

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

We're following some breaking news this hour.

SpaceX's Starship rocket suffered what the company is calling a, quote, rapidly unscheduled assembly, which means to you and me, the launch was a failure.

Remember that?

The SpaceX launch that crashed and burned.

Well, Elon Musk did it again last night.

This time, it involved a man, Rhonda Santis.

He was going to launch his presidential campaign on Twitter with Elon Musk.

It would be modern.

It would be social media friendly.

It would engage a new generation of people, maybe not that interested in politics, except rather like SpaceX, it suffered a rapid, unscheduled disassembly.

This is what it sounded like.

25 minutes of pure shambles.

You might not think you're interested in the latest presidential campaign hopeful, but you won't want to miss this one.

Welcome to the news agents.

The news agents.

It's John.

It's Emily.

Later in the podcast, we're going to be hearing about the net migration figures and the continual promises that they would be coming down, instead of which they just continue to rise and rise.

But we're going to start not with a rocket launch, but with a car crash, because this was what happened to much fevered anticipation last night when Rhonda Santis, who is, in Republicans' minds, the only candidate so far that could take on Donald Trump for the Republican nomination next year, went on Twitter Spaces with Elon Musk.

It didn't go to plan.

Such a great noise.

Sorry about that.

We've got so many people here that I think we are kind of melting the servers, which is a good sign.

That was the moderator, David Sacks, who's also a big funder, a donor of the Rhonda Santis campaign, probably wondering what on earth he's doing stuck there between these two beasts at that specific time.

Elon Musk, who couldn't even get his servers to work for this huge, catastrophically awful moment, and Rhonda Santis, who for some unbelievable reason chose not to be in vision for his campaign launch.

Rhonda Santis, as we reported on the podcast yesterday, was promising competence, professionalism under lack of drama.

He gave us drama last night.

He gave us slapstick.

He gave us custard pie humour.

He gave us, whoops, I've fallen over.

The first 25 minutes of that were just unbelievable.

I'd like to welcome Governor Santis for this historic, we're just trying to get a go on because there's so many people.

It's unfortunate.

I've never seen this before.

I'd like to just try to get a go on.

And make this your relate to this because both of us are technically challenged at times.

I thought I had done something wrong when I was listening at home at 11 o'clock at night.

There's howl around.

There's echoing noises.

There's the line drops off.

There's suddenly music.

And I thought, my God, what have I done wrong?

Might have surprised many, but not those of us who've known and worked with Elon for nearly a quarter of a century.

His commitment to freedom and his willingness to put his money well into his mouth is upset the narrative he's all imposed on us by our government.

No, it was all Twitter headquarters, and you thought, if there was only somebody here who knew something about tech, who could maybe sort this out?

So what Ron DeSantis gave last night was the biggest gift imaginable to Donald Trump.

And I think it's worth reminding you that Ron DeSantis comes to this as like the young guy in the race.

He's trying to remind everyone that Donald Trump is 76.

He's the old guy.

And 44, which is Ron DeSantis age, is in US presidential dog years pretty young.

And yet last night will have undermined that as a very simple concept.

And all he's done is give Donald Trump fodder, sound bites, humor, gifts, gifts, gifts galore, the gifts that keep on giving.

So he was called Ron DeSanctimonius.

If we were better at this, we'd probably work out what his new nickname is going to be.

But I think it was.

Ron DeSanct.

I do think it speaks, though, to a real error of judgment on the part of Ron DeSantis because Elon Musk got everything from this.

Elon Musk gets to portray his site in the middle of a presidential campaign.

We know that he supports Ron DeSantis.

He thought that Ron DeSantis was the moderate version of Trump.

So he was always going to gain from this as a publicity stunt, not so much today.

But Ron DeSantis, why would you do that?

Why would you align yourself to one medium, particularly when it has the potential to go

so wrong?

Yeah, we may be completely wrong about this and maybe exaggerating the effects of this.

But in American politics, the hoopla does matter.

Getting the theatrics right does matter.

And you wanted to make a splash, particularly having teased it for so long and teased it along the lines that you were going to be this really super professional, competent human being.

And then you are part of an absolute omnishambles of a launch like last night.

That is going to do him damage.

And I honestly, I don't think Donald Trump has probably laughed so much in a very long time and those around him because it was just excruciating, toe curling.

Oh God, this is just awful.

And he's already 20 points behind Trump.

So the point is, if you are David in the Goliath race, you can't be a shit David and lose even further.

You've got to take on Goliath and show what you're capable of.

He's 20 points behind Trump or was, I'm imagining that unless he does something absolutely mind-blowing

in the next 72 hours, that could be the beginning of the end or the end of the end of the Ronda Santos campaign.

Could be wrong.

And I love being wrong about presidential elections because it makes it much more fun.

But it's hard to see how there's a really solid recovery at this point.

Having got that 25 minute nightmare, I would imagine you'll have anxiety dreams about that for many years.

Worse than no levels.

Yeah, really, really worse than waiting for your own level results.

He then did the conventional thing and went on Fox News and set out his stall.

In Florida, we say we're the state where woke goes to die.

You know, as president, I'm going to make sure woke ideology ends up in the dustbin of history.

You see, this was the substance of what Ronda Santos wanted to talk about last night.

He wants to be the man that carries on the anti-woke clamor.

He thinks that there is a real space for more culture wars amongst the American right.

We discussed this yesterday on the podcast.

He might be right on that or he might be completely wrong because any Republican presidential candidate has to search for the middle ground right now.

And that's not necessarily over culture wars.

But at this point, no one will have heard the message about woke.

Nobody will have heard the message about Florida.

Nobody will be remembering his anti-gay laws or his abortion laws.

They'll just be thinking, do I really want to give my vote to a man who actually can't even launch his own campaign?

Look, what he tried to do last night was to walk across the street and take the fight

to Donald Trump and say, I am the true representative of MAGA supporters.
But in walking across the street, he slipped on a banana skin and landed on a whoopy cushion.
And that is what people will take from Ronda Santos.
He bumped into the chicken.
Exactly.
We'll be back in a moment.
And this time we're close to home talking about immigration and immigrants.
This is The News Agents.
Welcome back.
And Lewis is in the studio with us now.
And the Conservative government, since it's come to power, has every year gone on about how it is going to bring down net migration to the tens of thousands, stop the boats, taking back control of our borders, leave the EU, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.
Go home, Vans.
Yeah.
And today we had net migration figures that if you're just judging it by the rhetoric of what the government has promised, it's fallen a million miles short.
Well, 600,000 short.
These are the highest net migration figures ever on record.
And the previous highest record was last year.
So you get net migration by taking the total number of people who have left the country immigration, from the total number of people who have come into the country, immigration, and you get this figure.
So that figure was half a million in 2021.
And the ONS say that it rose to 606,000 last year.
These are the highest net migration figures on record.
Let's have a listen to what Rishi Sunak said about it a little earlier.
The numbers are just too high.
And there's been various factors, and you'll read the report, whether it's welcoming people here from Hong Kong or Ukraine, that's had an impact.
As we saw after the pandemic, more people came back to study here who hadn't been here during the pandemic years.
Look, but fundamentally, the numbers are high.
Important thing is this is less than the expectation management that the government had put on.
Over the last couple of weeks, there's all this speculation in the papers that the figure would be a million or even north of a million.
And it hasn't been that.
So although it is the highest on record, the way this lands will be a little bit less acutely far up by the government than it might have been.
But look, it's still an enormous figure.
And we should sort of just break it down.
It continues the trend that we've seen in recent years, where we've seen non-EU migration, overtake substantially EU migration.
We used to have EU migration far higher than non-EU.

That has completely reversed.

In fact, we now have net EU emigration.

More people, EU citizens, are now leaving the country than are arriving.

But if you break down the total numbers, you see that beyond the headline, there are some really big substantial groups that actually show that it's not completely what you might think.

So you've got 235,000 students and dependents.

So that's about a total third of the figure.

Then you've got about 235,000 on work visas doing key jobs.

250,000 or so asylum seekers or using humanitarian routes.

So you've got those three big blocks of people who make up this overall number that you're going to hear a lot about today.

I think it speaks to a real sort of mental inconsistency of the British voter, that we don't know quite what our response is.

Because if you ask voters, do you want to see immigration go down, nine out of 10 conservative voters will say yes.

And most Labour voters will actually agree, yes, we want immigration to go down.

If you ask people, if they want more nurses or more carers or more fruit pickers or more agricultural workers or more computer whizzers or more people to work in academia or more students, they'll go, yes, we want to enrich the country or we want to make the country work or we want people to build things.

We want people to care for our elderly.

And so actually what it comes down to is this really odd positioning, which is the immigration is this bogey, this thing that we all hate when it's high.

But actually, we do need the people to make the country run and at the moment, the country's not running.

So this is the point, right?

I think if you have a drink from now until the end of the day, for all the times you listen to the media today and hear people say, we need to have an honest debate.

If you had a drink today, every time you heard on the media, some commentator pop up saying, we need an honest debate on immigration, you would be completely leathered by about three o'clock.

It depends on what you're drinking.

Well, I assume if it's anything like you, John, it's something reasonably stiff.

Yeah, absolutely.

The point is politicians never have an honest debate about that.

But when people call for an honest debate, the honest debate we need is not the one that they say they want.

When people say that, they basically mean that we should have a debate which basically says immigration is bad.

What we actually really need and we need politicians to do is have the debate that Emily has just alluded to, which is that immigration, like so much else about policy and politics, is about trade-offs.

You can reduce that number of 235,000 workfeets.

No problem, fine.

But about 100,000 or so of that over the last year has been nurses and care workers.

Where are they going to come from?

And when you're taking your elderly relative into an NHS ward or you're taking them into a care home.

Or you're a farmer actually trying not to let your crops go rotten, right?

Yeah.

It's actually quite like somebody other than Suella saying, oh, come on, can't we all pick fruit now?

The prices go up as a result because they have to pay people high, so it pushes inflation up.

So yes, this is all about trade-offs and that is never the honest debate or the that we ever have because all we have politicians say, and we'll see soon that we're saying it again today, is we need to get the number down.

Fine.

Do that.

That's a perfectly fine policy objective, but then explain to us where those workers are going to come from and how long it's going to take to train the British workers to take their place.

I was struck by that phrase from Suella Brougham and I think at the weekend where she said we need to train fruit pickers and I'm thinking, I don't want to disparage fruit picking, but I've picked peas before and got paid for it.

It's not that sophisticated picking peas and you don't need that much training.

The problem is that in Lincolnshire or wherever it happens to be, you can't find anyone who is British who will do that work and therefore if you want to get this stuff off the trees or wherever it happens to be or off the ground, you need to bring people into the country to get it done and that is what is generating economic growth.

It's the great myth of Brexit that suddenly there would be British jobs for British workers and we wouldn't need these numbers of people coming in from abroad because happy British workers would be in the fields picking the vegetables.

There are British jobs, but there aren't actually the British workers.

It's interesting that you mentioned Brexit because that figure of 606,000 today's figure is double what it was just before the Brexit referendum in 2016.

That was the moment when the Brexiteers said, look at this, 330,000 people coming in.

Do you like this?

And the country said, no, 52% of those who voted anyway decided that it was too big a number.

Eight years after Brexit, we are now at double the number and it's not that the number is bad because as you've said, a lot of them are students, a lot of them are refugees, a lot of them are the kind of people that we think as a country we very much want to welcome. But if Brexit was meant to be the answer to controlling your immigration and you've now got a prime minister who is trying to show you how out of control it actually is, then on that metric, it has not worked.

Well, to some extent, it sort of reveals the slight myth that the Brexit vote when people

talked about Brexit and immigration, leave another said, look, it's not about numbers, it's about control.

Well, the British government has control.

The British government, not at the channel, but certainly in terms of the vast majority of people arriving, arriving through legal routes, accessing the British labor market, the British government is choosing to let them in.

Now, the British government could be held accountable for that.

There's still a sort of fine Brexit argument to say that that is preferable to what we had before, which was a lack of control, but the state is now accountable to it.

And still, we need these people.

And some of this, the ONS said today, you know, this is going to be an exceptional period.

This is partly the sort of after effects of COVID-19.

We've had other shocks.

Obviously, we've had what's happened in Ukraine and so on, the British labor market is adjusting itself in all sorts of ways.

We've probably hit the peak, but nonetheless, no one is seriously expecting actually net migration next year or the year after, to go back even to the figure it was in 2016.

Oh, if Richie Sudnack got it down to the pre-Brexit figure, he'd be cavorting in the streets.

So where does this play out politically?

Because Lewis, you were right to point out that the government sort of set the bar, expectation management at a million happy days, it's nothing like as bad as that.

But on the other hand, year after year after year, as we've been saying, the government has been saying, we're going to deal with this, we're going to sort this, it's going to be tens of thousands, we've got this policy, we've got that policy, and the numbers keep on rising.

Do you think the British people think, oh my God, they've let us down or do they look at Labour and think, well, you just let all these people in in boats and you're not really tough on migration either?

I think it's absolutely corrosive for politics in the sense that it's corrosive for the Conservative Party.

For politics generally.

For politics generally, yeah, but also for the Conservative Party, I mean, just take the Conservative Party first.

It would be like us every day, so we were going to put podcasts out, and every day never doing it.

Sooner or later, we're going to have no journalists for that.

They might do.

That's what he records.

Let's not try that, let's just not try that, but you know, what my point is, is that we would just lose credibility.

People at some point, we're just not going to believe us anymore, and the Conservative Party has repeatedly, from Cameron onwards, set itself up to fail.

It's not as if they don't try.

I mean, Cameron said in the cabinets, you know, pre-2016, that it was only he and Theresa

May were really serious about getting that migration down to the tens of thousands, which is his target.

But the problem is, as I go back to this point, it is about trade-offs.

So you might have the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister wanting to do that.

Then you have the Business Secretary coming to you and say, well, I've got the whole of British business coming to me, saying that hospitality can't go any workers.

I've got the Education Secretary coming to me and saying, higher education sector will collapse one of our huge export industries if it isn't for all of these students coming in and keeping these universities balance sheets afloat, so you have to make these accommodations. And my point is, no British politician, and that includes the Labour Party at the moment, is willing to have that straight, honest conversation about trade-offs with the British public, and that is caustic and corrosive for politics.

The flip side, of course, is we've talked on this podcast before about how difficult it is to find housing.

Yeah, totally.

Now, as soon as you're talking to people who say, I can't get a house, why have we let another 606,000 people in who also want housing, then it becomes a much more direct trade-off, which is, no, I prefer to live in the village that I grew up in and I can't afford a house there.

I think that's completely right.

I think this is the strongest argument that people who are skeptical about these numbers have.

You'll hear quite a few arguments today saying, oh, British business is addicted to cheap labour.

Well, you can make that argument.

And you can also, conversely, and this is an argument we never hear, that it is almost a sign of British success, at least to some extent, but we do have a highly educated workforce in this country.

We have a workforce, many, many graduates, they want to work on our able to work in highly skilled jobs in the services sector.

Their education means, effectively, that they don't feel the need or want to work in a lot of these low-skilled jobs.

It is actually a sign of success in many industries that Britain requires these workers from elsewhere,

but it is absolutely true to say that if the British government is going to pursue that model, which let's be honest, to a greater or lesser extent, government of any colour is going to, the failure to invest in housing in particular is catastrophic.

And we just see this theme coming back political area after area that we discuss on this show.

Housing is the biggest problem, because you hear about schools and you hear about hospitals.

The truth is, most immigrants who come to the country, particularly if they're students or whatever, they tend to be young, they don't have children, so they're not a particular drain on schooling, at least not for some years.

They tend to be healthy, so they're not usually a drain on the NHS.

Housing, by contrast, obviously, everybody's got to have somewhere to live.

And the long-term failure of British governments of every stripe to reform planning, to make the builders build enough houses, and if not step in and do it themselves, it's the biggest, biggest problem in terms of delegitimising immigration and creating tension.

Because actually, if you look at the British public in terms of their views, you've already alluded to it only in terms of what they think about more carers and humanitarian routes, people are very tolerant, people are actually very comfortable with it, and it's certainly usually about race either.

It is a question usually, in particular, about housing.

Welcome back.

If you were listening to us yesterday, you'd have heard we had an interview with Gitto Harry, who was Boris Johnson's last director of communications.

And it was a pretty fierce, combative, fair, but hard-hitting interview.

Robust.

Robust.

That's a good...

He hit back.

We had a good chat.

Yes, it was.

I think it's the other way of putting it.

Today, we're joined by Cleo Watson.

Now, in a much more junior capacity, she worked in Downing Street, initially for Theresa May, but then for Boris Johnson, and was there at the start of the pandemic.

She's very interesting on the personality of Boris Johnson, and not quite sure whether she was fired by him or whether she left, and a lot of interesting things to say.

She's also written, I think, what is in the term, known as a bit of a bonkbuster book.

It's called Whips, and here's a little taster.

Tonight, just after 11pm on a Wednesday, one office is still occupied, dimly lit by a single, lozen-shaped green lamp.

A man sits at a large desk with his shoulders hunched forward, palms on the table, deeply absorbed in his exertions.

In the few inches between his face and some documents on the leather-bound surface is a woman on her back.

Her fit-flopped sliders braced against the arms of the chair, her skirt pulled up to reveal a convenient hole torn in the gusset of her flesh-coloured M&S tights.

As ever, she is what's app-ing, gossip for journalists, instructions for her advisors and officials, congratulations to an MP for a speech in the chamber she's pretending she heard.

Cleo, was there really that much sex going on?

Well, there's obviously quite a lot going on that we know about, because when we sit in the papers, obviously the stuff we generally know is pretty serious, but the main thing is I think there's plenty of opportunity for it to happen.

Obviously the house sits late, it's got all these kind of nooks and crannies, lots of wine between votes, so the main thing is I think there's opportunity.

I'm going to put the question differently.

Is this the result of your imagination or the result of stories you heard?

I'm embarrassed to say this is my sick imagination, but you can definitely get inspiration I think from some of the stories that we know about, and like I say, the main thing is the staging is there for all this stuff to go on.

The party gate, what's astonishing looking back on it, and you were there, is how long it took for anything to emerge about what was going on?

One of the slightly confusing things is I believe at the time there was some stuff out there published in the papers about certain gatherings happening, the event on the Prime Minister's birthday, so that was technically out there in the public, but it wasn't necessarily dealt with.

I think that often whether these are deliberately laid pipe bombs or it's just where the public goes, where the media interest goes, I generally think these things come to light in the end. There was quite a public falling out between the Prime Minister and Dominic Cummings. What led to that?

We didn't ever understand, what was the catalyst that just sort of led to the whole walk out? What was kind of interesting to me was that obviously it's been seen as this huge fallout, but I remember their last meeting, I was in the room next door and they were kind of laughing and joking and talking about working together again the following year, so it actually felt like it ended on, dare I say it, quite a good note, but then that weekend there were all kinds of briefings into the papers.

I don't know who fired the first shot, but ultimately I think it just became a bit of a race to the bottom after that.

Do you think that was people around the Prime Minister or do you think it was, I mean, is your sense that there were people who were trying to get their revenge on Cummings at that point?

I really don't know.

I mean, it felt like in the same way that obviously Johnson has his particular coterie of supporters around him now, those people tend to be pretty anti-dominant Cummings as well, and I don't think people necessarily understood when they severed ties working together that actually it had ended fairly amicably, so I'm not sure that it was sort of authorised, but something got going either way.

Did you feel that with Boris Johnson when he was Prime Minister that it was inevitably going to end in tears?

Well, bearing in mind that when I came into work for Theresa May, it was just after the 2017 general election, so that felt on the cusp of...

It nearly ended in tears.

Yeah.

So I suppose I was just quite used to thinking might be gone next week anyway, and obviously I didn't work on his leadership contest.

I came in a little bit later than everybody else, but when I did come in, it was quite a full time.

He'd inherited her majority.

He was determined to get a Brexit done by October 31st.

He got rid of a lot of MPs in his policy.

Yeah, and it was physically hard to get into work because there were protectors on White Hall, and he seemed very anxious that he could end up being the shortest serving Prime Minister in history, but it's honestly, it's hard to know, and I didn't know the guy very well when I came in, and the more I think about it now, I'm not sure I ever did get to know him that well.

What does that mean?

I think that you never quite know what fully motivates a person and what their kind of incentives are, but I think particularly the terms on which I ended up leaving, I never quite understood whether I would sort of been fired or whether I had resigned, and it felt very up in the air.

And then actually, and I'd felt quite close to him because obviously I had this role where I was kind of physically around him a lot, and particularly when he was recovering from COVID, it required quite a lot of thinking about his schedule, his meal times and rest and exercise and that kind of thing.

And then I was reading some of the Anthony Seldon extracts and the bit where he and Sajid Javid are talking, and he's saying to Sajid, you can't take your advisors with you if you stay as Chancellor, and Sajid obviously fights back, and he said, they're just people.

And it's actually helped me to process that little bit to think, oh, I was just people.

Collateral.

For him.

Do you think that if the fallout hadn't been so bad between Lee Cain and Dominic Cummings, we would ever have known about Partygate?

And my understanding is that kind of initial video was from Downing Street to ITV.

So I mean, I don't know the kind of infinity web where all this stuff fits in.

I mean, it wasn't leaked by people outside of government to that point, it was leaked by an insider.

I assume so, because I don't know how the outside of government people would have got it.

You know, that video was made after they'd left already.

So truthfully, I don't know, this was quite a shocking example of people really falling out this time.

The stuff that we now know about the parties that went on really regularly sound crazy.

I mean, wine and vomit on the walls and also some pretty dark stories.

Really dark stories, even sort of allegations of sexual assault, people literally shagging on the sofas and people having sex against their will.

I mean, was that happening?

Well, not that I knew of.

I mean, you're right, I was at one event.

I was at the event in the cabinet room for his birthday and, you know, basically not to kind of wriggle off the hook, but I went home as soon as I could because, you know, I've got family and that was very important to me.

I think what is difficult is these, obviously, all this information is in the Sue Gray report and it felt particularly if you're, I imagine, you know, a family who has lost someone to COVID or your frontline worker in A&E.

The rage they must have felt, particularly after being with pieces who lied to about it last year, they must have got some questions at least answered this time last year. And so seeing the whole thing reopened this week and getting a sense of, so hang on, were we told the truth or is there another layer of lies on top, must be really hurtful. But just very quickly on some of the habeas stuff, I think one of the things I really hope the eventual COVID inquiry does is look at what those civil servants were doing with the rest of their time and an advisors. And I know, you know, I couldn't regret being at that cabinet room event more than I possibly do and I completely apologise for it. But those were not the kind of strong memories of COVID in number 10 and the work that these people were doing was, you know, and this isn't to try and necessarily pivot away from these events, but they were, you know, doing quite harrowing work. They were, you know, finding sites for mass graves. They were renting potential ice rinks as morgues and certainly at the beginning they were ringing up individual hospitals to find out how many people had died that day because we didn't have that dashboard going. And at the moment, I think the entire kind of government COVID response feels defined by Partigate at the moment because that's all that's sort of publicly available. And I really hope that if this inquiry does anything, it does put some light on what these civil servants are doing. Look, very good luck with the book. Thank you. I mean, I can't wait to read it. I should have bought you to do the audio book. What was I thinking? Yeah, I'm available. Weddings by Mitzvah's Masonics and Audio Readings. Thanks so much for having me on. It's been great. Great pleasure. Thank you. It's lovely. Lewis will be back tomorrow. Making up some adventure for us. Yeah. Saying I'm on a plane at 7.40 in the morning or something. Which might actually be reality. I hope it will be, actually. Yes, I'm away. You're away. You're off for half-term. Have a lovely time. We'll see you in a bit and I'll be back on Tuesday because Monday is the bank holiday and none of us will be here.

Bye.

Bye-bye.

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