

[Transcript] The News Agents / EMERGENCY EPISODE: Boris Johnson Quits Parliament

This is an emergency episode of the newsagents because we want to tell you a story, a bedtime story if you're going to bed really late tonight. It contains someone who feels that wrong has been done to him.

I have received a letter from the Privileges Committee making it clear much to my amazement they are determined to use the proceedings against me to drive me out of Parliament.

They have still not produced a shred of evidence that I knowingly or recklessly misled the Commons.

You may have guessed by now that this letter has been written by one Boris Johnson soon to be ex-MP. It goes on. Their purpose from the beginning has been to find me guilty regardless of the facts. This is the very definition of a kangaroo court.

Most members of the committee, especially the chair, had already expressed deeply prejudicial remarks about my guilt before they'd even seen the evidence. They should have recused themselves.

We hope you're sitting comfortably, children, because Boris has reached his crescendo. So I have today written to my association in Uxbridge and South Rhyslip to say that I am stepping down forthwith and triggering an immediate by-election. It is very sad to be leaving Parliament, at least for now, but above all I am bewildered and appalled that I can be forced out anti-democratically by a committee chaired and managed by Harriet Harman with such egregious bias.

On this emergency episode of the News Agents, Boris Johnson's resignation from Parliament, the fallout and what it means for Rishi Sunak and the Conservative Party.

Welcome to the News Agents.

The News Agents.

It's John.

It's Emily.

And it's Lewis.

And Lewis has been broadcasting non-stop for about the last four hours, did the Friday podcast and latterly, Emily and I have decided it is time to come to the microphone.

What a hero.

I know. Lewis, just take us through what it was like when you saw the kind of flash, the breaking news, Johnson is standing down with immediate effect.

Well, it was extraordinary, John. I mean, it's one of those nights, I mean, you both know this in live broadcasting that you kind of live for, right? And there's just this flash of adrenaline, a sort of flash of a sign-up just cuts across and you reread the tweet again and again and you can't quite believe it. Look, we thought we'd been very well served by the news on this Friday, right? It wasn't one of those Fridays where you're sort of trying to think, oh, what are we going to do? We had Nadine Dorri's resignation coming at four o'clock. We were going to do something about the Trump indictment, which we couldn't do. And when we finally put that episode to bed, and as you say, I went to do the LBC show, at about eight o'clock, I just see this tweet from Steve Swimford, the political editor of the Times, which initially says that Boris Johnson has been handed the Privileges Committee report and they're going to recommend a suspension of more than 10 days, which will likely trigger a by-election. Literally, I think about 60 seconds later, I see another tweet from Swimford saying that Boris Johnson had resigned. And initially, my initial sort of assessment of

it was, you know, this is the end of Boris Johnson's career. Then, lo and behold, there is a piece in the spectator where he says that I'm leaving Parliament for now, thereby at least rhetorically having a question mark over his future, which of course, once again, the psychodrama about Boris Johnson and his future is gripping British politics and it's gripping the Conservative Party.

I think what got me was the length of that letter. The resignation letter, if you can call it that, was basically just this one long howl of self-pity. And it is an extraordinary beast just to go through. He talks of being driven out. He manages to blame both Harriet Harmon and Sue Gray. He talks about not only not lying, but accusing those on the Parliamentary Select Committee, this Privileges Committee, which is, we should remind people, Conservative dominated in terms of the numbers. And he thinks that they knew that he didn't lie, but they were willfully trying to make his life hell. And it is extraordinary, I think, to step back and look at the man who honestly had it all. He had it all. He had this extraordinary majority. He had this ability to win. He had the best education. He had people falling at their feet for him. And he managed to, in his words, spaff it all up the wall, right? I mean, he managed just to throw the whole thing away, time and time again, because he didn't actually care about the job. He cared about Boris Johnson.

The thing that I wondered, looking at that statement, that this long self-justificatory, self-pitying, accusing everybody, conspiracy theory rich, fact poor thing of a statement, where the Donald Trump had rung him up and said, look, I've got this F6 button on my keyboard, which is my, it's a witch hunt. It's been going on ever since I became president. And you could use it to Boris if you're in a problem, because it just seemed so identical. And, you know, okay, he doesn't call it a witch hunt. He calls it a kangaroo court.

But in every other respect, this was Boris Johnson playing from a playbook that has been used by Donald Trump repeatedly and being used by Donald Trump today, because, of course, he got that second indictment. And I just thought there was something really extraordinary about it. But also the conjunction of that with the fact that the Honours List had come out today. And here we have Boris Johnson rewarding all these people, but he has to resign himself in some disgrace because of what the Privileges Committee has found. And you just wonder whether those people who have been honoured feel whether they really have been honoured or not, given the circumstances of it all. It is absolutely amazing that on the same day that Boris Johnson resigns as a result of the fact that we can deduce from the Privileges Committee are going to say that he knowingly misled Parliament, that is the cardinal sin of the British constitution of British politics. If you're a minister, let alone the Prime Minister, you never knowingly mislead Parliament. He joins the pantheon of John Profumo, who knowingly misled the House, of Anthony Eden, who knowingly misled the House over Suez. And yet on that same day it is announced that Boris Johnson has appointed a selection of his political aides, primarily former political aides, to the legislature for life. That part of the story will get lost inevitably because of the conjecture and the speculation about what Boris Johnson is going to do next. But we shouldn't lose sight of it. It is extraordinary and it is a complete and utter damnation really, or is it a complete and utter repudiation of any sense of there being honour in our politics. I don't think we'll lose sight of it at all. And I think that there are two things going on here. One hinges around what Nadine Doris did or didn't know. I mean, she's had a pretty complicated day. I know you also was busy at Lewis, but if you look at Nadine Doris, who just yesterday we were reminding our

listeners

of her decision to step down back in February at the next election, today she says she's going to step down. And we assume it's because she's on the Honours list and is getting her ermine, you know, going to become a peer. Then it turns out she's not on the list because presumably Rishi Sunak has blocked it and doesn't want to trigger the by-election. Then she resigns anyway, i.e. a big hypodermic needle jab in Rishi Sunak's election chances by making him have this by-election anyway. And you can't help wondering, I saw a clip with her where she said oh I can't reveal everything I know but obviously I've learned a lot of things today. I'm wondering whether Nadine Doris was privy to Boris Johnson's innermost thoughts and knew that he was going and

rather like the sort of Egyptian servant who kind of paves the way for their master by going into the pyramidal tomb first. She basically jumped before he did and maybe that seat, you know, the mid-bed's seat is now something that she will liberate as it were for him. But I think the other thing that it does is cast Rishi Sunak in quite a weird light because he's just passed all these honours through. He knew that they were deeply lacking in integrity. They were absolutely beyond impunity, absolutely egregious and yet he decided just in the last 48 hours to let them all go through. Look there are so many questions aren't there? I mean Nadine Doris is one set of questions about what she knew when she knew it. I'm not going to trigger a by-election. Oh I am going, I am going to trigger a by-election and kind of worth listening to the kind of about turns. The little pirouettes that Nadine has performed during the course of today. The other set of questions are what did Rishi Sunak know? Did Rishi Sunak think that actually yeah maybe I'm aware of what the privilege of his report is going to say and I have got leverage now over Boris Johnson. I can get him out of parliament. I can be rid of him. I'll give him his honours but he has to go in return. Or did Rishi Sunak just want peace and quiet from Boris Johnson which he certainly has not got now and just say I will give you the honours list that you want. So that's another kind of huge question that we just don't know the answer to. Well the other question as well is whether others might follow Johnson and Doris and there are all sorts of at the time of recording anyway. There are all sorts of rumours circulating in Westminster that other people who were supposed to be on that list of peerages, other allies of Johnson might follow and if that's the case then this story expands into something even bigger than just Boris Johnson being in his view hounded out of parliament in a more accurate view his being the victim of his own demise and of his own choices. And that is this expands into a bigger even bigger civil war within the Conservative Party and what then starts to look like a concerted attempt to remove Sunak. We should also just say one other thing and people will probably by the time they listen to that this have heard this view expressed not only by Johnson in the spectator but also by some of his allies as well this stuff about it being a kangaroo court of it being Harriet Harman and he names Harman again and again entirely deliberately this idea that they were always out to get him. The Privileges Committee did not remove Boris Johnson from parliament. The Privileges Committee would not have instigated a by-election against him. There were still more hurdles to go through. The Privileges Committee would have made its recommendation. Let us not forget it is a conservative majority committee so for him we don't know exactly the outcome we don't know exactly who voted for what whether it was unanimous and if it was unanimous then that will greatly add to its credibility but we do know that by definition at least some conservative MPs must have voted for this serious suspension right and that would have led to the House of Commons that

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being transferred to the House of Commons and then the House of Commons would have had to vote on his suspension from parliament. If they all of his MPs his fellow MPs had adjudged that that sentence that that punishment was proportionate to what he'd done only then would it have taken a petition within Uxbridge to generate a by-election. So if Boris Johnson had been so convinced of the righteousness and the justice of his cause he could have first taken it to his MPs fellow MPs and then he could have taken it to his own constituents. He didn't he's bottled it he's not running it in any by-election because he has chosen to run away. Look this is exactly the bit that doesn't make any sense to me at all you read that long rant which Mateless has brilliantly summed up and you think well hang on if it's so unjust and this is all wrong and these are lies and there is no fairness in any of this then go fight it. What do you mean so as a result of all this injustice I surrender that's not the Boris Johnson who's waiting for the ball to fall out the back of the scrum and if it falls my way I'll pick it up that it just doesn't make any sense. I think that Boris Johnson knew that he was toast and has realized that he's absolutely cornered or snookered or whatever metaphor you want to use and has just given up the ghost but he's dressing it up in this language as if there has been this massive conspiracy and also calling his troops to arms to man the barricades and to maybe bring down sooner. All I would say about that is remember what happened on the vote on the Windsor framework when he and Liz Truss led the charge against it and nothing happened. I mean it all sounds very grand and grandiose talk about plots and subplots and whatsapp groups and who's been removed. Fundamentally we are back to a playground popularity contest and basically this is Boris Johnson kind of trying to see if he's got enough people who will come with him and Lewis has said you know we're waiting to see anyone who might step down at the moment somebody is circulating rumours you know to sort of senior conservative bleeding journalists about there being more resignations until we actually see who goes and what kind of numbers then all we've got is a sense of generated puff which is meant to be surrounding Boris Johnson. Yeah I think that's right John I mean presumably he doesn't want to be a loser he thinks of himself as the winner he's the election winner and so he kind of thinks right I'm not going to fight Ducksbridge and this is an easy way for me to come out all guns blazing and then regroup and maybe he is you know maybe he is going to get his army maybe he does come back and maybe is an absolute nightmare for Rishi Sunak but at the moment it's quite easy to assume there's something going on in the wings when there might just not be enough people who really fancy their chances with them anymore let's not forget it was Boris Johnson's own party own MPs they've got rid of him. So one of the immediate questions for Sunak is if he is serious about trying to come back in some form whether it were in mid-bed fortune or some other seat the question is then thrown to Sunak and CCHQ about whether or not to allow him to stand and the assumption I think has got to be that Sunak won't allow him to stand which on the basis of the privileged committee they could do would try and stop him and that is assuming as I say that Johnson might be interested in doing it I agree I think Emily I think you're right like it's actually it's obviously this feels really big and and it could it could be big if Johnson is motivated by vengeance and he wants

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to do something about it then maybe but as Jon has said he didn't have many numbers actually a lot of conservative MPs are pretty sick of him actually according to the poll in quite a few conservative party members are actually really sick of him the public are absolutely sick of him and it isn't guaranteed that despite all of the noise tonight that he will be able to generate this continued acrimony I would say this though I mean if we're thinking about where this leaves Rishi Sunak on the one hand it is clearly a big win for him in the sense that his primary rival his nemesis his antagonist has gone whenever there was going to be a political problem or something

that happened or a by-election or whatever it was then word was always going to be well what will Boris Johnson do might Boris Johnson come back at least for now that seems to no longer be possible so that's got to be just a parliamentary win for him of course on the debit side it means there's going to be a by-election a by-election that the Conservatives almost certainly lose in Uxbridge if the current polling is correct there's a majority of about 7 000 never mind the wider circumstances and of course it really detracts from the primary message that Sunak has been trying to

create right which is that he's steadied the ship the psycho drama is over we're back to solid normal governance and this just reminds voters and everybody of all the reasons that Sunak was put there in the first place which was all of the turmoil that came before if that ends now if this really is a full stop if it's kind of the end of the long period that's characterised British politics from 2016 to 2023 then maybe that helps Sunak but every day that Johnson is in the headlines

like he has been all day today although it reminds voters and Conservative MPs why it was wise to remove him it also reminds voters and Conservative MPs why he had to be removed and ultimately that

is a stain on Sunak and the Conservative Party because after all Sunak does owe his entire rise to Boris Johnson I think you have to understand as well slightly the pathology of the Conservative Party and what has made it this kind of ruthless election winning machine and which is that although

there have been ideological battles galore and you know and you look at the last 30 years and particularly with Europe as the central fault line over it they still managed to come together at election times for the most part and put on a decent show of unity more or less and get themselves over the line and Conservative Party activists will be thinking we've still got this kind of chance of repeating what John Major did in 1992 if only we can come together if only we can you know just get our ducks in a row and we can start behaving like a proper government and you have this noise from Boris and I'm sure an awful lot of Tory activists will be thinking this is treacherous yeah Boris will have some people around the constituencies around the UK saying Boris was wronged he was done down he should be our leader but I think there'll be a huge proportion who think

this is a distraction and just cements that image of the Conservative Party as just being inward looking and fighting each other and not speaking to the British people and for a major political party that would be catastrophic yeah I mean the other thing I'd say is that people will talk about his political obituary on the assumption that this does feel final even if it probably isn't and people will use the words like you know the complication of his legacy and how much he did

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and how much he achieved and I think you will hear about him getting Brexit done and he didn't I mean he got the bill through but as we know as we see every single day Brexit is far from done and is making many many people's lives increasingly difficult and complicated and poorer he also will

tell you and others around him will tell you that he got the vaccine rollout done categorically UK vaccines were procured whilst we were still a member of the single market and the European Medicines Agency and there is a special regulation that means you can bypass the authorization anyway to get a vaccine rolled out so that is categorically not true and they will tell you time and time again that he is this extraordinary election winning machine the 80 seat majority blah blah blah completely forgetting that he stood against the one Labour candidate who did more damage to the Labour Party electorally than anyone in the last nearly 90 years so I just think every time you hear about this extraordinary political legacy of Boris Johnson you kind of have to put it back into the context of what really happened he was a prime minister during Covid where traditionally

the public is very happy to rally round the flag to support a leader in a kind of wartime situation and what did he do he threw it all away by literally breaking the laws that he had set up and seemingly not really minding or not even admitting it I mean it is absolutely amazing I mean I remember I think Emily you were there at the time we were there for Newsnight the Conservative Party Conference of October 2021 right so it's not even two years ago like the pomp of Johnson the first proper Conservative Party Conference after the general election of 2019 because of Covid the huge risk was astonishing it had not been long after the the Hartlepool by-election it was just a few months before and you know you could not move around that conference hall without bumping into cabinet ministers or MPs or ministers or whatever who were talking about 10 years of Boris you know he's reshaped the politics it's 10 years of hegemony and it really felt like that it felt like the Labour Party was not only not going forwards but it was retreating and okay lots of has happened external to Boris Johnson in the world since then but ultimately the author of his own demise is always it was always himself and he still can't bring himself I think to accept that and I think actually just thinking about that that letter that he's written tonight with a spectator piece my sense is is that he may well have caused himself quite a bit of damage by that it is so unself-reflective there is so little introspection he is so pugnacious in it he is so addled with conspiracy theories he is again he is sounding so Trumpian and that symmetry that symmetry of today with Trump being indicted on the same day is so unhelpful and the thing is what it reminds somebody conservative MPs is that you know ultimately

they like to think of themselves as a sort of ultimate custodian of British democracy and so on what it shows once again very Trumpian again is that Boris Johnson really doesn't care which institutions he tortures as he goes down with him in that exact way that Donald Trump does he's willing

to put a load of mud out there set light to all sorts of parliamentary processes to infect the conservative party and indeed the wider public democracy with the toxin that you know he could have just said well you know what I disagree with what they've said I'm going to resign though I'm just going to leave it at that but that is not his style he has to let everybody believe that not only is he had to resign but that he's been brought down which injects such a toxin and such a poison into our whole political process just on that point you know I remember the day before

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the 2020 election in Washington Donald Trump goes to campaign headquarters he's asked you know how's he going to do and he says well if I win it's fine how am I going to be if I lose I don't like losing and Donald Trump then set about making it setting up this narrative that he didn't lose the election was stolen from him there had been election fraud it was all absolute baloney it was total a hundred percent 24 carat bullshit that Donald Trump was speaking and he probably knew that that was the case and he undermined American institutions and faith in the democracy and now he's undermining faith in the justice system with what he's saying today after this latest indictment and you can see some of the same thing happening in British politics now and it is highly corrosive as we have seen in America America hasn't lapsed into civil war but by god the tensions are still there and could still play themselves out over the coming months as we get ready for the 2024 election this is not cost free there are consequences to some of this language and you know that is the way that Boris Johnson is choosing to play it yeah I mean if we were comedy sketch writers we'd be remembering that actually the two men Trump and Boris Johnson literally had dinner together about 10 days ago right so you imagine the conversation they're having in this dinner where you know Trump's like right when they indict me I'm gonna go hell for leather and say it's everyone else's fault great idea don't fantastic I think I'll do the same exit exit more wide you know when you talk about the institutions Lewis and I think that's really key to this because Boris Johnson has not behaved like a conservative in the way that Donald Trump has actually not behaved like a republican as we used to know them Boris Johnson with this latest honours list has put the king like the monarch in a totally invidious position this class of 23 the most egregious honours list you can imagine with the sleaziest bunch of all now getting to put names and titles who wear their little badges and all signed off by our king at Boris Johnson say so I mean you actually can't make it up listen yesterday on the podcast we revealed that none of us were getting honours in that list and I am actually now feeling quietly relieved that we didn't get them we've done it we've escaped I think we're the only ones who didn't at some point I'm going to go home today so I've got a question for both of you right before before we wrap up do you both think and maybe the answer is different for the different people but like there is a world right where maybe we look back on this week or the events leading up to this week and the event shortly afterwards where we think maybe this was rather than the beginning of something or the continuation of something maybe it was the end of something maybe it was a sort of end of the kind of to some extent of the Trump Johnson roadshow which has dominated our politics since 2016 maybe it's a continuation or maybe it changes in some way what do you think neither I don't think it changes anything I literally don't I don't think that Boris Johnson is going to disappear from public life as we know it and I definitely don't think that Donald Trump will it grieves me to have to agree with my right honourable friend Emily Matesless the right dishonourable lady Emily Matesless I suppose no I mean look I think that in British politics there has been a step back from populism that there is no such thing as impunity that you can't just lie through your teeth and get away with it endlessly and I think it does feel like the Boris show for the moment you never count him out forever but the Boris show has firmly come off the tracks and it's going to take some resurrecting and I think that that speaks to normality and this isn't a pro-tory or anti-tory point it's a pro-good governance point that we could finally be in a situation where the populism the boosterism the lying about what you're doing and you look at Rishi Sunak coming back from Washington

no trade deal that was promised in 2019 in the election manifesto there was never going to be a trade deal it was all nonsense that was spoken maybe we've got into a bit more sanity and that is what I would say maybe maybe the consequence of these extraordinary last 24 hours I think there's partly a difference between them right which is that when when Johnson first first became prime minister I used to sort of resist the easy parallels to be drawn between Trump and Johnson and yet the funny thing is as more time has elapsed the more similar they've become and maybe they fed off each other or Johnson's fed off him to some extent but actually the the clearer and the stronger the similarities have seemed but the difference is of course is that Johnson operates in a British context and I think it's fair to say that British politics British institutions and particularly the British public actually and this is the main saving grace in a way the British public as opposed to the American public are not as polarized our politics is less polarized the reason Johnson ultimately went is because he lost total credibility with the British public in a way Trump has not done in the same way at least with a good proportion of the American public and in that sense our politics I mean touch wood I might be being Panglossian here is still just about healthier yeah I mean one thing I would say is about the difference of legacy because if you look back to Donald Trump apart from you know that little moment when he tried to overturn democracy he left three members of the Supreme Court to essentially carry on his work you know many people on the Republican side will say whatever you think of Donald Trump he put three incredibly conservative justices into the Supreme Court to carry on the trajectory of what the Republican Party believes or wants to do when you look at Boris Johnson and I think this is really actually critical to the timing and to the tenor of his letter it's much harder now to find people who will go out and fly the flag the bunting for the successes of Brexit I'm not saying that everyone who voted Brexit regret said I'm not I'm not actually saying that I might be right but I'm not saying it but I don't think it's as easy to point to any concrete achievements that the Brexit Johnson legacy has bequeathed and I think that makes it much more complicated for him because yeah he can point to his time in Ukraine and I think that is genuinely something that you know Britain can be proud of that he really really was at Zelensky's side very quickly but if you actually think of Boris Johnson and Brexit as being synonymous that's not at the moment a great legacy to have you know what the studio lights have quite literally just gone out in here so I think we should probably take that as a sign I don't know about you if you're happy to wrap things up there I mean who knows what will have happened by the time we stop

recording today but I'm just hoping that we can move into a quieter Saturday John did you make it to Venice I made it to Venice via Vienna there's a lot of Vs in that sentence I was the only person who's taken you hitchhiked didn't you yeah more or less but I was offered at one stage when I was in the middle of last night having been notified that my flight had been cancelled and I was trying to ring the airline to get a route rerouted I was offered the opportunity of going via Philadelphia from London to get to Venice that seemed to me a long way around sounds like something you would do frankly yeah any chance to visit Pennsylvania I could exactly Philly cheesesteak oh yum yes okay well on that note Philly cheesesteaks all around at show news agents I'm gonna see you next week cheers you're just unfurling your sleeping bag if I find you there on Monday morning I'll be really unimpressed what's gonna happen now is that someone is going to come in and say Lewis you wouldn't just broadcast all the way through the night would you oh go on then what if I must we'll see you soon bye bye bye

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I'm still here just as I was about to get my foot out of the door producer Gabriel says to me there was just there's just one more thing Lewis privileges committee put out a statement in response

to what Boris Johnson has said about them and I've said this the committee has followed the procedures and the mandate of the house at all times and will continue to do so Mr Johnson has departed from the processes of the house and has impugned the integrity of the house by his statement

the committee will meet on Monday to conclude the inquiry and to publish its report promptly i.e we are going to see the report in full on Monday and we will be able to see who voted for what whether the recommendation for sanction was unanimous and we will get to hear in full their response to the pretty outrageous set of accusations that Boris Johnson former prime minister has made about the conduct of the house of which he was the custodian I think that really is it for this week at least I'm hoping that it is big thank you in particular to our amazing producers on the news agents Gabriel Radis and Laura Fitzpatrick who have put this emergency episode

together I'm off for an apparel spritz we will see you on Monday

this has been a global player original podcast and a Persephoneka production