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The Rest is POLITICS

Dear Reader,

It's Issy here and this week we have a fascinating interview about the state of foreign interference in UK politics, a Q&A on how to fix Britain's sewage scandal (after *Dirty Business)*, and a selection of insights from you, our TRIP community, about assisted dying.

All of that after a round-up of this week's episodes and keep reading for a bumper crop of cultural recommendations from Alastair and Rory and a *bonus* photo to power you through the bank holiday weekend.

In Question Time, Alastair and Rory discussed if - or when - the US will strike Cuba, the proposed ban on social media for children in the UK, and addressed the crucial question: Has Rory given up on walking? (No, he hasn't.)

For Leading, they sat down with US Congresswoman Sarah McBride to talk about trans rights, the double standard in American politics for Republicans and Democrats and how to remain positive in a dire political landscape.

And in the main episode, Alastair and Rory covered the abysmally low approval ratings of the Iran war, the rise of controversial 'prediction markets', and foreign interference in UK elections.

As our long read this week, we'll have interviews with the men making tens of thousands betting on the Iran war. You'll find this in your inboxes on Sunday.

In a special series for TRIP+ members, Alastair will be joined by Labour MP Liam Byrne to discuss whether we have reached "peak populism".

Why are so many people voting for populists and can these leaders be beaten?

To listen, join the TRIP+ club using the button below. Newsletter readers receive 10% off using the code newsletter10 at checkout.

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Last week, an independent Government review into "the risks posed to our democracy by the deployment of foreign money" concluded. The resulting report - that Alastair and Rory discussed in the main episode - is an alarming read.

The report's author, Philip Rycroft, lays out the scale of the threat facing Britain and the increasingly sophisticated ways hostile actors can donate to political parties, bribe politicians, and sway public opinion. He also adds a striking new name to the list of countries of concern: the United States.

As Alastair put it, Rycroft is "basically adding the United States to Russia, China and Iran as forces that we have to be very, very worried about in terms of interference in our democracy."

Rycroft makes 17 recommendations. Two - a cap on foreign political donations and a moratorium on donations made via cryptocurrency - were implemented immediately.

But do the proposals go far enough? Why is, according to the report, our ally, the US, a growing threat to UK politics? How can bad actors use cryptocurrency to avoid detection? And what will happen to British democracy if these loopholes aren't closed?

We spoke to Eliza Lockhart, a senior research fellow at the Centre for Finance and Security at RUSI who has spent years investigating foreign interference in elections, to find out more. Lockhart provided evidence as part of the Rycroft Review.

Dark Money and Weaponised Newsfeeds

When Welsh Reform leader and former MEP Nathan Gill admitted last year that he had promoted Russian interests in exchange for around £5,000 a speech, it

demonstrated that not only could foreign states influence British politics - doing so was cheap.

“You can spend £40,000 [in total] and have someone parrot Russian talking points to the European Parliament,” says Eliza Lockhart.

While in the US, it might take $100,000s to attract a politician’s attention, Lockhart says, “in the UK, a small amount of money can go a long way to creating a very distorting impact on how our democratic processes operate.”

This makes Britain particularly vulnerable to foreign interference in politics.

“It's not time to press the panic button, but alarm bells should be ringing,” Lockhart says, echoing the findings of the Rycroft report.

Rycroft describes the growing threats posed by foreign donations to political parties, coordinated campaigns to promote divisive content on social media and widespread lobbying and influence through think tanks.

“By definition, we can't calculate the amount of dark money that is coming into UK politics and influencing it and, as yet, it appears to not have achieved the goals of the people behind it,” Lockhart adds.

“But that barrier [against foreign interference] is not going to hold for much longer, simply because of the sophistication and the severity of the onslaught that we're facing.”

Why do countries want to target the UK?

There are many reasons why traditionally hostile foreign nations such as China or Russia, or powerful individual actors, might want to exert influence on UK politics.

“There can be very specific targets like a candidate in a particular election that they believe holds more sympathetic views to them,” Lockhart says.

Gill, who took bribes to advocate for Russia in the lead up to the war in Ukraine, is an example of this.

More often than not, however, Lockhart says the goal is to influence the political discourse to align with their interests or weaken the UK.

“Weaponising people's newsfeeds and what they're talking about, bringing certain issues to prominence and creating division in our society,” she adds.

Who is interfering?

As referenced by Rycroft, the government security agency, The National Protective Security Authority, told MPs: “The UK is a target of long-term strategic foreign interference and espionage from elements of the Russian, Chinese and Iranian states.”

There are examples to support this, such as the 2022 cyberhacking of the Electoral Commission by suspected Chinese spies. Separately, the case of Christine Lee, a lawyer accused by MI5 of trying to influence MPs and peers on behalf of China, as well as Gill, the MEP.

But now, the threat isn’t limited to these historically hostile states. Rycroft and Lockhart both warn we have to guard against bad actors from within our ally, the US, too.

In what Alastair described as the “best paragraph” of the report, Rycroft writes: “I am also cognisant of a potential new threat: an emerging willingness of foreign actors and private citizens, including from allies like the United States, to interfere in, and influence, politics abroad in pursuit of their own agenda.”

Lockhart expands on this, explaining how the US influences our politics and why it’s now different to the way soft power was exerted in the past.

“The US has long played a role in shaping political discourse internationally,” she says, “but recent developments suggest a shift towards more overt and ideologically driven interventions in allied democracies.”

One example she provides is that the US is reportedly developing a ‘freedom’ website to allow British and European users to see content banned by their governments including alleged hate speech.

She also describes a “clear shift” in the US national security strategy when it comes to exercising influence overseas, through think tank funding and the “creation of essentially policy discourse that will enable it to as it says ‘promote American values’.”

How are foreign actors able to do this?

Rycroft explains that there are two main methods: “attempts to directly suborn the political process through financial interference; and sustained efforts to undermine trust in democracy by stoking divisive debate, principally on social media.”

He gives two examples of interference via social media in his report: “The exponential escalation of adverse social media commentary about London and the presence of hostile state activity in the debate on Scottish independence.”

The other method, financial interference in UK politics, is not a new phenomenon.

As Lockhart says, “We've had lots of problems with unincorporated associations and offshore shell company things or structures being used to obscure the ownership of fiat donations.”

And determined actors have always found unusual routes to make donations. “You talk to anyone at the Electoral Commission and they give some very interesting examples of artworks and racehorses that have been donated,” Lockhart says.

Yet the emergence and proliferation of cryptoassets - virtual currencies outside the control of any bank or country - has worsened the problem and led to a “warp speed mutation of these concerns”, she explains.

The owner of cryptocurrency is identified only by a string of numbers and it is “very difficult” to connect those numbers to a real person.

“That is a problem for political finance regulation because [it] can be used to mask the original origin of funds. The technology itself [also] operates across borders at speed which can frustrate jurisdictional law enforcement,” Lockhart says.

What is being done to tackle the crypto problem?

On the recommendation of the Rycroft review, the government instituted a moratorium, what Lockhart refers to as a “ban with a plan”, on all cryptocurrency donations last week.

This places a stay on all crypto donations while regulators and law enforcement work out the best way to tackle the problem at source: the donors. Lockhart believes it is a better route than a blanket ban.

“A moratorium can only be lifted if parliament, through affirmative resolution of both houses and the Electoral Commission, agrees that safeguards are in place. That's a

higher threshold than if a ban was implemented via primary legislation which could then be lifted by a subsequent government via primary legislation."

What now?

If the government implements all of the recommendations from the Rycroft review, Lockhart believes we would be in a very strong position.

But the key will be enforcing those rules…

"If we don't have effective enforcement then the whole house of cards falls down," she says.

"Rycroft identified that there's no one actually holding the pen on foreign interference and political finance issues. We have a patchwork of legislation underpinning this both in terms of the general elections but also in terms of the local elections."

Rycroft recommended creating a Police Centre of Excellence to "pursue the investigation of complex criminal offences under electoral law involving foreign interference in UK politics".

This is a suggestion Lockhart supports. "If we don't bring this under control," she says, "there is a risk that we will lose public trust and once that trust is lost it's very difficult to regain."

You can read more of Lockhart's research here.

Two weeks ago, we interviewed the real heroes behind Dirty Business, the Channel 4 documentary about the UK's sewage scandal. After the piece, many of you wrote in to ask how to solve the problem.

Rory suggested we speak to economist Professor Dieter Helm from the University of Oxford, who has advised successive governments on utilities and environmental policy.

This week, Prof Helm shared his radical proposal to fix the problem, starting with a lesson from Victorian London.

Away from this interview, you can read his full paper on the topic here:

What a 'Water Revolution' Would Look Like

By Jim Norton

In the unusually hot Summer of 1858, London was hit by the Great Stink.

The capital had grown so big that all its waste - human sewage, industrial effluent, and slaughterhouse runoff - was flowing into the Thames. The stench pervaded everything, including the Houses of Parliament.

It was a crisis that finally spurred ministers into action. Within 18 days, astonishing speed for Victorian legislation, an act was passed to approve civil engineer Joseph Bazalgette's ambitious plans - which had been argued over for years - to overhaul the sewer system. Over the next 16 years, he built a 1,100 mile underground brick network that is still used today.

The engineering feat later became the template rolled out across the rest of the country - and it hasn't worked too badly in the 150 years since, says Prof Helm. "But now it's creaking at the seams." It's been badly maintained, he says, and it's struggling under the weight of the sheer volume of sewage coming from an ever denser population.

What's the problem?

The causes are broadly twofold. First is speed - rain runs off farmland, roads and housing developments far faster than the sewer system can cope with, overwhelming treatment works and spilling raw sewage into rivers and the sea.

Second is what's going into the sewers in the first place. Pharmaceuticals, industrial chemicals, shampoos, wet wipes - all flushed into pipes never designed to handle them.

"We just dump it there, out of sight, and think it's gone," he says. But it's not.

In 2024, UK regulator Ofwat signed off on around £100 billion of investment by water companies over the next five years to try to fix, or at least mitigate, the system's problems.

The spending will largely be directed at building infrastructure at treatment works, including hundreds of large storm storage tanks to cope with the runoff. Much of this cost will ultimately land on customer bills.

What's the solution?

“That’s a lot of money,” says Prof Helm, but it could be used far more wisely if we “turn the model on its head”. Instead of focusing on the end of the pipe, we need to start tackling the problem at source.

“We slow the flow,” he says, “We stop pollution going straight into the toilet, we design houses to store water, we re-wriggle the rivers [restoring the natural meanders of rivers that were previously straightened by human engineering], we change the way agriculture functions. Start at the top.”

How do we get there?

For all of this to work, Prof Helm says Britain needs to overhaul its regulation. “We can't do it piecemeal, we can't do it in silos,” he explains. “In this world I’m describing, we don’t leave it to monopoly water companies to do everything.”

Instead, he proposes a "catchment map" - a new regulator for each river system, overseeing everything from the source to the sea. In it, everyone whose actions affect a river - from farmers and developers to the Environment Agency and local wildlife trusts - becomes responsible for the health of the whole system.

It would also put power back in the hands of the people, says Prof Helm. He envisions each catchment mapped on a public website, where anyone - from campaigners to concerned residents - could run an AI simulation to test whether their idea would work and pitch it. “This is a wonderful democratic opportunity.”

Is it feasible?

There would be no need to nationalise, he says. Look at the UK's electricity system: a complex network with lots of different players - generators, wind farms, grid operators - mostly privately owned, but planned and managed as a single system. "That's the analogy, and it's a very important one"

Change would not be easy, he concedes. The old ways are tried and trusted. There's a "comforting sense of certainty" in a big concrete tank. "Provided you haven't got holes in it, it'll fill up, right? If I say, let's re-wriggle the river so that we slow down the flow - I'm a little less certain. And so it's risky."

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has put the cost of re-nationalising the water system at £100bn. Redirect it towards the source rather than the end of the pipe, Prof Helm argues, make polluters pay their share, and you would see better outcomes without soaring bills.

"The good news is, we've got a crisis - because policy only changes after a crisis," he says. "That's the beginning of a revolution we need if this water system we have is to be sustainable for the next 50 years. That, I think, is what I call a Bazalgette moment."

In last week's episode, Rory and Alastair discussed assisted dying. Many of you wrote in with your thoughts and experiences and we wanted to share some of them here.

Assisted Dying: Your Views

Martin Gorman: I work as a specialist paramedic in the community and one of my roles is supporting end of life patients. It's one of the toughest but most rewarding aspects of my job. I hear a lot about the need to improve palliative care. I couldn't agree more. But it's not the whole answer.

There is a significant group of patients for whom really good palliative care still leaves them in pain and distress as they near the end of their life. And another group who have just slipped through the cracks, often because the progression of their disease has outstripped any planned provision. Most tragic of all, I attend patients who have taken their own lives because of their unbearable situation. The abject tragedy of these cases is the fact that they are forced to die alone in order to avoid implicating family and friends in their deaths. People go to extraordinary lengths to deceive family members to get the opportunity to end their lives. Alone.

Finally, to address Rory's point about doctors easing patients into death with prescribed medications. In reality, post Shipman, all clinicians are only too aware of the scrutiny their treatment [if they use prescribed medicines to help patients die] could be subject to after the fact.

I have experienced patients (and families) begging me to just help them die. I cannot adequately articulate the horror of this situation and the knowledge that of course I can't do it. There is always a risk that the correct dose of end of life medication can be enough to tip patients over the edge but we surely cannot rely on this as a strategy to provide patients with a dignified and peaceful death?

Julia Bichard: I am a palliative care consultant working in an acute hospital. In my work, I encounter dying people every day.

I feel a lot of frustration about people commenting on the topic of assisted dying as if it is a clearcut issue, when they have no real experience or expertise in the matter. What we are discussing is state-funded, deliberate shortening of people's lives.

All other medical treatment seeks to improve people's quality of life and, ideally, length of life. How could something that seeks to end life be regarded as a “treatment”. In law, no other medical treatment can be “demanded”, so why can this one, when it is by nature a profoundly important decision; literally a life or death issue.

I can tell you that if dying people have proper access to high quality palliative care, there is no need for them to suffer.

The state of palliative care funding in this country is appalling. Hospices have, on average, only 30% of their funding from the NHS, despite providing an essential service. Access is a postcode lottery, with more deprived areas having less access. How can people possibly be making an informed choice about opting for assisted dying when we can't ensure they have access to palliative care?!

Surely anyone can see that we need to fund palliative care properly before ever considering using funds to create a whole new speciality of assisted dying. 82% of palliative care physicians are against the bill. That surely says a lot.

Now for the part you’ve all been waiting for…

Rory & Alastair’s Recommendations

Rory

- Norman Mailer’s *Harlot’s Ghost* on how the CIA planned the Bay of Pigs
- Rory says the film *Project Hail Mary* is “really fun”, as is the book behind it, by Andy Weir
- *Hitler’s Beneficiaries* by Gotz Aly about how regimes, of all kinds, create bargains with their public
- *The Coming Storm* by Norwegian historian Odd Arne Westad
- President Eisenhower's Declaration of Independence on Foreign Policy speech: “We cannot, in the world any more than in our own nation, subscribe to one law for the weak, another law for the strong, one law for those opposing us, another for those allied with us. There can be only one law, or there will be no peace.”
- And… *The Chosen*, an Amazon Prime programme about Jesus

Alastair

- Dennis Brogan's 1952 article in Harpers Magazine *The Illusion of American Omnipotence* which Alastair says shows how "decades of American arrogance is coming to a head in the form of a guy who believes that he is such a special creature if he says something is going to happen, it's going to happen."
- Oliver Bullough's books: *Butler to the World, Money Land and Everybody Loves Our Dollars*. They illustrate that "the UK has done a terrible job at keeping our economy clean," he says on the show.
- Liam Byrne's *Why Populists Are Winning*
- Sophie Raworth's *Running on Air*
- The TV show *Gone*
- The film, *Mr Nobody vs Putin*, which Alastair says is "absolutely brilliant"
- And, *Essays on Madness, a Lunatic's Guide* by AA Fellowes

Members of The Rest Is Politics+ receive 10% off all the available titles mentioned on the show each week from our friends at Coles Books. Join here.





Alastair sent in these bonus photos from Glasgow. The first of him interviewing Anas Sarwar for Leading (coming soon) and the second of the wreck of the historic Union Street corner, which burnt down last month.

Send us your Questions

What should Rory and Alastair cover in Question Time? Share your questions through this form.

Until next week!

Issy

PS: We'd love to know what you think of our newsletters. Feedback? Ideas? Send them to: therestispolitics@goalhanger.com

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