

[Transcript] The News Agents / Does Rishi Sunak care about climate change?

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

Quickly on Lord Goldsmith, he was asked to apologise for his comments about the privileges committee because I felt that those were incompatible with his position as a minister. He's obviously chosen to take a different course. I accept that. I'm proud of the record of this government and indeed of Zach in government making sure that we tackle climate change and protect our natural environment. I think the UK has played a leadership role globally and we will continue to do so as you will see.

That was the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, reacting to yet another resignation of a Boris Johnson ally from his government. The Foreign Office Minister, Lord, Lord Zach Goldsmith, said he resigned because of the lack of commitment from Sunak and his administration to what he described as the most pressing issue of our age, climate change and environmentalism. Sunak disputes that that was the real reason and we'll get into a bit of that. But today isn't about Westminster gossip and the endless. He said this and he said that. It's about that central question that Goldsmith raises. This week alone, we've learned we've had the hottest June ever in the UK. Parts of the world, Texas, Northern China, beyond have been recording record temperatures. And the Climate Change Committee said that Britain has lost its place as a world leader on the issue. So, is Goldsmith right? Does Rishi Sunak and his government care about climate change? And if not, why on earth not? It's Lewis here. Welcome to the News Agents.

So, you might not believe this, but we were always actually planning to do today's episode about Sunak and climate change and how hard it's going to be to get to net zero. And sometimes the news gods just sort of smile on you. And we heard first thing this morning that Goldsmith, a close Johnson ally, close friend too, of Carrie Johnson, had resigned. And as I say, specifically citing Sunak's lack of commitment on climate change. And though these resignation letters are often very pro-forma, exchanging nebulous pleasantries, this wasn't. It was quite damning. Here's an extract voiced in appropriate plummy tones by Gabriel and News Agents producer.

Dear Prime Minister, I became involved in politics above all because of my love and concern for the natural environment. We depend on nature for everything. And we're degrading the natural world at an astonishing speed. Logically, there is nothing more important. So when you asked me to stay on as Minister for the International Environment, I of course accepted. I did so with a view to guarding the progress we had seen in recent years on the international environment and to building on a record of international leadership that has been so warmly welcomed around the world.

But I have been horrified as bit by bit we have abandoned commitments domestically and on the world stage. The kept animals bill has been ditched despite your promises. Our efforts on a wide range of domestic environmental issues have simply ground to a standstill. More worryingly, the UK has visibly stepped off the world stage and withdrawn our leadership on climate and nature.

Prime Minister, having been able to get so much done previously, I have struggled even to hold the line in recent months. The problem is not that the government is hostile to the environment, it is that you, our Prime Minister, are simply uninterested. That signal or lack of it has trickled down to Whitehall and caused a kind of paralysis.

I will never understand how with all the knowledge we have now about our fundamental reliance

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on the natural world and the speed with which we are destroying it, anyone can be uninterested. But even if this existential challenge leaves you personally unmoved, there is a world of people who do care very much and you will need their votes. Every survey and poll without exception tells us that people care deeply about the natural world, about the welfare of other species, about handing this world in better shape to the next generation. And as these issues inevitably grow in importance, so too will the gap between the British people and a Conservative party that fails to respond appropriately.

This was followed by a reply from SUNAC, which actually basically said the real reason Goldsmith had gone was

You were asked to apologise for your comments about the Privileges Committee, as we felt that they were incompatible with your position as a Minister of the Crown. You have decided to take a different course.

And it's worth remembering that whatever SUNAC has asked Goldsmith to do in terms of apologising

for his comments on the Privileges Committee report into Johnson, as far as we know, SUNAC has said nothing about it to Johnson, the actual perpetrator, not asked for Johnson who dismissed the Privileges Committee as a kangaroo court to apologise or even commented very much about Johnson's conduct at all. But let's engage on the substance of what Goldsmith has said. When, for example, was the last time you even heard SUNAC talk about climate change. And that's a particular contrast with his predecessor, but one.

It's one minute to midnight on that doomsday clock, and we need to act now. If we don't get serious about climate change today, it will be too late for our children to do so tomorrow.

Not for the first time on a Friday, we've turned to the Times, Redbox, Politics reporter, Lara Spirit, to help make sense of it all. Lara, you're back again.

Hello.

I'm worried about you. I think you're just hanging around Leicester Square on a Friday at this point.

I'm just desperately looking for Gabriel to second me in.

Care in the community. I can't remember if the last time we spoke there was a resignation.

It feels like there might have been, but now I've got Lord Goldsmith, Zach Goldsmith, resigning. And what's quite extraordinary is the ferocity of the sort of war of words between both the Prime Minister and Goldsmith. Normally, these resignation letters are quite perfunctory and complementary, but not in this case.

Yeah, they usually come in spite of all of the bitterness that might have preceded them, with at least that very final paragraph saying, I will continue to support the government and specifically the Prime Minister from the back benches, et cetera.

You're a great guy.

You're a great guy. We've been the best of friends. This had absolutely nothing of the sort. And in fact, there was a kind of personal accusation leveled by Lord Goldsmith after issues you know, that he was personally disinterested in climate issues and that it was his lack of interest and his lack of application to this issue that was actually the reason why, in his words, there was some kind of paralysis in the government as a result of it.

So really personally singling out Rishi Sunak, which in light of the context of the Privileges

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Committee investigation into Boris Johnson and his comments was not particularly surprising from Zach Goldsmith, I don't think.

Does it matter?

Well, I mean, it's not necessarily surprising, given that he was the only serving minister of those 10 individuals singled out by the Privileges Committee when they said, these individuals have behaved inappropriately. They weren't right to be publicly criticizing the committee's actions in this way.

So as a kind of arch-loyalist to Boris Johnson, it's not necessarily surprising, given his views that he has obviously controversially made public about this inquiry, that he no longer wants to serve in the government that has even if slightly tepidly kind of allowed them and championed it to go ahead.

Do you think there is some legitimacy in Goldsmith's criticism? We're leaving aside the Privileges Committee stuff. I mean, there is a sense, isn't there, with Sunak that, I mean, I finally enough, we were talking about this just yesterday here, that I can't remember the last time Sunak really spoke about climate change, the environment. And you could argue, say, look, he's got a lot on his plate. He hasn't got much time before the election. It's not going to win him any votes. So he's not going to prioritize it. But when you compare it to Boris Johnson, say, there's been a real change.

I think that's a really fair thing to say. If you, I would say the only recollection that I really have explicitly is of him talking about his daughter and saying that it was one of her concerns.

Oh, that she told him off.

She told him off about it. But you remember, of course, that when Liz Trust took over, there were questions about whether she'd be attending COP. There were then questions about whether she Sunak would be attending COP. And it became normalized after a little while. But at the beginning of those inquiries, it was seemingly outrageous that a prime minister would possibly not actually be attending COP in person.

Which he did in the end, but only after a bit of pressure and...

I think only after the sense in which it became politically necessary for him to do that, you could argue. You know, we saw the Climate Change Committee a couple of days ago criticise the government for stepping back from their climate change leadership, the role that they had played before.

So I think you could say that in walks that golden says there is a kind of grain of truth. There is also that question that he raises explicitly of the 11 billion that the government has committed to be spending in climate. Now, if you look at the government's foreign aid commitment specifically, you know, they're planning on spending billions of pounds. They are spending billions of pounds of the foreign aid budget on domestic refugee in-house costs. So that's received a lot of criticism from a number of aid organisations about that.

There is a question around that, that when I've spoken to ministers before about that 11 billion figure, they say, you know, we have implicitly accepted that that won't necessarily be spent. Now, that's a huge amount of money and you don't hear it mentioned. And there doesn't seem to be a timeframe or any sort of real plan for the application of how they'll be spending that money.

So I think you can see in Zach Goldsmith why he would raise that particular sum given

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he's actually really fair enough to do so. We haven't got a real plan for how that money will be spent and it's looking increasingly unlikely that it will be.

It's peculiar, isn't it, in a way? It reminds us that the extent to which the Conservative right often can't see what they've got in a sense that in so many ways, you mentioned foreign aid with Sunak's decision to cut that, the environment net zero about which the Conservative right is very sceptical. Sunak is clearly reasonably sceptical. At least he doesn't care about it very much. In so many ways, economically as well, Sunak is to the right of Johnson and is much more aligned with some of Sunak's own critics and Johnson's allies than Johnson himself. And yet partly because politics is so much about vibes these days, they loathe Sunak even though he's giving them quite a bit of what they want.

Yeah, I think that's really interesting. I think Rishi Sunak's Premiership so far has been defined by these five priorities, by his own design. He's wanted us to say these are the five things that you'll judge me on. Now, whether or not that turns out to be a success given increasingly this week, you could argue that on all of those metrics, it's looking pretty unlikely or at least it does certainly an uphill struggle for him to be able to meet those ahead of the next election. But given the invidious position that he came in on, his inheritance deal, really rough economic situation to be dealing with, people around him would argue there's not necessarily the scope to be doing things on these other issues and that actually he wants to be judged on these five core issues he set himself. If I don't deliver on these, then you have every right to not elect me in the next election. So I think to say that he is not being proactive enough on the environment, not necessarily something that people or allies of his would shy away from, but would say, actually, do we have the scope to be as proactive on it at the moment? They say, if you look at what we're doing long term, it's not that he's just a firefighting prime minister that's only looking at the things immediately ahead of him. They're saying, look at the workforce plan, that's a long term plan. We're not completely allergic to the idea of doing things that last beyond this particular Premiership. But I think on climate, it's very difficult to point to particular things that he's done since he's come in to say, yes, that marks you out. And just find, do you think that this will create any pressure for him to be more active in this area now? I mean, there's one sense in which it's weird, right? Which is that SUNAK is a younger politician. Now, demographically, as we know from all of the polls, it is younger politicians and younger people, I should say, who care more about climate change and tend to be more concerned about it. He's got, he's mentioned his young family and they're obviously concerned about it. And yet it's an issue that doesn't seem to exercise him or animate him at all, particularly at a time when there are Conservatives, particularly on the left of the party, who are trying to say, look, we need to appeal to younger voters a little bit more. We've got to think about the long term. And on paper, he would be quite well positioned to do that. And yet he doesn't talk about it. It's interesting. I mean, he would never go as far as to actively roll back on any previous commitments openly in that respect, I would say. And he definitely is aware of how politically costly it would be. I'm sure he accepts the kind of growing consensus around these being important issues, not just for young people, right, but for people of all generations. I think he will have watched what happened with Labour's commitment to that 28 billion green prosperity deal, obviously being paired back by Rachel Reeves amid fears of promising big investments so quickly into a Labour government. He constantly talks about inflationary pressures. He is obviously, you know, the reluctant prophet of the inflationary era. He was when he ran to

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be the leader. And he wants us to be laser focused on the idea that that is the core problem that he is trying to address. Now, he would say that therefore big spending commitments, and I'm sure he would use Labour's 28 billion green prosperity plan as an example, are going to be adding to inflationary pressures. He said that about other spending commitments before. He said that about public sector workers wanting pay rises, inflation level pay rises before. So I think he reads a possibility perhaps that you don't have to be making large commitments at this time. People understand that his view of the public finances, one that he's spoken at length about is one that doesn't necessarily permit that kind of spending. But I think come the next election, there will be a lot of pressure to look at the conservative manifesto. Zach Goldsmith is not alone in the Conservative Party, you know, the Conservative Environment Network, very active. You have a lot

of MPs who are very organised around these issues. But something I would say is that the MPs that are organised around these issues are more likely to be of the one nation type of the Conservative wing of the party. They're less likely to be of the kind of more, typically more successfully organised, I think we could say, at kind of lobbying Prime Ministers. And I think they are less likely to be more critically obstructive to British soon next premiership should he kind of waver on some of these commitments. And indeed, in that period, that kind of wobbling period where it looked like he might not be going to cop himself, there was very little by way of actually threatening pressure that those MPs were placing on their Prime Minister, even though they claim that this is one of the most important political issues for them. Maybe there's something else in this too. Climate change is by definition existential. It's by definition, a big issue, the biggest issue really, it operates on an expansive canvas. It's the sort of thing that a destiny politician like Johnson or Blair or Macron like to talk about, like to seize. They see the magic letters legacy painted all over it. Sunak is a smaller politician, and I don't mean literally, though, that is true. I mean, in his style, he likes to find discrete problems he can solve. This feels maybe too big to outside his control. He doesn't quite have the political vocabulary for it. He's a politician who thinks in numbers, not words. And as we've seen from him as Chancellor and Prime Minister, his first instinct is that balance sheet, the inputs and the outputs. And I suspect that when Sunak looks at this issue, he's worried he doesn't quite see what he's getting. He sees instead a bottomless pit of money. He doesn't have, as George H. W. Bush famously said, a politician incidentally, to which Sunak is not entirely dissimilar in some ways, the vision thing. Add to that political pressure from the right, a resources problem, and pressing political issues which he is struggling to deal with before a general election, and you get inertia. But in a way, it won't be Sunak, assuming he's a short-lived Prime Minister who sees us through our journey to net zero. If our governments are serious about it, if Labour is, the transformation will be profound in a way few in politics or SW1 have really, truly engaged with. Someone who has is an old colleague of mine from Sky Newsdays, Ed Conway, who's written a book, Material World on the Race to Net Zero, on what it means for our societies, the sorts of resources involved. And he's worried that Britain is being left behind and quickly. That idea that the government and particularly the Prime Minister is uninterested in some of this stuff, like I actually hear that quite a lot from people, not just outside of government, but inside government as well, which is that they struggle to engage Rishi Sunak with this, whether it's the environmental thing or,

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you know, even more importantly, the industrial challenge we're facing to actually get to net zero. Because when you look around the world, and it's not, to be honest with you, it's not just a Rishi Sunak thing, it's a UK thing. We, for decades, for centuries really have been brilliant at just outsourcing so much of the stuff we make so that we basically just get the cheapest thing from overseas. And that served us brilliantly in years gone by, except for the fact that it meant that we deindustrialized faster than any other country around the world. And, you know, you've got lots of left behind areas leveling up, all of that kind of stems from that British thing. Well, Rishi Sunak is very much off that ilk, and perhaps kind of doubly so, because he's a hedge fund guy, he comes from finance, his passion, and these are understandable passions, which again, were very vogue-ish in years gone by, things like soft tech, so services, it's financial tech, as well, finance, AI, he's very interested in AI, which is a big deal, so let's not kind of dispute that. But when it comes to the other stuff, like how do we engineer our way in internet zero, he's just, people struggle to kind of engage him on that. He just looks a little bit blankly at you when you kind of try and get him excited about it. And frankly, like I say, a lot of people in government are like that. And that's problematic, because being laissez-faire, which is kind of what we were for many decades, was fine in the past. But now, the whole tenor of global geopolitics, of the way that we do economics, it's shifted. It's shifted dramatically. We are in a massive new change. You've got the US under Joe Biden, reindustrializing, at a rate that we've never seen before. You've got industrial strategy in America. Europe's doing the same thing. China's been doing this for ages. And so, when you think about those kind of material underpinnings of how we get to where we want to be, how we make stuff, how we get out of the ground, how we engineer net zero, which is massive, by the way, the UK doesn't feel as engaged in that. In fact, we just feel like we're kind of allowing everyone else to get ahead of us. And I think that kind of matters. It's weird, though, isn't it? In two respects, maybe, which is that you can say that Britain, under conservative and Labour government's coalition government, has not got a bad story to tell on carbon reduction vis-a-vis other countries over a long period. We've done it faster than pretty much anyone else. And indeed, Sunak is succeeding Boris Johnson, who at least rhetorically was very invested in this agenda. And thirdly, actually, Sunak is a young Prime Minister. And just demographically, we know that younger people tend to be more exercising concerns about climate change than others. And yet still, there is this atrophy. Maybe it's about the fact that he has a short time he knows as Prime Minister. He's got very pressing political concerns. He just thinks, I don't have the bandwidth for this. Maybe, maybe. But you look at this as well. And there was an interesting op-ed from Andy Haldane, former guy at the Bank of England, about this. If you were looking for some sort of opportunity, so leaving aside the environmental question, which is obviously incredibly important, but leaving aside that for a moment, we are stuck at the moment, we have been stuck for decades in this productivity trap, secular stagnation, economists call it. Basically, we're just not growing as fast as we should be. We're not doing as well as we should be as a nation. The same thing for the US. You could not find a better opportunity to break free of that and have some serious growth and all of the things, you know, big productivity boost than what we are going through right now. It's a green industrial revolution, potentially, where people could be having a bonanza. And potentially exercise some of our fabled Brexit freedoms, our regulatory freedoms.

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Exactly. Exactly. A lot of those things, you know, we could do because you wouldn't necessarily have some of those rules that are preventing you from protecting or supporting your own companies. And yet we just haven't gone for it. And I don't know. I struggle to work out whether that's a Rishi Sunak thing. Is that just kind of inherent government thing? But the UK is just falling behind while the rest of the world is going gangbusters. And I find that troublesome because I spent the last three years kind of looking more and more into this stuff, trying to understand, you know, how we get stuff out of the ground, turn it into the things that we actually need. And you just can't do it without engaging in at least understanding what you're able to make. And frankly, outsourcing all of our production, getting cheap stuff from abroad, getting cheap stuff from China, that was fine back in, you know, a few decades ago. But how about now when the US and China are being kind of making bellicose noises towards each other?

How about in the new environment? That's very different.

What is the cost of having a government which is not especially engaged in these questions?

And why is that a problem for Britain?

Well, here's where we leave economics and head into the world of security.

So the really good example of this is historical example, but it's relevant here.

You know, we used to be the world's biggest maker of glass and, you know, think of glass, pretty humdrum substance, actually back in the day, that was the semiconductors of its era, you know, that was the most advanced technology. We used to be the world leader at that stuff, okay, in the 19th, in the early 19th century. Then we, we let it all go. It all went to Germany, okay? Then comes World War One. The war starts. It is a war where you need binoculars to be able to

kill people, frankly. And we didn't have enough binoculars because where did we import 60% of our binoculars from? Germany. And we actually went to the lengths of having to send spies to trade with Germany to buy binoculars off them to kill them with it. It's an extraordinary story. And why is that relevant? It's because right now our dependence on China for things like, you know, polysilicon, the stuff that goes into either semiconductors or into solar panels for wind turbines, for copper, for almost any raw material you care to mention, is greater than our reliance was back in 1914 on Germany. And if you are heading into this more scary world, which unfortunately it looks like we might well be, then suddenly it's not just all about price. It's not just all about getting stuff as cheaply as you can, like we did back, you know, before the First World War, like we're doing now. It's about other considerations. And that is where Joe Biden is right now in the US. That's where Europe is right now. And the UK, maybe we have a kind of reasonable case to make. We're just going to take a step back and not think about this stuff. But I've yet to hear anyone from government actually lay it out. And this, like I say, this is, I think, the most consequential stuff for us today, not just because of our livelihoods, but because it's about the environment as well. It's about climate, and it's also about breaking free of many years of economic disappointment.

Because we need those materials and those commodities in order to move to net zero. So, for example, we need precious metals like lithium in order to move to electric cars, which the government itself says we need to do by 2030 in terms of new sales.

We need all of these materials to do it. So, you need lithium. You need a lot of copper.

You know, so copper people don't talk about much. It's sheathed away beneath the wires of the

device

you're kind of listening to this on. But we need extraordinary amounts of copper if you're going to have all those electric cars that are going to get you to net zero. So, the future, the next few decades, we like to think that net zero will be us kind of retrenching away from materials. Well, it's good. We're not going to be burning as much of them in the future. But we are going to be mining crazy amounts of them in order to make the devices we need, the electric cars we need, the wind turbines we need, the solar panels we need. And by the way, along the way, so solar panels, silicon chips, they may seem like the kind of cleanest technology we know of today. In order to make a silicon chip or indeed a solar panel, it's basically the same thing. You take silicon chunks out of the ground and you smelt them using coal. So, the device you're listening to this on is in part made from coal. And actually, you also use oil to go into the batteries. This is not to say, again, that we're not getting cleaner and not better at doing this stuff. But if we are going to get to net zero, we need to think about all of those different areas. It's not just about having fewer cars. It's about working out the entire industrial revolution all over again. And I don't think people have quite seen the scale of that, both the resources that we need, but then also just how big it is. And currently, the government is nowhere on that particularly. We're waiting. But there's a race. That's the point, Lewis. There's a race. As we wait to hear what's happening, you see the US doing it, you see Europe doing it. It may well be they're wasting a lot of money, but at least we should know whether what our position is really the race. I think it's true to say, isn't it, that perhaps when we talk about moving to net zero, it isn't necessarily commonly appreciated just how massive a change and how rapid this change is going to have to be. How big do you think this is going to be? And how big an impact do you think it's going to have on people's lives? Because it's not, I think, appreciated. It's not just about having electric cars. It's about basically moving to a whole new industrial model. It is the most ambitious thing that humankind will have ever done. The most ambitious thing. Because we have set ourselves the challenge of eliminating fossil fuels or rather massively reducing our reliance on them in a space of time where it's tighter than any previous energy transition. Whether it's moving from wood to coal, from coal to oil, from oil to gas, all the way along, this is a tighter timeframe than any of those transitions have taken in the past. And added to that, we are going from all those previous transitions. Let's not lose sight of the fact that why we're where we are today. That's why we're not all out in the fields. It's these amazing transitions which allow us all to get more productive, to have the equipment we all want today. All of those transitions, we were going to a more dense source of energy. So things were getting easier all the way up. We were on a ladder going up, so from wood to coal, that was a more dense form of energy. You got more out of it. It was more efficient. There was a profit in it. All the way up, this time around, we're going down the ladder. So we're going from something which is really energy dense, like oil and gas, through to something which is much less energy dense. Lithium ion batteries, putting the power through them is much less efficient. That, again, makes this a double challenge. And this is not to say there aren't amazing opportunities in any industrial revolution. That's an exciting time to be living. But I don't think anyone, when they were signing up to these commitments, was aware of just how big this would be. Finally, on that point, you can see a world in which the politics of the last half of this decade, in this country and elsewhere, whatever government is in power is serious about making

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this transition, is characterized by a big political counterreaction, maybe against some of this stuff, in a sense that if this isn't planned properly, people might look at various elements of this and say, well, this is costing me more. This is a huge change. Okay, maybe it'll save me money in the long term, but it isn't right now. And you can just imagine that there are certain political figures waiting in the wings who might have something to say about that. And you could imagine a politics of a new type of populism determined and predicated on that. It's already happening. It's already happening. People are looking at the cost and understand me, looking at what did I just say? It's a massive, massive challenge. It's going to be very expensive. And they're saying, well, is it really worth it? And I think part of the risk here is that by not being open about the scale of the challenge for quite a long time, the government has kind of, and many people, activists as well, have opened up that room for people who are no longer necessarily, this is the trendy thing in denial, as it were, in inverted commas. It's not necessarily denying climate change now. It's just saying, well, it's going to be too difficult. So let's not do it. I think the counter argument to that. Okay. And I think this is where I'm surprised that the government, and to some extent the Labour Party, but mostly the government, because that's that's the power at the moment. I'm surprised they're not making more of this. There are massive opportunities in here. We could be making stuff and building stuff again in a way that we just haven't been doing for decades. And that's what America is doing right now. And there have been so many challenges. We're faced with this massive environmental engineering challenge right now. And a lot of people say it's impossible. Everyone says it's going to be expensive. There have been so many times in the past where you could have said the same thing about making concrete, rediscovering how to make concrete. That's one of the big challenges that we did hundreds of years ago, turning silicon into silicon chips. No one thought that was possible for a long time. The kinds of engineering, the kinds of processes we use right now to make the chip in your phone is like sci-fi and no one thought it was possible when it was first envisaged. So there's a lot. It's easy to be doubtful right now, but there are big challenges which we can overcome. The problem is that I don't think people have been honest about the scale of those challenges thus far. And until you look at this kind of, you know, material underpinnings of the world, I call it material world, you don't have as much of a sense of the scale of it or the opportunities. As Ed was saying, this is a mammoth undertaking and right now we're being left behind. We've already mentioned this week that the UK's Independent Climate Change Committee has severely criticised the UK government for its recent record, saying we're no longer a world leader on the subject. Well, right after this, we're going to be talking to the man who has been leading that committee for over a decade and who has a tough message for the Conservative Party, his own party. Stay with us. This is The News Agents. Welcome back. Right, as I said, we're going to hear now from Lord Dieben, John Gummer. He's an extraordinary character really. He's been around Conservative politics, British politics for decades. He worked for Margaret Thatcher and he's had this journey to being perhaps the most

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strident voice about the perils of climate change on the Conservative side of politics. And as I say, we've actually been planning this episode for a while, so we actually recorded this on Thursday afternoon before news of Goldsmith's resignation broke. He's stepping down from that job after 11 years. So I thought that the best place to start would be to say whether he thinks he's made a difference in that time, whether or not he's done a good job.

Well, I've tried hard and we've got a long way further than perhaps people thought we were going to, but the thing is that it's not far enough. What's happening with climate change is that it's doing exactly what the scientists said, but right at the top end of their expectations.

And that's really serious. If you look at the way in which the water around Britain is warming, the loss of ice, the fact we're losing ice in the Himalayas, all the things around the world, which we expected to happen if we didn't counter climate change, are happening, but they're happening much faster and much worse than we had expected, I think.

That's deeply alarming.

Yeah, it is. And that's why we have to make people realize that we have to act as rapidly as possible. Otherwise, we really will face not just the next generation, but ourselves, even if you're as old as I am, with an impossible position.

Do you think that 1.5 degrees is still achievable internationally?

I think it's still just achievable, and you've got to stick to it, because when you think what 1.1 degrees, which is what we've had, has really already affected. When you think of all those floods in Pakistan, you've got, well, not just this week, we've seen temperatures in Texas reaching nearly 50 degrees. We've seen temperatures in Northern China reaching new highs, even in our own country. In June, we saw temperatures very, very high.

Well, it's the worst June that we have ever had. And if you look at Canada with 11.4 million acres burning, and we've had already this year a whole series of wildfires, and we've no idea how we're going to keep them under control. And of course, we don't have hydrants and proper equipment to do this from our cities. So almost all our fire organizations are way behind what they're going to have to be. One of the particularly live issues, of course, is around oil, new oil and gas extraction in the North Sea. It seems Keir Starmer has said that under a Labour government, there would be no new licenses for new exploration, although now it seems that there is some rowback, potentially from that decision. I'd watch the rowback, by the way. I mean, the rowback concept comes from newspapers who want a rowback. What the Labour Party has done, as far

as I understand it, is simply to say that the legal obligations, which would be laid upon them if they came in after licenses had been given, do put that in a different position, not because of anything they think, but simply the legal situation. What they have stuck to is no new exploration or exploitation in the North Sea.

But what do you make of the argument to say, which a lot of people within the Labour Party internally are making, to say that this is a mistake, because oil and gas are, and I assume you would agree with this, they're going to be part of the mix for some time to come, what is the point of not exploiting our own energy resources when we just essentially import them from further afield, which is more carbon intensive, than just extracting it from the North Sea? Well, first of all, it isn't necessarily more carbon intensive. We said that if you were going to do any of this, even if you were going to exploit more of what you've already got, the Climate Change Committee said, you should only do that if you have the highest

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environmental standards in the world. That's not true. The Norwegians are doing it in a much better way. We're not doing it properly. So isn't the argument then to do it better?

Well, if you do it better, the real truth is that there is no reason to do it longer ahead.

What we said was, in the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine, by Putin, it was perfectly sensible to produce as much gas as you could from the North Sea as an immediate response and then use the opportunities for renewable energy, which is much cheaper, much better. That's where we should be spending our money. There's no point in developing new oil fields in the North Sea. In 10 years' time, we'll be able to buy oil all around the world because the whole world is moving to use it less oil. We've already got enough oil in production, so to speak, for all that we could use. Your Committee, the Climate Change Committee, just this week described the government's efforts to scale up climate action as worryingly slow so that we are no longer a world leader in combating climate change.

Why did you say that? What's changed? Well, because two things have happened. One is that we've had a

in which we really haven't done the things we should have done as a result of what we committed ourselves to at the Glasgow COP26, which was led by Britain when we were really leading the world and we set the best standards. We got a lot of people to follow us. Boris Johnson said we were a few minutes to midnight. Exactly. There's no doubt that he led that in a remarkable way. No one can accuse me of being a great Boris Johnson fan, but there's no doubt that that is exactly what he did. And then we had this period afterwards when we didn't do the things which we had an opportunity to do. We didn't speed up our production of renewables. We didn't move

to help people change to electric heating and such like. We didn't move to reduce the energy that we used. All those things have been static. They haven't moved. We've done better on electric cars, but we still haven't got the very important rollout of charging arrangements. We haven't thought about why it is that if you use the public system, you have to pay VAT. If you're lucky enough

to have a drive, you don't pay VAT because it's yours. That's the sort of thing which we could have put right. We've done none of those things. And at the same time, America has moved forward with anti-inflation reduction. Yes, which of course is really all about climate change.

It's having a remarkable impact. It is a remarkable operation. And Biden really does need to be congratulated on what he's done. But after all, America wasn't really in the act two or three years ago. I mean, it is a very big change. The European Union has moved forward.

My Trump pulled America out of the Paris Climate Accords.

Then you look at the Chinese, which people are always pointing to. The Chinese have now moved significantly in what they are investing in. And Britain, of course, is now behind that.

But why is that? Is it because you think that the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, is simply less invested in this agenda than Boris Johnson is predecessor? No, I think it was much more the chaos of the period of having three Prime Ministers in one year. It's much more about the fact that Rishi Sunak has been dealt a very difficult hand. And he, one by one, is dealing with these things. I think that is certainly true. But by your own admission, I mean, you, I'm sure, would agree that climate change is the biggest, most existential threat to humanity, which is this.

And so really, in that sense, surely the Prime Minister ought to be gripping it.

Well, that is what I have said in my report. And the committee is quite clear about that.

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And what we've also said is that there is a chance to catch back up again if we use this year, before a general election, actually to do it. You can do it. He talks about it, does he? I can't remember the last time that Rishi Sunak talks about climate change, actually. Well, I've always believed that it's very much better not to deal with people, but to deal with the facts. The facts are, we were doing very well. We've had a period in which we have not done what we should do. And there is an opportunity now to get back on that. And that is what the committee has said. So there is an upbeat attitude as long as we're prepared to take it. And if we don't, we really lose out. But he's got five pledges. Not one of them involves climate change or anything to do with it. I'm suggesting that it ought to be an overriding thing in everything. A sixth. No, not a sixth. It's part of every one of those pledges ought to be that. So we ought to be having climate change as a key part of the changes we're making in the government and the opposition supporting the need for change in our planning laws. It's the way we think about housing. It's the way we think about immigration. It's the way we think about everything. It's got to be there. I don't want a separate one. It's got to infuse every one that we do. Do you think Keir Starmer and Labour's plans are superior right now, that you prefer those plans? I think some of the things that Keir Starmer has said and committed himself to are really important and valuable and the government should follow them. The problem with what Labour's done so far is it's only just started to be detailed. And the difficulty is that unless the opposition is detailed in the sense of saying to the government, you ought to be doing this. And if we were in power, we would do this. Unless you do that, you can't keep the government's feet the fire. And I really have criticism of the opposition in the sense that it hasn't done that in a way that it ought to in the same way that I have the serious criticism of the government that it hasn't acted. I mean, Rishi Sunak is a doubt that's going to make. And we know this because of what he said. He's going to make the 28 million, which Labour Party is pledging, over the course of the parliament now, not from the beginning of the parliament, but over the course of the parliament to get to in terms of green spending and borrowing. He's going to make that centerpiece of the Conservative election campaign saying we can't afford it, we can't do it. I mean, I don't know what he's going to do. I'm just going to say that we're going to have to spend this money. A great deal of money can come from the private sector if you create the atmosphere in which the private sector has the confidence to invest. And the truth is that my view is that I am not going to put my name to a particular amount. I'm merely saying that we're going to have to spend that money if we're going to have a world that is worth living in. That sort of money. And that sort of money. So I don't think that that is how we do it, where it comes from. The mechanisms are perfectly reasonable party political arguments. But the argument that you don't have to spend the money, whether it comes from the public or the private purse, is just not on. Do you think we ought to, on this issue, that it would show leadership if the leading politicians try to take this out of party politics, in a sense? In a sense that I wonder if you are worried, and you can sort of see some of the glimmers of this, we've seen it in the United States, we're starting to see elements of it with, say, the Euler scheme, which we're seeing in London, and the reaction to it, that there could be a populist insurgency political set of attacks on the net zero agenda. And that you could imagine perhaps a Conservative party in opposition, maybe it's moved a bit to the right, attacking a Labour government on precisely those net zero issues because it potentially creates problems in terms of cost of living and so on.

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Well, there are three things. First of all, it shouldn't create problems in the cost of living because most of the things you have to do for the cost of living, you have to do for climate change anyway, like moving as fast as possible to the cheapest means of generation, which is renewable energy, the whole series of things which will make life cheaper for people, so that it isn't necessarily proper or effective to say that. Secondly, when we do these things, we've got to get them right. And there are problems with Eulez. I mean, I am in favour of Eulez, the extension, but there are reasonable arguments you can make about only giving nine months notice to this, whereas we've always given a couple of years for people to get themselves sorted out. In other words, we've got to accept that there can be reasonable party political discussion on that. But the third thing is you're absolutely right. There is a kind of populist line which goes like this. You say this is expensive because you can always claim that without difficulty. It's inconvenient. You don't want it. It's nannyng. We don't like it. And you never compare that with what happens if you don't do it. The cost of not doing these things is very much greater. And the trouble is that the very people who are now running that kind of line, and some of the newspapers, Daily Telegraph is very keen on doing that kind of thing, the newspapers running that line will be exactly the people who will say, when disaster strikes, why didn't somebody do something about it? That's the history of populism. Populism changes the moment it becomes unpopular. And that's going to be the real concern. And that we have to fight. Do you think there is a danger that the Conservative Party turns to greater climate change skepticism, partly because of the newspapers, but also there is now a bigger media ecosystem in Britain, which is perhaps susceptible to that sort of thing. We see new television channels, for example, which are more skeptical about net zero. We see more political figures who are more skeptical about net zero. Well, first of all, you can't be skeptical about net zero if you know the science. There's no way. A lot of these people reject. Well, if they don't, they don't know that you're right. They don't know the science. They don't know. And they don't want to know because they want to have the contrary view because it's easier. It's populist. You can move out and say these things. The facts are we are heading for disaster. And you have to press that home to people all the time. And we have to do that. And I don't care whether they're right wing or left wing. And after all, the Labour Party has exactly its same problems because there is GMB and unite two unions, which provide them with a lot of their money. They came out against Keir Starmer's brave and sensible step about new oil fields. But it is essential, isn't it, though, that politicians who are planning these changes, which are going to be vast, substantial, got to be substantial in terms of the way that we live and the way our industry is conducted, the way our societies are constructed, our infrastructure and so on, that they make sure in order to resist, because there will always be politicians who want to take advantage of that and show that skepticism for their own political purposes, that the politicians who are planning this change have to make sure that this is something that benefits populations that is good for jobs, for employment. And it doesn't cost people out of their own pockets because otherwise, if this isn't regulated properly and done properly, that could be the potential outcome. You have to do it properly. You have to have very considerable sense about how you bring people along with you. You have to be very careful about the order in which you do those things. And we haven't been as good as we ought to be. You've got to use language which people understand and react to. I mean, for example, when we went round the country listening to people in the Climate Change Committee, we found very interestingly that, for example, the word retrofit

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doesn't mean anything even to people who are being retrofitted. What you've got to talk about is making your home warmer, making your home better in the summer. That's what you have to discuss in

that sort of way. It's like I've banned the phrase, kilowatt hour in the Climate Change Committee, because I don't think anybody knows what a kilowatt hour is. But they do know what you mean by their

bill. So if you say the bill will go up by £20, or will go down by £20, they know what you're talking about. Do you think there's a problem, which I sort of sometimes feel with this debate, that there is a tension between those who, like yourself, that want to make the arguments to say, this is going to be, if we don't do anything, this will be catastrophic, and sometimes leaning into an almost a sense of fatalism. That people sometimes hear those arguments and it almost feels like, my gosh, this sounds so difficult. It's never going to change. And that idea that it's never going to change or it's going to be too hard is always one of the most lethal ideas in politics, isn't it? I mean, how do you balance those things? No, you're so right. I've spent all the time that I've been dealing with this, which is since the mid-80s, trying to get that balance right. Because if you frighten people so much, and they feel that, then of course they say, drink America's tomorrow, we die anyway. The fact is, the world we're going to build by fighting climate change is a cleaner, greener, kinder, better world. And you have all the time to be clear to people that what you're trying to do is to change the world for the better for them, so that they don't have air, which is killing them. It's not an elite project. It's the opposite of an elite project. It has water that you can swim in. It has clean rivers that run it. It's the opposite of what is sometimes said. And the miserable newspapers, which can't understand that people's whole hearts and lives can be lifted if you talk about it in those terms, and if you do it in a way which enables them to do it. Let me give you an example of what the sort of stupidities we've got. The French are very sensibly done a very good thing, which is that they've got all their school playgrounds. They put some roofs over so that the cars can be under the some sort of shade, because the weather's getting much hotter. And then they put photovoltaic cells on the top of that. The school then gets cheap electricity, and they pay for that from the private sector. That's perfectly simple. We can't do that because there's a treasury arrangement, which means that you're not allowed to do that, because for some technical reason the treasury won't reach out to that.

Why are new homes built without being installed with heat pumps, right? Or why are new homes built

without solar panels, right? We have built one and a half million homes over the last few years, all of which have to be retrofitted. That is a scandal. It's a conservative government that went back on the promise for for having zero carbon homes. And then it's the housebuilding industry which has done this. So what the housebuilding industry has done is to sell people houses, take the profits for themselves, knowing that they've given a bill to everyone who's bought a house. That's why my somewhat radical proposal is that there should be a very simple levy on any housebuilder who built more than 100 homes for each of the past five years, for the next five years, and that should be there for their home purchases so that they could get the retrofit done. Finally, you mentioned there how long you've been at this, as it were, fighting this fight since the 80s. What was it in the 80s? Because obviously in the 1980s this was not a cause which was anywhere nearly as ubiquitous as it is today. What was it that made you think this is something I want to devote so much time to? Was there a moment or an event? I read an article which made me

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think about the science and of course it was the same sort of time as Mrs. Fatcher had been briefed on this and as a scientist recognized that time it changed was real. She talked about it at the UN. She talked about it at the UN and I used to write her speeches and used to write speeches which contained much of that material and I began to realize that it was right at the heart of one's attitude to the world. I've been brought up in a household where being a steward of what we've been given was a crucial moral demand and it seems to me that that's what we're beginning to learn. We're beginning to learn that we're not masters of creation. We actually have to be stewards of creation otherwise we destroy ourselves and that's the lesson right across the board of pollution of modern slavery of what we've done to the soil and the awful reduction in biodiversity. All that is teaching us that if you behave as if you are the rapist of this planet of ours then in the end you kill yourself. Will we do that? Are we doomed? We are not doomed but we have in our own hands our own future. That does two things. It dignifies us enormously but it also is a terrible responsibility. Lord Dieben, thanks so much for talking to us. Thank you. This is The News Agents.

Right that is all we've got time for this week. I don't know why I say that. We can just keep going forever on this podcast thing. It's not like we have to cut out for the weather or the sports news, something he can forever be grateful for but we probably should just leave it there anyway. John and Emily incidentally in case you were wondering should be back on Monday from their much needed sanatorium retreat on Lake Como. Frankly after how heavy they went to Glastonbury last weekend it's a minor miracle they made it in this week at all. Remember you can catch up on all our shows from this week on Global Player and you can find our new podcast, The News Agents USA, wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks to our production team on The News Agents, Gabriel Radis, Laura Fitzpatrick, Georgia Foxwell, Will Gibson-Smith, Alex Barnett, Rory Simon, Ellie Clifford and Kat Patterson. Our editor would have been Tom Hughes if he hadn't spent the whole week sitting on a verandah and sweltering Texan heat but we're hoping he's going to be back next week as well. The executive producer Dino Sophos. It's presented by Emily Maitlis, John Sopel and me, Lewis Goodall. We'll see you on Monday. Have a lovely weekend.