

[Transcript] The News Agents / Child grooming, 'political correctness' and dog whistle politics

We're going to talk about child grooming today. It's a really uncomfortable subject, and the conviction rates for it in this country are shockingly low. But we're talking about it specifically because our Prime Minister has pledged that political correctness about ethnicity won't get in the way of a crackdown on grooming gangs. And he spelled out what he means, which is specifically grooming gangs of British Pakistani origin, which he, his government believes is at the heart of most of this crime.

So how does this make you feel? Obviously, anyone in their right minds wants the people behind grooming gangs to be put on trial and if found guilty to go to prison for a very long time. But when you inject the words political correctness into it, is that a bit of a dog whistle? Are you politicising something that should be purely a matter of criminal justice and what is the best way to get people behind bars who have done wrong?

So is it better to call it out if that's what the data is telling us and we'll come back to that data in a moment? Or is Tory policy now being made by Tommy Robinson and the English Defence League, who've been on about this since the Rotherham scandal over ten years ago? Welcome to the news agents.

The news agents.

It's John.

It's Emily.

And we are at news agents HQ. Rotchdale, Rotherham, Telford. They all have something in common for all the wrong reasons, which is the terrible stories of grooming gangs, abusing, raping, young, vulnerable girls, often in care, that has led to something today where you've had the Prime Minister and Home Secretary talking about how there has to be a fight back about the political correctness that has prevented the government going after grooming gangs. But why now? Why has this taken so long when the Conservatives have been in power for 13 years and some of these cases that we're talking about were 10, 11 years ago? And by using the phrase political correctness as the reason why this hasn't happened in the past, are you trying to make this too political when what is at stake is something so fundamental to law and order?

So this morning, Rishi Sunak gave a pool interview. In other words, he said one thing to one reporter that everyone else can carry. And this is what he had to say about that whole question of his words, political correctness and grooming gangs.

Well, we've had inquiries, independent inquiries into the incidences at Rotchdale, Rotherham, Telford. It is clear that when victims or whistleblowers raise concerns with people, those concerns were ignored. And often the reasons that they were ignored were put down to people wanting to be not culturally insensitive or because of political correctness. So that's not right.

So that was the Prime Minister speaking in Rotchdale this morning. And today on the news agents, we want to try and get a really honest nuanced debate or understanding about what is going on. Why were those police failures so bad 11, 12 years ago in Rotherham, in Rotchdale? And does calling it out, in his words, make things better? Or is it just a kind of dog whistle to tell your supporters that you're on their side?

We're going to talk to a professor at UCL, first of all. She's an associate professor who has studied child grooming very extensively. And she talks about her concerns over the

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inconsistency of the data that we actually have. It doesn't really add up anyway.

Sajid Javid, when he was Home Secretary, commissioned the Home Office to do a piece of research around

ethnicity in so-called grooming gangs. And that was released in late 2020. And what it found was two things. One, that the majority of offenders are white British. And yes, you might well expect that given the demographics of the country. And that's why the second finding is so important. And that is that there was no credible nationally representative evidence of overrepresentation of any particular ethnic group within so-called grooming gangs. So that was Ella Cobain there from UCL, talking about how the statistics, the numbers are much more complicated than just a simple, dare I say it, black and white headline that the people responsible for all of this are British Pakistanis. Because Suella Braverman yesterday, when she spoke to Sky News, she talked about how almost all of these incidents were carried out by British Pakistanis who hold cultural attitudes completely incompatible with British values. So the way it was framed was that this was a Pakistani problem and white girls. And what the academic research seems to be saying is actually it is an awful lot more complicated than that.

And we've been looking at a Home Office report that was commissioned in 2020 that actually uses data that was nearly a decade old. And its specifications of what constitutes Asian or what constitutes British or what constitutes white is very confused. And the numbers aren't very large. And actually, you can take from that report virtually any headline you want, which is why we wanted to just try and ask a little bit more thoroughly what the numbers were telling us or couldn't tell us.

And we're going to go straight now to the Labour MP, Jess Phillips, who is Labour Party spokesperson on equality and children's issues and women. Jess Phillips, thank you very much indeed for being with us. I've seen a long thread that you have put out on Twitter about this issue where you seem to argue fine to have these ambitions, but the failure that there has been is about the criminal justice system and offering support to victims. So do you think that what Rishi Sunak has announced today changes anything?

No, absolutely not. I think that what Rishi Sunak announced today is largely what many people have been calling for for over a decade, actually, and without actual support for victims put in place will make absolutely no difference. The major error that the government seem to be making today in their announcements is not looking at the systems that they're in charge of, that they're getting wrong, because the reality is that all these victims of grooming currently have to go through the home office system of the national referral mechanism, which currently takes most victims over 550 days to be even told they're a victim. And if they're a British victim rather than a modern slave from another country, they cannot access any housing support or any of the same support that they might get if you were to be put into a refuge. There is no safe housing. So in the cases that I've handled, which I'll handle immediately after this interview, ironically, I have nowhere to place these people and nowhere. So when they come forward, there's no safety for them.

So Jess, this should be music to your ears then. If you hear Rishi Sunak talking about a new task force made up of officers with extensive experience of grooming gang investigation and providing crucial support, as you've said, if you called for it 10 years ago, you should

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presumably be saying, great, it's here now.

Oh, absolutely. I want to see a nationwide task force that deals with grooming. However, what it will be doing is dealing with grooming within the what we call the public protection unit within police forces, which if you read the Casey review, you will see that regardless of the fact that home secretary after home secretary and prime minister after prime minister has stood in front of, you know, whatever lectern it is with whatever slogan they've got on it this week and told us that they're prioritising violence against women and girls. Actually, what the Casey review found was that public protection has not been prioritised. It's been defunded across the board. And so, yes, a small task force that is going to go in and help what is a broken system in almost every single police force in the country. It will do something. And mandatory reporting is something that we've been calling for for over a decade. So I'm pleased. But actually, what Rishi Sunak is focusing on here is the headline rather than the front line. And I'm afraid to say that the home secretary and Rishi Sunak, unlike myself, have absolutely no idea of the reality on the front line of young girls propping out of the system, expecting less than like, you know, 2% of their charges to be taken, dropping out because they're not safe in the system. And I have to walk around the country knowing what I know about some of these groomers being completely free to walk around amongst all of our children. It is horrifying the situation as it is today. Does Labour have a problem with the government calling out the ethnicity of these gangs, of groomers? Is that a helpful thing to do if you actually know who you're going after and you're not scared to do it?

Oh, look, you know, I'm absolutely not scared to go after groomers regardless of the ethnicity. And I have taken part in supporting victims. I'm currently doing it of some of the classic grooming gangs that Suella Braverman likes to focus on the idea of it being exclusively Pakistani men. What I think is dangerous from what Suella Braverman has said is to underestimate, for example, the idea that black and Asian girls can also be victims of grooming and certainly are not being spoken to by these particular women.

So you're not denying that there may be predominantly a larger problem with British Pakistani men?

No, there isn't a larger problem. In fact, the majority of cases of sexual abuse and grooming that I come across are largely actually peer on peer and all the data would show you that from decades gone by. I'm absolutely, I don't agree that most of these cases are that and it's not whether I agree with it or not. I'm certainly not too afraid to challenge it when it does have that profile. I'm absolutely fine with that. What I am against doing is saying that that's the only issue. Last week in Bolton, there were 10 men arrested for child sexual grooming. Not one of them fits the profile that Suella Braverman is talking about today. Lots of the girls in Brotherton and Rochdale, for example, were not white. I think lots of the victims in lots of the different places have come forward and said, well, actually, this doesn't speak about me because I'm multi-ethnic. So we have to be very, very careful. What I would like is the Home Office to collect any data on any of this. We've been asking for data collection on the ethnicity, the immigration status of victims of all these crimes, as well as perpetrators for decades. The Home Office doesn't collect data on anything. It's useless.

So why do you think that Suella Braverman then comes out and says something like, the

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British Pakistanis, they hold cultural attitudes completely incompatible with British values? Oh, I don't know why Suella Braverman does anything. She doesn't know what she's talking about nine times out of 10. She certainly doesn't know anything about her own department. She did. She might have sorted out the massive delay in making girls who've been groomed for sex wait for so long. I can't speak for why Suella Braverman says anything. I mean, I think she's probably chasing headlines rather than dealing with the front line, which is the only thing her department is capable of. All it does is release statements. It doesn't actually do any of the work on the ground that's going to solve any of this.

So if this is not about a long-term solution, I mean, look, we've got local councillors elections coming up. You want to create the best political environment you can in those Redwall constituencies, Rochdale, Rotherham, all those sort of places. Do you think this is more about some dog whistle politics to get the Tory base out? I mean, what is it? Well, I just think it's a government in the last row is not having done nothing for the past 13 years to tackle this particular crisis, wanting to get headlines. Look, I can't speak for why the Conservatives behave in a certain way. What I would want to say is that the Labour Party, I've spent the last year, I have personally spent the last year working with partners and victims of grooming, which I will do again today and every other day to find out what is stopping us prosecuting these groomers, what is stopping the victims coming forward. And the Labour Party has been working on policy around that for the last year. This is the actual work. This is the actual work. I'm not interested in the headlines. I'm not interested in being popular and more retweeted. But when you look back at the failure over Rotherham, what you hear is the government saying, spelling out that the police were too scared to prosecute because of ethnic questions of the perpetrators. Yeah, well, that's disgusting. You accept that? Yeah, of course, 100% accept that. And that's disgusting. That's absolutely despicable. And that should never, ever, ever come into it. So he's right. I mean, from that perspective, yeah, you can call it chasing the headlines. But fundamentally, Rishi Sunak is right then to say, hang on a second, if that was stopping police from prosecuting when they should have been holding these people to account, then we've got to get over that. He's right.

But I mean, he, Rishi Sunak is from the government that's been in charge for 13 years. What has he done about it? He's done absolutely nothing about it. Women are routinely still, especially working class women, routinely not believed by police forces across the country. How many reviews do I have to see? What has Rishi Sunak done about the standards in policing in this? But if his message now is to the police forces, you'd say, great. Thank God, right? You'd say yes.

I think he's arguing a 10 year ago case for the situation we face now. This and these grooming gangs of all different types still exist today. In fact, if you read the independent sexual child abuse inquiry, what it says is it's worse today than it was in the days of Rochdale and Rotherham. It's got worse. That's the thing he should be focusing on. I don't care if it's your claiming cultural background for the abuses that you have against women. I will come for you regardless. I do not care. I have no truck with it whatsoever. So that's why I've worked, for example, with Sammy Woodhouse, one of the Rotherham victims, to try and say that rapists, for example, in cases of grooming, should never be able to have access to their

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children. Like in her case, that happened. We tried to pass that law five years ago. It's still not even in the government's victims bill that they put forward. Funnily enough, the things that the government are saying they're going to do today, they didn't put in their own victims bill. Anyone would think that that might be because they're chasing headlines rather than getting on with legislating about mandatory reporting. Why isn't it in the victims bill? Why isn't it there? Maybe I'll lay an amendment to the victims bill and maybe the government then will have to vote for a Labour amendment for the thing they're saying they care about. Where are they? They're nowhere to be seen on this. In my office today, I will see victim after victim. I will speak to them all day tomorrow. I will be, because of all this attention, I am getting hundreds of emails. There are cases and cases piling up and the government has done nothing about it. Jess Phillips, thank you so much. We'll let you get on with your work there. Thank you very much. Bigger work than us. Thanks, Jess.

No worries. Now, Jess Phillips knows what she's talking about when it comes to the questions of child grooming. You heard what she was telling us about the numbers of people that she's seeing, young women, girls, who she is dealing with on a case basis, on a victim basis. But what I thought was really interesting was when I asked her if she would criticise Rishi Sunak for saying that the police failings were about political correctness, she didn't want to talk about dog whistle politics. She didn't deny that that might have been the root cause of police failures in Rotherham and in Rochdale. In fact, it seemed to me that Labour is very keen to stay out of this culture war and carry on talking about the victims first and not the perpetrators. I mean, you heard Jess say she would go after a perpetrator, whatever colour, whatever race, all the rest of it. But she didn't say this is a dog whistle or this is the far right. And I wonder if that's because Labour is positioning itself very carefully on this one, actually, in terms of the language they respond with. Well, I think that there are two things there. I think one is that Labour Party can spot an elephant trap when it sees one and there is an elephant trap saying, come this way and fall into it, please, which is you kind of act like you're the defence of this. And so I don't think that Jess Phillips wanted to go anywhere near that. I thought that was interesting. I thought she was pretty critical of Soella Braverman and her motivations. And this was about headlines. It wasn't about sorting out the problem and also the language. But each time she said, there are a decade late. Yes, we'd like the task force. Yes, we'd like these measures. There are a decade late, which is a very different thing to saying this is appalling language and it's racist. Yeah, although I think she did distance herself from the language about British Pakistanis and their culture. And I didn't think she did subscribe to that. Look, I think Labour recognised there is a real serious problem that needs to be grappled with. And I think that they see this. You know, why are you only doing this now? Yeah, why is it taken so long? We've been campaigning about this. Why are you so slow to the party to the whatever on all of this when there was an 11% conviction rates, which is obviously greater than, let's say, rape more generally amongst the female population, but still incredibly low. And I think that Emily, we've on the podcast before talked about the terrible conviction rate for rape victims. And we have covered that extensively. And I think that Jess Phillips wants this to be a more generalised

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critique of Tory failure over criminal justice. Labour is not going to have the debate defined for it by Rishi Sunak or Suella Braverman. And if they want to use political correctness as a term, fine, you can use it. But we're not getting into that battle. We've got a bigger battle to fight with you. That's right. Well, we're on the subject of Suella Braverman. If you spent 24 hours sitting in a coach at Dover this weekend, you'll be reassured to know that Suella Braverman thinks it had nothing to do with Brexit. There seems to be an awful lot of evidence. To the contrary, we'll be back in a second.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back. Yesterday, the Home Secretary did the rounds on the Sunday shows and she was asked about those long queues at Dover, particularly the coaches, particularly school kids who've been sitting there for 12, 15 hours trying to get out of the country through the border crossing and had been stuck there. And she was asked if it was to do with Brexit. This is what she said. I don't think that's fair to say this has been an adverse effect of Brexit. I think we've had many years now sitting in the European Union and there's been, on the whole, very good operations and processes at the border. But what I would say is at acute times when there's a lot of pressure crossing the channel, whether that's on the tunnel or on ferries, then I think that there's always going to be a backup and I just urge everybody to be a bit patient while the ferry companies work their way through the backlog. And this was the response from Doug Bannister, the Chief Executive of the Doverport Authority.

The difference of being in a post-Brexit environment means that every passport needs to be checked before a vehicle or a passenger can cross into the European Union through France and that happens here in Dover. So it does make processing more challenging. Now it's interesting that you've got a very firm rejection of the Home Secretary there. And in Europe, this is the headline that La Repubblica, the Italian paper, is carrying today Brexit Codi di 15 ore per i Britannici a Dover e a Novembre sarà ancora peggio. So in other words, they're saying Brexit, that's their opening line, 15 hours' worth of queues for Britons at Dover and it's going to get worse in November.

So there seems to be no discussion about whether or not it's Brexit in the EU. You might say, well they would say that, wouldn't they? Of course they want to blame Brexit. But in your opinion, and you've sort of done this journey on a British passport quite a few times now, each time you travel, it is noticeably worse, right?

It's a bloody nightmare. I mean, it depends where you go. I mean, there are some countries in the EU that will accept the electronic gates. And of course Britain was never part of Schengen, true. But you know, I've been to Geneva twice this year for different reasons, neither reason sadly to go skiing. And it has been held each time with very, very long queues for British passport holders. And if you're an EU passport holder or Swiss passport holder, you just use the e-gates. Now, there's always been checks on your passport, but they would just have a cursory look so that the face matched the picture and away you go. Now they have to stamp the passport, because as a result of the hard Brexit, you can now only, if you're a European coming to the UK, you can only spend 90 days in the UK. And likewise, at a time, if you're going from Britain, and the one way you can guarantee that is to check passport stamps, so that your passport stamp in will be next to your

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passport stamp out. And if it's more than 90 days, they can check on it, which means that if you have a coach load of 50 people, and every person has to get off and have their passport stamp, it may only take an extra 45 seconds per person. But times that by 50, and times that by 50 coaches, and you have got a bloody long tail back and a 15 hour commute. The only place that I remember having to get off a coach to have my passport stamped in that way was when I was at the border between Moldova and Transnistria, which is still a sort of Soviet enclave. But that's what I mean. It was quite weird. There were people in those Russian greatcoats, and the bearskin hats, and all the sort of gold toggles, and we had to literally get off. And I remember thinking, wow, this is a sign of something seriously from another age, seriously from another era, because we actually had to get off the coach, hand over our passport, wait for it to come back. And it is extraordinary that, yeah, you're right, it's only 10 seconds. But that's a lot of 10 seconds in one go. And it doesn't work on the way back. So if you're French coming into the UK, I think the British have said, oh, it's fine, we'll waive the passport, so we're not going to do that as checks.

Well, remember, it was about taking back control of our borders. And what the British have said is, well, you can still come in and we're not going to stamp your passport. The French, other European countries have said, well, if you're going to take back control, we are going to take back control. And so these are the regulations. But there's another point to it. And it's a tedious point. It's about infrastructure. The port of Dover is not built for huge, complicated French passport checks. It is built for us being part of the European Union and free movement, likewise the Channel Tunnel.

Yeah, you could literally say they probably wouldn't have done an infrastructure that literally linked our two countries underground if they were expecting Brexit.

So when Brexit was happening, one of the things that was discussed for Dover was that they should build more French passport kiosks so that they could process more people more quickly. And that was ruled out by the British government. So there are only a few French kiosks. Now, I thought the coverage this weekend saying it was because of French border checks that people were not getting through or the weather or the wind was misleading, because you get the impression, oh, the bloody French, they haven't turned up for work again. And I don't think that was anything to do with it. All the French border checkpoints were manned, were staffed.

Well, it does seem to be a recurring pattern. I mean, we had it last July with the school holidays. We've had it at Easter. I mean, we had all the chaos anyway at Christmas because of the strikes and the flights that were disrupted. But you have to start wondering if you're going to see every single holiday where you can carry on blaming French sickness or the weather.

And at some point in the future, the European Union will introduce a visa system whereby you will pay seven or eight euros for a visa. It will be very similar to what you get when you travel to the United States, where you are on an ester and that you will be able to use.

It's electronic.

Yeah, electronic.

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It spells it out already in your passport.

But it is, it knows you've got a visa. You will not need a stamp because you'll be able to use electronic gates. And that will speed up certainly airports like at Geneva Airport, where there is one queue for kind of non-EU, non-Swiss citizens, which the British are the main party, and the rest. And that will ease once that visa system introduces. But to say that it has nothing to do with Brexit, and you can say, well, it's a very small price to pay if you're in convenience for half an hour at an airport, fine, who cares. See, when you're in convenience to have to spend 24 hours sitting on a couch, that wouldn't be my idea of the ideal start to a holiday, I have to be honest. But there's clearly a causal link between one thing and the other.

So some conservatives like Tobias Elwood, we should say, we're calling it out and say, of course it's Brexit, let's not be stupid about it. I didn't hear actually much from Labour about that causality at all. And it's interesting because we just talked about Labour trying to navigate their pathway through the question of child grooming and the question of whether talking about ethnicity is dog whistle politics or not. This is somewhere where probably they could be a lot bolder in terms of saying the thing that most people are actually thinking, but they still choose not to, a month out from the local elections. Well, Emily, you and me, in January, we again went to Switzerland to interview Keir Starmer, the Davos World Economic Forum, where we pushed him very hard on Europe, and it's absolutely clear that that is another subject, that the Labour Party doesn't want to go anywhere near and doesn't want to get into that fight because it doesn't want to look like it is relitigating the argument over Brexit, good or bad. It just says we want to make Brexit work. Relitigating is such an interesting word because relitigating, which was used actually by the Chancellor when he came in to us, suggests that you are talking about undoing stuff in the past, whereas I think this is focusing very much on the present and indeed the future. And how you just want to be able to travel a bit more easily, a little less encumbered, and not have to spend 24 hours sitting on a bus.

We'll be back in a moment.

Tomorrow we'll be on Trump Watch. It should be an interesting few hours when Donald Trump makes that flight from Mar-a-Lago into New York City and appears before the New York judge on charges of, well, we don't know yet. They haven't opened the indictment yet. Still yet to be unsealed. We know it is in connection with the payment to adult film star, porn star, Stormy Daniels, payment there. It's possible there's another payment as well involving another former playboy model. We don't know the details of this yet, but Donald Trump will be doing some version of a perp walk. He has to appear in court, mug shot taken, fingerprints taken. Donald Trump's trajectory has changed, and maybe with it, the 2024 presidential election. We'll see you tomorrow. Bye.

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