

[Transcript] The News Agents / In prison and running for President - is this the future for Trump?

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

It is Wednesday the 14th of June and we need to wish a special someone a very happy birthday.

Donald Trump, former president, is now 77 years old.

This is a flavor of how he welcomed in his big day.

This is called election interference in yet another attempt to rig and steal a presidential election.

More importantly, it's a political persecution like something straight out of a fascist or communist nation.

This day will go down and infamy and Joe Biden will forever be remembered as not only the most corrupt president in the history of our country, but perhaps even more importantly the president who together with a band of his closest thugs, misfits and Marxists tried to destroy American democracy.

Some of his greatest hits there, I guess we should just say many happy returns.

Yes, Donald Trump moved seamlessly, some might say, shamelessly from being a defendant in court to be campaigning for the next presidential election at that \$100,000 ahead dinner at his Bedminster Golf Club in New Jersey.

If there was remorse, regret, sadness, he didn't show it.

It was pure fire-breathing defiance.

Welcome to the News Agents.

The News Agents.

It's Emily in News Agents HQ.

And it's John outside the federal courthouse in downtown Miami where the circus has gone. Just while I've got you on Things American, of course, News Agents USA is now going to be in your feed on Global Player every Tuesday and the next day from wherever else you get your podcasts.

We're going to be speaking in a moment to the former FBI director James Comey, who is pretty clear he thinks Trump will be convicted and will probably go to jail.

That is to come.

First, let's pick up from the detritus of the night before, where Donald Trump sailed out of that underground, as it were, court appearance.

Very few people were in the room for that.

But on his exit, he stopped in at the Versailles restaurant.

And this is a Cuban restaurant, and he presumably went to kind of pick up the sympathy vote or try and tell people that he was one of them.

The language that he uses now is about Joe Biden's Marxist.

So who better to talk to than people who have fled the communists of Fidel Castro?

And he is now setting himself up for a narrative in which he's the political prisoner.

So he went to, yeah, Little Havana in Miami, and it's got a very Hispanic feel this city.

And he went into this restaurant where there is very strong Republican support, and he got a huge welcome, and he said, I'm going to buy everyone dinner.

He didn't actually buy anyone dinner, and he didn't actually eat there.

He got on his plane, flew from Miami to Bedminster in New Jersey, where in true Trump style, he ate McDonald's.

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So he forego any Cuban food, and then spoke at this dinner.

Now we've played a clip of it in the introduction there.

There was another really important bit of Donald Trump trying to explain what had happened or what hadn't happened over these confidential documents.

Have a listen to this.

I hadn't had a chance to go through all the boxes.

It's a long, tedious job, takes a long time, which I was prepared to do, but I have a very busy life.

I've had a very busy life.

They make it more busy because you're always fighting.

So two really, really important things to pick out of what Donald Trump said there, that he just hadn't had time to go through the boxes and sift through the top secret documents.

I mean, one, he is tacitly admitting that he did have the documents, which is, I mean, he might try and talk about the Presidential Records Act, but there are a whole pile of other legislation that says that any classified confidential document is the property of the government, not the property of the President.

That's the first thing.

And just think about what a nightmare it makes it for his team of lawyers to defend him.

If he's going off talking and ad-libbing like that, where he is more or less conceding, he did have those documents.

The second thing is, when he says, I have been too busy to go through it these past two and a half years, if I was the prosecuting counsel, I would just turn round and say, Mr. Trump, could you tell us how many times you've played golf in Florida since you left office?

Because as we know, he has been playing golf more or less on a daily basis.

It's like trying to say to your partner, I'm really sorry.

I haven't fixed that wobbly shelf these past two and a half years.

I've just been too busy to do DIY.

It doesn't wash.

My favorite thing is that there is a saying that everyone who's ever been arrested knows which is your right to remain silent.

And this is the one right that Donald Trump doesn't ever exercise.

He has the right not to speak.

His lawyers are waiting for him to remain silent.

And you're right.

Every time he opens his mouth, he comes out with something which is blatantly untrue, like the fact that as a president, he could take whatever documents he wanted.

He couldn't.

That's a lie.

That is an untruth.

And if that's genuinely what he thought, then it doesn't explain why, when they told him it was wrong, he still hung on to them.

Exactly.

And I just think that, you know, we spoke on the USA edition of the podcast last night

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about how he's going to try and play this in the court of public opinion and hoping that the court of public opinion bleeds over into the actual court. The fact of the matter is in court, Donald Trump risks being buried by an avalanche of facts. And there's no getting away from that when you look at the evidence that they have gathered and all the material that they have got, that it just won't work in a courtroom in the same way as it does at a friendly audience in Bedminster, where everyone's paying 100 grand for a ticket, or in a Cuban American restaurant in Little Havana. We mentioned yesterday that Melania wasn't at his side. There was an embarrassing moment when Fox News apparently thought that she was. It was one of his aides and they mistook the female aide for Melania. But somebody who was at his side and I think deserves a mention in this, because it's kind of how, if you like, the little people in inverted commas get swept up and quite often destroyed in the Trump activity in frenzy. Trump's co-defendant is a guy called Walt Nauter. He's his valet. In all the shots, he's the one just sort of correcting the tie or checking his hair. He is, if you like, for Veet fans, the Gary to Selena Meyers. And he didn't enter a formal plea, but he also denies all the charges. And he is right there in this extraordinary position of just being the valet, but being the one who is also accused because of any participation he had in following Trump's orders in moving boxes around Mar-a-Lago. And I think that is an extraordinary sort of extra element to all this. The way Trump is this kind of, I don't know, like this plug hole. He sort of pulls everyone down it with him. It's not just him descending. It's anyone around him, lawyers, valets, housekeepers. They all tend to get tarnished by whatever move he's just made. And Walt Nauter didn't enter a plea because he didn't have a lawyer to represent him. And that's another fascinating part of does he want Donald Trump to pay for his attorney, in which case there is a serious risk that the attorney is doing Donald Trump's bidding and he's not looking after Walt Nauter's interests, or is now to thinking I need to put distance between myself and the president because I find myself in an unbelievably precarious position. I heard Donald Trump's former attorney, Michael Cohen, last night saying, Don't ever, ever think that Donald Trump is going to be loyal to you. If he can save his skin, he is going to sacrifice you. And that Walt Nauter really needs to get away from the Trump orbit as quickly as possible. You talked about the other people on the periphery. You're right to say that Melania Trump wasn't here to give Donald Trump support yesterday. But one figure we did notice, or I should in fairness say, my producer Gabe noticed was here when I had gone off to find a bathroom, was Carrie Lake, the candidate who stood to be Arizona governor and failed.

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She is Uber Trump, ultra-magger, you'd have to say.
And she spoke to Gabe about the case.
This is absolutely a bogus indictment, a bogus case.
We're going to find out at the end of the day he's going to be exonerated.
He's an innocent man.
Unfortunately, it's going to drag through and
the media will spend as much time as they can talking about it.
Because you don't want to talk about the real stories that are happening out there.
You don't want to talk about inflation that is sky high and
really robbing from Americans' paychecks.
You don't want to talk about the wide open border.
You don't want to talk about millions of people pouring across illegally.
Drugs pouring across more than 100,000 young people dying from fentanyl overdoses.
These are the things you don't want to talk about.
You want to talk about a bogus story.
We're going the wrong direction right now, and
we're going in the wrong direction in a hurry.
And we need President Trump to come back in, put our country first,
put our needs of our nation first, and get things back on track.
This is not justice that you're seeing.
This is a disgusting example of a president,
I loosely call him that, Joe Biden, weaponizing our government.
Our government wants to weed the people.
He's weaponizing our government against his political foe.
Because guess what?
His political foe is so massive and so strong that Joe Biden can't beat him.
And he knows that, and he knows Trump's going to win the nomination.
Trump's going to go on to beat him.
And when Trump gets back in the White House, we're going to uncover all of the corruption.
The real corruption is coming from the Joe Biden criminal family.
We just found out this last week he took another payoff,
a \$5 million payoff from the communist regime in China.
The cruel communist regime that enslaves its own people.
He took a payoff from them.
The American people are onto it.
The jig is up, and Joe Biden even knows that.
That'll be the last time John Sobel ever goes for a pee.
You see, all good stories on the news agents end up in the urinal.
What can I tell you?
I need to get a man nappy.
I just need to get a man nappy.
We need to get you your own valet for your upcoming arrest.
Can we have that in my contract, please?

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The rider.

We are going to hear from James Comey in a moment.

And he is the guy, don't forget, who basically put this massive spanner in the works just nine, ten days before the 2016 presidential election that brought Donald Trump to power by reopening an investigation into Hillary Clinton. Many on the left think that he's scuppered her chances.

But many on the right also think that he's scuppered Donald Trump's chances over the Russia investigation, which he brought about.

So we're going to hear his thoughts on where we are now.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back.

We're going to be speaking to James Comey, who is the author of Central Park West.

But you will probably know him or have heard of him somewhere in your mind as the most famous FBI director since Jed Gehoover.

And that is in no small part because of his decision to reopen an investigation into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server in the final stretch of that extraordinary presidential election of 2016.

It was about nine days before voters were going to the polls.

Indeed, some were already voting by post that he said he thought it was important to reopen an investigation into Hillary Clinton.

She has never forgiven him for that.

And two years later, a Trump era Justice Department report determined that the decision reflected a serious error in judgment.

He went on to work for Donald Trump and was then fired by Trump himself.

He found out via a TV screen.

So this is a pretty seminal moment to talk to James Comey about all the noise surrounding Trump, surrounding the FBI, surrounding the way justice and the law works in America right now.

But we're going to start with Central Park West because it's a political thriller, a courtroom drama, a mafia world.

And James, I'm wondering why or how you do fiction when the real life plot line is so good.

I try.

I try not to think about current events when I'm writing this, but it it inevitably compares to what we're seeing in the news.

I'm going to read from page 326.

I should probably get you to do this.

He exhaled loudly before continuing,

I worry you're aiming at the wrong target with all the truth stuff.

Our job is to look up bad people to protect good people.

When we have the admissible evidence to prove it, sometimes that means we've got to use other bad people to do it.

Sometimes that means people we know are motherless fucks are going to get away.

But I've never really thought of our job as finding truth.

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That's not what the system is for.

We're in a really odd place at the moment with truth, with that whole word.

I think the current Ipsos polling suggests that 38 percent of Republicans, only 38 percent view Trump's federal indictment as serious.

That means 60 percent of his potential supporters are ignoring or rejecting the findings of the special counsel who's brought those 37 indictments charges against him.

And that is their truth that they've been told it's a witch hunt, that it's a democratic stitch up brought by Marxist, I think was the latest one last night. What do you do with their truth on this?

Really, two things.

First, never surrender to the idea that there isn't a noble truth.

You can like rain, I may I may dislike rain, but it's not raining in this room while you and I are speaking.

That's an objective truth.

So don't surrender to the notion that things are unknowable.

And second, have some sense of empathy in a way for those people who are trapped in the big lies.

It's in some ways impossible for Trump's supporters to look at that indictment and accept it, because it would require them not just to recognize something about Trump, but maybe more importantly about themselves, that they were fooled, that they were victims of a fraud, and that's really hard for people to do.

But going back to your rain thing, it's not just whether it's rainy or it isn't raining.

They get to vote for rain, right?

And they get to vote again for rain, Trump, based on what he is now telling them.

Sure, I'm not an expert, but I don't doubt the poll numbers.

I think a significant number of people are trapped in that fog of lies that Trump has drawn them into.

And he's he's not a bright man, but he has a reptilian cleverness.

He's he's onto something when he said long ago that he could shoot someone in the middle of Fifth Avenue and not lose supporters, because it's too hard for supporters to admit that about themselves.

I mean, I've prosecuted fraud cases where the victims came to the sentencing to speak for the fraudster because they couldn't acknowledge that they had been victims, that they were fools.

The images of January 6th on the televisions in the United States, whisper to those people, they say, you fool, look what you did, you fool.

Most people in response to that turn away and memory all it or write some story that gets it out of their head.

So it doesn't surprise me that people would still support him,

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except everything he says, because they can't get out without acknowledging something really painful about themselves.

Do you think the special counsel who's brought the indictments, Jack Smith, could he have chosen not to indict?

Of course, there's there's no burden to bring a case requirement to bring any case. The United States prosecutor can choose.

Here, though, the facts were so strong.

And if you read the indictment, you know what his evidence is.

He put it all in there.

It's what we call in the business of speaking indictment, that it's hard to imagine a circumstance in which a prosecutor wouldn't bring the case, not just the mishandling of some of our most sensitive information, but the blatant obstruction of justice.

If the law is going to mean anything, that case would have to be brought.

Jack Smith's appointed by Merrick Garland, who's appointed by Joe Biden.

And this is where if you don't believe, if you're not a Democrat and half of the country isn't, it becomes much easier to dismiss cases as politically motivated.

I wonder if you think that the whole system needs to change,

because, you know, most Brits will look on this and they don't agree with Trump,

but they can see the perception difficulties with politically appointed judges and lawyers.

I get that, but I I like the alternative less.

That is, prosecutors are leaders of the Justice Agency being entirely untethered to the will of the people, as expressed through the ballot box.

And so, of course, there's a really the will of the people.

Is it if you're appointed by a president?

Well, the people elected that president,

who surely ran for office as Biden did, saying how he thought about the Justice Department, how he thought about the priorities.

And so the will of the people is expressed in his election and then his appointment of the leader of the Department of Justice.

And he's been very clear.

I expect a leader to restore the independence of that institution.

I will have no contact with it.

And I don't doubt that that's true.

Memorably, Gerald Ford pardoned Richard Nixon.

You know, that phrase, our long national nightmare is over.

Does it seem quaint that to you now looking back?

I mean, is it impossible to repeat in America?

I don't know it's impossible to repeat.

I like that expression, the history doesn't repeat, but it rhymes.

We often find ourselves because the nature of humans coming around to the same kind of problems again and again.

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I still think even in hindsight that Ford was wise to do that.

And he took consolation.

A lot of others did, too, in the idea that under our laws, the acceptance of a pardon is an admission of guilt.

And so Nixon, by accepting the pardon, acknowledged that he was guilty of the things for which he was pardoned.

And there's a certain closure in that that was useful to the country.

It raises really interesting questions about if Donald Trump were ever president again, could he pardon himself, especially if

pardoning himself is to acknowledge that he himself is guilty?

I'd rather not think about that.

It seems beyond fiction.

Well, go back one.

If he was convicted, could Joe Biden pardon him?

Would that be in his gift?

Sure, he could pardon him.

As long as Joe Biden is president, he can pardon anyone convicted of a federal crime under the United States statutes.

He could also commute the sentence of any such person.

That is, not forgive their offense, but say, I will shorten or remove your jail sentence, it's possible.

Do you think he would?

I don't know.

It seems very unlikely, again, given how blatant the attack on the rule of law more broadly is from Trump and the conduct.

In this case, it's hard to see how that would vindicate the interests of the president in fostering respect for the law.

But I don't know.

Do you think it is likely that there could be a conviction for Trump?

I think it's highly likely.

Again, all I know is what I've read in the indictment, but it's all there.

He's got a big problem inside a courtroom, which has been his problem since the 2020 election.

You can say whatever you want with hair dye running down your face at four seasons, total landscaping.

But when you step into a courtroom, you have to bring evidence and you have to swear that it's true, which is why the American system was 60 and oh, in lawsuits brought in connection with those lies.

I think you'll see more of that here.

I say inside the courtroom because he's also going to wage a battle outside the courtroom to undermine confidence in the result and all those sorts of things.

But inside the room, he's going to have very little ability to do anything other than lay under an avalanche of facts.

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You think he could be sent to jail?

Yes, he definitely could.

I mean, the guidelines for these offenses, they're not mandatory in the United States, but we'll highly likely recommend jail time.

And from within jail, I mean, obviously we're jumping ahead.

But he could still campaign to be president.

Yeah, this is where it gets to the place where any publisher would reject your proposal for this book.

But sure, in theory, he could be in jail, in federal prison, running for office.

If he were convicted felon, he probably couldn't vote for himself, but he could run for president.

What would jail look like for a former president?

I've been to a lot of different federal prisons.

He'd be in a in a low security facility.

So without offense, but sort of think of it as a university dormitory with grounds to wander around and work to be done.

And if he dismisses this whole case, as he has done in the Court of Public Opinion, tried to as a witch hunt, then presumably he could be convicted, but still in his mind, highly electable.

Sure, it's hard to get inside Donald Trump's chaotic mind.

But I think he thinks that this is a fundraising vehicle and a way to pull those supporters in even tighter again, because of the Nelson Mandela of America fighting the good fight from behind bars.

Yeah, that's a hard.

I'm not even sure I want to repeat that sentence, but because it it those two names don't fit together in the same sentence.

But I'm sure he would tell his supporters, I am a political prisoner.

I'm fighting for you.

They're coming for you.

Again, binding them tighter to the fraud.

Now, that's a distinct minority of America.

I don't think anything Donald Trump has done has increased his share of the vote since 2020, so it's very hard to see how he gets elected by Americans more broadly.

But it's very easy to see him still being the Republican nominee for president.

And it's very easy to see that a conviction wouldn't actually alter anything in his campaigning trajectory in terms of admission of guilt.

He'd just say, this is what they're doing to me, come and support me.

I mean, it could actually work in his favor.

The rallies would be smaller because he'd be inside a federal prison and his supporters would have to be outside.

But yeah, he could continue to use it as a tool to bind people closer to him.

Again, it will continue to repel independent and more thoughtful Republicans and all Democrats.

So it doesn't, as I said, doesn't increase his prospects for being president.

But we could have this grotesque scene of a convicted, maybe incarcerated person

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running for president of the United States.

And it is possible he could win.

He could become president again after 2024.

Yeah, it's non-zero possibility.

I don't know how I would rate it.

It's very, in my opinion, very unlikely, but not impossible.

Would you be fearful if he was?

I mean, he said candidly he's going to go after Joe Biden, Joe Biden's enemies.

The people he thought stood in his way.

Would that be a worry for you?

Personally, yes.

Sure. I mean, this would be the retribution presidency and the president, a smarter president, and maybe he is smarter having been there once, could understand his ability to to abuse the office to go after his enemies in ways that he didn't before. So it's sure it's possible.

I think he's moved on to, he's still slightly obsessed with me, but he's moved on to other obsessions, I think.

But I mean, that would change your life, would it?

Yeah, it'd be sort of the same that I've been dealing with.

I mean, they came after me with all kinds of investigations, I've been audited and all kinds of things.

And all of it was nothing because there's nothing there.

And so I don't, I'm not someone who scares easily.

So it wouldn't change my life.

The speed of this trial, wearing a lot about the speed, the rocket docket, as they're calling it, in no small part, because of what America went through in 2016, when you reopen the case into Clinton's emails just days before the election, they do not want the same thing to happen this time.

It's like the ghost of James Comey is hanging over all of this.

Yeah, I'm not sure it's the ghost of me.

It's long been a tremendously important norm in the justice system to try as often as possible to avoid any entanglement with an election.

And I still believe in that and I believed in it in 2016.

So even if 16 had never happened, the Justice Department would be very keen to move this as quickly as possible so as to reduce the potential impact on an election.

Do you think they'll get this done before Christmas?

They might, yeah.

This is a district court in Southern Florida that has a reputation for moving quickly.

And it's not a complicated case.

Again, if you read the indictment, you know what the evidence is.

So I could imagine Trump's team looking to delay it and the prosecution pushing.

And it's possible to have it tried this year.

Chris Christie was doing a CNN town hall a couple of nights ago.

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He ran the fifth largest attorney's office in the country.

He's a lawyer.

He's standing for the Republican nomination.

Very much not a Trump fan and a former governor.

Let me play you a clip from that town hall.

I spoke out right from the beginning that I thought that Jim Comey in particular made the decision that he didn't believe Donald Trump should be president.

And that's wrong.

I think it was wrong that Hillary wasn't prosecuted.

I think it was wrong that Jim Comey wasn't brought to justice for the things that happened at the FBI.

Your response to that?

Just a writhe smile.

But he speaks for people who think that what happened during your tenure was incredibly damaging to the FBI.

Yeah, he speaks as a politician speaks.

And so I don't want to react to it in particular.

It changes over time what he says.

The Russia investigation.

I mean, he says quite candidly, you know, he was part of the campaign.

They were running ragged.

They couldn't work out one end of the country from another, let alone collude with Russia. And he used this line that you didn't believe Trump should be president.

Yeah, that's part of my writhe smile.

I don't politician say the darndest things and he's just one of them.

Do you get that many who are now hearing Trump talk about witch hunts or the fact that they found nothing in the Russian or however you'd see that takes us right back to this sense of double standards, you know, that they didn't really find very much on Russia and they probably shouldn't have gone into that in the way they didn't find collusion there.

Well, he can say anything he wants, but a thoughtful person, no matter what their political leanings are, who reads the Mueller report, reads the report of the Senate Intelligence Committee, which was overseen by Republicans, sees that the Russia's attack on the election had to be investigated and that there were significant evidence of contacts between the Trump orbit and the Russians.

And I accept the conclusion that there wasn't a chargeable case there.

We investigated it for six months under my tenure.

I didn't know what the answer was, but it had to be investigated.

And it looks to me like it was done well.

So I don't even follow the double standard stuff.

And you're a fiction writer now, James Comey.

I'm wondering if that's in small part a sort of PTSD.

I mean, when we first talked about the sort of post-match from 2016,

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you talked about there being a terrible choice and an even worse choice and thinking that you've chosen one over the other.

I'm imagining, I feel I know you a little bit, I'm imagining that you have replayed that scene and those choices and those decisions and your words over and over again in the last, I don't know, five years, eight years.

Would anything have been different now?

Oh, you're definitely right.

I've thought about it a thousand times and tried to cross-examine myself every step of the way and I end up in the same place.

I mean, there are lots of small things that I wish I had done differently.

But in the way in which I announced at the press conference that I did at the end of the investigation or what we thought was the end of the investigation, I should have structured that differently.

Just tell it in what way, because people won't kind of automatically go back in the way you want it.

Nor should you.

It's a small thing, but my family rightly criticized me and said, you should have delivered a headline at the beginning of your remarks because you confused people by not telling them what the result was at the front end of your remarks.

It's a small thing, but they're right.

And I should have thought of that.

But look, in the main, I think I would do the same thing.

Again, knowing what I know now, time travel is tricky.

Knowing what I knew then, I don't think I could have chosen the other alternative.

And I see that people see it differently,

but I actually think that decision will stay on the test of time.

And I'm very proud of the way the decision was made by my team.

It was a decision made with integrity.

It wasn't about politics.

It wasn't about trying to help Trump, hurt Trump, help Clinton, hurt Clinton.

It was about trying to figure out what is the least bad alternative here and taking it.

Have you had any contact with the Clintons?

I think last time we spoke, they hadn't read the book and you were encouraging them to and you hadn't spoken.

Is that still the way?

Sure. I've never met Secretary Clinton and so I haven't spoken to her since then.

Are you excited about the presidential choices for 2024?

Excited.

I wish we didn't face the prospect of a Donald Trump candidacy.

But I think it's important that the American people focus and in some ways Trump is forcing them to focus on what the choices are.

And Joe Biden is a person, an institutionalist who has conducted himself as president,

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consistent with our values.
And that's not a policy statement.
That's about the rule of law in particular.
And so I think it's important for the American people to see the difference.
Do I wish it was Mitt Romney running against Barack Obama?
That would be a whole lot simpler.
But that's not the world we live in right now.
Why do you think so few in Trump's party are speaking out against what they're seeing?
I mean, this isn't theoretical now.
There are indictments, there are criminal charges, there are two cases and possibly more to come. Why do you think there is this sort of carpet of silence?
Because they like their jobs and they like access to power.
I mean, it's deeply cynical, but they fear the voters, the Republican base voters.
And so rather than risk their jobs in Congress and have to go back to selling furniture or whatever in rural North Carolina, they want to stay there.
And they tell themselves a story that the nation needs me.
And so they either fermentively lie or they stay silent.
It's an old human frailty story, but that's the reason.
I'm sure there are some wing nuts among them who truly believe the lies that have trapped the rest of the cult, but most of them know better.
Because they see Liz Cheney, who spoke out, or Adam Kinziger, who's spoken out.
And they're not part of the party anymore.
Yeah, they see what happens.
Look, as someone who's spoken out,
I know a fair amount of criticism and threat comes directed at someone who speaks out.
And most people who've chosen politics as a career don't have the backbone that Liz Cheney or Adam Kinziger have.
And so it's depressing, but it's also predictable.
And James Comey is staying in New York fiction for now.
Well, I really hope so.
Yeah, I'm not I was never going to run for office and I am never going to return to government.
I love this work and it's not PTSD inducing.
It's fun to get a chance to show people what it's really like inside these cases in a cool way.
And I've enjoyed it much more than I expected.
So this is what I want to do when I grow up.
James Comey, thank you so much.
Great to be with you.
So that was James Comey.
And in a moment, we are going to hear from one Louis Goodall,

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PMQs and peerages.

What more could you ask for on a Wednesday?

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back.

And Louis has rocked up, finally, just in time to watch a bit of telly and give us his sense of where the political lie of the land is today.

This woman, right, we've been trying to get into the studio.

She was writing something.

She's writing the episode description for two thirds of the episode was even recorded.

Me and the editor, Tom have been trying to get in for the last half an hour.

And now she says, surprise me, put my whole episode description out of date.

Prime minister's questions and peerages.

Look, this in some ways, right?

This was the climax of the last five days of politics.

And of course, it was only one way and one set of questions that Stam was going to go on, but I think actually it was quite a revealing session in a number of ways.

I think this was one of Sunak's worst PMQs performances since he became Prime Minister.

He was very, you might imagine, he was on the back foot.

He was defensive.

He was pretty flat footed, not least in his first flat foot.

You can't probably say that.

You're both going backwards and you're flat.

That's how bad it was.

So yeah, it wasn't great for him.

And it was encapsulated by the first answer that he gave.

Stam are entirely predictably going on this question of his not giving peerages to Nadine Doris and others and the Tory party being wracked by this latest psychodrama at a time when so much real stuff, which is happening to real people's lives, is going on.

Just listen to this exchange.

All across the country, people are worried about their bills, the price of the weekly shop and the spiralling mortgage rates.

So why has the Tory party spent this last week arguing over which of them gets a peerage?

Yeah.

Prime Minister.

Well, Mr.

Mr. Speaker, my points on this are very clear in line with a long established convention of previous Prime Ministers having the ability to submit honors, I followed the process to the letter in convention with long standing process. It is, it is, by the way, Mr.

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Speaker, a long standing convention that Prime Ministers on both sides of this House have followed in the same way that I did.

What's extraordinary about that is as soon as Stam are asked that question, I just assumed, of course, that the natural pivot for anyone answering that question is to deny the premise of the question.

It's to say, of course, we haven't been focusing on that.

We've been focusing on trying to bring down inflation.

We've been focusing on the crisis that's happening in the mortgage markets.

We've been focusing on the war in Ukraine, whatever you want to say.

But instead, Sunak accepts that the Conservative Party and he has been, which is true, been completely absorbed by this incredibly narrow, recondite, basically meaningless question as to whether Nadine Doris and Nigel Adams get a peerage or not.

I thought what was revealing about that session overall is what you could see is a man, Sunak, who is not only weary with the political problems that he's facing, but also that he is being truly led and weighed down by not just Johnson, but by trust as well.

He cannot, much as he is trying, escape the long, long shadow of his predecessors.

I mean, Stam are not only obviously hammering him on the honest question and the peerages question, but also on saying, well, are we going to be going through this whole thing again with Liz Truss and her giving honors and potentially peerages to the very people who, in his words, crash the economy?

And once again, Stam are managing to frame

Sunak as weak and brittle for not being able to resist because Stam is right about one thing, which is that for all of the attention that we've given over the last five days to this question and for all of Sunak's attempt to suggest he's making a break with Johnson, the truth is, is that he approved most of the peerages and honors.

Sunak, in that very kind of bureaucratic way, kept sticking to the same formulation.

I stuck with precedent.

I didn't interfere.

You know what? He should have thought more about the politics.

And at the moment, he's in the worst of all worlds.

He's basically managed to create a war with Johnson and his allies.

But he's also not really got the credit for truly resisting him and making a clean and effective break.

So he finds himself politically, I would say, in the worst of all worlds.

I think it's also relevant that we learned today that Boris Johnson knew that Nadine Doris wasn't in line for a period back in March.

So I don't know how Nadine, well, we sort of do know how Nadine is feeling about all these things, because she tells us fairly regularly on Twitter.

But to be fair, she presumably could have been told that when he first found that out more than three months ago.

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She has now, incidentally, and I mean, this is a saga that, you know, if it was one of those exercise bike journeys, you'd be getting a lot of cardio activity because it goes up and down and up and down, up and down the resignation, the non-resignation, the resignation, again, the non-resignation.

She's actually delayed her exit now because she didn't want to be, presumably, just one of the crowds who were leaving in the same set of early by elections, which we think will happen at the end of July.

So she technically can still be in the commons.

She can technically still be part of any debate that follows the Privileges Committee report, which we are now expecting tomorrow, and she can carry on being a thorn in, well, really, everyone's side there until she formally steps down. I mean, it's not beyond the realms of possibility that she changes her mind again and decides she can do more inside than out.

It's totally within her gifts completely.

I mean, the question over the longer term could be if she keeps dragging this out, we'll soon take the whip away from her because she's she's still technically got it because she's still a conservative MP.

And again, the hypocrisy of this in a sense that right now,

I mean, we were talking on the show yesterday saying that Nadine Doris is saying that she would like to go to the House of Lords.

That's where all the sort of legislative heavy lifting gets done and so on.

Not only, as we said yesterday, has she been doing very little of that as an MP.

But right now, the people of Mid Bedfordshire, I mean, did they have an MP?

Did they not have an MP?

There is currently no process in place to replace her as an MP.

I can't imagine she's going to be turning up in loads of votes or being in loads of debates. She's doing this precisely because she wants to maximise the potential wound to Sunak.

She doesn't want, as number 10 seemed to want, to have all three by-elections in the same day, even if they lose all three.

Try and move on as quickly as possible.

Try and cauterise the wound as quickly as possible.

No, she wants to have a second stab at some point down the line.

Quite frankly, if you're a constituent, that is just terrible.

This isn't just a political game.

They do deserve proper political representation, how soever they choose to vote when the by-election comes and to just be dangled in that way, doesn't say much for the political process.

And maybe the fact there hasn't been more noise around that might speak to what they feel that they've been offered over the past few years anyway.

Who knows?

The other thing I thought about PMQs was that, again, in terms of Sunak's flat-footedness, there really wasn't much of any sort of narrative

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or any consistent framing of attacks towards the Labour Party.

And this is something they're going to have to really try and sort out.

It felt like at various points that he was going through the kind of Conservative Party's greatest hits over the last 10 years or so from different Prime Ministers.

Some of those attacks at different times have been highly effective, but now, some of them at least, because of the events that have happened since, really do feel like they are running on fumes.

And the best example of that was this exchange here.

Our number one economic priority is to reduce inflation so that we can restrain the increase in interest rates.

But one thing we know that we need to do to do that is to reduce our borrowing and debt, Mr Speaker.

That's how we will bring interest and mortgage rates down.

But last week, what do we see?

Labour confusion with the shadow Chancellor attempting to water down their plans to borrow £28 billion more a year.

But she was promptly overruled by the Shadow Energy Secretary, the former leader, who said that they were 100% not abandoning their pledge.

It really looks like Labour's offer never changes.

It's uncontrolled borrowing and more chaos with Ed Miliband.

I think this speaks to something really key, which is that right now, we don't know where the public is.

We don't know where the public mind is on borrowing to invest, which is what Labour's talking about.

Rishi Sunet can call it uncontrolled borrowing and he can cite the notes that was left about running out of cash as they always do.

But actually, if you ask the public whether they wanted more investment in jobs, more investment in green energy, more investment in the NHS, more investment in infrastructure, I don't think most people would say, oh, what a sort of superfluous thing to do.

How vain, glorious, what a waste of money.

People would say this country, I think, and I could be wrong, but I'm guessing most people believe there are things in this country in dire need of investment.

And so that just feels out of date, actually.

Yeah, the thing that really feels out of date, of course, is the chaos with Ed Miliband theory.

I mean, that might have been fine with David Cameron in 2015,

but a lot of very chaotic, very turbulent, very choppy water has passed under the bridge since then.

I mean, it literally is a meme.

That's the definition of something not really having the same meaning as it used to.

Exactly. I mean, two other quick things I thought were relevant for PMQs.

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One was, in terms of the SNP's attacks, they're obviously, as we've been discussing on the show again this week, they've been having quite a week, notable that virtually every SNP MP, and this is a bit of a pattern that's happening now, Prime Minister's questions, are no longer even bothering to train their attacks on the Conservative Party. They're all using Prime Minister's questions with the Conservative Prime Minister to attack the Labour Party and the SAC's Dharma because they know that that's the real battle that's going to come over the next 12 months or so. And the other thing, just on your point about borrowing to rest heavily, the other big, big change, right, that is happening in our politics now and probably the most important thing, you know, just take away all the stuff about peerages and then the Dean Doris and Boris Johnson, the psycho drum, the most important thing is that government borrowing costs are rising. Yesterday, they exceeded the peak that occurred in the mini-budget. That, of course, naturally constrained any potential income in government, Labour government, in terms of what they are able to do, even if they are able to convince the public that it is a good thing to borrow to invest. The high interest rates have not been part of our politics, either our economics or our politics, for 15 years. And that changes the game in so many ways, not in just terms of government maneuverability, but in terms of the economic and financial pain, which is being inflicted on households right now, more chaos in the mortgage markets this last week, more mortgages being withdrawn from the market and about 2.6 million households with a mortgage having to pay thousands of pounds more in repayments next year, because at the moment about 3.2 million households are paying interest rates of 3% or more by the end of next year, so let's assume the general election is coming at some point towards the end of next year, that will have risen to 5.8 million as a result of the impact of higher rates. So this is, you remember back in the days of the Labour government, one of the political refrains they kept repeating again and again was, we've had record low interest rates, or they'll say, we've kept interest rates low. Now, we haven't heard about that for the last 15 years, because interest rates have been like through the floor. They just haven't been a salient part of our politics. But there was a reason that the Labour government at that time and the Conservative government before that emphasised interest rates so much. The changing face of interest rates and the fact everyone is going to use the fact that they are now high and they're going to creep higher, is going to change everything. Yeah, I mean, I grew up in a near of negative equity.

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You have to imagine what happens when you get to a point where we just talk about it in the office, where no one can afford their mortgage. It's like an Escher painting, you know, where everyone's going around in the same ever escalating circle.

Because if you can't afford your mortgage, then you can't spend. Then other people's businesses don't grow and you can't afford to live where you are. And with all of that together, I think you just got the sense from student today that the walls are just closing in and that in every direction, things are becoming not just a political nightmare with the legacy of Johnson and Truss or whatever, but increasingly a policy nightmare as well.

I mean, actually, Johnson and Truss is probably the light relief. 100 percent.

And if you want to catch up on all the craziness going on in Miami and we don't just mean John Soaple, then you can find us on NewsAgeantsUSA. It is a brand new feed.

Just type in UseAgeantsUSA and you'll find us pop up there.

Bye for now.

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