

[Transcript] The News Agents / Another pledge broken: will Starmer face a backlash from his party?

This is a global player original podcast.

Kier Starmer and his team have got to show some clear water, some clear red water between themselves and the Daily Mail and the Telegraph and themselves and the Conservatives. And at the minute, many people can't spot the difference. And that's a shame for somebody who's probably as talented as Kier Starmer is. He's got to show that he's on the side of working people and progressive politics. And I don't think we're seeing that.

That was Mick Lynch. He's the RMT leader and he was speaking on Sophie Ridge's Sunday morning show on Sky yesterday. And he's asking Kier Starmer, in words of pretty much one syllable, what he's about, where the difference is between what he hates now in terms of the Conservative government and what he's promising tomorrow in terms of what Labour will deliver. Mick Lynch, of course, and his RMT union are no longer affiliated to the Labour Party.

So on one level, Kier Starmer can just shrug his shoulders and say, I'm going to ignore whatever you say. But does Mick Lynch represent a more widespread view that Labour, we know what it doesn't stand for, but not quite sure what it does? Welcome to the news agents.

The news agents. It's John. It's Emily. And later in the podcast, fascinating interview about the situation in Iran today, where the morality police are restarting patrols to check that women have got their hijabs on correctly and fully covering their face and everything is being done according to the rules of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Or is it the case that the morality police are just showing up how weak the Iranian state has become? But we're going to start with Labour.

And we're going to be looking at what Kier Starmer himself has been saying and writing over the last couple of days of this weekend, because he's written for the observer and he's spoken to the BBC and he's talked about this conservative created crisis. We all get that. He doesn't like what the 13 years of conservative rule have done to the country. And that's kind of his USP to hate it. He's the leader of the opposition. And yet in much of what he's saying, he goes on to explain that he can't actually change that yet. And so I think there is a growing unease coming through of what he can actually promise. We get that Kier Starmer wants to be grown up. We get that he doesn't want to hate on the civil service. We get that he doesn't want to sort of run around calling our institutions kangaroo courts or throwing parties during Covid and lockdown. But is that enough? It's enough to get you listening, right? It's enough to get you saying they will be different. But will they do different? And that's the question that at the moment, Labour is choosing not to answer. Well, if you listened to what Kier Starmer pledged when he became the Labour Party leader, he came up with this sort of extravagant list of 10 pledges of what would mark his leadership of the Labour Party. A lot of them have been jettisoned, watered down, discarded. Now, of course, we have had a pandemic. We've had the invasion of Ukraine.

We've had the surge in interest rates. We've had a return of inflation into the political system. If you compare and contrast Kier Starmer in 2019 to Kier Starmer today, you're left with the feeling of, oh, he's jettisoned quite a lot of, you know, the key pledges about income tax rising for the top 5%, the scrapping of tuition fees, universal credit, nationalisation of public services, freedom of movement, the 28 billion green prosperity plan. It's all been either watered down or got rid of. And therefore, people are saying, well, hang on, will the real Kier Starmer please stand up? And I think the heat has grown in the last 24 hours with that confirmation that came yesterday from Kier Starmer, that he would not change the policy of taking away child benefit

[Transcript] The News Agents / Another pledge broken: will Starmer face a backlash from his party?

to families with more than two children. This was introduced by George Osborne in the austerity years

and Kier Starmer has previously called it punitive. His deputy Angela Reiner has called it inhumane, obscene. Yesterday, he told our former colleague Laura Kuhnsberg that actually he had no plans to scrap it. If you have more than two children at the moment, you don't get benefits. Would that change under a Labour government? We're not changing that. That's a real kind of political trap for Labour, because either they want to be the party of ending child poverty or else they end up being the party that essentially carries on the austerity measures of a Conservative government.

And today, Yvette Cooper, the Shadow Home Secretary, reinforced that by talking about the importance of fiscal responsibility and saying, actually, Liz Truss is where you end up if you go for unfunded spending. So they are so cautious about any single commitment to spending that is not absolutely signed off, that they will not even agree to scrapping a policy that they have previously called obscene. And this is a real risk for Labour and its supporters.

What Blair was trying to do in 97 was to say, we are not going to raise the top rate of tax.

He wasn't talking about limiting welfare benefits. If you're limiting benefits,

like child support, then that really does affect an awful lot of people and that will

disappoint a lot of people as well. And so there is, yeah, you want to be fiscally prudent,

but do you want to be in a position where you're seeming to harm the most vulnerable in our society?

Well, weirdly, just as, actually, as we've been talking, a resignation letter has been

published on Twitter by Jamie Driscoll, no fan of Keir. He has been the Labour

Northeast Mayor and he has just announced that he is resigning to stand as an independent

and he points the blame firmly at Keir Starmer. Many of the things that John was just taking

you through are mentioned in this resignation letter, that you turn on so many priorities,

28 billion to tackle the climate emergency, free school meals, ending university tuition fees,

reversing NHS privatisation, a list of promises too long to repeat in this letter.

I think Jamie Driscoll is a very different case. We know that he's on the hard left of the party.

We know that there was a whole discussion about his seat and he would call it de-selection,

Labour calls it selection, but it still will come as a headline that Keir Starmer

will find difficult to refute. This is somebody in his own party saying,

I don't know what you stand for anymore. The only thing is that Keir Starmer might be able to use

this just as you could use Mclynch, is you choose your friends carefully, you choose your enemies

more carefully and it may be to have him against the reforms that Keir Starmer is introducing

will underline to the British people, oh, Keir Starmer is not just another left-winger,

like Ed Miliband or like Jeremy Corbyn and therefore you have got somebody new now

in charge of the Labour Party and that might actually help him a bit. I mean,

it's interesting the statement from the Labour Party on this because it's sort of what it implies

saying the Labour Party is delighted that local party members have selected Kim McGinnis as our

candidate. With Keir Starmer as leader, the Labour Party is a changed party,

brackets, you're the old party, relentlessly focused on delivering for working people

and we make no apologies that Labour candidates are held to the highest standards, brackets,

he had low standards. Well, you saw that line coming, didn't you? I guess maybe the clear red

water now is not between Keir Starmer and the Conservatives, but between the Mclynches,

[Transcript] The News Agents / Another pledge broken: will Starmer face a backlash from his party?

the Jamie Driscoll's and Keir Starmer, which is fine if all you're talking about is a kind of internecine warfare, i.e. have you sorted out the left of your party? We're not that anymore, we're definitely not Jeremy Corbyn, we're not even Ed Miliband, we're going to look more like Blair, you won't even find us scaring you about rising income tax or anything like that.

The question is, and I think it still remains, yes, okay, you've sorted the left of your party out, but what about the voters who are actually coming to you because they want to feel significantly better off, they want to see services improved, they want to see air quality improved, they want to see better transport services, you come to Keir Starmer because you're fed up with what has happened

over the last few years and you've got somebody who says we're not going to make the mistake of spending, we can't win power by spending was his headline in The Observer and everyone gets the fiscal constraints and the golden rules and all the rest of it, but what are they for then?

So I suspect a Labour strategist's answer to that would be, and they would look to the way Blair played this and for Mick Lynch, Reed, John Edmonds, who was the head of the GMB union or Bill Morris,

who was head of the Transport and General Workers Union back in the Blair days and was unhappy about

Blair's pledges that they were not going to raise the top level of tax, they would say, yeah, look, this is creating a dialogue where people are happy who are maybe a bit more conservative to vote for

us and those people who want all those things, well, where else are they going to go? They're going to vote for Labour anyway, so we don't need to super please people who live in liberal London constituencies where Labour, you know, weigh the majority. We want to get people who didn't vote for

Labour in 2019 and that's what we're doing. And the difference is that Blair actually sat on a really healthy economy. I don't think we realise at the time just how comfortably he was boosted actually by what had happened before 97. This time round, there isn't the choice to say, I'm not going to do that straight away, but we'll be fine. People need to see action taken because look at the NHS, look at public sector workers, look at people's mortgages, look at the rate of inflation. There isn't the chance that we can just kind of carry on as we were because as we were isn't working, it's broken. Well, we're joined in the studio now by Tom Baldwin and he was a political correspondent back in the day when I was. He then goes on to work for Ed Miliband as his director of communications when he was Labour Party leader and he's now writing a biography of Keir Starmer that Keir Starmer is cooperating with. So presumably happy that you're writing it. Tom, what do you make of where we are now? I think there's a bit of a sort of dialogue of the deaf going on at the moment with the media in that he comes on, talk about these five missions that he's set out, two terms of Labour government and journalists, not necessarily yourselves, but other journalists, I say, yeah, but what are you going to do right now? What are you going to do in the first hundred days? And what he's trying to say is that these things cannot be fixed in a hundred days. We have deep seated problems in this country and people looking for some sort of magic

pill which is going to make people happy ever after are going to be looking in vain. So he's trying to talk about the long term and there's a game being played in which journalists are trying

[Transcript] The News Agents / Another pledge broken: will Starmer face a backlash from his party?

to get him to make some sort of unfunded, uncosted spending commitment and the Tories would love him to do that and I'm generally of the view that if your opponents really want you to do something you probably shouldn't do it. Tom, it's a funny way to phrase that though that journalists are trying to get him to play a game. I mean, I think that's kind of reductive of honestly of both our roles because the journalists asking the questions are trying to work out presumably what the vision is and what the difference is. You heard, you know, Mitt Lynch at the top there say, where's the clear red water? And I guess if Keir Starmer comes in as he did in last weekend's Observer piece and says, fucking hell, the Tories are catastrophic, they're just crisis are because he literally said, he said the conservatives have created a crisis, right? So he's on the one hand saying, can you believe what we've had for 13 years? And then you go, okay, so, so, so, Keir, go on, where's the offering? And he goes, well, obviously, we will carry on doing that and we will have to carry on doing that. And we won't be able to spend on that. And you know that thing about, you know, the child benefits policy, well, obviously we'll have to stick to George Osborne's austerity plan on that. I don't think it's unfair for us to be saying, come on, where's the offering here then? Where's the difference? Well, I mean, there is enormous difference between what the Labour Party stands for and what the Conservative Party stands for and has done. And that's part of the problem. Two years ago, you could perhaps have borrowed large sums of money to fund a Green New Prosperity Deal. We've had the economy absolutely trashed by Liz Truss. Interest rates have gone up. It's much more difficult to do that. Now, when the circumstances change and the facts change, policies change, that's natural. Of course. But if you're going into an election, and let's leave journalists out of it, because we're kind of largely irrelevant to this process, isn't it right that the public are saying, yeah, okay, at the end of 10 years time, you hope to have done this. But I want to know what's going to happen in the next few weeks, the next few months of a Labour government. Where's the urgency there about telling us that? Because I think part of the problem is this short-termism. And you can say, leave journalists out of it. I think if you think of the problems that the media have identified as the existential crises facing this country right now for the last 10, 20 years, they've actually turned out not to be. Wherever that's, you know, boats of desperate refugees in the channel, Europe, benefit sheets, these have not actually been the problems. And politicians are constantly forced into this position of sort of having to pronounce on what is seen as the latest great existential challenge to our way of life. And we never actually get around to fixing the long term. That's really interesting, Tom, because what you're citing, I think here is, if I'm not mistaken, sort of daily express front pages or daily mail front pages. It goes a bit deeper than that, but yeah. Well, Keir Starmer isn't pushing back on small boats and the market. He's not, for example, saying actually, I don't think this is not a problem. He's not saying, oh my god, forget the right wing press. They're trying to lead you down dark alleyways of fear and loathing. You don't have to go there. In a way, he's sort of leaning into some of these worries. I mean, he could just be talking about child poverty and inflation and the cost of living and mortgages and green energy, but he doesn't seem to be pulling towards that either. Well, look, he's standing for election and it's probably not a good idea to be attacking the media. I'm not standing for anything. I can attack the media. And I think the media is part of the

[Transcript] The News Agents / Another pledge broken: will Starmer face a backlash from his party?

problem in this country. And I think it's been part of the problem with the politics of this country, but I'm not standing for office. And Keir Starmer is, and he's quite rightly politely answering people's questions. Now, the trouble is, I think sometimes people see this as a sort of cynical game of what he's doing. He's pitching towards the center or, you know, you know, the reason why he's saying this about he's not getting rid of this disgusting policy on the two child policy is because, yeah, he's trying to play up to the Daily Mail. I think it's actually simpler than that. He's saying, look, I'm not Jeremy Corbyn. I don't have a magic solution. I don't have some single big transformative thing I couldn't do in the first 100 days. It's going to be tough. It's the worst inheritance if he does become Prime Minister, the worst inheritance any Prime Minister has had since the Second World War. Let's compare to the Blair era, where Tony Blair stood to be the leader as a representative of New Labour. They campaigned as New Labour. And if I remember him when he became Prime Minister, we're going to govern as New Labour. Keir Starmer's campaigned as somebody very different. Now, I know you're going to say, yeah, look, we've had the pandemic, we've had Ukraine, we've had the Tories running the economy, yada, yada, yada. What he campaigned on bears no resemblance to what he's saying now. And therefore, who is the real Keir Starmer? Well, I would push back against that because if you look at those 10 pledges, I mean, the first most central pledge, he said that he's never going to take his eye off the voters. We need to win back in order to get back because we can't do anything unless we're in power. He also talked about public ownership. And, you know, they're talking about taking the railways back in the public ownership. You're talking about Great British Energy. He talked about New Workers' Rights, and they're doing some of that. He talked about green energy and they're doing some of that. Can they do everything? No, they can't. And we know why. It's not just Covid and Ukraine. It's because the economy has been trashed. I sometimes think that sometimes they should be bolder about saying what they are going to do because they actually do have quite a radical program. You enter an election with Ed Miliband, an election that he lost. How wise a message is it to go in and say, dear voter, we can offer you jam tomorrow, but I'm sorry there's no jam today. That's a very difficult message to communicate, isn't it? Yeah, but when Ed was leader of the Labour Party, we were in actually similar circumstances where the perception was there was no money to spend. And I think the sort of dominant narrative was that austerity economics was here to stay. That didn't last very long. And there were three ways you can get around that. You can say you're going to tax more, you can borrow more, or you can do what Ed did. We'd say we're going to regulate more and we're going to put the burden on to business. Now, that resulted in 2015 with not a single business coming up to support the Labour Party because they thought Ed's rather moderate social democratic reforms were much scarier than David Cameron's plan to have an in-out referendum on Europe. How's that working out for you guys? And did you at the time think that Ed was on the right track there, or did you think it was loony, crazy, but couldn't say? I think part of the problem is we presented actually quite moderate reforms in quite a scary fashion. We made it seem bigger than it was, partly because that pressure of what are you going to do immediately? You talk about 97 I think is interesting because everyone thinks that Tony Blair came in with this great big bold modernising

[Transcript] The News Agents / Another pledge broken: will Starmer face a backlash from his party?

offer. If you look at those five pledges, there are micro policies, the policy on the NHS. Do you remember it? Reduce waiting lists. By spending £100 million more, cutting red tape, £100 million microscopic summons in terms of NHS spending. So when you hear the Mclynches of this world

say, he's got to show us who he really is. Is that actually really helpful for Kirsten

Arman now? I mean, does he want to be losing, as it were, the voices of the hard left?

Again, I think you can see it as a sort of cynical gait where, as a sort of act of triangulation, or he's trying to prove he's not Jeremy Corbyn, he isn't Jeremy Corbyn. He's a grown-up who believes

in long-term change in this country. I think he is having trouble getting that message through at the moment. Why? Partly because he's not yet in that final stage of his leadership, I think.

Somebody said the other day he's trying to do Kinnock, Smith, Blair and one parliament.

He's changed his party. He's offering reassurance to British people that he's not going to wreck the economy and people do feel very, very insecure at the moment. He's showing that the Tories aren't fit

for office. Then there's a question about that final stage. Now, how you pitch that, I think,

is important because we've had these big transformative offers in recent years. We've had modernization. We've had Brexit. We've had austerity. I don't think people feel much better for them. I think people are suspicious of a single big transformative idea, a vision.

What they might want to is grown-up, respectful leadership, which is going to get us to a better place, but it's going to be tough. Now, that, I think, is Keir's essential message to British

people. At the moment, I think it's getting obscured by... Listen to an interview on the

Today program the other day. He was announcing his fifth mission on breaking down barriers to opportunity in education. All he was asked about was VAT on private school fees and these micro issues. I think we do have to try and break a habit in the political class more generally if we're going to start fixing these problems in the long term.

You're almost arguing for, please, can we have a more civilized, reflective, mature media?

You've worked in journalism for years. You've been a comms director. You know what the

journalist class is that you're going to be up against. I thought there was a whole point of the news agency. There is the space to expand on this. Unfortunately, I don't think... Do you

think it's realistic? Okay, let's just ask you, did Keir have to go to the Murdoch party? Do you

think to get himself into a place where the sun, the times, blah, blah, blah, is going to be

friendly to him? Was that necessary? Yes. He hasn't flown several thousand miles to Australia.

Which Tony Claire did? Yeah. He went to a party. Name the island. Heyman. Very good. It makes you think that one John Soeper was probably there in the bushes. No, I wasn't. Steve Richards got sent

instead of me. I was friggging furious. Okay, so Tom, nice sort of swerve, but he did still...

He went to a party in the end. Keir doesn't need to bend his knee to Rupert Murdoch.

He needs to show Rupert Murdoch that he's going to win, because Rupert Murdoch has backed every

winner of every British general election since he owned the sun. And if Keir can convince Rupert Murdoch he's going to win, that's all he needs to do. He doesn't need to make any more concessions to

him. But he has to go to the party. Look, he's running to be prime minister. It would be crazy to

[Transcript] The News Agents / Another pledge broken: will Starmer face a backlash from his party?

boycott a party of Britain's second best-selling newspaper. Tom, why would you do that?

Is your biography going to tell us anything we didn't know?

I think it will tell you something you don't know, and I hope you'll paint a picture of someone who's very different from the public image that you're getting at the moment.

What do you think the public image is that we're getting at the moment?

Someone who's dull, someone who's stiff, someone who feels deeply anxious about carrying a Ming vase across the Polish floor. And that's not true?

I think he is someone who is very focused on the most competitive people I've ever met.

Is that right, really? Keir Starmer is one of the most competitive people you've ever met.

I was interviewing one of his legal colleagues the other day, and they said that when he became leader of the Labour Party, everyone was saying, yeah, maybe you'll get Labour and better footing, maybe you'll be Neil Kinnick said, no, he'll win, because that's what he does.

And really, I wouldn't underestimate him.

Don't you just have to say that because you're his...

No, I don't. I can say what I want. And yeah, it's what I believe.

Tom Baldwin, nice to have you.

Thank you very much.

Nice to see you.

And after the break, we will be discussing Iran and whether the return of the morality police to the streets is a sign of strength of the regime or its profound weakness.

This is The News Agents.

That's the sound of the protests on the streets of Iran. It seems unbelievable to realise that that was almost a year ago. August brings the anniversary of the death of Masa Amini. You'll remember the

22-year-old woman arrested for miswearing her headgear. And it was her death, essentially, that kicked off this extraordinary volume of protests from men and women alike, not just in Tehran, but around the country. And it also provoked a retaliation by the government, by the regime, that created hundreds of deaths. And I guess Iran is one of those areas, stories, the protests that has been in the background to so much of the kind of frenzied British political year. But right now, it's back with a kick.

Because we've just heard that the morality police, what a great name for a police force, the morality police, are going to be resuming their crackdown on people not wearing their hijab correctly. And so clearly a degree of confidence from the regime that they think that these protests have reached their high watermark, or that they have been crushed and now they're going to enforce

their will, again, having initially been rocked by the protests. And the regime not quite sure of what to do. Well, we're joined now in the studio by Rana Raimpur,

who for years was a colleague of ours at the BBC working for the Persian service.

What do you make of what is happening now in Iran today?

So I wouldn't necessarily see it as a sign of confidence. To me, it's a sign of desperation.

Because, as we heard earlier, when the protests happened last year, there were widespread, nationwide protests against the compulsory hijab, which quickly turned into a call for regime change. And it lasted for months and months. And it really shook the foundation

[Transcript] The News Agents / Another pledge broken: will Starmer face a backlash from his party?

of the Islamic regime in Iran. And then something shifted in the society. Now we see women on the streets just walking without the headscarf, waitresses serving people at restaurants and cafes without headscarves. And especially now, because it's summer and it's very hot, we hear that young girls and women, they wear crop tops on the streets. And it seems that the regime has totally lost the plot. They have tried to push back through various tactics. So for example, if you go to a shop without a headscarf, then they will threaten the shop and they close down several businesses as a result of women not wearing the headscarf. Or two days ago, there was a concert in which women took their headscarves off and they started dancing. And they turned off the lights of the concert hall. Well, these little petty tactics that have failed. And now we hear that they are bringing back the morality police. It looks different. So in the past, it was a white van with a dark green strap on the side on which it said, Gaste Ershad or the morality police. Now they're just normal white vans. They would literally pick women off the street and take them off or take even from schools, right? They would take them off and you'd have to spend a month working in a mortuary or a month doing sort of hard labour or Neanderthal punitive measures, right? Completed draconian, yes, you're absolutely right. But it has failed even before this. Some form of the morality police have always existed under the Islamic regime in Iran since 1979. It changed its name. It has evolved, but it's always been there and it has failed. And the Iranian society is now extremely angry and is ready to fight back. So yesterday, in the city of Rash in north of Iran, a number of women were being arrested and people fought back. So it quickly turned into a scene of a street fight. And a lot of people believe that the regime is taking a risk by pushing the people to a corner that they will definitely push back. If you were in Tehran now, presumably the overwhelming percentage of women would be wearing a headscarf. What would you be wearing? It depends on where which city you're at. It depends on which area of the city you're at. I would have been dressed like this if I was in Iran. No headscarf at all? No, no, no, no. And you wouldn't have felt in danger? No, because even if they stop you, a lot of women do carry a headscarf in their handbag. So you'd have something on you at all times. They have it in the handbag. And if somebody tells you to do it, they try to resist. And if they insist, they just put something over their hair. Normally they don't. So for example, my mother, who's in her 70s, she just doesn't even take it with her anymore. And I had friends who visited Iran in recent months. And at first, they were a bit scared, especially because they're dual nationals and they were scared about being arrested and getting into trouble. But after a few days, they just stopped wearing it. And how different is that to before last August? If you were in Iran before last August, before the protests, would there have been 100% compliance? Not 100%, probably 90%. And now we're looking at 50%. So this has worked then. I'm looking at what General Said Montezarol Mahdi, who's the police talking about the return of these patrols. And he's saying, as of today, police will have no other choice but to legally deal with those who are heedless of dress code. He said they'll be referred to the judiciary. So that sounds to me like he's saying, right, we're back on. You're not going to get away with it. And there's going to be a judicial process or custodial sentence. Yes. And that's true about a lot of these laws that have been imposed by the Islamic regime in Iran, but it's impossible to police it. You can't possibly have a police force on every street corner.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Another pledge broken: will Starmer face a backlash from his party?

The same is true about so many things like satellite dishes, you're not allowed to have satellite dishes, but everybody has one. And every now and then the police would raid a neighborhood, they take away your satellite dish, and within an hour, you get a dealer and they bring you another one. Most of them actually work with the police. So it's just impossible. So laws have become unenforceable. Yes. I kind of think back to East Germany and the Stasi, and that there was someone in every building that would be acting as an agent for the Stasi and telling them who was doing what in their private lives and kids made to spy on their parents. Yeah. Iran doesn't have that network or does it? There is a network of plain clothes, undercover forces, but they're not on every street corner. They're not in every house. They're often based in mosques or the poorer parts of cities. And they then get deployed to the rest of the cities when there is unrest. So politically, what does this mean, Rana? Is it enough for the large majority of Iranian people who were against the government, against the administration, say, if you just let us be at this point, we're not going to create an overthrow? Or do you think there is still the challenge to the ultimate authority of the state? There is. There is. So it's a million dollar question. The regime is still very strong and recently it signed a deal with Saudi Arabia that will give it more relief when it comes to the Iranian economy. So it's very strong, but it doesn't have popular support. But the question is, will the lack of popular support overthrow the regime? That's not going to be easy. A lot of people feel that something has to change. There is this sense that this unsustainable, there is that sense in the Iranian society that something will change at some point. It's an under-breaking point, especially given the state of the economy, over 50% inflation. So that's going to be the thing that breaks it, always, isn't it? Yes. Yes. People can't survive on 50% inflation. But then there are so many countries in which people do, but as well. Well, we just don't know is the truth. We never get to speak or hear from... What's really interesting, you're correcting me, saying I'm not sure it shows that the regime feels self-confident. The revolution has not failed. The revolution is continuing. It may be out of the headlines, and we're going to see the limit of state power by the fact that the morality police are reforming, resuming their work. Why have they brought it in there? It's a gesture, because if they give in on this, which is one of the pillars of the Islamic regime in Iran, which is the compulsory hijab, then the society will be more emboldened. They'll ask for more. They'll push for more. So they have to keep this pillar. Otherwise, if they let go of that, then they'll be in trouble. What next? But it could also show their weakness, and the limit of their power. Which it does. Yes. It's so pathetic. Even their own supporters yesterday on Twitter are saying that, did you realize that you're shooting yourself in the foot? Do you realize how angry people are? It seems that you yourself want regime change, because the way you are behaving, and just lack of judgment, and lack of vision, and lack of understanding of what people are and where they're at, you are calling for regime change. Rana, the shadow of Nazanine obviously lives long in the British mind. I mean, you talk freely about what you'd wear if you went back and how you wouldn't be that scared. Do you go back as a dual national? I am a dual national, and I haven't been back since I left Iran in 2008 to work for the BBC, and I have been one of the anchors at the Channel, and I have received so many death threats that, for the time being, it's not very wise to risk it. So you haven't seen any family there since 2000? No, I haven't. That's hard? Yes. Yes, but it's harder than being in Iran a journalist and in prison, rather than

[Transcript] The News Agents / Another pledge broken: will Starmer face a backlash from his party?

being in London a journalist and covering Iran and not being able to go. There are so many journalists inside the country that can't report them. In fact, the women who broke the story of Masa Amini last September, they have been in prison since then. Oh Lord, you're talking like somebody who's not going to go back to her home many times soon. And have your family been targeted

at all? Yes, so my parents have been interrogated, the passports have been confiscated. So they couldn't leave the country if they wanted to? For a while, so they were under travel ban for about a year. And then all of the Persian, we received Persian service, 150 people were being investigated and charges of conspiracy against national security. So there's an open case against all of us. And then my conversations with my parents last November were wiretapped by the Iranian forces, and then they edited it. They published about two and a half minutes of it, of 15 different conversations in order to put pressure on me. And then they published it and portrayed me as if I'm someone who's supporting the regime, because I was telling my mother that I'm worried about these protests and how they can turn out and they can easily turn into civil war.

By the way they edited the tape? Yes. And then I had to take two months off, I couldn't be on air, because I was just receiving so many death threats that I had to deactivate everything and just lay low for it to pass. So yes, the answer to your question, whether I'm planning to go back is no.

Well, no, I'm so sorry. Thank you for joining us.

No, thanks for telling me. Thank you. Thank you.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back. Now on The News Agents, we like to think that when we ask a politician a question, we will get something that resembles an answer rather than just going on to autopilot and just listing what your kind of pre-programmed F7, F8, F6 answer is.

Well, our colleague Sheila Fogarty from LBC has been to interview Rishi Sunak this morning at a school in East London and she tried to tackle him on the question of whether scrapping inheritance tax may be a Tory policy at the next election.

When it comes to the cost of living, you know, reports over the weekend that the Conservative Party is looking at inheritance tax, scrapping inheritance tax ahead of the next general election, people hear that and think that can possibly be a priority when I'm making decisions about how I feed my kids, whether they can go to university, all those things that we're sadly all too aware of in the cost of living crisis. How do you defend this as a priority? Well, I'm very clear about what more priorities are. I set out Pfizer them at the beginning of the year there to halve inflation. Don't just say the list. Don't say the list.

That's really important because you know them, but I don't know if all your listeners do and I want them to know what I'm focused on for them. And that's to halve inflation, grow the economy, reduce debt, cut waiting lists and stop the boats. And you know what, when all your callers can call in and parrot them back like that, then I probably will stop calling. Well, as long as you've done it. What a fascinating response. So you had a Prime Minister there unable to deal with the question he'd just been asked, which is please just confirm or deny the reports that presumably leaked to The Times, The Sunday Times over the weekend of whether you really are going to start scrapping inheritance tax, which raises many serious questions about failing social mobility and why you need to give those at the very top of the ladder a tax break, but not call it a tax break.

And the fact that Rishi Sunak has to parrot his five pledges and then has to turn it into a sort

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of competition. Can you name Rishi Sunak's five pledges? When the electric can all parrot them back to me, then I'll know I've done a good job. So just somebody who's actually not that agile. And I understand that he probably has been told by the Levitts or the Linton Crosby's of this world, you just stick to your five pledges. Don't talk about anything else. Just stick to the five pledges. Don't talk about anything else. But in the context of an interview, you can't literally be seen to not be able to even pivot to the answer of the question. I think your key word there was agility and the lack of it, because you don't even need to say, yes, it's true. No, it's not true. You could say, look, when we're coming up to a general election, we are going to consider every policy undersigned because we want to work out what is best for the British people. And we'll consider that and we'll consider a whole range of other policies. But what I've set out in my five pledges, he doesn't even make the nearest attempt to even glance at the question that Sheila has asked. And I just think that the public listening to that thing, oh, shut up, whatever the politician, whoever the politician, whatever even the policy, I mean, let's go back to the policy of inheritance tax, which would clearly be a really attractive sop to those people, presumably living in bigger houses in sort of wealthier suburbs or constituencies, and would see that as a major way of saving, you know, probably half a million pounds a million pounds, you know, of your considerable wealth. That proportion of the electorate is tiny. So the fact that Rishi Sunak is even floating something that would appeal to a very, very tiny number of people suggests that he's now looking for voters in places where he thinks even they are slipping away in the richman's, in the leafy areas of the southeast. In places where people live in very expensive houses that they may have lived in for 40 years that weren't that expensive when they bought them, but are now worth millions because of housing inflation. And therefore they have got a considerable estate to leave to children or whatever it happens to be grandchildren. There is a good intellectual argument against inheritance tax, which is that this is money you've already paid taxes on, you've had income tax, and therefore it's the state double dipping and taxing you again. But you need to make the argument, you need to be prepared to say, well, the reasons we're doing this are whatever. But to the political point, yeah, it gives the impression that the Tories have given up on the red wall, because if you wanted the red wall, maybe you'd lower the rate of income tax instead of which you're doing inheritance tax, which will help the people with the biggest, most valuable estates pass on their wealth to their children. So I will bet that this doesn't ever become a policy. But what it signals is a gentle stroke on the shoulder. I hear you, please come back to us and maybe this will happen in the future. We've already heard that Jeremy Hunt has confirmed he won't be able to cut income tax before the next election. Obviously, every Conservative Prime Minister, Chancellor, would dream of going into an election saying will be the party that cuts income tax. He can't do this. So this is essentially a tax cut tax relief for those at the very top when they can't have an actual tax cut. I don't think this will happen. And I think where she's sitting at probably knows that he won't intellectually even be able to make the case in the situation that we are for this kind of cut. But it is a way of just nodding to the people that you'd quite like to get back. But having listened to the clip, I think it is fair to say that Emily and I and you are completely none the wiser because none the wiser at all, because he didn't even seek to address it in any way, shape or form. Our least favourite interview to have on the news agents. We'll be back tomorrow. We'll see you then. Bye bye. Bye for now.