

[Transcript] The News Agents / Has 'Small Boats Week' been a disaster for the Tories?

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

This is Robert Jenrick, the immigration minister on Wednesday, day three of the much heralded Stop the Boats Week.

The apparent refusal of some people to accept perfectly decent accommodation on this barge.

You've got to remember that this is a formal accommodation that's being used in Belgium, in the Netherlands, has been used by British oil and gas workers.

And so, you know, if it's good enough for them, it should be good enough for the migrants as well.

We'll always house people in decent, legally compliant accommodation.

And this was the breaking news on Sky Today.

Some breaking news relating to the fact that all the migrants who had been placed on the Bibi Stockholm barge from Monday this week have been removed because of legionella bacteria found in the water system there.

And we've now got a statement.

It was only on Monday that a Home Office minister was telling us that the Bibi Stockholm could be full with 500 people on board by the end of this week.

The way it's looking is it's going to be empty.

Welcome to the Newsagents.

It's John and it's nobody else and I've been left all on my lonesome.

Just a word about later on in the podcast because we're going to be talking to Gary Linnaker.

He's apparently launching his own podcast about football or something and I'll be talking to him about whether Harry Kane is really on his way to Bayern Munich.

But before that, we started the week talking about small boats.

We spoke again about small boats on Wednesday and in honour of Lewis Goodall, who is busy preparing for his wedding tomorrow, it is only fair we take stock of how the government has done on its much heralded small boats week.

I think you'd have to say not brilliantly is the answer.

The barge, the Bibi Stockholm, is now being emptied as we have been discussing.

750 people arrived yesterday across the channel on 14 separate crossings.

That's a record for the year and the total since we started counting how many people have been arriving since the small boats crisis started.

Well that's past the 100,000 mark.

Many more are expected over the coming days with calm seas forecast in the channel.

The border force in charge of monitoring the movement of these blow-up dinghies, well their very expensive vessel broke down yesterday, worse to come, the 400,000 pound drone that is sent up to monitor all these channel crossings that crashed into the sea.

So when our dear friend, the Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party, Lee Anderson, says the policy has been a failure, who am I to argue?

Listen Nigel, I'm not going to sit here and make excuses to anyone.

This is out of control, we're in power at the moment, as you say the Deputy Chair of the Conservative Party, we're in government and we have failed on this, there's no doubt about it.

We're joined now by Sir Craig Oliver, friend of the podcast and a man who was at the centre

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of government communications when he was working for David Cameron, when David Cameron was Prime Minister and was the director of comms in Downing Street.

I mean it always seems such a good idea, you've got August, how can we stoke the news engine, I know we'll have a week dedicated to one of the things that we're dealing with, let's call it small boats week and you get to Friday and you think, oh my god, what's happened?

I think it's a classic example of something that Lyndon Crosby used to call feeding the crocodile, you keep throwing red meat at the crocodile until you discover you haven't got any more and then the crocodile comes back and bites you and I think that's what's happening with the Conservative Party over this issue, over many, many years they've consistently stoked it, they've fed the crocodile, they've inflated the balloon and they're surprised when the crocodile bites them or the balloon bursts.

How damaging is this?

Look, I think it's a problem for them, I think it's largely a self-created problem, over the years what the Conservative Party have done have spotted that obviously immigration isn't popular, the Brexit referendum I'm convinced was pushed over the line by immigration as an issue but what the problem is is that the people who look at it long term say, look it's a huge problem that we're not actually going to be able to come up with any easy solutions to, that when you look at the kind of geopolitics and the big trends that are going on in the world, immigration is only going to get worse yet we have politicians that at the moment who consistently try to say to people, look I've got a clever quick wheeze that's a short term fix and it can be a dividing line with the Labour Party but lo and behold look when they try and do that it blows up and I think you look down the years there's been lots of times when the Conservative Party have decided to double down on the issue, I remember when Samuel Javid was Home Secretary and over 100 people had come in on small boats and he decided to end his holiday and described it as a national emergency. Last year when Liz Truss was asked if she was a friend of France she said she wasn't sure and the French decided that they were going to make us pay a price for that and we had a problem with that too. We come up with solutions like having a barge that we can stick a whole load of people on which is a tiny pinprick in the problem and lo and behold they haven't done their homework and they haven't worked out that it's going to be a problem and I think that until the Conservative Party actually stepped back for this and say look this is a huge problem that is going to go on for decades and we have a problem with dealing with it and we need to have a grown-up sensible approach to it, they're just going to keep getting bitten by it. So if you were Rishi Sunak now and you kind of I suppose the next big thing on the horizon is his speech at the party conference which you you know he would hope is the big chance to set his stall out, do you say next to nothing about it? Do you go for this approach saying God blimey it's much more difficult than I ever thought it was so don't expect any quick solutions or do you keep doubling down on the rhetoric that we're going to stop the small boats we're going to turn them back we're going to be tough we'll put them on barges we'll send them to Rwanda and if that fails we'll throw them all onto Ascension Island. I think that he will go with the latter and the reason for that is that the Labour Party haven't quite found a way either of dealing with it so although this issue keeps blowing up in the Conservative Party's faces the Labour Party have had this kind of studied neutrality or they've criticised the government for not

getting a grip of the problem and not really come up with any solutions of their own and that's starting to be a problem for them I think. The problem for them is it does take over the media agenda as it does become a problem and people do point problems at the government they're inevitably going to say well what are you going to do about it and I don't think the Labour Party has any solutions other than to say look this is a huge problem the Conservatives aren't dealing with it very well and then to stop talking. What would you do about somebody or what would David Cameron have done about somebody like Lee Anderson who you appoint to be deputy chair of the Conservative Party and he says out loud what no one's allowed to say out loud that the policy has failed. Every party needs a kind of Lee Anderson the kind of person who presents themselves

as speaking truth to power the kind of person who comes out and says the unsayable that everybody actually knows is true the problem with that is that actually what Lee Anderson saying isn't straightforwardly true it isn't the case that Lee Anderson has got some mega solution to this problem that's going to solve it all and it's all going to go away. The reality is I suspect what David Cameron would do is not have somebody like Lee Anderson speaking in that way and will probably

slap somebody down who did say that. I think the Conservative Party have found it rather beguiling they've started to be thinking in terms of campaigning and so you end up with situations like cabinet ministers like Robert Jenrick speaking out of both sides of their mouth by saying well I wouldn't have chosen those words but actually the sentiment's okay well actually I think a grown-up politician needs to say the sentiment isn't okay this is a far bigger problem and we need a grown-up solution and you know what for the Labour Party there also needs to be a kind of consensual solution because these are big problems that are not going to be solved in one parliament.

But the one thing you can be absolutely 100% sure of is that the Labour Party and Conservative Party are not going to come together pre-election and think let's take a combined approach let's forge a bipartisan policy on this you know intractable issue. Exactly right and that's why we end up in these kind of downward spirals and I think what's interesting about this story beyond the fact that it keeps blowing up and causing problems to the government. What's interesting is it's a kind of microcosm for the political environment that we're going to find ourselves in till the next election that there is an issue that is really thought of in terms of how do we divide ourselves from the others how do we gain political advantage on rather than actually look at it as a complex not long-term nuanced problem and how do we ram that home and meanwhile

the massive issues that the country is really facing I'm not diminishing the immigration is a problem it is a problem but massive issues like what are we going to do about climate change how do we grow the economy how do we reskill an entire country how do we actually reform the health service are by the by and we endlessly go around in circles on arguments over barges and whether or not we can get 100 people to Rwanda or not I guess one of the funny things is that is it possible to have that conversation with the British people and when you're going through the British press to say you know what I mean it's not just us that's got this problem everywhere you look in Europe you just have to look at what's happening in the Sahel you look at what's happening in North Africa you look at what's happening in parts of sort of the Middle East and Afghanistan where people are trying to get the hell out that this is a problem that affects all of Europe

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I think it is possible but I think it requires a willingness and a bravery and guts to say look we live in a complex world the population is growing massively climate change is a huge issue a billion and a half people more are going to be in sub-Saharan Africa they're only going to be pushing one way and that means that we've got to come up with big global solutions to these problems

but it requires a very big brave politician who is willing to say that over time I am going to educate and I am not going to get drawn into cheap short-term hacks which actually inevitably end up not working and actually in bitter people and drive people into a situation where they think politicians can't be straight they say they can do one thing and they can't Brexit was all about immigration and lo and behold the number of people coming into this country that migrants has doubled

Craig Oliver I'm grateful to you thanks so much thank you my favorite quote of John F Kennedy was at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis where he talked about how success had many parents and failure was an orphan I would just say that on the small boats week our Home Secretary Cuaella Braverman hasn't been seen not a peep I wonder why we'll be back after the break with Chris Bryant and what you need to do to fix parliament

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welcome back and we are joined in the studio by Chris Bryant Chris Bryant of course has played such a prominent role in the life of this parliament as chair of the standards committee and he's got a new book coming out called code of conduct why we need to fix parliament and how to do it and I'm going to come to the book in just a moment but we were just talking about what is happening with the small boats with the bitty stock home barge being emptied because of Legionella being found aboard and the rest of it what do you make of the way this is unfolding and as a piece of government handling well first of all I I just think it's endless series of tragedies for individual people fleeing you know environmental degradation war famine et cetera all around the world and it's not just facing the UK people taking extraordinary risks you know crossing oceans and boats that are clearly not suitable and then there's a completely different tragedy which is the tragedy of a government that hasn't seen this coming and has managed to shoot itself in every foot going and I just don't feel they've got a plan I think they've got an idea of what a headline looks like and what they will put on a leaflet in the general election but you know the the barge for instance I was reading recently great expectations and there's that scene of the hulks yeah and I just feel as if yeah exactly and it just feels to me as if somebody wants to resurrect the Victorian era is it the Victorian era that people want to resurrect or is it that search for the good headline that gets them over the next hump and in politics there's always that discussion about what is good tactics and what is strategy and it seems that tactics gets you over a short-term problem well strategy is something different yeah that's true but I think there's another bit which is you your strategy might be to get your core vote out and only your core vote because you know you're going to lose the next general election but you don't want to lose it so badly that you wouldn't be in contention for a general election after that or the one after that and throughout this parliament the strategy of successive prime ministers has been basically to galvanize the core vote and blow the rest and how much of that is to do with this feeling that they're going to lose the election the way that this parliament has conducted itself which brings us squarely onto your book well I try to outline in in the book is two separate issues but I think they are connected the first is that in

our system we give phenomenal power to the prime minister of the day as long as you get the keys to Downing Street you decide when parliament sits how long it sits for what it debates every single day of the week when it goes on holiday what amendments can be tabled you can bring in lots of legislation through the back door through what's called secondary legislation so it doesn't go through all the different votes and scrutiny procedures in the House of Commons it just sometimes it even enters into force before it was published and secondly we have a problem which is to do with whether it's entitlement or the style of the way that we've done politics over recent years we've ended up with lots of people not just slightly distrusting politicians or having a rye look at them but actually really really worrying that every single politician is a crocker liar and a waster but do you think it is an election issue itself yes the way our parliament is governed oh 100 percent but you've also right you write in your book I must admit I've really had a constituency right to me about this a few have sent me their blueprint for reform or whatever but you know it's it's is it a vote winning issue yes because it's about power and also because I think we've got into such a bad state so in this parliament I'll only give you one statistic 22 MPs it might be 23 in a few weeks time 22 MPs have been suspended for a day or more or have left parliament permanently before a report was finally published on on their misconduct and that's been a series of different issues sexual harassment and bullying paid lobbying on behalf of a client or straight out lying to the House of Commons and refusing to correct the record so seriously that is by a country mile the worst parliament in our history and you talk about some of it yourself don't you about unwanted approaches from other people I've been an MP since 2001 and

in those early days it was it was not uncommon for male MPs older male MPs to slap a woman's bottom

grab them far more tightly than they wanted to be grabbed and I had several MPs none of whom was out as a gay man touching my bottom and one of them was a bit more aggressive than that

and one of the things I've tried to lay out is that was then undoubtedly some of that still exists today but back then we used to brush all of these things under the Pugin carpet but in this parliament

now that we have the first parliament in the world an independent complaints and grievance scheme a member of staff or another MP can go and complain confidentially and a proper investigation will be done a high court judge will finally determine whether you've broken the rules in a way that you should be suspended from the House of Commons and some MPs have left and this is all parties it's not one part I mean obviously the focus of attention has undoubtedly and understandably been on the conservatives and the government because they're in power yeah I try to be as non-partisan as possible and in fact quite a few of the people that I cite in the book

in an approving way are conservatives I do want to say that we are all human but we have a real problem now and my concern about for instance Boris Johnson lying to parliament is that I think that that has now become normalized in our political discourse both very aggressive language the kind of Leanderson stuff or for that matter being a minister standing at the dispatch box saying something which is patently untrue being told by the UK statistics authority that it's untrue and refusing to correct the record can can we be holier than that about this in the sense that politicians have always fashioned the truth as this malleable object that they can shape for their own political purposes I don't like the kind of knee-jerk reaction that sometimes people have

to politics and and I think the fine detail is what matters what about parliamentary language you can't stand up in the House of Commons and say you're a liar you can only say in very explicit circumstances when the motion is whether the member has lied or not so obviously but it's unparliamentary language in normal debate so I don't think that that rule will last I think we will have to find a way of massaging it somehow because two of the people that I cite of the 22 are Ian Blackford and Dawn Butler who accused Boris Johnson of lying well the House has now found that they were right and he was wrong but they were both suspended for a day from the House of Commons so I don't think that that rule will last and I think the speaker could exercise a bit more leeway okay so what about Leanderson's language that I'm I'm going to find myself repeating

it again but you know when he talks about the asylum seekers they can fuck off back to France so I don't I mean it's not language I would use and I think he's deliberately trying to get a rise out of people like you and me which is why I don't want to rise to it I'm not rising to that bait and things that are not said in parliament it's a bit difficult to police in parliament and the freedom of Hurley-Burley in parliament is a good thing but I think the argy bargy in Prime Minister's questions now for instance is just preposterous I think the speaker should now stop the phenomenal hurrah whenever the prime minister or the leader of the opposition comes into the chamber which is just pure isle all the sledging the attempting to prevent a minister or a member from being heard I think Lindsay does a good job it's an almost impossible one because he doesn't have all that much power you set an example in the book of trying to get something done for your constituency which is a sort of small transportation issue and the endless number of transport ministers who come and go why not have an appointed cabinet like you do in the United States of America where you get experts who sit around the table that the energy secretary is someone who knows something about energy the transportation secretary is someone who knows something about transportation and you do away with this kind of whirligig where

what you're doing is you are promoting people who will be loyal to you and then you know and that's ultimately their kind of main prerequisite so that's part of my problem with the the systemic problem which is what I call in in referring to Abba the winner takes it all loser standing small syndrome that we have we've got obsessed with reshuffles who's in who's out and all of that and and it feels like the only moment that the prime minister can fully exercise their powers when they're having another reshuffle there was a one moment do you remember when two Tory MPs in a week

I think both complained that they had been approached and told that they wouldn't get something for their constituency unless they voted the right way in a vote of confidence well I mean that is in the end corruption and that's why I think the key thing that I would argue for is we need to take back control that is the commons needs to take back control of the order paper yes I can't remember who came up with it can you take back control of the order paper so that we decide whether we're going to have a two-day debate or the on illegal immigration bill or a two-hour debate which is what we had rather than the government how do you make this debate

mainstream abuse of power people get it corruption people get it lying to parliament people get it but when you start saying taking control of the order paper I think you isn't there a danger that moves into geeky territory which I'm sure an awful lot of I love I've worked in parliament I've kind

of been a political correspondent for years you're calling me a geek I'm suggesting it might be seen as geeky I wouldn't dream of calling you a geek it's about power it's about power in the end and of course the things that matter to people are corruption but do they really even care about corruption so I would argue that the town's fund and the levelling up fund where ministers decide to give money to certain constituencies on the basis of the whether the local MP has lobbied them for it I think that that is pork barreling it's made pork barreling part of the British system which it never has been in the past and in the end you know politics isn't a form of entertainment it's a form of trying to change the world for the better and if you lose sight of the objective that you're trying to pursue and all you're doing is really trying to keep yourself in power then the whole thing falls apart the final question do you think anyone's going to make any of these changes yes I think weirdly the book covers an awful lot of different things and I try to do it parliament changes at a glacial pace though doesn't it well well we've changed the code of conduct quite substantially in the last few years I think we need to go further on second jobs we need to cut down and we need to get rid of all the consultancies and directives we need to be much tougher on that I've made proposals in the book about changing the rules on all party parliamentary groups now this is in the geeky territory but it's actually the soft underbelly of corruption in parliament and we've done them we did them the day before the recess so victory number one I hope that in the next general election voters will not let people off the hook all political parties need to have robust measures on this my final thing would be look I hope that some people will read the book and they'll go you know what I really want to get into politics because I think it's an honourable profession you can change the world you can achieve phenomenal things it's an extraordinary opportunity but we need to love our democracy Chris brand thank you so much thank you

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welcome back and as people who may or may not pay close attention to my viewpoints on certain issues and my twitter feed you will know that my main preoccupation is what is going to happen to harry kane and whether he is finally going to start next season with bian munich and as we speak it is 1437 in news agents hq studio we think he's on his way to munich and that he's ready to go at stansted airport but I haven't heard definitive word yet whether his plane has taken off I don't think he's going easy jet I think he was on a private jet getting himself there I had suggested that maybe suella braverman could change priorities and stop worrying about small boats which doesn't seem to be having a huge amount of success and maybe stop small aircraft leaving for Germany but anyway to discuss further whether he is on or off whether he's going or staying we're joined by a sports journalist who's taken the plunge and good luck to him to launch his own podcast it may even crash and burn he also played a bit of football in his time and oh yeah he presents much of the day Gary linica great to have you with us how you doing I'm doing fine but I don't quite enjoy that in case it crashes and burns part I mean what because your podcast is only number one in the charts indeed and the rest is football in case you were wondering what it's actually called with micro riches and alan shear so it's yeah it's got off to a flyer thank you john clearly it has and I'm not surprised listen so what's happening with harry kane please tell me he's going to somehow miraculously stay at Tottenham I'm afraid I might have to disappoint you there John I can't see that happening now he's clearly on his way I think Foster Cogler has pretty much said as much today in his press conference that he's going to have to work without harry kane but he's been preparing for that because they've

known

for a while this was just a negotiation thing that's been going back and forth obviously everybody wants to know what's going on and when is it going to happen on the impatient side of things but as a also someone that's obviously a big lover of Tottenham Hotspur having played there it's a tough one for Spurs but Harry's been brilliant to Tottenham hasn't he for so long he's done he's given them such an amazing service I doubt even Tottenham staunches fans would actually begrudge him the most but I can't see it not happening now what about the reasons for going because okay the Tottenham trophy cabinet queues lots of jokes about how empty it is and now you know there is no such thing as Tottenham Silverware etc and I remember though I mean I remember the

glory days but for Harry Kane he was closing in on becoming the premier league record goalscorer Shearer's record and presumably that's not going to happen now that he's going to play out his days in Germany well it's unlikely I mean obviously could come back in a couple of years and nowadays

players do play for longer so it's not impossible but highly unlikely yeah I mean as a selfish striker myself obviously we play for personal gain much to the time but I think in Harry's case he's already beaten Jimmy Greaves his extraordinary record at Tottenham he's already the leading goalscorer for England he's national side and what's missing for Harry's our trophies in the cabinet and this should pretty much guarantee that that happens and I think at this stage of his career

he's given such good service to Tottenham I think it's I think it's a great move for him it's one of the biggest clubs in world football he'll have a chance of winning the champions league with Byron

unit they're always a contender there's no question about that great place to live everyone speaks English or though if I did offer one piece of advice it would be to try and learn German because the local supporters appreciate that and you need a fresh challenge sometimes in life and in your careers I'd admire him for taking this on at a stage where it's obviously not easy to leave the club that you love it would have been heart wrenching for him in many ways and to take a young family away abroad as well he's quite a brave thing to do so I'm full of admiration for and what about Alan your podcast mate Mr Shearer is he relieved that his record is going to stand well I saw him post this morning on Twitter he posted a picture of himself in a pilot's uniform saying I'm ready to take some music of course he'll be delighted and I think there'll be an emergency podcast coming your way soon on the rest of football to get Alan's views at length and you can find it wherever you get your podcasts you can thank you very much John you're very sweet as a supporter of the news agents I'm glad you've got that mutual appreciation exactly look final thought on the season ahead who should we be looking out for don't tell me Arsenal's the team to watch well I think they'll be up there I mean I've kind of tipped them but I also think Liverpool will go really close so I think we'll actually have a really tight hard fought title race that could feature more than two teams this season so I think it's going to be a crack of a season we know how good Manchester City are and they'll take some beating but I think it'd be certainly tighter this season than probably last Gary listen great to talk to you thanks very much oh it's a pleasure cheers John thank you bye and that is it from us for this week we are off to get rather drunk and rowdy and disruptive at Lewis's wedding thanks as ever to our production team Gabriel Radis, Laura Fitzpatrick, Alex

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Barnett,

Georgia Foxwell, Rory Simon, Will Gibson Smith and Lucy McKinstree our editor is Tom Hughes it is presented by Emily Matles, Lewis Goodall and me, John Soaple. We'll see you all next week clutching a paracetamol goodbye this has been a global player original podcast and a Persephoneka production