

## [Transcript] The News Agents / A year of Rishi - can he keep the Tories in power?

It's an honour to be elected as leader of the Conservative and Unionist party.

I am resigning as leader of the Conservative party.

I am humbled and honoured to have the support of my parliamentary colleagues and to be elected as leader of the Conservative and Unionist party.

That was Rishi Sunak, coming up to a year as our Prime Minister.

That is, if you like, eight Liz Trusses or eight Iceberg Lettices.

But how do the Tory party go on?

It's been 13 years in power and is there just a feeling that it's all coming to an unhappy end?

Is there anything that Sunak can do now to turn things around?

Welcome to the newsagents.

The newsagents.

It's John.

It's Emily.

And it is a year since Rishi Sunak was anointed Conservative party leader and therefore became another unelected Prime Minister in the sense of the British people had no say in his appointment, making him the fifth Conservative Prime Minister in the last 13 years.

The rivals for the leadership of the Conservative party are, of course, David Davis and David Cameron.

I expect to go to the palace and offer my resignation.

A fresh pair of eyes and fresh leadership would be good and the Conservative party has got some great people coming up.

In David Cameron, I follow in the footsteps of a great modern Prime Minister.

I will shortly leave the job that it has been the honour of my life to hold.

I do so with no ill will, but with enormous and enduring gratitude to have had the opportunity to serve the country I love.

Five men, one job, an hour of your questions from across the UK, how they answer tonight will help decide who becomes our next Prime Minister.

Boris Johnson is elected as the leader of the Conservative and Unionist party.

Thank you so much.

It is clearly now the will of the parliamentary Conservative party that there should be a new leader of that party and therefore a new Prime Minister.

It's an honour to be elected as leader of the Conservative and Unionist party.

I am resigning as leader of the Conservative party.

Rishi Sunak arrived at Conservative party headquarters this afternoon.

His party's third leader this year.

And I think to go back to your original word anointed, that is so important to give context to where we are, to where the Conservative party is now.

We're going to be talking to Ben Riley-Smith who's book *The Right to Rule* really points at this sense of almost legacy entitlement of the Conservative party and it's two unelected last Prime Ministers.

The question I keep asking is, is Rishi Sunak the person that you thought he would be when he started a year ago?

And arguably when you pick up from rock bottom, Liz Truss was a wonderful inheritance in

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some ways because yes, the economy had completely tanked and the world was on the verge of explosion.

But then if you come in as the steadying force, the ship, the only way is up, right?

Jeremy Hunt is in as Chancellor, you begin a clean slate and you can say I'm repairing the damage that has been done by the last Prime Minister.

He wasn't Boris Johnson, he wasn't the populist.

We've raised that question before on the news agents.

Was he going to carry on that sort of populist destruction, if you like, of institutions of democratic norms and the guardrails that sort of hold our institutions together and I don't think Rishi Sunak has done that.

But the thing I can't get away from is this sense that he looks so unconnected to a mandate.

And I think that's made life really difficult for him.

I mean, what could he have done?

He could have gone to polls as soon as he got anointed, elected, whatever.

But without that mandate, he looks quite scared of the electorate.

He sounds scared of broadcasters.

He's got nothing to rest on that says, yeah, you're the one.

We want you.

We want you in power.

And I think that has actually influenced virtually every single decision that he has or hasn't taken in the last 12 months.

I think what's so interesting, picking up on that, you and I met someone, a party conference, who reminded us of the quote of Kenneth Clark about the 92 to 97 government, the lamentable John Major years, where each time you think you've reached rock bottom, you can go lower.

There is no such thing as rock bottom in politics.

Things can get worse.

And although Rishi Sunak, I would argue in terms of technocratic ability in hard work, in attention to detail, it may be an ethical sense of bringing a kind of sense of properness back into government.

There are a lot of boxes that have been ticked.

But when you are in such a parlour state, maybe the British people have made up their mind.

And this is the general election.

It's going to tell us the answer to that, that the British people have made up their

mind and there is nothing you can do because the people said, you know what, I've had enough.

I've had enough of you changing power.

And that's why if you look back at polls over the past year, when Rishi Sunak has been trying to do all these different things, nothing has shifted.

The polls are in a state of stasis.

The Labour lead is where it was and that is his problem.

Nothing is changing the dynamic.

OK, I would say on the tick side, he has got serious achievements under his belt in the shape of the Windsor framework, in the shape of better relations with France and let's say EU Brussels, you know, he's got the horizon deal back on the table again.

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He's managed to work better with Macron in terms of, you know, migration and border force control.

And I think the Windsor framework was a really credible piece of politicking that he actually got through, you know, he got through the commons, got through the lords.

So I think that shouldn't be underestimated.

He's a much more consensual politician than either of the two that came before him.

But I think the bigger question which you've alluded to is, what can you do after 13 years in Paris? Is there an actual cut off point where whatever you're offering now, even if it's tax cuts, even if it's a massive injection into the NHS, people are kind of turning around and going, you had your time, you know, you've had your chances, you've had your opportunity and maybe there is nothing that you can do if you are the fifth in line, the fifth successive Conservative Prime Minister, each one trying to create the sense of change and disturbance to the last.

But each one basically part of the same organisation party, and let's be honest, it's quite a dysfunctional party at the best of times that has put them there.

And how do you just keep reinventing yourself and making yourself seem new and fresh to the British public?

And I think there's another thing that we were talking about in the office where you get to a stage and it's happened with John Major's government and nothing to do with John Major.

But there was a kind of feeling that everything had just become a bit tarnished, a bit sleazy. People were doing really crap stuff and needed to be called out, the whole cash for questions stuff and, you know, people's relationship with certain dodgy business people.

And you know, and there has been some of that this time round as well.

And you look at what happened with Chris Pincher and you look at the suspensions from parliament and you say, Oh my God, you know, the tendency is to think they're exhausted.

Give them a break.

This was complacency of power.

And I do think that sort of nails it, that when people have been in power for so long, they become careless.

I'm not speaking from experience, but maybe they don't mind if they flash at an aid in a hotel room.

You know, maybe that doesn't strike them as an odd thing to do anymore, allegedly.

You're into a place where things that would not have happened in that first year of power it seemed an extraordinary gift is now happening.

Well joining us now is Ben Reilly Smith, and he's just put five Conservative Prime Ministers into one book called The Right to Rule, which I've now covered.

I'm afraid an orange highlighter, Ben, because there's some really juicy, delicious bits that I don't think we would have got from the Daily News conversations of which more to come.

But I guess what you lay out here is the sense and it's inherent in the title of this perception perhaps that the Conservative Party treats itself as if it is the natural party of power.

And everything that we've seen in the last five Prime Ministers, including the way that

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position has been, dare I say, sort of handed down, has been a sort of a testament to the fact that they sort of think that they should always be in power.

Well, it's that handing down thing that I found remarkable.

So Rishi Sunak was in his 20s when David Cameron first became Prime Minister.

That's how long this series of Tory governments has been.

And yeah, I wanted to try out that hypothesis, I suppose, in the book, talking to all these people, kind of 120 plus figures like Truss and Boris and Cameron and various chancellors and Corbyn, people from the other side of the world, Corbyn and Farage and what a lot of people said to me is what you have to understand about the Conservative Party is they're not an ideological party, they are a power party.

So Labour was set up with a demographic in mind, the working class to represent them and to try and bring about an ideology, democratic socialism, whereas the Tories are much less anchored on both of those two points.

And it allows them to shape shift to some degree about what they want to mean.

Now, if you weren't being cynical, they would say, look, we have these values that follow through free enterprise, freedom of speech, suspicion of a large state, individual responsibility. But it does mean when the public opinion shifts, they have an ability quicker, I think, than Labour to move to where they are to try and win an election.

Just on that, though, don't you think that one of the fundamental things that has happened and this goes back further than your book is with Thatcher, you saw the start of ideology, it was wet versus dry.

And then it became less about economics, but more about Europe, and that they became deeply ideological on this particular issue.

Oh, they did about Europe, it was almost by accident.

I mean, you know, they went into that referendum with the Conservative leadership and the Conservative government saying, do not vote for this thing.

And part of the stories of the 13 years is how Cameron got to that point, trying to keep Europe delivering the exact opposite.

And then, yes, after that seismic moment when economic and foreign policy were thrown up in the air, there was a group that became all-powerful, which was the hard-line Brexiteers, that helped

convince Theresa May to go for a hard version of Brexit, eventually brought her down when she couldn't get it through Parliament and helped get someone to replace her who did deliver that Boris Johnson.

So certainly kind of Brexit ideology has found itself getting in the bloodstream of the Tory party, but it's going to be interesting in the years ahead, how dogged that belief becomes, especially if there's a period in opposition, and if Keir Starmer gets in and begins to move away from that.

I just want to go back to that question of mandate, because Rishi Sunak is now a year in power as Prime Minister.

He doesn't have a mandate.

Liz Truss, before him, had a mandate from the Tory party membership, no one else.

Clearly, they're not the only party that done this.

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Gordon Brown didn't have a mandate either.

But I wonder how significant you think it is to the way that they then go on and rule.

You know, Liz Truss is the sort of the firecracker, the person who couldn't stop at 100, had to go to 150, the one who sort of set light to the system because she felt that time was running out, she had to prove herself.

Rishi Sunak seems to have been picking up the pieces, Prime Minister, who again doesn't have a mandate, doesn't feel very strong in his own mind somehow.

I just wonder how you think that affects what they do in power.

I think it probably makes it trickier to get the public to buy into new policy positions or directions that you want to go in.

So Liz Truss had the problem and Rishi Sunak has the problem, as Theresa May did with David Cameron.

If you inherit a manifesto that is not yours, that has the stamp or seal of approval from the public because they voted you in on that manifesto.

If you want to then start to diverge from it, you get all these problems parliamentarily because the Lord's only protects policies that were in the manifesto, but also with public opinion.

So Liz Truss wanted to rip up the fracking ban and the public and also Tory MPs who supported it said, well, hang on, we were elected, this government is here on a manifesto that included the fracking ban.

So what was the justification for that?

And she would spell out various arguments, but it's much trickier to do that.

Theresa May had it on grammar schools.

David Cameron was elected on a position of keeping the ban on new grammar schools.

She came in and said, I want to remove that ban, had all types of problems in the House of Lords.

And perhaps that was one reason why her manifesto in 2017 was so expensive because they wanted the stamp of public support for those policies so they could get it through parliament.

So it certainly can be an anchor for prime ministers who come in without a mandate from the public and want to change policy direction from previous manifestos.

I wonder how much you think that, you know, going back to your thesis that the Conservatives are a party of government, whereas Labour are more naturally kind of more comfortable in opposition.

Is it that the Tories have been good in these 13 years, or is it that Labour have been woeful?

Maybe it's a mixture of the two.

But you would argue that, you know, 2019, the British people were never going to vote for Jeremy Corbyn.

Yeah.

I think it's a combination of both.

But one fascinating thing that comes out in the book is if you compare these two parties, the Tories can get rid of a leader very quickly if their MPs don't like him.

The mechanisms.

You mean the actual mechanisms.

Yeah.

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So they're much more brutal about doing so.

Absolutely.

But just to briefly dive into the boring bits, which is with the Tories, you need 15% of their MPs to submit no confidence letter and you trigger a thumbs up, thumbs down vote. With Labour, it's 20%.

There is no no confidence mechanism.

20% need to say, on the record, I am supporting this rival candidate for leader.

And even if they do that, it goes to a contest where they can lose.

So to do the example, David Cameron was bought down.

His replacement was put in place, Theresa May, before Labour had even worked out the rules for the contest, whereas Labour tried to want to get rid of Jeremy Corbyn.

The MPs manufactured a vote where 80% plus said, we want him gone.

He said, I'm not going.

Eventually it led to a contest and the members voted him back.

So that is an example where Tory MPs lost faith in Theresa May and Boris Johnson and this trust and got rid of them.

Tory MPs lost faith in Jeremy Corbyn, but couldn't get rid of him.

Tory MPs can now submit letters of no confidence in Rishi Sunak.

He's been there a year, which means that that kind of, if you want to write your letter to the chairman of the 22 committee, you can.

Is anyone going to do so?

It's worth saying there are still deep divisions within the Tory party.

If you talk to Boris Johnson set or Liz Truss's set, they are still very bruised and wounded by Rishi Sunak's set, both of them to various degrees, blame Rishi in playing some part in their downfall, rightly and wrongly, but that pain is still real and it's there.

The question every Tory MP has to ask and the reason I don't think lots of letters are coming in now is do I genuinely believe my party and my seat is more likely to win at the next election if we switch leader again?

And I think there's a pretty universal belief among the back benches right now that whatever you make of last year, you accept that the public have really been put off by the fact that you change leaders twice and you appear to be treating government like a plaything of the Tory party.

So right now I don't detect a huge sway of letters coming because every Tory MP accepts if we go through another bout of psychodrama, it's unlikely to win us the next election.

And perhaps the second reason is who on earth would they go for if not Rishi.

So had Boris Johnson still been an MP, there is a group of supporters for his who, you know, end the seat promoting his return to power, but he's not there.

There's no obvious other name out there.

I just want you to anatomise the state of relationships within the Conservative Party because it seems.

Let's get back to May, Johnson, Truss and Sunak.

Are they four camps?

They all hate each other, don't they?

Or do they?



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Or is that is that an unfair characterisation?

Well, I was wondering whether she's the hate term, but there is kind of deep disillusionment in each of those.

It's so personal, right?

If you were a cabinet minister under Liz Truss and you think there were supporters of Rishi Sunak who are helping tip you over the edge after the mini-budget backfired, your career at the top was seven weeks long.

And now you're on the back benches, grinding your teeth, saying, OK, we made some errors, but could we have stayed in place if it wasn't for the other guys?

Ditto Boris Johnson, you know, critics would say his failings played a huge part in the reason he fell, but his supporters think, well, if Rishi Sunak hadn't resigned with Sajid Javid triggering that ministerial rush of resignations, then maybe we would still be in our top post.

So, you know, when it comes to your political career, your time at the top, your time in the spotlight and those associated with Liz Truss, a feeling that that period was has become a laughing stock, really, that seven weeks.

You make quite a claim in here that it was Rishi Sunak's camp that was spreading pretty vicious rumours that we all heard about Liz Truss and what she was getting up to in her private life.

I mean, you're convinced that that all came from Sunak's camp, are you?

I'm not the bit in the book, I think, without being too weasel-worthy.

I reference another book, which is Harry Cole and James Hill's biography, where they say four different MPs linked to the Sunak camp were pushing some of this stuff.

So for that particular bit, I referenced another book, but there is definitely a feeling at the top of the Truss group that Rishi Sunak's supporters did not fully accept the results.

And in the wake of the mini-budget, some of them were leaning in more heavily than others might criticising her policies.

And some of that is on the record.

If you look at the MPs, who came out publicly criticising her mini-budget, Mel Stride was one who was chairman of the Treasury Select Committee.

He was the chief whip, if you like, of the Sunak campaign, trying to maximise MPs.

And now Work and Pensions Secretary.

And now Work and Pensions Secretary Grant Shaps was another who was kind of dismissed by Liz Truss from the cabinet.

That's now back in cabinet under Rishi Sunak.

I think he was briefly her home secretary, wasn't he?

He, at the very end, he was drafted in as home secretary.

I don't know why we find that funny.

He'd been very public.

I think it wasn't on this podcast he was showing off his...

Yeah, it was on his podcast.

He was showing off his spreadsheets.

Yeah, so he was clearly kind of publicly criticising her at that period.

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But the reason Liz Truss is not prime minister is the backlash to the mini-budget. It's not because some of these critics were kind of manoeuvring.

But two things can be true.

She could have made a big misstep that caused chaos on the financial markets.

And also those among Rishi Sunak and his team could have been helping speed her departure and make sure he was best placed to take over when it all came to an end.

Your book ends before the last Conservative Party conference.

How do you think that played out, Ben?

Because they try to do a sort of trick of the light there, which was Rishi Sunak announcing himself as the change candidate.

Fifth Tory prime minister in 13 years.

And he sort of set fire to the last four and said, I'm your new guy.

Yeah, I think imagine if you're in Downing Street and you have an opinion poll lead for your rival's label of 15, 16, 17, 18 points.

And it's been like that for the best part of a year.

And you're thinking, what on earth can we do to change the electoral dynamics?

And one way you're definitely going to lose if it looks like you are the status quo and it looks like the country is ready for change.

So somehow they have decided that the best chance we have is to try and make this young.

You know, he's only 43, hasn't been in the top of politics that long in Britain to try and make this guy in body change.

And their analysis is strategically Kirstan who made a big blunder by not going bolder, quicker with this lead and really projecting himself as the force of change.

And they are doing these drops of policy, changing net zero strategy,

standing up for drivers, taking HS2, A-Levels, the face smoking ban,

to try and say, look, I am making big moves to change fundamentally the country.

Now, it's very easy to say, that's not going to work.

How on earth can you embody change if you are, you know?

Do you think he was badly advised?

I don't think he was badly advised because what on earth do you do?

You've got to try something to change it.

And there aren't that many options to them.

They can't lean on the economy.

Penny Morden actually got to, I would suggest the closest, which was in her sort of preamble speech, she said, you know, you don't really want to vote for Labour.

We'll give you a reason not to.

Which I thought got into a space that was very natural territory for the

Conservatives, because I think a lot of people, certainly in that room,

would have been saying, I'm not 100% with where Labour are going.

I'm not 100% sure I trust Keir Starmer, but give me something to cling on to.

Yes.

Maybe that was where soon I should have taken them, because cancelling things doesn't sound like quite the visionary that he thinks it does, right?

And I think there's a tension there, you're right, between be more Tory



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and give the Tory vote of something to believe in, which is a bit of their strategy, but Tory MPs want to do much, much, much more of that and be the change candidate.

So some of the stuff Rishi's done in this big pivots after a year does fit into that box, you know, being less ideological about net zero, clearing barriers in front of drivers to make it easier to drive.

But you're right, the phasing in the smoking ban, that is not a classically Tory thing to do to ban a product that isn't banned most of the rest of the world.

So there is a tension there, but I think they do know they need to and want to motivate Tory voters is just how far they go on that.

I mean, the big one next year is whether they draw a big tax dividing line with Labour, be it a scrap inheritance tax or a big increase in this higher income tax threshold, because they want to do that's where they got the public finances to do that.

In the wake of the by-election, so many Tory MPs we talked to said they have to be more Tory.

So that is a real tussle that's going on in the party right now.

And then there is a debate of how you attack Labour.

And you talked about it, that Keir Starmer hasn't really embraced change and he's no different and it's just the same old Labour.

Yeah, classically, the Tories frame themselves as the party of economic competence, that is the rock solid centre of their electoral pitch.

And they cannot do that this time because of what happened last autumn.

So somehow, if you're in the number 10 bunker, you're thinking, well, what can we attack Labour on?

I think what they're going to do is zoom in forensically on particular policies and really turn the heat up to say everybody look at net zero, our difference versus their difference.

Do you really want to have to not buy any petrol cars in seven years time?

Or, you know, where pragmatic will protect your finances as we make this transition? They won't.

And same on small boats and possibly on transgender issues.

And they'll pick these topics that I think they can weaponise Labour's position.

Just pull the curtain back for us a bit on how they are lighted on this policy.

And this guy, Isaac Lovito, who is the Australian polling guru that the Conservative Party are leaning heavily on, you know him.

Yeah. What's he like?

Young guy, mild-mannered, bearded, plain talking, a thick Australian accent.

His mentor, I suppose, was Lyndon Crosby, Sir Lyndon Crosby, who was David Cameron and Boris Johnson's electoral guru.

He masterminded the 2015 general election.

And if you remember, it was all looking like it was going to be another hung parliament, another load of coalition talks, and the Tories managed to

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unexpectedly win a majority shaft, the Lib Dems as well.

Wiping them out in the Southwest.

Lyndon obviously also won, helped win Boris Johnson, his two mayoral victories in London. So Isaac Lovito saw some of those firsthand with Lyndon Crosby.

He's also got experienced in campaigns in America and Washington and back in Australia. And this, I think, could be a really interesting unknown for the campaign to come.

Isaac Lovito was campaign manager in 2019 when Boris Johnson won that massive majority. They successfully worked out how to frame Brexit.

Brexit was framed as get Brexit done, which was quite a clever message because it didn't just appeal to Brexiteers, but also remainers who said, look, I don't want to talk about this anymore.

The decisions to be made just move on.

So it's actually a slightly wider message than just we love Brexit.

So he has tried and tested electoral victories under his belt.

Labour, that's not true.

You know, they haven't won an election since 2005.

It sounds like Morgan McSweeney will be the Labour campaign manager.

Maybe he'll be brilliant.

We don't know.

They're trying out their strategy in the by elections, right?

They're trying out their strategy by elections.

And also, I suppose, if you are arguing the counterpoint, there is only so much campaign managers can do if there is a mood across the country that says we want change. Nothing the Tories are saying is getting through.

You use this phrase, be more Tory.

That's what the Conservative Party is being encouraged to do by its MPs.

I mean, given that you've had five different Tory leaders, what does be

more Tory look? Does it mean Suella be more Tory, stop the boats?

Does it mean sort of Dominic Raab, Jeremy Hunt, try and get taxes down?

What is being more Tory now?

Well, you're right.

That's the point.

We try and make Tory MPs whenever they make this loose game.

Well, what specifically do you want to happen?

I think the obvious one they talk about is economics and tax.

So this is the biggest tax-raising parliament since, I think, the 1950s or the 1940s.

So, yeah, you've got to go back more than half a century to find a parliament where a party and government raise tax more.

I mean, bluntly, Ben, do you think the cancellation of HS2 was literally to give Rishi Sunak and Jeremy Hunt the headroom to cut taxes when they need to before the next election?

No, because they've said that all of that money is going to go on other transport projects.

Yeah, although some of those projects were aspirations and yeah.

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The money will go to it.

But whether it is this specific project or not, TBC.

No, I do think he generally believed that was the right thing to do.

But this is the problem they have.

It's where do they find this money?

I think what you might see at the autumn statement is them being really tight with public spending to give them the move next year to spend a bit of money on a tax cut.

So is it right to frame it that Rishi Sunak could be having a reshuffle quite soon?

We keep hearing speculation about it.

Who he keeps.

Well, we keep speculating.

Or we keep speculating.

Us too.

Yeah, everybody does.

Because no one is disabusing us of the idea that there could be a reshuffle.

He's asking what's going to happen.

Well, I'm going to say it's the choice between you get rid of Jeremy Hunt because he's not Tory enough and you keep Soella Broughamann.

Or you get rid of Soella Broughamann because she's just too far out there and alienates too many supporters.

And I just wonder where that debate is.

Well, as it happens, I spent 1200 words trying to work out in today's paper whether Jeremy Hunt might be moved.

And the short answer is I don't know.

But that's not great.

You can make a part of that living if you were making the argument.

You would say one, Jeremy Hunt was not Rishi Sunak's pick as chancellor.

He inherited Jeremy Hunt as chancellor from his trust.

By all accounts, he was going to be Mel Strider or Oliver Dowden with the two front runners to there is this big pivot coming as we're seeing from trying to put out the economic fires and other fires on small boats and NHS and to try and look forward to election and make some plays that might make a difference.

And this year's big economic problem has been inflation.

The next year's big economic problem could be the recession that's being forecast.

So how you kickstart growth with tax cuts could be a big factor.

If it happens, I don't think it would happen before the autumn statement because that's four weeks away.

And the autumn statement will be about bringing down inflation and halving it this year, as we said we would.

But could he possibly move him between autumn and next March?

I think that is an open question that possibly is more likely than most pundits are expecting. On Suella, I think she there is a big chunk of the electorate that used to be taken up by UKIP and is increasingly taken up by reform and see how reform got 5% I think some of the by-elections last week.

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They need to project to the country that they do have a serious concern about small boats and how they're tackling it.

She's the guard dog to keep garage and ties away from the door.

I think they think she is saying things that a surprisingly large number of the electorate agree with and you need somebody in the government saying that type of stuff. It was interesting after her speech, quite provocative speech in over in America that created a lot of headlines.

There was some polling done and a lot of the I think in most of the questions they polled on statement she made, the electorate were on her side rather than against. We're with Ben Riley Smith and we're going to be hearing more from him in just a moment.

This is the news agents.

Ben, can I ask you one thing?

You mentioned the paper you write for the Telegraph, we should say.

When you're looking at the ability that the Conservatives have had to stay in power,

I guess we should mention the power of many of the right wing papers in this.

I mean, you've exceptional journalists and you've done extraordinary sourcing in your own book and the people you've spoken to.

But bluntly, there is a position taken by your paper, by the Telegraph, by the Times, by, to be fair, most of the biggest selling papers in the country.

That does make no apology for trying to keep Conservative Prime Ministers in power.

There is a bit in the book that talks about that actually trying to unpick that question.

So we live in a media landscape where newspapers hold their political colours on their sleeves much more than in America, say, where it's the reverse.

The broadcasters are very partisan and the newspapers much more down the line.

I mean, I always think that grew up because it was such a competitive media environment in the UK, if you were ever going to a newsagents, there are a dozen different daily national newspapers to pick from and over decades and decades in that battle for readers, they tend to turn up their kind of opinion because that probably has a connection with some of the readers.

So that is the kind of reality of the media landscape.

And yes, you're right.

If you counted up how many papers came out and backed the Conservatives in their opinion pages versus Labour, it is tilted to the right.

Bluntly, do you think that is keeping them in power?

No, I don't think that's keeping them in power because there's so many other factors.

But I think it's certainly true that Conservative papers during campaigns can echo some of the messages that the Tory party is trying to land.

Penny Mordin was kind of cut out of the leadership race

because the male decided that Liz Truss was going to be the Boris Continuity candidate, right?

Well, she certainly got a lot of critical coverage in the days up to the critical vote in the mail. That's true.

But it was so close.

## [Transcript] The News Agents / A year of Rishi - can he keep the Tories in power?

I mean, that's one of the remarkable things.

You know, if you look at the sliding doors moments in history, if five of Liz Truss's MP backers are back Penny Mordin in the final ballot, just five had switched.

She would have been through the second round and seeing how the grassroots didn't seem to like Rishi Sunak.

Then she may well have been Prime Minister.

Just going back to the power of the press, 92, Kinnock, you know, will the last person turn out the lights if Kinnock wins?

And then it was the somewhat won it headline.

And then in 97, the Sun backs player Blair wins by a landslide.

And even when Blair won, there were papers like the Telegraph and like the mail that were nothing like as hostile because Blair had courted them assiduously in the run up to that election.

Do you feel conscious as a newspaper journalist of the power that you have or is it gone now with the diffusion of the media and kind of online and all the rest of it?

Well, I suspect it is much, much, much less than 92.

I mean, that was 30 years ago.

I don't know what average newspaper printed sales are now, but it would be a fraction of what it was in the early 90s.

And this media landscape has fractured things like podcasts around social media.

So certainly, I think compared to the 80s and 90s, you know, where you had terrestrial TV and you had newspapers and that's pretty much it. But Brexit wasn't that long ago, Ben.

And I think you could say that there was huge influence.

I'm not saying there's not influence.

I just don't think the influence is as big as what I imagine it was in the early 90s. And that's an individual reporter.

Yeah, you are.

There's a division between our comment pages and opinion pages who are encouraged and free to voice their own opinions and our news pages where we have to deliberately hold back and be as impartial and objective as possible.

And then it's up to our HQs to work out which stories they project onto the front pages.

Do you get people telling you, oh, I'm not sure that's one for us?

Not really. No.

No, I mean, we get spiked because they say that's a boring story.

Oh, there are particular areas, particular areas that they're interested in, such as op-ed pages are very keen on lowering tax.

So the tensions in the Conservative Party around tax and how that's manifesting is an area we write a lot about.

But no, I don't think it's as simplistic as someone said, hang on, that's not good for the Tory.

So let's ditch that.

## [Transcript] The News Agents / A year of Rishi - can he keep the Tories in power?

Shall we end with a sweepstake?

Oh, yeah, go on. Love a sweepstake.

Yeah, I always get them wrong.

Well, that's the point. We have to.

Do we want to all throw an election date into the, I mean...

Oh, go. Ben's keen.

I think it will be the autumn rather than the spring.

I mean, we've written a story about this.

The problem with going in the spring is you have to actively choose to go early.

And in 2017, that's what Theresa May did.

And the minute it's called, she did it clearly for personal political advantage, but you have to explain to the entire electorate why you're going early.

And it's not just because it's in your placement of...

So it's very, very hard to do that.

It might not find it very early at all.

Most people remember that we're sort of...

But they would say, you could go till next January, why are you going in spring?

And you have to have an answer for that, which is...

So why wouldn't they wait till January then?

I think the question is whether they go in the autumn or they wait all the way to January.

The reason you might not do that is already this narrative is up and running, that you are clinging on by your fingernails to staying in power.

Now, if you go in autumn rather than spring, I don't think that's got such a bite.

But if you're literally playing every day you possibly can until January, then maybe that narrative does begin to bite and people are thinking, well, haven't you given up really on your chances of power?

You're just trying to cling there as long as you can.

Which was John Major in 97.

Yeah, I thought it brown.

Yeah, he left it to the last possible moment and it was tough.

I did see George Osborne.

I did say he was in the bunker in Downing Street with John Major and there was endless discussion about whether to go early.

And he said, what the reality is you wake up one day and you say, are we going to win the election if we call it today?

And you say, probably not.

You say, OK, well, let's give it another day.

And if there's never comes a point when you think if we call it, we got a chance of winning it, then you just find yourself at the end.

Without mentioning any names,

I will just tell you that we were talking about the sort of migrant hotels case today and we caught up an MP and said, would you like to come on?

We understand that, you know, the hotels are being sort of cleared out in your constituency and this person said, now I'm a bit tired.



## [Transcript] The News Agents / A year of Rishi - can he keep the Tories in power?

And it was such a great line.  
It just sort of seemed to sum up a general autumnal malaise with.  
It takes me back to being a teenager and ringing up a girl  
and she's saying, I'm washing my hair.  
But I did think it was specific to us.  
And it wasn't like, oh, I've just gone off a plane.  
I'm absolutely shattered.  
It was kind of like a bit tired.  
I think there's real disillusionment in Downing Street  
and on the back benches about how the polls haven't moved.  
So in the first couple of months, there was a tightening from this trust.  
And basically for 10 months, it's been the same.  
Despite inflation coming down, despite the small boats,  
numbers ticking down a bit, despite this big reset, the polls are not moving.  
And that gets quite despondent if you're thinking,  
well, I've got to try and win my seat next year or how on earth is this party?  
Are you going to win the next election?  
So I think despondency is quite widespread among the parties.  
I mean, we spent a good deal of last Friday on the phone to CCHQ  
and a whole list of back benches to talk about what had happened in mid-beds  
and what had happened in Tamworth.  
Very few people were wanted to come to the wicket.  
No. And what was so funny is they were delivering this line saying,  
oh, there's no love for Labour.  
But that's exactly the same line that all those years ago,  
when you were doing by-election coverage in the 90s before 97,  
they delivered exactly that same line and it didn't prove true then.  
As if by magic, we have a clip of that.  
OK. What message do you have for the MPs who come out onto College Green,  
one saying one thing, another saying the other this,  
the government's got to do this on Europe, the government's got to do that on Europe?  
It must be rather exasperating when you're trying to run the National Union, isn't it?  
Well, I think the message that we would give is this,  
that there is no enthusiasm out there for Mr Blair  
and his new reconstructed Erzats Labour Party.  
I mean, it is all false in their heart of hearts.  
The voters know it. But what are you going to say to your Conservative?  
And I'm saying to their Conservative MPs, that is our opportunity.  
Let's score some goals. The goal is wide open.  
It's all to play for. Let's go for it.  
Here you are. A rather upbeat message from here in central office,  
even though they've lost 550-odd seats or so this evening.  
Back to you, David.  
I love the catty punchline at the end.

## [Transcript] The News Agents / A year of Rishi - can he keep the Tories in power?

Well, I can't... What happened to my voice?

I think I've obviously gone down market.

I sounded so posh then.

I love the way they said Mr Blair.

I don't think I've heard him called Mr Blair for about 30 years, right?

When did we drop titles on the BBC?

Yeah, it's been the 90s at some point.

Stand as a slip slip.

Clearly slip. I mean, I do think it's interesting about how they do play StarMart.

Because I think that he may not be Mr Excitement itself,

but he seems pretty solid, safe pair of hands.

Yes, he's flip-flopped, but then that's actually reassuring

to voters to hear that he's gone away from Corbyn madness.

A couple of years ago at Labour Conference, I talked to a shadow cabinet

minister at the time who said, look, the difference is Keir Starmer

passes the test of if voters squint their eyes and see Starmer outside

the number 10 black door, they don't get heart palpitations.

And they had that with Jeremy Corbyn and arguably they had that reaction

to Ed Miliband, where Starmer, OK, maybe bland and dull,

but nobody is waking up in the night thinking, oh, my God,

a Starmer Premiership is coming. What's that going to mean?

It's interesting that I've noticed he started to call Labour,

changed Labour now. That is their verbal tick.

So it's not new Labour. It's definitely not old Labour.

It's changed Labour.

And that's the message that he's trying to make stick, presumably

in the realisation it won't work for Rishi.

Yeah, which is safe Labour basically means you don't have to worry.

I mean, it was really interesting.

Rachel Reeves' speech was just hitting all of the notes that traditional Tories said,

you know, we'll spend every pound of taxpayer money really carefully.

I want to bring down taxes.

We're going to crack down on frauds.

And the Bank of England Governor endorses me.

Yeah, I mean, any of that structure could have happened for a Tory Chancellor

a couple of years ago.

I'm afraid we're going to spring on you one more sweepstake.

Oh, God, not another prediction.

Yeah, what's going to happen in the election?

I genuinely stay away from all predictions, many because I'm meant to

because I'm an impartial journalist.

But I think that it's very, very difficult for the Tories to get re-election.

Just look at the polls and somehow they need to find something

that will change that dynamic.

## [Transcript] The News Agents / A year of Rishi - can he keep the Tories in power?

And clearly they haven't found it yet.

You still think there is a pathway to victory?

Well, if you spelled it out, you would say the economy dramatically improves.

Inflation is properly down.

People really begin to forensically look at Rishi and the policies that the Tories are relentlessly pointing to.

They think the electorates on their side are some of those.

And, you know, anything can happen in short campaigns.

I mean, 2017, Theresa May and the Tories went into that campaign 15 plus points ahead against Jeremy Corbyn and they ended up losing the Tory majority.

So polls can change.

It's not it's not unprecedented.

They lost Kensington and Canterbury.

I mean, that was an extraordinary election, wasn't it?

Yeah.

So a year out thinking you definitely know what the result of the election is going to be is a fool's game.

And I guess the other thing that has changed so much is there is so much more volatility than there used to be.

There's no class affiliation to how you're going to vote, which you could depend on, you know, 400 seats in the House of Commons returning person X or Y.

Just because of the nature of that seat, it had always been like that.

That doesn't exist anymore.

And just to give an example of things that can come out of the blue and change the political dynamics, at the beginning of last year, I'm reliably informed from people close to Rishi, Boris Johnson was very, very close to hitting, having that number threshold hit that would trigger the vote.

And then Russia invaded Ukraine.

People removed their letters.

They thought we can't remove the lead in a country while there's war on the European continent, and it probably bought him three or four months in the job.

Zelensky saved Boris Johnson.

External events can suddenly come into play.

I think history will probably judge that saving Boris Johnson was lesser than saving Ukraine, which is what Zelensky also did.

But I mean, maybe that's not fair.

I think that's fair.

It was the cartoon, wasn't it?

Yeah.

That Boris Johnson thought he was saving Zelensky.

Zelensky was actually saving Boris Johnson.

That was the one that emerged.

Ben, thank you so much for being with us on the news.

It's brilliant.

## [Transcript] The News Agents / A year of Rishi - can he keep the Tories in power?

Thank you so much for having me.

It's been brilliant.

This is The News Agents.

We always get fixated on the people in politics who are behind the scenes, who we don't see doing the morning round of interviews and putting themselves forward because that is such a rare beast in politics.

But Isaac Lovido, who we were hearing from Ben there, is such a figure.

Interestingly, I've met Isaac and I sat next to him at a dinner organised by Peter Mandelson and his company.

So there you have the great guru of Labour elections wanting to hear from Isaac Lovido, the great guru of elections for the Conservative Party.

And among that sort of people, there is a kind of respect, the technocracy of running an election, the skills, the dark arts, what you need to do, how to read polling, how to read focus group research and all of that.

And how you position a party with a message so that it can win an election.

And you could see from Peter Mandelson, Lord Mandelson, and there was a respect for each other across the room.

Yeah, across the political divide.

It's interesting, I was talking to somebody at the Labour Party Conference who said the moment that Mandelson was brought in by Brown and some of our older listeners will remember, I just remember this sort of purple venex that he wore to go back into sort of Downing Street.

And he was then Lord Mandelson, which is the way of getting him back into the Brown Cabinet. There was this sort of unspoken assumption that even though Brown looked to be about to lose the 2010 election, Mandelson's job was to lessen the loss.

And actually, that was a success for Brown because it wasn't an outright wing for David Cameron.

It was a hung parliament.

They did hold on to more Labour seats than they thought they would.

And there was at one point even a suggestion that it was potential for Brown to stay in power with the help of a Lib Dem coalition.

And so sometimes the strategist's job is not just to win the election, obviously, you know, on a good day, it's to win the election.

But it's also to minimise the damage that that party is doing.

And the way it was sold or told to me was that Mandelson was brought in to make sure that if Brown was out of power, it was only for a short amount of time, five years, and then Labour would sort of regain the next time around.

Of course, history is playing a very different picture.

You can't ever assume that you know how the room is going to look in 10 years time.

But I think that's an important part as well, which is why when we're asking questions, for example, about Rishi Sunak gained to the polls in May or June, rather than October, November or even January, there will be some in his party saying, if you go early, I get to keep my seat.

**[Transcript] The News Agents / A year of Rishi - can he keep the Tories in power?**

If you wait, more of us will lose.

Academics talk about political science and there is no science in politics.

There are no rules and you never know anything for certain.

And I just remember going into the 97 general election where Blair would win this huge landslide, speaking to the most senior people in labour on polling day itself, and they were still nervous that they could lose the election.

And you don't know until those ballot boxes are emptied.

You do not know for certain.

And that's what Peter Kyle was telling us at the end of last week, that, you know, he was kind of chewing his fingers to the bone because he didn't know there was so much room to do if you're Trump, you know that you've won whatever the.

Fair point. Yeah, it's so much easier.

He always wins, though.

We'll see you tomorrow. Bye bye. Bye.

The news agents with Emily Maitlis, John Sopo and Lewis Goodall.

This has been a global player, original podcast and a Persephoneka production.