

RICHARD: I'm going to throw five numbers at you and three letters, as well, and then you're going to repeat them back to me, okay?

ASHLEY: Yep. I've got my pen.

RICHARD: 53555, and then the letters CGC.

ASHLEY: That's our new way of fundraising, right?

RICHARD: Good memory. I think they call it "text to donate," and it's a new way to raise money for Common Ground Committee, which makes these podcasts that are free for everyone to listen to.

ASHLEY: Text 53555 on your phone, and then type the letters CGC into the message. Common Ground Committee relies on fundraising to do its work.

RICHARD: Text 53555 and then the letters CGC. And now our show and also our new theme music.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. We're about to have a fascinating and, I think, far-reaching conversation with a man who walked across Afghanistan, was a top British politician, and is now a podcaster. Rory Stewart spoke to us from London.

ASHLEY: How does our public square look from the UK, where you are?

RORY STEWART: The U.S. public square really looks incredibly divided. We saw a version of this in Brexit. So that was pretty dispiriting. But in the U.S., it sometimes feels as though it has some of the elements of a civil war.

ASHLEY: In our interview recorded late last month, we asked Rory Stewart about polarization, populism, and what he learned about aid programs that are supposed to lift people out of poverty.

RICHARD: So it's a pretty broad-ranging interview. We also asked: how do other democracies view the current political dysfunction and division here in the U.S.?

ASHLEY: Rory Stewart's new book is called *How Not to Be a Politician*. It's largely about his time as a British government minister and member of Parliament. It's caused quite a fuss in the UK and is a bestseller.

RICHARD: Okay, here's our interview.

ASHLEY: Rory, before we talk politics, you have led a very interesting life. You've done a 6,000-mile solo walk across Asia. You're a former British cabinet minister who ran to be the next conservative prime minister. You have worked and lived in Iraq and Afghanistan. You've been running a charity, and you have a hit podcast, and you're a mere 50 years old. What's the most rewarding thing that you've ever done?

RORY STEWART: I think the most rewarding thing I've ever done is running a nonprofit in Afghanistan. I set that up in 2005, and I lived in Kabul, and we restored the center of the old city, Kabul, historic area,

created a clinic, primary school. But probably close second to that is the work that I've been doing over the last year, which is working with a wonderful organization called GiveDirectly, which is a much more radical organization which gives direct cash support to the extreme poor in Africa.

They're very different types of nonprofit work. One of them was very intensive for a few hundred people, rebuilding almost brick-by-brick the old city. The other is very much about letting communities take the lead, respecting their dignity, their choice, and giving them cash.

ASHLEY: We are going to come back to GiveDirectly, but back to politics for a moment. Why did you want to be a politician in the first place?

RORY STEWART: I was very aware, working in Iraq and Afghanistan, of how much was going wrong. It felt to me that we had really, fundamentally misunderstood these countries. We'd fundamentally misunderstood the position of the U.S. and the UK in the world. I thought, in the end, these decisions to get involved in these mad adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan must rest with politicians, and if I become a politician, I can fix that and maybe fix other things, too, because I began to suspect that the insanity of what we were doing in Iraq and Afghanistan might also indicate a general insanity in the political system, which might also relate to what we were doing at home.

RICHARD: Insanity in Iraq and Afghanistan, tell us more.

RORY STEWART: Well, I walked across Afghanistan in the winter of 2001, 2002 just after 9/11, and it was on a walk that took almost two years. I stayed in 550 village houses on the walk. I was walking 20, 25 miles a day. I was encountering communities where the women had never been more than two hours' walk from their village in their lives, where only one person in the community could read or write, where villages were still at war with each other and had been for 25 years, so nobody could walk four miles between one and its neighbor. And I picked up that these villages were far more conservative, far more religious, far more anti-foreign than anyone possibly imagined.

And then I turned up in Kabul, and I saw an intervention in which people were saying, "There's a commitment in Afghan society. Every Afghan's committed to a gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic, centralized state based on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law." And weirdly, at the time, 22 years ago, people didn't find that funny. They didn't realize how weird it was, what they were saying. I then spent the next 10 years of my life trying to explain why the idea that you could see Iraq and Afghanistan that way was insane, but unfortunately, during that period, we ended up spending \$3 trillion deploying 150,000 soldiers on the ground and perpetually trying to do what we couldn't do.

RICHARD: Speaking of insanity or at least dysfunction, your new book, *How Not to Be a Politician*, is based on your years as a member of Parliament and paints a deeply depressing picture of UK politics and some of the people within it. You write of rampant cynicism, ignorance, glibness, incompetence, and many elected politicians, you say, don't know what they're doing or even voting on. Are things really that bad?

RORY STEWART: Yes, they're absolutely that bad, and I'm afraid they're pretty bad in most of the mature democracies in the world. The truth is that the basic mechanisms of democracy are the same in all our countries. We are driven by a particular media environment, by social media, by the necessity of campaigning and marketing and selling and fundraising. I was talking to a U.S. congresswoman who spends—she said 110,000 hours in two years just on the phone raising money. These things are not

compatible with thinking seriously about policy, and those fundamental tensions are getting worse and worse.

ASHLEY: How do you think that the UK system, which you described in such devastating detail, compares to the system over here in the U.S.?

RORY STEWART: I think that there are, of course, differences, but fundamentally, the idea is the same. The idea is that a particular group, pretty small group of people—they might be called senators, congresspeople, they could be called cabinet ministers—somehow are going to be able to govern these incredibly complex societies, that they're supposed to understand Iraq and Afghanistan, they're supposed to understand the intricacies of health policy, they're supposed to understand, now, AI, climate change. And the closer you get to who those people really are and how they actually spend their days, the things they're worrying about, the less plausible it is that this is a system which is likely to generate thoughtful long-term policy.

Now, there are things we can do to make it a bit better, but they rely on tackling a couple of things. They rely on addressing the threats among technology. We haven't begun, really, to think about how we deal with the way that Twitter and Facebook polarizes and divides and begun to think about the way that AI is going to make the forthcoming U.S. election even worse. But we also need to think about how people like myself, who claim to speak for the sort of center, liberal, progressive tradition, how we're supposed to combat populism. What are you supposed to do about Boris Johnson? What are you supposed to do about Narendra Modi? What are you supposed to do, above all, with Donald Trump?

And the risk is that we sound like a kind of '90s tribute band, that we're still living back in the world of Clinton and Blair and that we're not really acknowledging that populism had a point in its critique about many things that were wrong in our economic system and the way our politics and its national relations worked. And we have to produce a different way of communicating and a very different content to our communications, very different ideas.

RICHARD: How would that be done? How do politicians who believe in a functioning democracy improve the way they communicate with voters?

RORY STEWART: I think that, too often, people from the centers sound like dry technocrats. We kind of spit facts at people. Al Gore, John Kerry got in trouble with this when they were campaigning. We need to find out how to talk in a more relatable, emotional fashion. Secondly, we need to make the strong moral case against populism, but we also need to have a sense that we have more than just a kind of technocratic vision of the future, we're saying something more than, "I've read a paper produced by a thinktank in Sweden, and if we do the following tweaks, we're going to make a few improvements." We need to have a sense of moral energy.

ASHLEY: You mention populism growing out of something. Can you talk a little bit about that for a minute?

RORY STEWART: Populism, for me, is really the result of the collapse of the fundamental governing assumptions of the 1990s and early 200s. Those were, firstly, that we had a particular idea of global trade and deregulated markets that was supposed to deliver prosperity for all. Our second assumption was that this prosperity would necessarily lead to a rise of democracy around the world. Thirdly, this economic system and this democratic system would create a liberal global order. And it seemed pretty

good in the '90s. The number of democracies doubled in the world. The world was getting more peaceful every year. GDP was growing fast.

And then it all came crashing down. It came crashing down with the 2008 financial crisis, with the rise of China, with the humiliations of Iraq and Afghanistan, with our own awareness through many different social movements about social justice inside our own countries, and finally, because of the rise of social media. That basically meant that we entered the early 2010s still not quite acknowledging as the center that the old model was broken, that the public was alienated, and that we were about to enter, in 2014, an age of populism.

RICHARD: So the populists were right in a way, at least in their analysis of some of what was wrong?

RORY STEWART: Yeah, so *How Not to Be a Politician* is partly a book about the slow realization of somebody from the liberal center, in my case, the liberal center right, that we—and by "we," I mean me, my centrist Labor colleagues David Cameron, Ed Miliband, who was the opposition leader—but also, I would say, people admired greatly like President Barack Obama, had not fully digested how radically the world had changed. I felt that I had spotted the problems in Iraq and Afghanistan and why the liberal global order was a bit shaky, but we were still not fully coming to terms with what the 2008 financial crisis meant and what the rise of China meant, and we were continuing to imagine a world that was rapidly vanishing.

ASHLEY: Our podcast is called *Let's Find Common Ground*. As you know, the U.S. is deeply divided. Our politics are very polarized. How does our public square look from the UK, where you are?

RORY STEWART: Well, at the moment, of course, it looks a bit dispiriting. The U.S. public square really looks incredibly divided. We saw a version of this in Brexit. With Brexit, we saw a situation in which 50 percent of remain voters said they wouldn't be prepared to speak to a Brexit voter, and vice versa, and only 25 percent of either side were prepared to countenance their children marrying somebody from the other camp. So that was pretty dispiriting.

But in the U.S., it sometimes feels as though it has some of the elements of a civil war. I've never met such dramatic incomprehension. But the key here, I think, is communication, persuasion, and empathy. It's not easy in a world of social media. Actually, often it feels almost impossible, but you have to begin from the assumption that most people are in good faith. And what I think worried me most as somebody who obviously, my political tradition and my friends are mostly sort of center left, but what worried me most is the way that they respond to Trump or to Brexit by portraying people who vote differently to them as though they are uniquely uneducated, befuddled victims who don't understand their own best interests and are motivated only by ignorance and fear.

RICHARD: I think many people on the left, the center, even the center right of American politics currently are in great fear of what will happen if Donald Trump is reelected and that if he isn't reelected that maybe things will go back to normal. How do you see things in relation to that?

RORY STEWART: I think we live in a very dangerous age, and I think Donald Trump is a symptom, not the driving cause. I think we live in an age where all those things that I've talked about, and particularly, now, the additional element of AI create extremely rich, fertile soil for populism. It's not an accident that we can see Marine Le Pen in poll position to take over as president of France or that the AfD is rising in Germany or that we see all forms of left and right-wing populism spreading across Latin America.

The fundamental driving force of this, of the narrative that you can speak for the people, an imagined people, against the elite—not a majority of the people but a people that you present as the real nation against the elite—that you can polarize and that you can generate extreme bullshit. Sometimes it's lies, sometimes it's half-truths, sometimes it's just gross simplifications. These things remain absolute present dangers and are systems—and this is partly what How Not to Be a Politician is about—the old-fashioned politicians are extremely poorly equipped to respond because our profession has become so saturated with media, so cynical, so tribal, so short-termist that it's extremely difficult for us to present a dignified moral response to populism.

RICHARD: Rory Stewart. More of our interview in a minute. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. Our show is produced for Common Ground Committee, one of the most active voices in the bridging community.

RICHARD: Yeah, people and organizations who are pushing back against rigid divisions in our society.

ASHLEY: Common Ground Committee has a range of programs including the Common Ground Scorecard, a quick way to help voters find out which elected officials are seeking common ground to move the country forward.

RICHARD: And there's also a new way to support this work with your dollars. Text the word CGC to 53555, and donate.

ASHLEY: Now more from Rory Stewart on how he views America's role in the world.

RORY STEWART: America is entering, even under Joe Biden, a phase of isolationism. It's no accident that we have had, under the Biden presidency, seven coups in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is not like the '90s and early 2000s where the number of democracies in the world was growing. They are diminishing, and President Biden is getting credit, rightly, for standing up to Russia and Ukraine, but the foreign policy from the middle class, I'm afraid, which is the strapline for all of this, if you look at the detail of it, has many things that traditionally we would have called isolationist. The U.S. is no longer a confident global player, and despite all the horrors of Iraq and Afghanistan, when the U.S. was a more confident global player in Bosnia, in Kosovo, in Sierra Leone, in Liberia, it was helping to make the world a slightly better place, and it's no longer doing that.

RICHARD: And we're seeing some strong pushback against U.S. funding for Ukraine from many Republicans, including Donald Trump.

RORY STEWART: He really doesn't think that the Ukraine/Russia fight is worth getting into, and he appears to have said to John Bolton that he doesn't think that he doesn't think that the China/Taiwan fight is worth getting into, either. So he speaks for a very extreme, simplistic, and, to many people, a very appealing isolationism because he was right about Iraq and Afghanistan. He was right. That's an unfortunate fact. He may have been right for the wrong reasons. He may have been right in bad faith, but he was right. Those things were complete messes. Nobody knew what they were doing.

The problem is that the tendency is to lurch from over-engagement through these fantasies of nation-building towards complete isolation. That's where Donald Trump has dragged the conversation, and Joe Biden gave into that through his precipitate and irresponsible withdrawal from Afghanistan.

ASHLEY: Just going back to the personal and hopefully something a little more uplifting for a moment, which is common ground, you cohost *The Rest is Politics* with Alastair Campbell, who is the top communications advisor to Tony Blair, and he is a Labor guy. You were in Conservative politics during your career, and you're friends, right?

RORY STEWART: We are. We are, and I think common ground or the center ground is not about pretending we agree on everything. It's not some sort of lazy consensus. It's about an energetic tension between different ideas and different values but where the tension is harnessed to create a vision for the future, to create a moral vision, and as somebody who's passionate about the center, I want to try to keep communicating that.

RICHARD: What does supporting common ground or being a common grounder mean to you?

RORY STEWART: For me, it means listening, empathizing, and being rigorous and challenging at the same time. I don't think common ground comes from pulling your punches. I obviously far prefer Joe Biden to Donald Trump. I very much would prefer Joe Biden to win the election, but I don't think that means that I should exempt Joe Biden from criticism. I don't think that's a healthy way of thinking or engaging with the world. I think that common ground comes from nuance, comes from being able to say that your enemies get some things right, and your friends get things wrong and being brutally open and clear about this. It's a belief in persuasion. It's a belief in education. It's a belief in explanation. It's a belief in truth, truths through dialogue.

ASHLEY: You served as a member of the British Parliament for nearly a decade, and you've said you disagreed with many of the constituents who you represented. How did you speak with them when divisions came up? How did you handle the lack of common ground over some of the things you believed in?

RORY STEWART: Well, it's important to understand if a constituent disagrees with you that often they're coming in to see you to have a fight. If somebody has made their way to your constituency advice surgery, and they've waited for an hour to come in to see you—

RICHARD: That's a wonderful British term, your constituency advice surgery. Just to explain for American listeners, when a British member of Parliament holds a session with local constituents, they call it a surgery, right?

RORY STEWART: That's right, exactly. Yeah, exactly. I remember tweeting out, saying I was just going to surgery, and Americans following me on Twitter saying, "Oh, I'm so sorry. All my prayers are with you." Yes, exactly, so it's generally once a week, we'll sit down, clear our diary, first-come-first-served, sit in a town in our electoral district, and people will come rolling in to talk to us.

They will come in, and they will want to have a fight about, "How could you possibly back the Saudi bombing in Yemen?" or, "How could you possibly defend cutting child benefit?" So I think the first thing to do is to be prepared to have that conversation. Never get into the type of politics where you think,

"Well, this person's never going to vote for me, anyway, so it's not really worth it." And many of my colleagues feel that.

I actually quite admired—there are many things I disagree with, and one of the things I admired Mrs. Thatcher for is that when Margaret Thatcher went canvassing round doors, and she found a big sign saying Labor Voter, and they tried to hold her on the doorstep for 40 minutes having an argument, she would stand there for 40 minutes having the argument with all her team saying, "We've really got to move on. We've got more doors to cover, and no point wasting your time on this person." So I think politics has to be about persuasion. There's a wonderful professor at Yale called Bryan Garsten, who's written a wonderful book about persuasion, because the idea of persuasion is the democratic idea that through argument, you can actually change someone's mind.

RICHARD: You mention Margaret Thatcher. She was very much a conviction politician. In your book, I think you write a lot about politicians who don't particularly believe in anything. Is that a widespread problem?

RORY STEWART: It is a big problem. It is a big problem. I think politicians fabricate conviction. They fabricate certainty. They want to sound clear. But real, deep conviction, the kind of conviction that most of the listeners to the podcast would mean by conviction, i.e. something that you've spent many decades thinking about, reflecting on, questioning yourself on, reading about, deeply dwelling on, asking yourself great words of the great parliamentary hero, Oliver Cromwell, "Ask yourself, from the bowels of Christ, whether you may not be wrong." That kind of conviction is very lacking in politics.

ASHLEY: In parts of your book, you do sound a little bit kinder about the U.S. system than the British one. I think you said that when it comes to civil servants, American civil servants are more open to new ideas than those in Britain. Could you talk about that a little bit?

RORY STEWART: Yeah, I think that is true. Along with all the problems in Iraq and Afghanistan, I was deeply, deeply impressed by many of the Americans I worked with. I was lucky enough to be able to brief Hillary Clinton when she was Secretary of State. I worked closely with Richard Holbrooke, distinguished American ambassador, with General Petraeus, with General Stanley McChrystal, with the U.S. ambassadors in Iraq and Afghanistan, and I was struck with all of them how incredibly open they were to listening to people from outside.

They didn't have any reason to listen to me. I wasn't an American civil servant, but the American system is surprisingly open to professors, to journalists, to people from think tanks and is curious. It's genuinely trying to find solutions to problems. Sometimes it's trying to find solutions where there are no solutions. That's probably the flaw in the American system, that Americans find it difficult to accept in Iraq or Afghanistan that something may actually be impossible, but I think there is something very noble in the attempt, even if the result is not great.

RICHARD: You have a background in international development, and after leaving electoral politics, you were the leader of a charity called GiveDirectly, which calls itself the only global charity that lets donors give directly to the poor. The website says, quote, "Your donation empowers families in poverty to choose for themselves how to best improve their lives."

RORY STEWART: I'm the president of GiveDirectly, and I'm moving to a new role as senior vice of GiveDirectly, but I'm a champion of this model, which GiveDirectly does, which is to provide direct cash

assistance to the extreme poor, and actually, we also do it in the United States. One of the strange things is that the evidence is now overwhelming that cash is a very, very powerful way of helping people, unconditional cash. So, for example, in Africa, and this was my business affinity, 30 years in international development, traditionally, what we did is we had this idea you give someone a fish, they eat for a day; teach them to fish, they eat for a lifetime. So we wasted a fortune, as it were, teaching people to fish, which meant that we sent out tens of thousands of people who looked a bit like the three of us to wander around African villages capacity building, which meant that we sat there, and we tried to study and survey and do needs assessments and work out what was best for the villages and then provide it for them. And it was incredibly expensive. We never really calculated how much this was costing or what the result would be if we took all that money and just gave it in cash instead.

Starting 10 years ago, people began to study this, and the result is extremely uncomfortable, and I discovered this when I turned up to the GiveDirectly program in Rwanda, turned up, and they had given the village, scattered through the houses, \$70,000. Now, \$70,000 is really nothing. I mean, a traditional village development project would cost you \$1 or \$2 million, and you'd turn up and, in three months, because everybody's got \$700 per household, the electrification has doubled from 40 percent to 80 percent, livestock ownership has doubled, nutrition's improving, bone density's improving, stunting's improving. Every house has a new roof. Everyone who doesn't have a latrine has a latrine. Small businesses are exploding.

The economic benefit, we then find in other studies, to surrounding areas, \$2.50—for every \$1 you put into that village, \$2.50 of benefit is flowing to surrounding areas because it turns out that the problem with the idea that the three of us are going to turn up to teach someone how to fish is that generally they either know how to fish but just don't have the money to buy a fishing rod, or they don't want to fish; they want to open a bakery. And the key point about giving someone cash is you are respecting their individuality, their knowledge of their own conditions, and their ability to fix their own problems far more cheaply and smartly than we can for them.

ASHLEY: And have you been able to measure results from your own charity, from GiveDirectly?

RORY STEWART: Yes. We've found benchmark studies in which direct-cash giving is outperforming nutrition programs on nutrition. It's outperforming youth business training programs on youth business training. It's outperforming education enrollment programs on education enrollment. But of course, it's doing that simultaneously across the board. The same dollar is doing all those three things at the same time.

I suppose that we were talking about evidence and curiosity, so one of the questions to the U.S. system for all my great admiration of the U.S. system is: why is USAID not doing this abroad? Why are you continuing to pay farmers in Idaho to grow maize, ship it at huge expense halfway around the world, drop it on people in South Sudan who then are forced to sell the maize in order to get cash to buy the tent that they need? Why is it that in the U.S., instead of following a lot of the data that we have from Europe on the impact of cash on the poor in the United States, are you still going around giving food vouchers, which, again, people sell to get the cash they need? The whole thing is a completely bonkers system. So I have a huge admiration for the U.S. system, but also I see these highly intelligent, dedicated people somehow not really following the evidence.

RICHARD: Is there a broader theme here from your book, from your charity work, when we try to solve problems, we need to be a little more modest about our intentions?

RORY STEWART: 100 percent, and we need to find a way of acknowledging that. It's difficult to acknowledge, particularly difficult for politicians who, if they admit that they don't really understand the subject or that they can't really do something, are giving ammunition to the media and political opponents. But we have to find a way of acknowledging that we are not superheroes in some childish fantasy, that we are mature individuals living in a grownup world and that all of us have deep limits to our knowledge, our power, our legitimacy, that we live in societies that have never been so wealthy, never been so healthy, never been so educated, where our voters and the recipients of our programs often know far more about their own conditions than we could ever do. And I think the beginning of wisdom in the new politics, the kind of politics I would want to build in the common ground, is humility.

ASHLEY: What do you think are the chances of that in our social media age?

RORY STEWART: I think, oddly, the social media age—yes, it makes a lot of things difficult. I think it polarizes, it divides, it simplifies, but it also gives permission to people to be open in ways that they weren't before. My colleagues in Parliament, and I'm sure the same is true in the U.S., are able, for the first time, to be far more open about their sexuality, about their childhoods, about their mental health. We've had a lot of politicians in the UK stand up and be very frank about mental health, which would have been very difficult for them 15, 20 years ago. We are beginning to learn to present ourselves as humans, not perfect individuals, and that partly is a new age that enables that.

RICHARD: Rory Stewart, thanks very much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

RORY STEWART: Thank you.

ASHLEY: Rory Stewart spoke to us from London.

RICHARD: We have links to the charity he spoke about, GiveDirectly, and also more about Rory at our website, commongroundcommittee.org.

ASHLEY: Let's Find Common Ground publishes new episodes every two weeks. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Oh, and by the way, don't forget to text to donate to the number 53555 and then the letters CGC.

ASHLEY: Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.