, I think I'm right in saying that David Trimble did not exchange a single word with Jerry Adams during the entire process that we were there. And there was one point at which David Trimble was in the gents, having a pee and who should walk in, but Jerry Adams and Jerry Adams, who was prepared to speak, said suddenly like, hey, David, how are you doing? At which point David Trimble managed to stop himself in mid-flow and disappear into a cubicle and lock the door. And I think the history of this, and we talked about this, I think, almost a year ago on the podcast, the remembering, and we'll remember this one, we're at Queen's University Belfast, that Edgar Graham, who was a lecturer and a lawyer and a unionist and a friend and a colleague of David Trimble's was chatting to a colleague in the middle of the Central Square in Queen University Belfast in 1983,

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

and was then shot in the back of the head by people from the IRA. And as assault on a university lecturer in a university hall, I did a murder in that way. It's something that's very, very difficult to remember and process. No, absolutely. And I can remember, there were various points at which we were getting very angry and very frustrated with various parties as they were you know, pressing for more or refusing to see somebody else's point or refusing at points, even to discuss somebody else's point. And I think this was another of Tony's strengths, was his ability to always to try to see it from their perspective. So, for example, I remember once when Adams and McGinnis were being particularly difficult about something, and of course, they

were leaving, there were various points at which they disappeared and left their phones and went off. And they were obviously, you know, talking to people in within the IRA about whether they could get them across the line. And, you know, Tony made the point that every time they go off there, that they're running the not inconsiderable risk that they're going to get a bullet in the back of their head. And all of them had that sense, you know, so we sometimes just trying to be the people in the middle. And I think that's what Tony and Bertie did extremely well. They were the people in the middle. But Bertie Herne, for example, I mean, you know, and if you remember

his mother died during that, those few days, and he had to go, go down to Dublin to attend to that and come back and then back for the funeral and all that stuff going on. And yet at the same time, sit there often and just take a level of a kind of, you know, abuse, frankly, from some of the Unionists because he was, you know, he was the leader of the Republic of Ireland. And I think one of the things that's forgotten in a lot of this, by the way, is, and of course, there'll be a lot of focus on Ireland, North and South, but Joe Biden's trip to the Republic is going to get massive publicity for obvious reasons. And, you know, the Irish did change their constitution to get the Good Friday Agreement through. They essentially, you know, renounced that the notion that the point of their constitution should be to fight for United Ireland. So there was a lot of big change went on. And if you go through, you know, some of the issues, we talked recently about just some of the issues. So you've got, you know, the whole issues of sovereignty and who's sovereign

discrimination, what you do with the paramilitary groups, policing, decommissioning, demilitarization,

then all the civil and political rights that were being addressed, it was a massive, massive, massive agenda. And to get that signed and then to get the massive support for it over 90% in the Republic and over 70% in the North. And then as you say, despite all the ups and downs and despite Brexit and despite the undercurrents of violence that have been there and that we saw again a little bit of the weekend, it's still on track, apart from the fact that the institutions are not up and running. And the DUP, I really do wish would, would kind of make that final leap to say, look, we've just got to do what it takes to get these up and running.

Well, it's such a lesson, isn't it? And I think this is some of you said a lot in the past that it's not just a question of the signing of the document. It's a question of what happens in the years after and how long that took. I mean, Sinn Fein didn't accept the police service in all nine until I think the early 2000s. And the final weapons were only handed in sort of between 2001 and 2005. So it was a long old process requiring a huge amount of patience. When

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / Starmer's most controversial move yet, the truth behind Vladimir Putin, and the Good Friday Agreement

you and Tony Blair and others must often have felt huge frustration even after 98, you kind of felt this was done because for the next seven years it was touched and go a lot, wasn't it? No, I'd say that Northern Ireland became a permanent part of Tony Blair's agenda. The fact that Jonathan Powell, for example, who was Tony's chief of staff, but he was also his chief negotiator on Northern Ireland. So Jonathan was never constantly backwards and forwards. And

before him, John Holmes, a civil servant who was absolutely brilliant and so important in those early stages. But no, it became a never-ending process. And the Good Friday Agreement, in a sense, was the high point. But then there were plenty of low points thereafter and plenty of challenges that were met. And Rishi Sunak is now the prime minister and he's got to get this, get the thing back on the road. I mean, we'll do a lot more on this in the coming weeks. And obviously, we'll do a lot more when we're in Belfast and hopefully interview some people involved as well. But it is a slightly worrying lesson for other peace processes around the world when we worry about the Yemen peace process or South Sudan or Somalia, that how difficult it was in Northern Ireland, even with all the immense resources of Britain, Europe, the United States, which were able to put very serious economic packages in place. And I think GDP per capita has nearly doubled since the Good Friday Agreement was signed in Northern Ireland, even with all of that, how tough it was and how much the odds sadly are against the processes in poorer countries which are driven by conflict. And I find it troubling that the Brexiteers and the DUP constantly want to try and play down the role of the European Union. But the fact is in these peace processes, you need that international support. The role of the Americans, the fact of Clinton being so committed to the process, the fact of George Mitchell being the chair who was kind of respected by all sides and able to kind of bring his wisdom and patience to the whole thing, that really mattered. And then likewise, some of the economic progress that was delivered with the help of the European Union, it's not to be sniffed out. And I think any of these processes that you're talking about, they require international support and international backing. And you could argue that that without that, that the Good Friday Agreement might not have happened and certainly wouldn't have been endured in the way that it has. Here's a question for you. What do you think of the 13 years of conservative rule we will still be celebrating 25 years later?

What do you think about the creation of the Canal and River Trust, Alastair?

Okay, what about austerity? 25 years on, will we be celebrating that? Maybe gay marriage, but the foundations for that were well laid by the time.

Normally, we would have said 0.7% for international aid achieving that target, but unfortunately, they then destroyed that. That's gone, yeah.

Well, Alastair, I think let's move towards a close and let's maybe pick this up again when we get to Belfast. Yeah, that's when I shall see you there.

See you there, bye-bye. Take care, bye.

We love him.