

[Transcript] The News Agents / Are ministers right to say: don't worry too much about exam results?

This is a global player original podcast
The master returns first Parkinson's the talk of BBC one
Now as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted
All you need for a talk show three guests with an interesting tale to tell one of whom can do a turn
He made it sound so simple didn't he?
Michael Parkinson there doing his first show when his show returned in 1998
Distilling the essence of what a chat show a talk show was
And when you heard that music you knew what was coming
It's been announced that Michael Parkinson has died at the age of 88
And for so many he defined what a chat show was and changed broadcasting forever
He was an important cultural figure show came on in the 1970s when I was a kid growing up in a suburban living room
And he brought the world of culture the world of music the world of arts the world of cinema
The world of theatre into everybody's room and enriched an awful lot of lives
And so on today's episode we're going to consider the cultural legacy of Parkie
Welcome to the news agents
It's John and it's Lewis and later in the show we are going to be talking about A level results dates that sort of fixed point in the calendar
But there are really interesting things about and interesting things to say and draw out from the class of 2023
Who are kind of supposed to be the return to normal i.e. they are being marked and assessed in the same way as the pre pandemic years from 2019 and before
But of course they're not that group they were caught up in those years and there are big questions about how the Westminster government in England have decided to go about it versus the rest of the UK
But we're going to start with someone who didn't go to university but who has had the most stellar extraordinary career
His dad worked down the pits in South Yorkshire it was a career that his father said you must never follow
And so Michael Parkinson became a journalist and he then tried his hand out at television
Turns out he was rather good at it and then he just had this easy avuncular style of interviewing people that he became a cultural fixed point over many decades in British life
And I think it's a big moment for British broadcasting and British culture as well
And for those thinking are they starting on this and why are they talking about this
The reason is that this is a show that is sometimes about the media because you've got two people here today but three people who obviously are in that world
And are interested in television and how it's done and Parkinson was a kind of legend of it
And someone who reinvented or invented I suppose certainly in British terms at least the chat show and how it works and that has had a legacy
And also it's an interesting thing to consider about whether or not a show like that could exist now
So for me I remember him in terms of his show coming back in the late 90s when I was a kid having been off air for a long time
Which I about which I wasn't aware and what's amazing about it is obviously it came back in exactly

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the same way right

It was like three people that he would have on and they were all proper A-listers

And in terms of the audience it got then which was huge even bigger audience in the 70s and 80s which John you'll remember

I think it's sort of hard to quite imagine actually the hold those shows had even in the 90s by comparison to today

There are successor shows like Graham Norton for example, which is a fantastic show

But at that time in the sort of pre proper pre digital age

Even when sky was a relatively sort of recent innovation in in britain in the 90s

The hold that these shows had and the hold that these channels had these cultural moments these proper cultural moments

Hard to replicate or even imagine something like that

Well, look at some overnight figures that came out today for the number of people who watched england semifinal against australia

seven million

Michael Parkinson averaged around 12 million in his heyday 12 million

Sometimes got up to 17 million. This is in the 1970s and this is when I was a kind of growing up and

Funny thing to reflect on then is obviously

You would sit around the tv as a family

There was no other option. There was no

iPads there was no laptops and there were only three channels

There was bbc one there was bbc two and there was itv and that meant actually there were very few

Famous people. I mean there was kind of more common wise and there were the two ronnie's and there were you know

I could carry on a name a dozen other but you wouldn't have thousands of zed list celebrities

Back then Michael Parkinson would have on from the world of art from the world of music from the world of theater

Just so many different people that it frankly would be easier to list

The people who didn't go on parkinson than those who did and this was your view on the world of popular culture

Yeah, and just I said, you know the start about a-listers. I mean the list is absolutely astounding

And we were thinking about which clips we were going to play

Before we started recording and honestly, I mean it's like she could fish in a barrel. I mean, yeah, we could be here all day

I mean here's just one back from when the show first came back

This is with david bowie. I think in the late 90s the rolling stones are opening up for him

It's the first time I ever saw him and they weren't really very well known

There's about six kids rushed to the front, you know, that was their fan base at the time everybody was there for little ritchard

I think bow diddly was on the

And the show and all that and it was priceless. I'd never seen anything so rebellious in my life

Some guy yells out

Get your haircut

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The mix says and I'll never forget these words

What I look like you

And the other person who's laughing there uproariously is tom hanks because you know, it's parkie

And you've got david bowie and next to him is tom hanks

I'm just saying about which clips we were going to use as well

Just on a kind of like slightly grand way

Like these shows are going to be studied in the sense that there is basically from the 1970s

Right up until the show ended in the mid 2000s, right? There is this kind of compendium

This archive of like genuinely kind of massive

Celebrity cultural sometimes historical sometimes political figures, right?

This is going to be studied and used as just a sort of archival base of some of the big figures of the late

And early 21st centuries and that was one of the things I liked about it as well

It wasn't just like celebrity fluff. There were political figures. There were kind of like more intellectual figures

Sort of cultural figures. I think that comes from the fact that he was he was a journalist, right?

I think this is why other journalists often like him or liked him is that it wasn't just again

And that kind of american style celebrity fluff, you know, you come in you kind of do pr

And you're just there to us to have a good time

You could always see with him. I think that he considered himself a journalist and there was a sort of line of journalistic inquiry

He was trying to find out something and reveal something about that person

And that certainly sometimes probably led to a little bit of irascibility

In a way that it wasn't just about you coming in and doing your pr and getting your celebrity fluff out there

Well, if we're going to talk about discomfort, let's come to meg ryan

She went on the show meg ryan star of when harry mc sally and you've got mail. Yeah, exactly

Oh since the apple exactly. This is her

on a chat show

Where the chat show host is kind of provocative. Yes, you are worried journalists. You're worried of me

You're worried of the interview. You don't like being interviewed. You can see it's in the way that you you sit and the way you are

That's you don't like, don't you?

So so therefore, well, I mean certainly perfectly easy question

a decent way to ask you about being a journalist. I mean

In other words, if you were me, what would you do now?

Well, just wrap it up

Yeah, and I think it's also great to say that again, and this is why yeah again that sort of tv geek in me

loves to watch this stuff because

You can also see like changing cultural mores, right? Like michael bargains was born in 1935

It was a long life and the 1970s

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and 1980s which in a way we feel of as being quite close like it's far closer to the second world war Than it is to us. He took national service. Yeah, exactly and his father was almost would have been victorian when he was born

In fact, he probably was

So you can see those sort of changing cultural mores and values and probably the most famous example of that, right?

Is the hella merrin interview from the 70s, which I think it's fair to say you wouldn't get away with today

Your physical attributes which people always gone about

Um hinder you in your pursuit of the ambition of being a successful actress or a serious actress

Because serious actresses can't have big bosoms. Is that what you mean? Yeah, it would be unthinkable

for graham norton to pass comment on the physical attributes of

An actress when you're talking about her breasts

Do you think the chat show is still extant in that way that's still going in that way?

Do you think it's still

Matters in a way because I mean it wasn't just parkinson, right? You had wogan in the 80s as well, right?

I think that was on three times a week at one point. I mean amazing really. I mean the norton show is fantastic

I mean, he's he's brilliant at it and it's a

Inherit some of that parkinson kind of

Format as we were saying and if you look at the american format, it's completely different

So if you look at jimmy kimmel fallon, steven colbert

They bring one guest on at a time and it was only when james cordon

Went over to the states and did the late late show on cbs

That you would have guests interacting with each other and having that sense of sort of slight jeopardy

And I remember on parkinson some of the conversations. I've got a memory and I don't know whether it's accurate or not

but I think it was

jimmy reid

communist trade union leader

And kenneth williams carry on actor

Having this fantastically serious political conversation about the role of the state now that wasn't like entertainment

But it was kind of a really proper serious conversation taking place

About some of the big issues about freedom and liberty and all the rest of it

And I think that that parkinson brought all of that

As well as all the gloss of the kind of most famous jazz pianist oscar peterson or whoever it happened to be

Into the show at one time

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Yeah, it was quite a more rarefied mix of kind of intellectual stuff and and celebrity stuff, right? But I think in a way
Probably you couldn't do it now for another reason, right? Which is that look back then
I suppose these people only had shows like this to really access people, right?
This was the way of promoting their book or promoting their movie or whatever it happened to be their show
Like that isn't true now. So now I suppose if you're a pr
Sort of thinking about what's the kind of risk of this?
What is my client going to get out of this and are they going to enjoy it or not?
Basically, if it's not like actually they're not going to have a great time
They want to ensure that there's no jeopardy
There's not much point in them doing it because they have got access to their own digital channels
They can communicate directly to their fans, right?
So I think it's hard to imagine a synthesis of a show like that in quite the same way of being quite robust
Plus celebrity plus the audience it is kind of in a way that format is kind of a bit of a bygone age now
It's from a bygone age. Yeah, and look Graham Norton does an absolutely spectacular job
And he's a brilliant interviewer, but he doesn't get quite into the awkwardness of
Some of the things that he says he's not about that. Yeah, exactly
He wants the people there to have a good time and we enjoy it for that if you're the PR
For a star who is a bit awkward or kind of suspicious or whatever
You've got myriad other opportunities in which you can promote and project that particular
Person in a much more controlled environment. That is also just fine
I think that is we're talking about kind of what's in it for celebrities the risk
Of saying something that they ought not to say or going somewhere that's a bit subversive as Conley was deeply subversive
Is so much higher and you can see this playing out for example in stand-up comedy who are always staples of these shows
Like stand-up comedians
You're seeing that play out in the comedy world right now and the kind of potential
For people just drawing back a little bit from the line being cancelled fear
Yeah, potentially. I mean like there's a sort of big there's a question mark about that culture and that term
But yeah, the risk is higher
And so I think you know all of those components taken together mean that shows like that to be as compelling as they were then
It is just that much harder in a moment
We're going to be talking about universities and a level results day as I said at the start of the show
But we thought before we do we just leave you with this one clip
Which is a really
Lovely extraordinary clip of George Michael when the show came back with Parkinson in the late 90s talking about
How much he had always wanted to be on the show and that the show itself had sort of created its

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own world

An own dynamic where people had watched as a kid ended up
Going on the show and then thinking that they'd made it. So here is the late great George Michael
That this is a great honor for me because I I can remember
Being I don't know eight or nine years old
And my mum would allow me to stay up
Beyond a certain time in the evening only to watch the Parkinson show
It would be a with a quality watching. So I'm very very privileged to be here. Well, that's very very
kind of you
very kind of you that's good to have you and uh
She probably wouldn't have been quite as
Quite as thrilled that I had to take my willy out to get on here
This is the news agents
Welcome back if you are 18
And you have had a sleepless night
If you are the parents of the 18 year old and you've also been tossing and turning waiting for a level
results and what it will mean
I hope it's all turned out nice. I hope you've got the grades you wanted
I hope you're going off to whichever academic institution it is to do whatever it is
You've dreamt of doing
But as we know
This time round
The proportion of a or a star grades
Is 27.2 percent down from the pandemic peak
Of 44.8 percent a very large number of people getting a and a star grades because of course
They were being assessed by their teachers and not subjecting themselves to the rigors of the exam
hall
This whole cohort of students both from the pandemic year in 2020, 2021, 22 and now 23
I mean they are perhaps unarguably the unluckiest cohorts of students that we've seen
And you could argue perhaps that this one is the least lucky even of all of them
Because they too of course missed out on crucial education
Leading up to their GCSEs. They didn't sit their GCSEs
These exams were the first sort of proper exams that they've ever taken like imagine that
I mean like you know when I was the equivalent of their age part because we had modular exams
and all of these sorts of things
I'd done so many exams. It was so normal
This group hasn't and crucially as well the government in England
Decided to early on on this to move the way that they are assessed in terms of the
Distribution to grade boundaries that they'd need how tough the exams were how much kind of
Bandwidth they would have to make mistakes. They decided to move that back to the 2019
distribution list
i.e
It was harder to do as well in these exams than it was for the previous couple of years despite the

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fact that again

These kids even though they haven't missed out on their immediate

A-level period have missed out on much of the education leading up to that point

That is not a decision that the government in wales have taken or indeed in scotland norden island

that we don't have those grades yet

And you can see in terms of the grade distribution between england and wales

The fact that higher grades are being awarded in wales by comparisons england

So you can see in terms of the different approach the different set of results that has yielded

And what is so interesting has been the reaction

of the education secretary

and the prime minister

To these results, which is sort of saying

Don't worry. It doesn't matter if you don't do that. Well, if it doesn't matter whether you don't do that well

Then why do we why are we bothering with A-levels?

If we don't think that that's an important barometer an important benchmark against which you measure the progress

of a child's education

Then why go ahead with these the torture of A-levels? Yeah, I think this is really interesting

Jeremy Clarkson has done his now traditional tweet of the year

Which is every A-level results day. He tweets some variant of I got to use or whatever it was and look at me now

Which I think he did want seriously

And I think he now does because he knows he knows everyone it's triggering

It's like a sort of troll event

And lots of people it winds people up because people say well, yeah, that was all right for you

But you know, you were privileged or whatever and look at you now and not everyone can be like you

Which I'm sure he knows but as you say he's just doing it because it's it's sort of vaguely triggering

But sunak also tweeted something along the lines of you know, this is this is important

But it's not the end of the world if you haven't done well

And that's kind of what keegan and say and on one level like that's quite a nice thing to say

It is reflective of a truth

Which is that these exams will not determine your whole life outcomes keegan is right in one sense

Which is that you know, I can't remember the last time I got asked about my A-level results or degrees and things do move on

But of course there is a slight tension

In a prime minister or an education secretary saying that because not least because you could argue

Well, the signal at that sending to future kids is well, you don't need to worry too much

Secondly, well, let's be honest. Can you imagine what rishi sunak was like on his A-level results day?

I doubt rishi sunak was going up to winchester college hall or whatever assembly hall and coming out and going

You know what? I'm not too bothered about all this. Yeah

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Whatever

I'll be fine

I'll live on because you know

Actually, we know that like the wealthiest parents are the most middle-class parents or whatever

They're the ones who are particularly exacting and we can see from these results by the way

And you don't spend 40,000 50,000 pounds a year

To have manners maketh man, which is the which is the school motto

And then to flunk your bloody A-levels and don't get into university

Well, quite exactly and they would be the ones most disappointed of all and we can see from these results that

There is already disparity further disparity the worst for the last 10 years

Between the outcomes for those for most deprived areas and for the more affluent areas and regions

So that's a problem and the other thing about it is that look if it's the case

That exams actually don't matter too much

It's kind of a bit contradictory when you consider the position of the prime minister of education secretary

Is that exams are the thing or the best way of measuring attainment?

In fact under this government

We have moved from a situation where there were other forms of assessment like coursework for example

Which many people argue are actually more effective and allow you to take a more rounded

Assessments of an individual's ability back to a system where literally your entire set of attainment outcomes is measured on one single day

So if exams don't matter too much then why do we use them to measure children's attainment and determine their

Futures at least for the next few years. It's also disingenuous in one other sense

And that is that look, you know, I can't even barely remember what my A-level results were

You know, it was a long time ago. It would work for you something like that. Yeah

Carpentry and technical drawing and no one gets asked now in your career

What your A-level results are and 10 years on it's true. You won't be asked

But for the next year for the next three years when you're trying to get on your

University course when you're trying to put together your CV, which you're going to send off to your first employer

Then yeah, it does matter. So don't kind of say, oh, well, you'll be fine

Don't worry, of course

Opens the next door that you've got to pass through on your journey through life

And for the next, you know, five years a kid is 18 years old and gets their A-level results

Yes, those A-level results do matter because they are the benchmark against which you're going to be judged

And of course there are more and more young people entirely legitimately starting to wonder and asking

Whether or not in terms of the next steps of higher education if that's what they're going into and of course

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We should say this is not all about A-levels all sorts of different results coming today T levels whole suite of technical educations
It doesn't all lead to sort of traditional academic Qualifications and universities
But for those that are there are many increasingly asking is it worth it?
Is it worth the enormous debt we've covered on this show before the fact that we don't really have a student loan system
We have a de facto graduate tax which means you'll be paying it off for the next 30 years big proportion of your
Income paying it off and also in terms of whether it's leading or not to other employment opportunities
And we even heard from the prime minister very recently
Didn't use this phrase
But there was all this talk in the press about mickey mouse degrees clamping down on degrees that don't yield very much
In terms of post-employment opportunities
And we've got the background again, which we covered what last week
Which is this marking boycott and wave after wave of industrial action in universities
Which means that frankly
The service that you get and the quality of education that you get in any particular HE institution
Is depending on where you're going potentially questionable. This is adan
He is a newsagents listener hurrah, and he's just got his A-levels
I'm seriously considering not enrolling in the university due to the costs of the grievance with it
And I've been offered to study social policy with politics here at London school of economics
It's going to leave me with around 64 000 pounds of debt
Which due to the loan system and the interest rates, I'm likely never going to pay off
Hence the conflict over enrolling the reality is is going to be a struggle to complete the degree
The cost of living is extortionately high
My hall costs are going to be 10 000 pounds a year
Which is only going to leave me with 2000 pounds from the loan system
Which is going to have to leave me into working part time, which I'm happy to do
But the issue is is the amount of hours I'm going to have to work to get through it
Which is going to inhibit
Any real chance of me gaining a two one or a first
Which is like essential to getting a decent graduate and succeeding. Yeah, and that's if it's even marked
Which as we were discussing last week is not actually a certainty at the moment
And I suppose this is to link back to what we were saying about what keegan and to a lesser extent
Soon that we're saying I suppose in a way
This is what I slightly worry about with this discourse of oh, don't worry and also
Oh, actually, you know, maybe academic universities and not everything don't worry about it
I worry at the moment that there are so many bloody reasons for young people
Particularly young people maybe from disadvantaged backgrounds not to sign up and go to

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university. They are huge problems around costs
There's industrial action, which might put them off
There are messages and signals that they're getting potentially from politicians, which is well, maybe it's not worth it anymore
And even oh well, don't worry too much even about your exam grades
and we know for a fact that for
a small but not inconsiderable group of disadvantaged young people
That this will be their ticket to social mobility, which is something that politicians always talk about
So I really worry about these signals that are being sent out because let's be honest
We all know that for so many of those politicians if they're kids with the ones who turn around to them and said I'm actually
Prime minister, I'm sure she's doing that doesn't insist his kids call him prime minister
But you know, actually I'm thinking about not going to university
Their reaction would be no, you bloody well are
So this is the problem. This is a debate that often is is laced with a little bit of hypocrisy
Very often politicians are talking about other people's kids and I don't like it
Well, let us hear now from Chris husbands. He is the vice-chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University
and thanks so much
For joining us. I just wonder kind of what the phone calls have been like coming in from
A-level kids who you know may not have got the grades that they needed to to get on the course they wanted
Yeah, it's it's tougher than it has been last year and the key that decision here is the government decided that it would move
Pretty rapidly back to a 2019 grade distribution
So the consequence of that is that grades are lower than they were last year
And a significant number of students have probably undershot their grades
So our call volumes are up by about 40% on last year. So it's been a busy day for us
But today's the day when you think about individuals, it's a tough day for individuals
And just very quickly if you've got so many students who are not meeting their grades
Does that mean you're going to lower
What you demand to let people into the university? You can say one or two decisions here
You can either say we're going to hold the grades in which case numbers will fall a bit
Or you can say
Given that these grades are sort of lower for this probably the same level of attainment than they were last year
We'll be prepared to moderate the grades and we've taken the latter view
Because we think that's fairer to this generation of kids
But I suspect that not all universities have acted in the same way
Do you think that the government moved too quickly to move back to the 2019 distribution?
So my personal view is yes, they did and the other bit of to play into this is that they by and large decided to
not take the advice of the
Sir Kevin Collins the

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Education recoveries are who recommended significant additional spending to remediate the lost learning of the pandemic years

So you've got a generation of kids the kids who are doing their A levels today. They didn't do their GCSEs two years ago

They've not had that sort of routine practice in doing exams that every other generation since time immemorial has had

So I think government has moved back a bit too quickly. They could have done this over three four years

There's only over two years a bit last year and a bit this year

Well, let me put to you a point we spoke to the university lectures union last week

Yeah, furious at vice chance. There's furious at the row that's going on

And feel that they have been let down and that's why they've been forced to take the action of stopping marking people's papers

I mean going through university

Occuring those debts that you've just been talking about and then not getting a grade at the end of it

I mean, why would you bother? Okay? I I saw part of that interview last week

I'm really happy to answer that question a couple of the background bits of information that I think are relevant

So does the undergraduate student fee was set at 9 000 in 2012? It's risen once to 9 250 in 2017

It's now worth about two thirds of its value

Of its 2012 value. So there's a really tight cash squeeze on higher education

I'm really sympathetic to the position of staff who've seen their pay eroded for us

It's very simple. If you've got fixed prices and rising costs, you've got to make some really really tough choices

So I'm very very sympathetic to the overarching position on pay

Which is pretty similar to pay across the wider public sector. But look, it's not a good look for the sector

It's not a good experience for students

I would be incredibly happy if we got to a position where we could put

What has now been five years of industrial action behind us because it's just

deeply deeply challenging for everybody involved

The argument was made by Joe Grady that there are the reserves there

To pay the lecturers and to take them off these zero hours contracts and the like

So that they could have a better lifestyle

Yeah, uh, I've heard Joe Grady say that

There are some universities that got very extensive reserves and there are reserves across the sector

But they're very very unevenly distributed. Most of the reserves are sitting in four or five institutions for the majority of the sector

We are caught in a vice between fixed prices and rising costs

And that is a real challenge for us

We are we are desperately keen to be as good an employer as we possibly can be

That means preserving jobs. That means helping our stuff to

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Where we can on cost of living issues

But but the economics of this are pretty brutal with fixed costs and rising prices

It's a really difficult situation. Well, except Chris the UC you say that the sector overall has 40 billion in reserves

Okay, you say that that is concentrated among certain institutions fine

But maybe then there needs to be a mechanism of redistribution of some sort and indeed they say that 150 of you the vice chance

took home 45 million in salaries

I mean you will understand that lots of lecturers who are getting by on what can be with the cost of living pretty paltry salaries

Particularly junior lecturers will find it pretty galling to hear from vice chancellors talking to them about tough decisions given that context

So I always play my own experience into this. I was offered a salary in 2015. That's not increased.

I've not taken any increases

I've won't take any increases. That's that's always been my my position and and I do take a personal position on pay

In relation to what I think I can look my stuff in the eye and defend

So I take that these are my colleagues run really big institutions

I've got an institution of 40 000 people 36 000 students four and a half thousand staff

These are big and complicated jobs

Just wanted to ask you for your reaction in terms of some of the rhetoric and some of the ways that ministers

Including the prime minister have been talking about two things number one

Today we're seeing the education secretary and the prime minister

Basically saying that you know congratulations on your results

But ultimately these things don't matter very much in the long run in terms of a levels

You know the education secretary today saying you know people won't ask you about them in 10 years time and someone

And also something that the prime minister was talking about a couple of weeks ago

Which he didn't use this phrase but the media wrote it up about concern around Mickey Mouse degrees degrees that ultimately aren't worth very much

To individual students. What's your reaction to those things? The economy is changing

So we are offering degrees in subjects that a generation ago did not exist

Games design pretty high level computer programming data science health analytics

The world is changing and degrees that might look

slightly different to one generation have enormous credibility in the future economy and we need we need to remember that

I'm pretty disappointed to be honest the secretary of state chose today to say your exam results don't matter

Yeah, you got hundreds of thousands of kids getting exam results after hard work

It's not the time to say it and the noise from a couple of weeks ago when the government said talked to universities about ripoff degrees

The level of fees was set by government in 2012 by this government

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If we're going to have a debate about the value and the price about the relationship between the costs and benefits

Let's have a serious conversation between government and the sector and society

About what we want from our higher education system and how collectively we're going to pay for it

There's a really good process going on australia at the moment where the government is actively asking that question

It says over the next 15 years nine out of ten jobs in australia are going to require higher level skills

What do we want from our universities? How do we pay for it? That's the debate we need to have in this country

Chris, thank you so much. Sir Chris. Thank you pleasure and we will be back in a moment to raise some of these questions

With the former university's minister one joe johnson

This is the news agents

Welcome back. So we are joined now by joe johnson lord joe johnson, of course in the house of laws

And he was formerly a university's minister and junior minister in other departments as well. Um

Joe, what do you make of the results today? Do they broadly what you expected and the return to the 2019-ish grade distribution?

Yeah, it's been well flagged that this would be a tough year in terms of those expecting to get the highest grades

um, there's clearly been a

Return to the old pre-pandemic rate of people getting a stars and a's and that would have been tough for a very large number of

People who've been through a really grueling period in their school years

Did you think that was fair looking back now? I mean, these are difficult decisions

I personally would have preferred a slightly smoother curve than the let's do it all in two jumps

Which is what the government has basically done to do it all in two jumps

Especially when these two years of students have experienced themselves such a tough time

Didn't sit there gcse's

They did sit them, but they would they often um, you know did so under very difficult conditions

I think that was tough. So I personally would have been more comfortable with a slightly

Softer gradient back to the old normal than we've done

It's been brutal, but I can see why the government wanted to crack on and do it

That's uh, it's been tough for this particular cohort really tough

You've got the situation now where if you're on one side of the the english side of the m4

Your a levels have been tougher

In terms of marking and if you're on the welsh side of the m4, it's a bit easier because they're not going so fast

Isn't that intrinsically unfair that you could have you know

Well students getting into universities because their grades have been marked more leniently

Then you will have on the english side

Yeah, it's possible at the margin that there'll be a few cases where english a level students will have lost out

On that basis, but I think the numbers in practice will be very small

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We do increasingly in the united kingdom have four quite different he systems

It's a devolved policy area as you know

So the systems are diverging and and and those sorts of frictions are examples of that

And we've also had the messaging from the education secretary and the prime minister to some extent say, ah a levels

They don't matter that much, you know life goes on anyway, which of course it does

But then what's the point of having a levels if they don't matter that much?

I think they do matter a a levels obviously really important if you if you want to go down that academic path that leads you to university

There are other paths to go down and that's what I think what the government's trying to get at in saying listen

You can do t levels. You can do vocational technical qualifications

And advanced levels of apprenticeships

Um, so I think the government wants to get out of this idea that it's a levels or nothing

University or broke and that's been a consistent theme of government policy for you know a number of years now

How many of the kids of senior ministers do you think will not go down that academic route?

Yeah, vanishingly small

Proportion I would have thought but you know, I haven't got the fine data. That's one field research

Sure, but that's interesting isn't it because those paths are great and legitimate and people should go down them

But it's just interesting that so few children of senior ministers will ever do so you can sort of see why

There may be a little bit of discrepancy between their rhetoric

And actually what in practice they themselves might think of them by the fact that none of the their own kids go down that route

Yeah, I think the crucial thing is that we get more opportunities and clear pathways into those uh routes in particularly into the apprenticeship route

So the reality is at the moment, there are a relatively small number of opportunities to pursue

Apprenticeships and so if you want to go down that road, it's hard to find an apprenticeship

That's going to be right for you and that's really what's got to change is that you know within the school system

We've got to have much clearer careers advice and guidance

Um to young people and more opportunities generated in the system not just by employers

But in other ways said they said that there are more opportunities for people to go down those paths

We had a voice note from a guy who's just got his A levels

He's got a place at the LSE and he's wondering do I really want to go because i'm going to incur such

Enormous levels of debt. It's going to be with me for ages

I mean he didn't say this on the voice note and he might get to the end and his exams might not get marked

Yeah, no university

You know, it's obviously not right for everybody but overall on average

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It delivers strong returns to people who pursue higher education
Our economy needs people with the skills that you acquire in higher education
In abundance and that's reflected in the post graduation wage returns, which you get on your degree
On average, you're going to be you know, a couple of hundred thousand pounds better off over your
lifetime with a degree than than without
Compared to someone with the same 18 year old
Qualifications who didn't go to university. So there are still strong positive returns to higher
education. Can you tell me what a mickey mouse degree is?
marsupial studies
It's the term given to courses which are seen to be offering
Low value to the student and to the taxpayer that underwrites them
But define one. I understand the concept, but I just don't know what the course is
I guess in the government's mind
It's a course with very high dropout rates, right? So where a student is enrolled by an institution
But then drops out after year one or at some point quite early on in their studies
Saddled with a bit of debt because they haven't progressed very far
And haven't got anything to show for it
That I think is in the government's imagination sort of the quintessential case of bad value for money
An institution which is recruiting
Somewhat recklessly students who aren't equipped to benefit from their course and drop out. Name
me one of those courses
That's not too difficult
I mean you go to the office of students website and you sort
Courses and institutions by dropout rate and you identify those courses
Which are delivering dropout rates of sort of in excess of 30 and that's all easily done on the ofs
database
It's publicly available information. There is always inevitably on a level results day
One of the kind of bits of the discourse that gets rehearsed every year and we hear it sometimes
from
Conservatives MPs or occasionally from government ministers is this idea
Certainly in the papers too many people go to university too many young people go to university
today. Do you think that's true?
No, I sort of on a on a macro level. No
It's curious because we're constantly told we need a more
Higher skilled
Workforce and so on and yet this thing comes up again
We actually saw a slight decline in the proportion of 18 year olds going into he this year versus last
year
And I think if you look around the world at the most highly performing knowledge economies
Japan, South Korea, Canada, Israel
They have proportions going into tertiary education that are far higher than ours in the 60s 70s
Percents
So, you know, I don't think anybody can seriously argue that a shortcut to higher productivity for the

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UK

It's going to come through

lower average levels of educational attainment

And I don't think anybody seriously is going to argue that and you mentioned at the very beginning

The reference to the fact that this cohort or this collection of year groups have had a particularly difficult time

Do you regret that when Rishi Sunak was chancellor that he rejected?

The recommendation from Sir Kevin Collins who had

Come up with a plan and a figure that he thought was necessary for catch-up learning and that we're now not doing

Yeah, look, I mean that figure collided with the reality of real hard fiscal constraints on the government

And I do understand that choices need to be made, you know, all manner of expert bodies want more for their particular

Part of our

Yeah, indeed

It would have been wonderful if the government had been able to write that check to support those recommendations

Well, it could have done they could have done but they could have done but it would have meant

Would have meant very difficult choices elsewhere in public spending or much higher taxes or borrowing

So, you know, there are those tough choices to be made and I understand where the government wasn't able to

To meet them in full

Before you go

Can I just ask how your brother's doing getting used to the new life? I think you follow him on instagram or

John, you probably get a quicker a quicker insight than than I can offer

Have you spoken to him recently? How is he enjoying life?

Very much so but I mean look, he's he's uh, you can reach him yourself john get him on get him on the phone

He's having trouble with the newts, isn't he?

Newts in the swimming pool. So so I read so I read did you just have interest?

Did you regret the way that he left parliament? Did you agree with him that it was a witch hunt?

Look, it's water under the bridge. It's not. It's a very recent water under the bridge joe

It only happened a few months ago. I think he's bad

He's but he's the best place Lewis to speak for himself on all of these issues like he doesn't want me commenting for him

No, but we do

It's so annoying, isn't it? We've tried to tempt you. We've tried to lure you out. You're not going to have any of it

Are you? No, I'm not I'm the line the least qualified person to comment

I don't think so, but anyway show johnson. Thank you very much. Thank you very much. Thanks

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guys. Thank you good

Right, we are going to be back tomorrow. I will be back tomorrow. Lewis google me goodl. We'll be back

Honestly, you're dead to me. You're dead to me

Almost dead to me is my best man

Bye. Bye

This has been a global player original podcast and a persophonica production