

Encapsulated - Episode 6 of 10

FADE IN:

INT. NEWSROOM - NIGHT

The HOST (55) is interviewing ELLIS HUGHES (48).

HOST

Welcome back to 'Devil's Advocate'. Our next candidate for the evening is Ellis Hughes, a former insurance agent who's running on a platform of cooperation, solidarity, and transparency. I can't say I'm optimistic about her odds, this is politics after all. Mrs. Hughes, pleasure to have you.

ELLIS

You're too kind! Great to be here.. And I'm okay if you call me Ellis.

HOST

Sure thing, Ellis. Why do you think the field is so crowded, and how are you going to stand out as somebody with no political experience?

ELLIS

Well, for the first time in our country's history - hate to say - our vote actually matters. Your zone is like your family, and so your voice matters, even in a larger area like ours. One in 200,000 is still much more influential than one in 300 million.

HOST

So it has nothing to do with Mayor Green being a decrepit, greedy moron who doesn't deserve to keep running the city.

ELLIS

Mike was elected under different circumstances, I don't think it's fair to criticize him for happening to be in office on the 20th.

HOST

But his ratings are less than 30% favorable, might it just be that he's a terrible human being, and people can see through his act?

ELLIS

I think the outrage has nothing to do with him - he's been the mayor for decades, and nobody 'saw through his act' before now. It's just that people suddenly have a voice, and history shows that when that happens, we use it for anger.

HOST

So you're saying that Mayor Green is the victim of the crazed public...

ELLIS

He doesn't have to be, but yes, I think the outrage is a panic response. We've been thrust into a world where survival is a luxury, and people need somebody to blame. Mike Green happens to be an easy target.

HOST

Good luck winning votes by telling people that THEY'RE the problem. Tell me-

ELLIS

Well, no, THEY are not the root problem. They're simply responding to a new reality as one would expect - irrationally.

HOST

So you want to tell voters they're crazy? Yikes.

ELLIS

But they know it. Deep down, they want to know that things will be okay, that they'll have a job tomorrow, that they can go to the store and buy milk whenever they want. That they won't lose their families again. That life can return to normal. People don't LIKE acting this way, but under pressure, they have no choice.

HOST

So how would your campaign relieve the pressure? Why are YOU the one they can count on?

ELLIS

Well, one of my three goals is solidarity, which is this idea that WE are all we have. We can't rely on neighboring zones, let alone a federal government on the other side of the country. We need to take care of ourselves first. And to do that, we need cooperation - another of my goals.

HOST

So what? I know you're new to this, but voters don't care about buzzwords, they want a plan.

ELLIS

Right. That's one of the reasons I decided to run - insurance was frustrating because people would pay us to, effectively, do nothing unless it was an emergency. And I realized that it's immoral to be paid to not add value. To turn money into hypotheticals and policies instead of using it to make a tangible, immediate difference.

HOST

You really ARE new to the swamp. Don't say I didn't warn you when you've been mayor for a year, and you realize you can't really accomplish anything that you promised.

ELLIS

But now you sound like Mayor Green.

(the host looks offended)

Insofar as you're applying pre-barrier thinking to a post-barrier world. In YOUR world, politics never accomplished anything. But in this world, the NEW world, the rules have been rewritten on everything from family to security to commerce to religion to politics.

HOST

People don't change though.

ELLIS

Not with that kind of attitude they don't.

HOST

No wonder you're polling at less than 1%. So-

ELLIS

4% actually. According to three independent groups, I'm at 4% as of last week.

HOST

(misses a beat for the first time)

So- so what would you do to TANGIBLY promote ideas like cooperation and solidarity.

ELLIS

Well, for starters, I would cut the salaries for city employees in half, reduce their hours, and recruit volunteers. Government work in our zone should be a hobby, not a career. That'll reduce the amount of tax dollars going to managers and secretaries accomplishing nothing, and will allow voters - as well as the government employees - to focus their time and money on making practical contributions in the private sector.

HOST

Doing what sort of work?

ELLIS

Construction, manual labor, healthcare, education, learning the skills required for our zone to be a functioning society. We were lucky, we're one of the most densely populated zones - let's work towards becoming independent, because unlike other zones, we have that opportunity.

HOST

Sounds very tribal, you continue to disappoint.

ELLIS

But we don't have a choice anymore. I feel awful about the small towns, the outskirts, the places that won't last but a few years on their own - except I can't actually go there and help them. And the truth is, people in our zone are suffering too. I know it's trendy to feel sorry for zones that are dying - and I genuinely feel for them - but people die on our streets, in our parks, in our hospitals, and in our homes EVERY DAY, and nobody complains.

HOST

That's because it's a lower percentage - losing 100% of the population in a rural zone is much worse than losing 5% of the population in a city.

ELLIS

No it's not. Losing 400 lives in a small town is nothing compared to losing 10,000 lives here.

HOST

So how would you help our people, besides cutting government jobs and shifting focus to the private sector? Which won't even make much of an impact...

ELLIS

It will though. It's not just about lowering taxes, which nobody will complain about. It will reshape the way we think about government work. Working for the city will be something that everyone does, not just career politicians and administrators.

HOST

Except you as the mayor, you'd still be collecting a nice salary. How convenient.

ELLIS

Says who?

(the host is silent)

My salary and hours would also be cut. I'd spend a lot of my time taking classes at the community college for vocational skills. Oh, I forgot to mention: I'll be diverting a lot of our tax dollars to vocational and technical schools.

HOST

And I assume you won't be supporting any foreign aid or disaster relief programs outside of our immediate zone?

ELLIS

Nope. Except for the border patrol fees, all the city's spending will be within our zone. And even then, I'll be cutting expenditures on border patrol - we really only need them for commerce, and once we have a self-sustaining economy, I'm open to cutting them out of the picture entirely.

HOST

Are you insane? They also keep the barriers secure so that we don't have anarchy. Who will keep us safe if they leave?

ELLIS

Safe from whom? Who's going to attack us? That's a pre-barrier worldview. We have more than enough resources to manage our own security, because our biggest threats are those WITHIN our zone, not those outside it.

HOST

So you won't be paying for national defense either? What about a nuclear threat?

ELLIS

In the case of national defense - as is the case with insurance - we're spending REAL money on an UNREAL threat. I guarantee that our enemies have bigger concerns right now than bombing us.

HOST

Wow. So, just to recap, you're going to keep all tax dollars local - no national defense, no border patrol-

ELLIS

MINIMAL border patrol.

HOST

MINIMAL border patrol, no foreign or domestic aid outside this zone, because who cares about anyone that's not us?

ELLIS

Exactly. And five hundred years from now, we'll still be here, and we'll be thriving.

HOST

So what about your third platform, transparency? Is that code for being brutally honest - about how you don't care about the rest of the world?

ELLIS

I care about people AROUND me. Saving the world has always been challenging, the barriers make it next-to-impossible. It's not dispassionate, it's realistic. But since you're not going to change your mind-

HOST

You haven't convinced me yet.

ELLIS

You don't want to be convinced. Which ties into transparency - I would provide grants for individuals and organizations who use their resources to inform citizens, share new ideas, and inspire us. I would also make it criminal for news studios and journalists to deliberately stir up tension, anger, resentment, and fear.

(the host is dead silent)

In a pre-barrier world, we had the luxury of being divisive. If you didn't like somebody, you moved away, you could leave. We can't anymore, we're stuck with each other, and I'm not about to start killing people who are obnoxious. So I'll be taking practical measures to promote unity, cooperation and mutual understanding.

HOST

So, you just shut down people who disagree with you? Like Big Brother?

ELLIS

Nope. I would shut down anybody who isn't open to change. Actually, I encourage debate - I used to be on the debate team - because it's a chance for people to learn. I encourage TV shows and podcasts where people go back and forth, like iron sharpening iron. My problem is with people like you who always have their minds made up.

HOST

(uncomfortably)

Let's switch gears. You mentioned that there are threats within our zone. Elaborate.

ELLIS

Well, besides people like you, there are a lot of us who are dangerously individualistic. One of the prevalent pre-barrier views was that you make your own success, that your status depends on how hard YOU work. In reality, your success is out of your control. If you're poor, it's not because you're lazy and cruel; if you're rich, it's not because you're a good person. It depends on what you're born into.

HOST

So, we need wealth distribution?

ELLIS

Wealth distribution doesn't get at the root issue, which is that the 'haves' won't admit that the 'have-nots' are trapped. You can have a wealth tax, a gradient income tax, even a legal limit on how much somebody can own. But until the rich see the poor as humans, they won't care.

HOST

Good luck getting them to.

ELLIS

I'm not naive. A law against stirring up hate goes a long ways, but it won't do much for a CEO who can afford to build their business on the backs of the working class. And like I said, taking their money won't get at their root insensitivity. My plan is to require them to go through training, spend time with other people, really see them as equals.

HOST

Because training is ALWAYS effective. You'd be better off just offering them cash incentives. Give them a list of 'moral goals', and offer them a tax break for every month that they meet them.

ELLIS

That's actually not a bad idea. I like it, 'moral goals' - I would still keep the laws about sowing dissent, but this would be a good way to encourage them to think about the community, not just their own interests.

HOST

(jaw dropped)

I was kidding! That was a joke, and you ran with it! I can't- wow. I'm legitimately concerned that you're polling at 4%

ELLIS

Because I changed my mind?

(the host nods in disbelief)

But you had a good idea. I hadn't thought about a tax incentive - like you've pointed out, I'm new to all this. And let's face it, we're stuck with each other, so let's learn from each other.

HOST

Are you for real? Why not just keep MAYOR GREEN in charge, we're stuck with him TOO right?

ELLIS

I actually would have him as my assistant.

(the host is stunned)

What? He's been the mayor forever, he knows how the city works. He may not be the best leader, but he has a trove of experience we can draw on as we try and solve the city's problems. It makes sense when you think about it.

HOST

It makes NO sense. Have you actually thought this through, or is your campaign a joke??

ELLIS

Only to somebody like you. Why is it a problem for me to partner with the former mayor, or to change my ideas if I hear a good one?

(the host is silent)

Actually - I was meaning to ask you. I wanted to run one of my policies by you and get your thoughts. I want to hear from somebody who won't just agree with me on everything.

HOST

You want- you want to run a policy by ME first? Unbelievable, unbelievable...

ELLIS

If we're close to the end of my time, I can talk about something else.

HOST

Nope, not yet. Might as well discuss SOMETHING.

ELLIS

Great! So, I'm thinking of implementing a universal basic income, because I want our zone to be a place where people don't worry about survival. But there are a few issues. One is that not everybody needs the income, and two is that it feels lazy and unsympathetic to just throw money at people and expect them to be happy.

HOST

And how would you pay for it? You seem to want lower taxes, right? In other words, your policies conflict. It's almost like you haven't thought your ideas through...

ELLIS

No, I've thought this one out. The tax would ONLY apply to those who make over \$150k a year, so it wouldn't affect most people. But it still feels like we wouldn't be addressing the deeper issues.

HOST

But people don't actually care about 'deeper issues'. You said it yourself earlier - it's a waste of time to focus on hypotheticals and platitudes. Focus on adding value. Putting money in people's hands may not seem like the sensitive thing to do, sure, but they'll absolutely use it.

ELLIS

True. That's where I've found this to be the most difficult, because in THEORY we need to change MINDS, but in REALITY we need to change LAWS. And you're absolutely right, having a guaranteed income will help people meet practical needs. And with the rich footing the bill, it's fair.

HOST

Here's a thought. What if you only received the basic income if you were below a certain financial level, but you stopped receiving it if you made more than, say, \$60,000 a year?

ELLIS

Interesting.. That would solve the problem of giving it out to people who don't need it - AND it would incentivize the rich to provide the working class with more opportunities for gainful, long-term employment.

HOST

Exactly. If EVERYONE gets to that level, then that tax disappears. So the high earners keep their money, and everyone else can survive.

ELLIS

I love it! See? This is why I enjoy having these discussions, to bounce ideas around. Alright, here's another one I've been stuck on - what do we do about reproduction?

HOST

(leaning in, sincerely interested now)  
You mean about maintaining a certain population level? It definitely seems to be a hot-button issue for most of the candidates.

ELLIS

It does! And I feel miserably unprepared because I haven't thought it through much beyond, 'make sure we don't run out of people.' But as for actual policy, I'm at a loss.

HOST

Well, some of the candidates are saying that we would need a state-mandated quota of-

ELLIS

No no, set aside what the other candidates are saying, I'll have plenty of time to hear their views in the debates. What would YOU do?

HOST

Me? Well-well I, I suppose I would have a plan similar to the 'moral goals', where I'd offer a cash incentive to people who have more kids. The only downside is overcrowding.

ELLIS

Right. I thought about that too, and that's why I'm worried about having a strong opinion on it. Because if I don't promote a plan to encourage repopulation, people will say I don't REALLY care about long-term survival.

HOST

But if you encourage it too much, we run out of space, and THEN you have to find ways to cut back on the population, which could be worse.

ELLIS

What if- maybe we just let it run its course, see what happens? We already have a pretty sizeable population. If people were allowed to just live without concern, have as many or as few kids as they want, we might be fine. We could do a head-count from year to year and intervene if it ever approached the tipping point.

HOST

You'd certainly make fewer enemies that way.

ELLIS

I'd hope so. And that's really my goal - we're all together in this, so let's find solutions that work for the majority.

HOST

Except that you run into the tyranny of the majority, how do you keep that in check?

ELLIS

I've actually discussed this quite a bit with my husband, even before the barriers. We realized that in a city this big, with a group of people this diverse, it's almost impossible for the majority to agree on anything. And when I say majority, I don't mean 51%, I mean 75%.

HOST

Really quick - would you make that the new criteria? Say, if we wanted to pass a new law, would you require 75% approval?

ELLIS

Oh absolutely. I think 51% is absurd, because it means that 49% of the population is going to resent the outcome, which is basically half. If you require at least three-fourths of the city to approve something, I'm thinking that there are very few issues that THAT many people would agree on, which means there's a much lower risk of using that power to harm others.

HOST

So what ARE the things you could rally at least three-fourths of the city around?

ELLIS

Survival. Turning this zone into an independent, thriving community where nobody is left out and everybody has a say.

HOST

About that. Sorry to slip back into antagonism, but I meant to ask earlier. How would you expect us to be independent? Or even higher level, do we NEED to be independent? Supposing we were able to grow all the food within the barriers, wouldn't it still be necessary to trade?

ELLIS

It would certainly help. And long-term, yes, I guess it IS a little intense to have no contact with the other zones. But it's such an easy rallying point, and like I said, it's one of the few common goals we share. Making OUR zone the best, making our economy self-sustaining so we could survive another disruption if needed.

HOST

Even so, would you change your mind on some of your more isolationist policies?

ELLIS

Not all of them. I still think, for instance, that the vast majority of tax dollars should be spent locally. I'm open to trading for essential supplies, but as far as aid goes, or even federal projects like barrier research, I'd rather just spend that money internally.

HOST

So you don't support barrier research?

ELLIS

Nope. If somebody finds a way through them, I'll be happy to sign up. But again - hypothetical vs. reality. Studying the barriers has no practical consequences until they find a way through.

HOST

Fair enough. We only have a few minutes, so I'll end with one final question. How do you do it?

ELLIS

Do what?

HOST

This. On some issues, you have ideas thought out, but then you change your mind. On other issues, you've deliberately NOT taken a stance. You want your opponent to be your advisor if you win, you want to cut your salary. And you are honestly the first person I've ever had on the show who's been able to change my mind. What's your secret?

ELLIS

It's.. I suppose- it's like this. Imagine that you've been deaf your whole life. You've learned to adjust to the world, make sense of it, and experience it without hearing, and it's been painful at times, and lonely, but you did it.

HOST

Who would be the deaf person in this analogy?

ELLIS

That would be me. And one day I wake up to find that everybody else just lost their hearing. So who do they turn to for help?

HOST

But what's the equivalent - I mean, what does being 'deaf' translate to?

ELLIS

To being loving. Being cooperative. Knowing that your goal is not to win arguments, but win relationships. Focusing on practical ways to change the world instead of abstract ideas. And helping people around you instead of focusing on people you've never met.

HOST

And that last bit ties back to the very beginning where you mentioned that 400 deaths in a small town pales in comparison to 10,000 deaths in a big city like ours.

ELLIS

Right. Which is not to say those 400 lives aren't valuable, but 10,000 is objectively more. If we pour our resources into helping those 400, they'll probably die out in a few generations anyways, and our people will die too. If we focus our resources on the 10,000 lives in our own backyard, we can sustain our species much longer.

HOST

And some have speculated that we may go extinct regardless, because this is such an unprecedented shock to our way of life.

ELLIS

And that's why I want to run for office. Because this is one of the most populous zones there is, which means we have a chance to avoid that fate - call me, what did you say earlier, tribal? Call me tribal, but I think our zone can be a utopia if we set aside our differences, all work together, aim for self-sustainability, and listen to each other for once.

HOST

Viewer be warned, what I'm about to say may come as a big surprise: I agree with you.

ELLIS

And I'd be happy even if you didn't, so long as we made progress.

HOST

Ellis, it's been a genuine pleasure. After the break, we will have Katherine Mapleton, a candidate who is running on a platform of population control and zoning reform. Thank you again, Mrs. Hughes.

(they cut to a break)

Well, good luck with the voters. I'm sure the interview helped a good deal.

ELLIS

I hope so, thanks for-

A technician interrupts them and pulls the host aside. They whisper incoherently, Ellis can't make out what they're saying. After a minute, the technician leaves, and the host beckons for her to sit back down.

HOST

Do you need to be somewhere?

ELLIS

No, nothing besides this. Did I do something wrong, do we need to do a reshoot?

HOST

Quite the opposite. We're going to run a little longer. You need any water?

ELLIS

I wouldn't mind.

The host calls the technician over; he brings Ellis a water bottle. Another assistant makes sure their mics are still on. A third brings out an extra chair and has Ellis move down so all three are in the shot.

The technician gives the countdown. 5. 4. 3...

ELLIS

Welcome back to 'Devil's Advocate'. Before the break, I had a... UNIQUE discussion with Ellis Hughes, one of the candidates for mayor. If you didn't have a chance to watch it, I would highly recommend doing so once it's available online. I've just been notified that Katherine Mapleton, another candidate, has requested to interview ALONGSIDE Ellis. Katherine, come on over!

KATHERINE (37) walks over, smiling and excited. She shakes both their hands and sits down.

KATHERINE

I'm so happy to be here!

HOST

And we're happy to have you. I'll let you do the talking, because I'm sure people are curious. Why did you want to do the interview WITH Ellis, instead of the solo interview we had planned?

KATHERINE

Simply put, I was moved by what you said. Not just me either, my phone was buzzing non-stop with constituents singing your praises - your uncertainty, your common sense, your flexibility. When you get down to it, we both agree on two things: our zone can be exceptional; and our focus should be on collective survival. So I thought, what the heck, forget political parties, forget the competition to be mayor. Let's just keep the conversation going!

ELLIS

I'd be delighted! What should we talk about next?

FADE OUT.