

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

Alistair Campbell was, in his heyday, something of a political bruiser.

But he knows, at times, he can sound like a wanker.

And so he thinks he's got a way, a button he can press, to deal with it.

You've got what you now call a W switch off.

What happened to the wanker switch on Thursday night?

Sometimes the scale of the wankerdome just overwhelms it.

We'll be unpacking that with him and an awful lot more.

Welcome to the News Agents.

It's John.

It's Emily.

And we have a stranger in our midst.

Someone has wandered into the News Agents podcast studio,

who I think has his own podcast, but we're not going to talk about that.

The rest is News Agents.

There's a little chuckling going on from a Mr. Alistair Campbell,

who's come in replete with his Burnley tie-on and looking very smart.

Welcome.

Thank you, John.

Thank you, Emily.

Well, you've been everywhere, haven't you?

No.

This is the only thing I'm doing for the entire hour.

Yes, before he's roped into the next 15 rounds of local radio interviews.

No, no.

Anyone would think he was trying to plug a book.

Is he?

We're going to talk about Labour, actually.

We're going to start by talking about Labour.

500 or so gains in the local elections.

Tour is down more than a thousand.

Is this now a turning point for what Labour policy should be?

I hope so.

A kick up the...

I don't think I'm actually going to need this kick up the backside.

I think that a couple of years ago, I saw Keir,

just because he's my neighbour and, you know, friend and my local MP and stuff,
and we just had a cup of tea.

And I was saying, oh, God, it's not feeling great, is it?

And he said, well, no, it's quite tough at the moment.

He said, but, you know, I'm very clear about how I've got to do this job.

I've got to sort out the Labour Party and it's quite dull and it's quite tedious.

And I don't really want it to be screaming headlines.

I just want to sort it out.

Then I've got to show the joys are absolutely useless.
And I think I'll be able to do that.
And then I've got to bring forward all the big policy.
Now, I kind of think that's what he's doing.
And I think he's now in stage three.
And I thought it was interesting about his speech of the weekend.
I actually am a bit old fashioned.
I read speeches rather than just, you know, I prefer to read them and watch them.
And I read his speech and I actually I actually thought it was really quite thoughtful about the state of politics,
about the state of the world.
It's not heavy on policy, but he's making clear that that's coming.
I mean, Clause 4 on steroids, you can say it's a bit of a kind of, you know, it's just a kind of slogan.
It's just a headline.
But actually that's giving himself the challenge now to bring it forward.
And that's what has to happen now.
And what does that mean?
Sorry, what do you want to see spelled out within the next six months?
Well, funny enough, we did on the country's number one podcast,
we did this interview channel called Leading and we've interviewed George Osborne today.
And I, although I disagree with him powerfully and fundamentally about austerity,
I really hope Labour listened to what he says about Labour
because he's basically saying they need a very clear message about what their economic policy is.
They need a very clear message of education on health.
And I think that's that's the bit where he makes the point that education is kind of bad.
Is that missing?
So and would you tell the UK's biggest daily podcast
what should happen on the Brexit strategy right now?
I did an event last week for Julian Priestley,
or you remember there was a civil servant in Brussels.
He ran the European Parliament for 10 years and he died a few years ago.
There's an annual lecture and I made the point.
I said, I completely understand why Keir doesn't want to have Brexit centre stage in the next election.
I completely get that he's got to get into power.
But I honestly do think that there are so many people now who feel this thing is not about making it work.
It's got to be fixed.
It's breaking the country.
So much of it is going wrong.
And I just think a line in the manifesto that says we're not revisiting the referendum,
but the Brexit is promised.
The Brexit is delivered after all the lies and all the crimes, etc.
It's not working well for the country.

We have to revisit certain parts of it
that may require renegotiations with with our European friends and colleagues.
And that's what we'll do.
So given the arguments you keep making about how it's broken
and the Tories are just a kind of series of factions,
do you believe there is the space for Keir Starmer to be bolder?
Yeah, I do.
And I think he does as well.
And that's why I think I think that's coming.
I thought I don't know if it's true, by the way, because I haven't spoken to any of them about it.
But I really hope that thing about lowering the voting age is true.
I think that that allied to proper political education and actually I would go for compulsory voting as well.
I'm not sure if we'll go for that.
I actually am moving and I know a lot of people in the Labour Party are moving on the issue of changing the electoral system.
Just before you leave the voting to a lower age, would you include EU permanent residents in the UK in that?
They should be allowed to vote too.
Yeah, I don't know what to think about that.
I mean, I'm aware of it because, you know, we can vote.
Fiona and I can vote in local elections in France.
We've got a house there, but we can't vote in the national elections.
I get that.
The Turkish election we've just had, one of the factors that's in there, 1.5 million people who live in Germany vote in the Turkish election.
I know that's the other way round, as it were.
But I remember going back to the Scottish referendum,
I thought, you know, Scots living outside Scotland ought to have had a vote.
So it's not straightforward and I don't know what I think because I haven't really thought about it.
You don't worry it looks like gerrymandering.
You don't worry it looks like a way of kind of thinking, well, these are people that are likely to be more sympathetic to us, particularly after Brexit and therefore, hey, look, we need the kids and we need the EU.
Yeah, look, I've seen the front page of the right wing papers today and that's what they're all going on.
I mean, I think I honestly do think that we need more than change of government.
We need a complete change in the way we do politics in this country.
It's absolutely, it's moribund.
So actually, I'm quite excited by any of these ideas.
I think the whole thing that Andy Burnham's talking about about get rid of the House of Lords and have a kind of second chamber of the regions and the nations.
I don't know how it's going to work.
You know, the book that I've written is which is really about trying to engage people more in politics.

I just think I meet so many young people who know way more about politics than older people who think about it way more for sure.

And I just think the idea that 16 and 17 years in this country should not have a say.

I just think he's bonkers.

Keir Starmer is a neighbour, but you said you haven't spoken to him that much recently.

And it's really curious for people listening to understand what that relationship is between you, between Blair, between Keir Starmer.

Is Keir Starmer asking you for advice?

Who's he listening to?

Well, he's got his team around him.

He's got, I mean, I'm always very conscious.

By the way, I've never lived in Iceland in my life, unlike Boris Johnson.

And Keir Starmer also lives in Camden.

We're both, he's Kentish tan and I'm gospel oak.

I saw it, Fiona and I had dinner with him and his wife a few weeks ago, and it was very nice and we had lots of chat.

I don't know whether that's giving advice.

We just talk about stuff.

I know he sees Tony.

I know he sees other people, but I'm always very conscious and always have been.

I can remember what it is like working when I was working alongside Tony Blair and then later alongside Gordon Brown.

You get bombarded with people telling you what you think.

You've got to be very careful about that.

So I actually think that some of the stuff that I say, like that speech I wrote last week,

I didn't send it to him, but I hope he has a look at it.

I hope his people have a look at it where I'm talking about the Brexit thing.

So is that giving advice?

I mean, I desperately want him to win.

If he ever, you know, I do see him.

And if he picks up the phone and asks for a chat, I'm always very, very happy to talk to him.

Do you think he is going to win?

I think it's, I was quite a pause.

No, because I think it's, I don't think you should.

I used to, you remember you covered our election in 1997.

I used to absolutely raise Mary Hell, as Fiona's dad would say.

If I, if Tony was ever introduced us, please welcome the next Prime Minister, Tony Blair.

Never, ever, ever think you're going to win until you've won.

So I think he, I think he definitely can win.

I think the country is desperate to get rid of this government.

I really think they've just had it.

But you should never, ever, ever take it for granted.

I think it could be anything between, from Keir's perspective, a hung parliament and a big win.

And I really hope it's not that.

And let me just press on that.

What about tactical voting?

Well, I, look, I would, if I was voting in...

So if your constituency was a marginal Tory, Tory...

You'd say go, go Lib Dem.

If I was living where Dominic Raab is up against Monica, I would say vote Lib Dem.

And that would probably get me kicked out of the Labour Party again if I was in it, because you're not meant to do that.

But that's one of the nice things about being out.

Why weren't you back in?

Well, I probably will be one day, but I just haven't applied.

I know I could get back in.

But I could, partly for that, partly the fact that, look, last week that speech I made in Brexit, there is something different if you're a member and you feel that.

And you, so I said things last week that I don't know if I would have said them if I'd been a Labour Party member.

Because I'm very tribal like that.

So I'm sort of tribal without feeling the full ownership of the tribalism.

Well, Alistair's staying with us and you'll be hearing about that wanker button we mentioned at the top of the show,

plus Iraq and Murdoch.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back.

Alistair Campbell's still here and we're going to turn to a chapter of your book now, Alistair.

Alistair, here's mine, I said, wanker.

Many found it funny.

I didn't later look for the man to apologize.

You've got what you now call a W switch off.

What happened to the wanker switch on Thursday night?

On news night.

I knew you were going to come up with, you know, the money for the NHS.

Nothing stood with me, not my campaign.

And it's very rich, a man who essentially was part of telling lies to invade a country to accuse me of dishonesty.

I think you might have lost the argument there, my dear.

If I may patronize you even more.

Honestly.

No, that's it now.

Yes, I will.

No, that's it.

No, that's it.

No, sorry.

You bring these people on.

You never challenge them.

You let them talk utter rubbish about Brexit.

And it's happened on the BBC for year after year after year.

Okay.

I am not going to take that from you with respect, Mr Campbell.

Thank you.

You don't have to.

Thank you very much for being on the programme.

Thank you.

Sometimes the scale of the wankerdome just overwhelms it.

And I feel I can't hold back.

What were you thinking when that happened?

So what was I thinking?

It's complicated.

I've written about it in my new European column this week because I do like to unbundle this stuff.

And that's what I've done in the book.

I actually don't think I'm as bad tempered as my reputation.

I think that if Mark Mardell, your former colleague at the Beebe, he chaired the Europe speech I did.

And he said, the thing about Alistair's reputation as a bruiser is he tends to bruise the people who need to be bruised and deserve to be bruised.

That's kind of the approach I take.

So did you walk away from that thinking?

Yeah, they deserved it.

No, I walked away thinking from that thinking that is really not on-brand with the podcast motto of disagree agreeably.

I thought I was quite disagreeable.

But I felt, I think sometimes, I mentioned in the book, I think in that passage about the interview that I did with John Snow 20 years ago when people think I lost my temper.

When you walked into the channel for...

Well, I didn't.

I went and told you not to do it.

No, you didn't tell me not to do it.

You told me to do it, but don't lose your rag.

Do it, but stay calm.

So let's just go back to this bit because it's really interesting.

I feel I know you well enough to imagine that as soon as you've done that, you thought, what the fuck have I just done?

I didn't think that.

I thought, I thought, I thought, I did.

I did the bit I didn't like.

I didn't like the fact that I turned on Victoria by Derbyshire.

And I think I was doing that as a deflection.

I thought if I carry on talking to this woman talking such utter crap about Brexit, I really am going to lose it.

So was it the my dear?

Was that when it went wrong?

Because that's, you know, and you recognize it, didn't you?

You said, oh, I sound like a patronizer.

Yeah, I said, yeah, I didn't like that.

Funny enough, though, Grace, my daughter, who's like, you know, as feminist as they come, she didn't.

She thought that was fine because she thought the woman was so ridiculous that she needed a bit of kind of, you know, but I didn't like that.

And then the other, but then.

So what happened is what?

So I was with Isabel, who's here now, who's publicist on the book.

And I said, what do you think?

And she said, well, you know, she said, well, get a lot of attention so people will be talking about it a lot.

So but and then I looked at social media, which is usually a mistake, thinking it was going to be an avalanche of, you know, horror.

And it just wasn't.

It was like 80 percent positive.

Now, that doesn't make me think that I still did the right.

Go and do it again.

No, I wouldn't do that.

Sell more books.

Shut up.

I'm just asking you, when you get reinforcement, because this is how twist works, isn't it?

It's a positive reinforcement cycle that might make you think, oh, that was a great thing to do.

No, no, no, no, no.

I think that that was on balance.

It matters in the scheme of things.

But look, I got so many messages from people who said, God, at last, somebody is calling these people out for the utter bullshit they talk and the fact they never accept responsibility.

That's the thing that got my goat was her basically saying, it's all going badly wrong because they're not doing what I think they should do with Brexit.

Brexit was always going to go badly wrong.

So no, I didn't I didn't I didn't like it.

Do you think there may be the lesson for this for you, Alistair Campbell, is that that sort of confrontational television is not a great format for you and that podcasts are better?

I mean, I was very struck by the two episodes of the podcast you did on Iraq with Roy Stewart and the rest of his politics are quite a popular podcast and the tone that you took in that and the depth you went into.

And I thought I heard a rather different Alistair Campbell.

And I wonder what the net result of that was, whether you have fewer people now saying, Alistair Campbell, he's a war criminal.

Well, it's really interesting that because look, the short answer to the question about whether this sort of long form thing is better.

I've always thought that I think one of the most frustrating things and you guys must have found this your whole career.

One of the most frustrating things about the way news is packaged is that it's a package.

You get a few seconds.

If you're lucky, you get 30 seconds.

You might get a minute.

You've got to sort of make that point.

The thing about what was really interesting about the Iraq that we didn't plan to do two hours.

It just sort of evolved and Rory Stewart had been talking about it for a long time saying, I think he was getting a bit of grief from his friends saying, look, you know, you too far too chummy.

You need to give him a hard time over Iraq sometimes.

And I kept saying, look, when we do Iraq, let's do it properly.

Let's really do it in depth.

We waited for the anniversary.

And it's amazingly responsive because you're absolutely right.

So many people responded to that is to this day being nothing almost listened to episodes.

Because you expressed, I think, more regret there.

You talked about your feelings about David Kelly in particular and more honesty, I would say, with Rory than I can imagine.

If you'd done Newsnight or the today when I go into.

So I did Times Radio the weekend, right, about the book.

What can I do?

How to fix politics?

And the first question Hugo Rifkind.

He said, well, surely a lot of people are going to say, well, who are you to talk about?

You're the guy who gave us Iraq, to which I said to him, I actually think you say lots of people.

I think actually they're called journalists when I'm out with the public.

I get very little of that.

And what I felt with the interview with Rory partly because we've got to know each other quite well.

I didn't feel he was coming at it.

I know his view.

He thinks the whole thing was a disaster.

We shouldn't have done it.

Didn't think that at the time, but that's what he thinks now.

I don't think that.

But I felt that he was asking reasonable, sensible questions and I was trying to think and give straight proper answers.

Just push back a tiny bit on that.

It's not just journalists who were opposed to the Iraq war, who thought it was a disaster, who thought that there was misinformation, who felt that the British people were misled.

It is wider, far wider.

Okay, what I meant was that when I'm out and about, it's very rare that somebody comes.

They used to, but it's very rare these days that somebody will come up and have a go about Iraq.

But journalists, I think, feel they have to.

And I think because a lot of journalism, I'm afraid, want me to talk about the bubble. The real bubble is those journalists who feel that they're actually talking to other journalists and they're not really thinking about the public too much.

And I think that's what's gone wrong with our media.

So, but no, the Iraq thing.

I was, it's really interesting because I didn't feel, bear in mind, I can't remember how many hours I did at the Hutton Inquiry and the Chilcot Inquiry.

It was a lot.

So I feel I've answered all those questions many, many times, but there was something about, and this is maybe why the podcast does work so well, there was something about the way we talk to each other, the way we engage, that people felt I was saying more than I had.

I didn't feel that, but I have to say at the end of it, I was absolutely exhausted.

Yeah, Rory arguably got more out of you because you're mates, because you know each other.

I mean, this is a really meta conversation we're having, but we all get really indignant, don't we, when GB News just has like former prime ministers interviewing other former prime ministers.

Ridiculous.

Ridiculous.

But aren't we doing exactly, aren't we reflecting that when Rory kind of gets Alistair Campbell to sort of talk in depth about Iraq in a way that I don't think you would have opened up to somebody who wasn't, you didn't trust, you weren't, you were in a safe space with him.

This is what everyone is doing now, they're talking to their friends, they're not putting themselves up.

No, I don't agree.

I don't agree with that because I would go up, look I have done, I've done lots and lots of interviews, but they usually, you know, I think one of the longest interviews I ever did about Iraq was the day that my first volume of diaries came out, the Blair Years, I was the 810 slot under the day program with John Humphreys and they were so determined to get me to kind of, you know, either lose my rag or say something stupid, they went through the news, they went through the weather, they went through the sport, went on and on and on.

I've done hours, hundreds of hours of interviews on Iraq.

And you talk about trust, I mean I sort of trust you too, I've known you two for a very long time.

If I was doing an interview, I wouldn't think you're there to try and stitch me up.

I would be very open, but if I was talking to you for a package or to you for a newscast interview, I know that you're going to get four minutes, you're going to get three answers that actually have any impact at all.

What's good about having something that's more long-form is you can do nuance, you can go into depth.

And actually if I think about my old boss Tony, his great genius as a communicator, he is good at doing nuance in very, very short space of time.

Do you think Keir has that skill?

I mean he was asked for example about whether he'd roll back the anti-protest legislation. Now in a way that should be a really easy one for Labour, right, they think they're quite draconian.

We saw what happened over the coronation, we saw that poor woman who was the super fan and we know his views on the Met Police and the need for reform.

Why isn't he out there saying of course this legislation has to be changed, he's not?

Well, I've not heard that and I don't know.

I think, look, does he have that nuance?

I think he does have nuance, but I think there's a difference between that and doing clips for the news.

You know this, it's a nightmare.

Remember when Ed Miliband got caught?

He's doing the same answer as before because he knew he was just going to get clipped.

I've had John Prescott not realise that he was live and he said the same thing five times in a row.

I think I'm just going to use a clip, but it was live at the time, so he literally said the same thing five times.

Gordon Brown was even worse.

I mean, Gordon Brown was a nightmare to interview.

You'd say, how are you doing, how are the kids?

Is that your fault?

Were you like, stick to the message, stick to the message?

No, not really.

I think I was very, very lucky because working with Tony was just a naturally good communicator.

I remember once driving up the M6 to go and see a Burnley game on a Saturday.

One of our politicians was on radio five, and I was listening to this program, driving up the right away, and she comes on and she literally said the same thing about six, seven times.

I phoned her up later.

I said, listen, that interview, how do you think it went?

I thought it was fine.

Why?

Because I got the message over.

I said, no, yeah, you did, but you said literally the same thing six times.

She said, but that's what you told us to do.

I said, no.

Educate the same message.

Don't just say the same thing.

So going back to Keir Starmer and the way he communicates at the moment, the thing that strikes me, going back to Emily's point, it's just so cautious.

There's so much caution about the risks of everything.

Yeah, I get why you say that, but I go back to the point I made about this three-stage thing.

I think he's been in a defensive crouch on those two things.

Actually, I think his attacks on the Tories have got better and better.

I think he's harder with Suna because, you know, he's not as big a liar as Johnson.

He's not as utterly ridiculous as Truss.

So it's harder, but I think his attacks have got better.

Do you think those adverts worked for Labour?

I'd rather they hadn't done them, but I think they did work in a funny sort of way because I think that...

This is where they said Rishi Sunak doesn't care about the Tories.

Yeah, I'll tell you.

I mean, I'm talking now purely in sort of political tactical terms.

He had made a speech two weeks earlier about the criminal justice system that, again, was thoughtful, rounded, serious.

Nobody paid a blind bit of notice to it.

They then did that social media attack on Sunak, and they got themselves noticed through the campaign in a way that they hadn't up till then.

Now, I think that's why they did it, and I can see why, but I think you've got to be careful about getting driven down the road that the Tories want to take, which is a really dirty, nasty campaign.

I want to talk a bit about populism, which is something else you address in the book, and it looks like Erdogan is on course to be re-elected in Turkey.

Trump is still very powerful in the United States.

Why are those arguments being lost by centrist politicians?

I mean, Tony Blair will always say, we've got to reinforce the centre, we've got to reinvigorate the centre, and yet the lure, the appeal of people on the far right, people on the far left, is still there.

Well, it's complicated.

I mean, I think with Erdogan, there's all sorts of other factors to do with, you know, that he now controls most of the media, he's quite a repressive figure, he's on a track between where he was and where Putin is, and Putin started on the same track as well.

Putin, one power through reasonably democratic means, and has then now corrupted himself and corrupted the political system, and Erdogan's kind of on that path.

Look, you use the word appeal, there is an appeal.

There is an appeal to the strongman leader, to somebody who stands up and says, they're out to get you, and I'm on your side.

It's quite easy to kind of get people to come behind you on that.

I think that it's not just populism, it's populism alongside these other things, polarisation and post-truth.

I think that's what's created this kind of cocktail.

We shouldn't be too, look, Trump is gone, admittedly he could come back, Johnson's gone, I don't think there's any chance he's coming back.

Orban's still here.

Orban's still here.

Bolsonaro's gone.

Putin's still here.

But the point I'm making, Putin's still here, the point I'm making is that defeating individual populists is not as easy as defeating populism.

And populism, you have to understand what populism is.

It's not about being popular, it's about how do you separate out the pure people against the elite.

And I mean, this absurd, you and I were featured together, I think all of us were in this ridiculous new elite thing.

I mean, the idea that I feel utterly powerless, never mind powerful, that we're kind of somehow controlling the country.

I think you have to put that in the context of a poor bloke who gets his money from a non-dom, international hedge fund trying to flog a book.

And God, you know, we all have sympathy with people who are said to flog a book.

I mean, flogging books is hard work, isn't it?

It's really hard work.

What can I do?

Pick a book about it.

But I think that what's incredible about what's happened, if you think of it, Trump, Daddy was a billionaire, Johnson, Eaton and Oxbridge, Resmog, Dad was the editor of The Times and the House of Lords, Farage, privately educated city trader, these people become the voices of the people against the elite.

It's incredible.

It's one of the most extraordinary cons of all time.

Well, what's incredible is that actually, knowing all that, nobody saw this coming.

Nobody had the weapons, actually, or the linguistic skill to defeat that when they could see it.

Well, you see, this is why, to go back to Tony's point, I still think one of the most compelling pieces of political exchange was when Tony absolutely rinsed Farage in the European Parliament.

Why, Prime Minister?

I urge you.

If you haven't been said that you wanted to be the permanent president of Europe, please stay on for a further six months, six more months of the British presidency, and they'll kick us out.

Thank you.

Let me just tell you, sir, and your colleagues, you sit with our country's flag.

We do not represent our country's interests.

This is the year 2005.

This is the year 2005, not 1945.

We're not fighting each other anymore.

These are our partners.

These are our colleagues, and our future lies in Europe.

And when you and your colleagues say, what do we get in return for what we contribute to enlargement, I'll tell you what we get.

We get a Europe that is unified after years of dictatorship in the East.

We get economic development in countries who we have championed.

But in a way, we stopped doing that, and we started to pander to Euroscepticism as opposed to take it on the whole time.

And I'm afraid that David Cameron, for all I think he's, I never felt utterly ashamed to hear him describe as the prime minister in the way I did with Johnson, say, or trust.

But the fact is, the referendum was what opened the door to this deluge of populism and polarization and the fact that he wouldn't do blue on blue, so Johnson and Cummings were given free reign.

I'm going to ask you a quick question.

Corbyn obviously is out under Kirstam.

He's not going to find a way back.

Diane Abbott got herself into hot water, apologised straight away, but she's still being denied the whip.

Do you think she should get back in?

Well, I don't know.

Look, I'm not for a slave party, I'm certainly not a whip.

I'll tell you what I will say about that.

I mean, is it too dimensional to have a Labour party that just keeps on sort of throwing out its...

Yeah, look, I think the levels of abuse that she has to put up with, I know you get a lot and I get a lot, but the levels of abuse she has to put up with on social media are of a level that are utterly horrific, and that makes me much more sympathetic to her than maybe I would be if it was just...

So if you were Kirstam, would you say...

Well, I'm not going to get into that because that's entirely up to them, but I just think that...

In fact, she said something, or she wrote something, or somebody wrote something for her.

I think we've got to be very, very careful about this stuff.

I say in the book, I'm not big on this council culture stuff.

I'm not big on this idea that somebody says or does something five years ago and it pops up on social media and we've all got to go, oh, this is terrible, we've got to get rid of them.

I just don't...

You know, we've got to be a bit more grown up about it, I think.

I've got a final question for you, which is about the media, the press, more particularly the press and the role they'll play in the next election.

In the lead-up to 97, you went out of your way.

You went to Australia.

You went to Heyman Island.

About love Australia.

Yeah.

Murdoch and Kosey up to Murdoch and Murdoch, sure enough, backs Labour in the 97 election.

Does Keir Starman need to care about what the mail, what the express, what the telegraph are saying?

A lot less.

Because of the economic power now of the newspapers.

I think also because...

I think the public have got their measure.

Look, if you're still reading the Daily Express now, today, and you still believe that Brexit is a great thing, then there's very, very little chance that your view is ever going to change.

But I think that...

You see, it's interesting how many of your questions have really been about this media landscape.

I think the public have moved on.

Where I've always felt the newspapers are powerful is in their ability to get the broadcasters to have their agenda set for them.

And I think that...

Still, I'm afraid the case.

I think it's still the case of the BBC.

I think it's still the case of Sky.

I think it's still the case of ITV.

You know, as well as I do, that you go into most meetings and the big broadcasters, they all sit around with their newspapers and say, what should we take out of this and what should we do with that?

And that's their influence.

We used to joke, actually, that if you wanted to get the BBC to pick up a story on Newsnight, you had to get it in to the mail first.

Absolutely.

But we used to do that.

We used to do that.

You know, we knew that Jeremy Paxman on Newsnight would put the papers out there, right?

So if we were trying to get the BBC, the boardy, interested in covering a story, get it on the front of the Times and the Mirror, say.

And he shows it, oh, that's a story.

We better do that.

And then you suddenly get a phone call at midnight saying, well, can we get the minister in to do the 810 slot?

I mean, it's ridiculous.

You have to do it.

But so I think it matters less.

But I'll tell you the other thing that I think is interesting on this.

I think here is actually a lot tougher and maybe a lot more ruthless than people understand.

And I don't mind a bit of ruthlessness in the politician.

And I thought that when the mail did that whole beer, Durham beer thing nonsense, was it 13 successive front pages?

Curry's Starmer.

Yeah.

That wasn't the headline.

Anyway.

You've got a taste of what it's going to be like.

It's going to get worse.

OK.

And what I would say in those circumstances, call it out every time.

So like today, the papers, the right-wing papers are full of this thing.

He's trying to gerrymander and rig the election by getting young people and Europeans to vote.

These people are desperate.

They haven't got a record to defend the government.

So you stop what you're doing to counter attack?

No.

No, no.

It's just part of your language.

I don't think you don't make a big deal of it at all.

But when he comes on the programme and says, you say to him, but look at this, you're being accused of gerrymandering.

You say, well, look, you're talking about a newspaper that absolutely despises the air I breathe.

I mean, I'm honestly not going to let that distract me at all.

And then he joins Miliband and Corbyn and just about every other Labour leader in blaming the press.

And that's kind of pretty unattractive, isn't it?

Don't blame.

I'm not talking about blaming.

You see, but you're asking me to project it as though I'm saying it's a big thing.

I'm saying it's not that big a thing.

I think you'd rather have the press on board.

Why did we go to Australia because we were trying to neutralise the right-wing press?

Yeah.

And that's what I mean.

It's easy to say that now.

It may be.

It's not such a big thing.

But you went a hell of a long way to get murdered.

Because at that time, I think it was very, very different.

I'll tell you the media challenges that I think the politicians should be focusing on at the moment.

They're about AI, they're about social media, they're about the fact that the Cambridge Analytica thing has not really been sort of, you know, drilled down.

I think the fact we're still banging on about whether the sun backs Labour or not is kind of yesterday's stuff.

That's for us to ask a new to answer at this point.

Do you think we've talked enough about the book on that?

I think we've got to end this.

Have you got to end that book?

I do, yeah.

I don't feel, I don't feel that you've sort of given it the love and attention.

OK.

Can someone give us a call security?

Can we get call security?

Nurse, we need help.

Security, please remove Alistair Campbell.

And in a moment, we'll be joined by Lewis.

He's at NatCon.

It sounds like a sort of US defence contractor, but it is actually the National Conservative Conference that is taking place.

Not a Conservative Party conference, it's sort of for those people who are a bit on the right of the Conservative Party.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back.

And as promised, Lewis Goodall joins us now from NatCon.

What's it been like?

Suella Braverman has just spoken.

Yes, she has.

And you know what, John?

This NatCon thing, which, you know, most people won't have heard of, which is supposed to be about reinventing conservatism or national conservatism.

It's partly about reinventing that, but if anything, it just felt like the beginning of a Conservative Party leadership race.

Suella Braverman just gave a speech, which veered way off her brief.

Yes, all of the headlines that had already been given to the newspapers were about her saying we've got to get legal migration under control.

Obviously, she's been most well-known for policies trying to tackle illegal migration.

So as we say in the trade, wide-ranging speech, you know, talking about all sorts of different cultural, Conservative issues, you know, lighting up on trans issues, a full-throated attack on what she calls progressive liberalism, and trying to establish her philosophy and thinking of what conservatism is and ought to be.

And she made this joke.

I mean, at the very beginning, a couple of protesters tried to protest and intervened on the speech.

They were very quickly escorted out.

And she had quite a good line.

And she said, oh, it's Shadow Cabinet Audition Day, which was slightly telling or had more meaning than I think she intended, because to be honest, that is how it felt.

It felt.

And we heard Jacob Rees-Mogg as well this morning.

It felt as if, you know, the sort of klaxon has already started for them having at least half an eye on the potential for a Conservative Party leadership race, probably out of government at the next general election.

Well, look, Lewis, we'll look forward to that tomorrow, because I think there's so much to look at there and so many kind of bits of nuance that are really worth delving into.

We'll speak to you tomorrow.

See you then.

Can't wait.

Well, Lewis mentioned Jacob Rees-Mogg, who spoke earlier this morning.

And I think it is worth playing you what he said, because it was quite jaw-dropping.

From a Conservative point of view, this is a mixed picture.

We have won the nation state.

There is no prospect of the UK going back into the United Kingdom.

The gerrymandering effort you've read about today of Kirsten Alba giving votes to all the EU nationals here would not get us back into the European Union.

It's fanciful to think that.

It's a particularly silly scheme.

I very much doubt they'll do it in the end.

Parties that try and gerrymander end up finding that their clever scheme comes back to bite them.

As dare I say, we found by insisting on voter ID for elections, and we found that the people who didn't have ID were elderly.

Oh, and they by and large voted Conservative.

So we made it hard for our own voters, and we upset a system that worked perfectly well.

It was rather the glories of our country, actually, that we did on an honesty basis, where the real problem is with postal voting.

As you know, I'm a very mild-mannered individual, but I am incredulous that someone who was in the Cabinet, when this legislation was being drawn up and being passed through Parliament, stands on stage and says, yeah, it was an attempt at gerrymandering.

Throughout all the cases I covered in America, where there was allegations of gerrymandering, they always said it was about democracy and ensuring electoral safety and making sure there was no fraud.

We have just had Jacob Rees-Mogg say it was about stopping young people voting, but bugger it, we stopped the old people who were going to vote Conservative.

To be fair, we are always asking politicians to be more honest with the voting public.

So there you have it.

Jacob Rees-Mogg admitting that a law he was part of bringing into being was to help the Conservatives shift the boundaries of who could and who couldn't vote.

I'm not sure he really meant to do that.

I mean, there is every chance he did, and he just thinks, what the hell, I'm out of the Cabinet now and I'm going to be the person that corrects a wrong.

But there's also a sneaking chance that somehow his words got away with him and he meant it as an attack on Labour and Keir Starmer's talk of lowering the voting age or giving the vote to more EU permanent residents here.

And it all got away with him and he ended up letting the cat out the bag, which is, yeah, the Tories were really trying to get young voters off the list.

Just every now and then, accidentally, a politician tells the truth.

And we saw something today, which is profoundly ugly, that you're trying to massage the voting system

for your own political ends.

We sort of know that it happens.

You'd very rarely hear someone who served in Cabinet say, yeah, that's what we were trying to do.

And I'm really interested to see whether Rishi Sunak then has to push back on this,

because he has two choices, ignore them all as kind of nutters in the room,

or actually tackle it head on and say, that is very, very far from what we were trying to do.

We'll be back tomorrow with a lot more on NatCon.

It'll be NatCon Day 2.

See you then. Bye-bye.

Bye for now.