

[Transcript] The News Agents / Is it too easy to be considered a refugee? Suella says so.

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

Is the refugee convention in need of reform?

Would a revised global asylum framework work and how would it look?

How can we better balance national rights and human rights so that the latter do not undermine national sovereignty?

What are the appropriate criteria for being labelled a refugee these days in the 21st century?

How can we stop human rights laws being gamed by smugglers?

Are we delivering safe and legal routes in an efficient and effective manner?

And while we may have different views as to the solutions, I hope we can at least agree on one thing, that we are living in a new world bound by outdated legal models.

It's time that we acknowledge that.

Thank you.

That's Suella Braverman, a few days away from the Conservative Party conference speaking in Washington and talking about the refugee crisis and saying that the bar is too low for people seeking asylum, that if you're gay and you're facing discrimination, you should be able to claim asylum.

She argues vehemently against that.

She's calling for a form of the Convention on Human Rights established by the UN in 1951.

She says that that convention is outdated and that we're now living in a totally different time.

Is she right?

Do we need to tear it up?

Welcome to the Newsagents.

It's John, it's Lewis.

It's Emily and the boys are both back from the beach, Lewis, Bournemouth, John, Bondi.

Didn't get the rough deal again, of course.

You didn't find a Davey in a canoe in Bondi Beach.

No, but I saw a Davey.

Well, I've seen a Davey getting overturned from a canoe and hugging a sheep in his own small boat.

We're going to be talking about Lewis' encounter at Bournemouth a little bit later, but we're starting in Washington, Bizarrely, where our Home Secretary has been making quite a big speech and heavily trailed speech as well, which is a sure sign that she thinks this is an important statement on where we are with refugees and asylum seekers and what needs to happen to change the world so that you get fewer people arriving on small boats in the English Channel.

And she's giving it to the American Enterprise Institute, one of the biggest think tanks in the sort of Washington scene, enormously influential on the right of politics, enormously well-moneyed.

And this goes back to the UN Convention on Human Rights, which I would say that when we were growing up was the kind of gold standard for how countries should treat those in peril.

It was seen as the sort of, just to give you the background, it was signed after the Second World War, after the survivors of the Holocaust were looking for a place of refuge.

It was signed in 1951 when the world kind of came together to say we need to offer safe

[Transcript] The News Agents / Is it too easy to be considered a refugee? Suella says so.

havens to people in trouble.

And I guess a lot of us, we've sort of grown up not really asking questions until this government pretty much opened up the whole question of whether it was, to use that horrible phrase, fit for purpose, whether it had served its time, whether there were now so many people trying to make that voyage from their country or whatever peril now looks like to this country and asking questions that I would say 10 years ago were sort of unthinkable.

Now they're not.

They're on the table and they're being said out loud in Washington.

The sort of background to this, obviously we know the British context around small boats and we can talk about what's going to happen with the Supreme Court, which is a sort of key part of it.

But the background to it in a sense is, you can say to other brave men has got a point in that there are more refugees in the world today than there were in 1951.

There were a lot in 1951 and after the Second World War, by the way, there were huge population movements before and after the Second World War for obvious reasons.

The UNHCR says that, you know, in 1951, 1.25 million refugees were under its mandate. Today the UNHCR estimates there are about 35 million refugees in the world, 108 million refugees have displaced people because politically instability is particularly profound and particularly

difficult at the moment for, you know, Afghanistan, Ukraine, the Horn of Africa, you know, you name it.

It isn't just Britain, we talk constantly about small boats, but isn't just Britain this struggling with this problem.

We see what's happening in Europe.

We see what's happening in Lampedusa, the strain that the arrivals are putting on the European Union cohesion.

We see what's happening in the US and the southern border and the internal strain that's putting on the United States.

So this isn't a British problem.

This is a global problem.

The question is then, is the problem or is the answer around the UNHCR number one and particularly this idea that Braverman has trailed today, which is the thing which is going to get most attention because it's particularly, you know, you could argue in Sendry talking about just being a woman or just being gay, can't be enough or being discriminated, can't be enough to get you asylum.

And the truth is, if you look into it, it doesn't.

It isn't enough within the UNHCR and isn't enough within the UK just to be from a country where you get discriminated against.

There is a difference between discrimination and persecution.

So you can imagine it if you're from Poland, say, and you're gay and because you can't get married in Poland, like you can here, that wouldn't be enough to get you asylum in Britain.

No way.

If you're from Uganda, where you can be sent to prison for being gay and even face the

[Transcript] The News Agents / Is it too easy to be considered a refugee? Suella says so.

death penalty for being gay, yeah, that could get you a refugee place.

But it's not enough as the Home Secretary is suggesting just to be discriminated against because you're a woman or you're gay or whatever.

It just doesn't work like that.

The trouble is that she is talking about the number of displaced people being one billion.

Now that is a very emotive figure because it suggests that one seventh of the world is actually knocking on the gates.

Yeah, on the move, knocking on the gates, you know, in one little small boat heading to Calais.

Of course, that is nonsense.

The one billion figure, I guess, is explained by saying if you took everybody who lives in a country that comes under the definition of persecution, then you've got these numbers.

If you take every female in Afghanistan, if you take every gay male or male in Uganda, then that is what it adds up to.

Are a billion people knocking on the door of our country?

No, that's absolute rubbish.

But it's a very clever headline to suggest possibility, potential.

You know, it's what people always talk about, the floodgates.

If you don't stop it now, how big could this problem get?

And I think that's what Suella Braverman is using to try and say this is the moment to make changes to a constitution.

And it will resonate.

Yeah.

Look, for an awful lot of people, there is a concern of seeing small boats arriving and the number of hotels that are being filled up with people seeking asylum and the rest of it.

And the widespread belief that these aren't refugees fleeing persecution, Allah, the end of the Second World War.

These are just economic migrants who are looking for a better life and think there are better job opportunities and better wages to be had in the UK.

And so she's feeding into a concern that is very real and very much out there.

And I guess that she is thinking that this is starting a debate, doing it in Washington rather than in London.

You are on an international stage where who knows, we could have Donald Trump serving a second term and might find himself chiming very much with the sort of views that she's expressing.

And that is absolutely right.

And that is about sentiment.

But maybe there's room for a few facts in this, right?

Which is that the number of refugees in the UK was higher 20 years ago than it is now.

Or the fact that this isn't a convention that's been set in stone since 1951.

It is a living instrument.

It changes.

It gets modified.

Sometimes it gets augmented.

That is certainly true.

But it isn't like nobody has revisited the terms of this convention since 1951.

And I also think that we have to look at what we ourselves have done to make it harder to send people back to, for example, the safe country.

She talks a lot about people coming from safe countries.

We do not have, since Brexit, a returns agreement.

We are no longer part of the Dublin Treaty Agreement.

We do not have returns agreements with other EU countries that makes it easier for us to send people back to safe countries they've left.

That was completely in our hands.

Ultimately, it is costing us an enormous amount of money, housing so many people in hotels and so on.

As we discussed on the show before, it's eating bizarrely, perversely into the UK aid budget in a serious way.

No one wants to see that.

No one thinks that a huge amount of the UK development budget should be being spent on travel lodges and holidays and to house people for an indefinite period of time.

But of course, that addresses or that relates to something that reform of the UNHCR, the Convention, would not even begin to cover, which is our own broken, decrepit asylum system, an enormous backlog that there are.

If we want to get people out of those hotels, get them repatriated to wherever they came from, in some cases, which will work, some cases it won't, then you have to fix that.

But the Home Office itself has got itself into this odd position where it has said, the Home Office ministers have said, no, we don't want to fix it because we think that that will incentivise people to come more quickly.

If you make it quicker, then it will come.

Because then you get in a refugee place.

And the other thing, which is a sort of perverse way of looking at the other perverse way of what the Home Secretary said, I'd say again, it's perfectly legitimate to consider these things because it is a global problem and countries will be thinking more and more about these issues.

Nonetheless, it is a perverse logic for the Home Secretary to argue, as she has done many, many times now, essentially her argument is to say that the UK shouldn't take any refugees or very, very few because the argument is repeatedly put forward is they should stop at the first safe country that they get to.

I don't know about the two of you, but I can't imagine we're going to have many refugees coming from like native-born French people or Irish people, or that is what basically we would have.

Well, to be fair, what she said is, we will decide where we want the refugees from.

And at the moment, we're saying Ukraine and Hong Kong, right?

Both in other words, places that she imagines people going back.

I mean, essentially, presumably she imagines that people are coming to Ukraine.

They're going temporarily here.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Is it too easy to be considered a refugee? Suella says so.

It's temporary, right?

But the logic nonetheless is, is that the countries which are next to political hotspots and places of instability will take most of the refugees or nearly all of them.

And guess what?

They already do.

Yes.

They already do.

I mean, the pressure is on countries like, we always imagine it is just small boats that are coming across from France to the UK, whereas the huge influx is happening in Greece and it's happening in Italy as well.

And that those countries are really struggling with the numbers of people that are arriving on their borders.

And look, there's a lot of European disunity about what should happen within Europe over the returns of what should people be allocated.

But I think, you know, you said, Suella's making a speech that is speaking to the potential presidency of Donald Trump.

She's also speaking, presumably, to the open ears of Georgia Maloney in Italy, who I think they are very aligned with on this subject, right?

And she's also speaking to the Conservative Party before Conservative Party conference.

I mean, that's the thing.

You know, Suella Braverman does not think that as a result of this speech, there's going to be some reform at the UN of the Convention on Human Rights, right?

It's not going to happen clearly.

Why is she doing it?

Well, look, as I said before, you know, there does need to be creative thinking about this issue. I think there's two reasons she's doing it.

One is that they're preparing the way for a potential Supreme Court judgment under a Wanda plan that doesn't go their way probably in the early New Year.

Yeah. And then they've got to have something else to say.

Potentially, there's lots of speculation that could be the backdrop to a general election, particularly if the general election came in the spring.

But then the other is, of course, she's got an eye on what happens after and what everybody is talking about is the potential for a Kemi Badenok, Suella Braverman final two, and probably an opposition, the person who is furthest to the right of the Conservative Party wins.

And this is a bit of perfect political positioning for Suella Braverman to do just that.

Don't forget, even before that, setting traps for labour, right?

And it is quite a legitimate thing to do to say, well, you've heard what we want to do.

We want to look again at the Convention.

Does Kier Starmer?

Does Yvette Cooper?

Are they going to be talking to you about this, or are they just hiding their head in the sand when it comes to immigration numbers?

Let me tell you what Yvette Cooper has said.

She says international conventions aren't responsible for appalling Tory failures to

[Transcript] The News Agents / Is it too easy to be considered a refugee? Suella says so.

go after the criminal smuggling gangs to take asylum decisions or clear the backlog.

Those failures are a responsibility of Rishi Sunak and Suella Braverman.

We need more international cooperation to stop smuggler and trafficking gangs, establish return agreements and make sure countries work together to ensure those fleeing persecution and conflict get sanctuary.

In general terms, it says we want better agreements.

We want better return deals and all the rest of it.

How easy it will be for labour to achieve that, of course, is a different matter.

In a moment, we'll be talking to Naomi Klein, who's just written a book called *Doppelganger*, which is, at first glance, how she kept on getting confused with another Naomi, Naomi Wolfe, a conspiracy theorist.

But she takes us into a whole new world, a mirror world, she calls it, a war against objective truth and just what is happening out there on social media.

This is *The News Agents*.

With us in the studio, Naomi Klein, author of *Doppelganger*, recently, amongst others,

I have to tell the story of how we first got to hear about *Doppelganger* because our producers, Laura and Gabriel, came back from a meeting with Penguin and said, would you like to interview Naomi Klein?

And I went, ooh, wait a minute, wait a minute, there's two, one's batshit crazy and one's a real thinker, the thoughtful one, who's a thoughtful one?

And then they started telling me the premise of the book, which was about confusion, about Naomi getting confused with another Naomi on social media.

And I thought they were winding me up, but they weren't.

And what you do, Naomi, in this book is extraordinary, actually.

I guess it starts with the idea of what it's like to be confused for a decade of your life with somebody who is really going off on a very, very different intellectual, cultural tangent to the stuff that you're writing about.

But then it widens into a much bigger examination of the war against objective truth, essentially. So take us through just the initial crazy stuff at first.

Well, I don't call her crazy, first of all, I just quote her, it sort of speaks for itself.

I think she's part of a growing group of people, particularly during COVID, who really changed and went down this conspiracy rabbit hole.

I call them conspiracy influencers as opposed to conspiracy theorists, because I don't think it's really fair to theory to say that they have one.

It's really jumping from one wild claim to the next, they often contradict themselves.

But yes, I have been getting confused with Naomi, well, probably for more than a decade, actually.

What happened to me, it was 2011, I was in a public restroom and I overheard a couple of people talking about trashing me.

One person said to another, did you read that terrible article by Naomi Klein, she really doesn't understand.

They were talking about Occupy Wall Street.

I just froze in horror, just like every mean girl in high school coming flooding back.

And then I realized that I knew the article they were describing and I knew who'd written

it.

So I came out and I said, I think you're talking about Naomi Wolfe.

Now, since then, I've been getting confused with her much, much more often.

I would just shrug it off because it was occasional, but during COVID, she really was a vector for medical misinformation.

This is something that Wolfe claimed that she was so concerned about vaccine shedding on unvaccinated people that she at one point suggested that perhaps there should be separate sewage systems for vaccinated people and unvaccinated people.

But this is not essentially a book about Naomi Wolfe per se, is it?

It is about the ability for so many of us to suddenly go in the face, as Emily said, of objective truth.

And you said like there's a war on objective truth going on where people go and suddenly people that are rational, that you've seen educated and had similar backgrounds who suddenly make radically different choices about what they choose to believe.

It's like a faith.

Yeah.

I call it the mirror world and she has lots of company and on bad days, it feels like half the United States has just decided that they can make up their own reality.

And I think there's different drivers going on.

I think for Wolfe, I call her an influencer and she's very good at the internet.

She has a lot of followers and she knows how to monetize.

And there was a really significant event that happened before the pandemic, right before in 2019 here in the UK.

What you're talking about there is Naomi Wolfe's book about gay men being put to death for being gay in Victorian England.

And she's interviewed by Matthew Sweet on Radio 3 who completely debunks her reading of the statistics.

I don't think any of the executions you've identified here actually happened.

Well, that's a really important thing to investigate.

What is your understanding of what death-recorded means?

Death-recorded, this is also, I've just read you the definition of it there from the old Bailey website.

But I've got here a newspaper report about Thomas Silver and also something from the prisoner records that showed the date of his discharge.

The prisoner was found guilty and sentence of death was recorded.

Yeah.

But see, but next.

The jury recommended the prisoner to mercy on account of his youth.

See, I think this is a kind of, when I found this, I didn't really know what to do with it because I think it is, I think it's quite a big problem with your argument.

Yeah.

So big a problem that the book was pulped and her reputation sort of with it.

Yeah.

And I mean, I think her reputation was already on shaky grounds before then because she had

flirted with all kinds of conspiracies online about ISIS beheadings, like claiming they were crisis actors, which was a particularly egregious one because these are real people who would be.

And families who were egregious.

Yeah.

I mean, she was just asking questions in terms of why one would go into this world, into the mirror world.

I think for someone like her who had experienced one of these reputation destroying moments, public shaming, I quote Rosie Boycott in the book saying, any possibility of regaining the status that she had once had as a prominent feminist writer after that was lost.

So Boycott says, she could only go into a world where truth doesn't matter and of course she would become a star in that world.

But in terms of who built that world, it is, it's Donald Trump's world.

It's Steve Bannon's world.

She's on Steve Bannon's podcast sometimes every single day.

They wrote a book together.

I think there's a political reason why you would want to wage war on reality.

If you're Steve Bannon and Donald Trump, you don't want to be held accountable, first of all.

You want your followers not to believe anything that they see anywhere else.

And this is the flood, the zone strategy, but they've been waging war on reality for a while now.

It's just, just intensifying during the pandemic.

Here in the UK, we've seen the implosion, I guess, of Russell Brandt in the last week.

And he is somebody who has also, seems to us, made that change from mainstream from, you know, BBC, from Radio 2, from Channel 4 to Rumble now, to this kind of alt-rights site where he can talk to his own brand of followers who believe everything, they're kind of set up to believe.

He's an example, I think, of some of the incentive structures for spreading just these outrageous theories and couching things that are not hidden as if you have uncovered a massive conspiracy.

Everything, it's also in the packaging, you know, you will not believe what Anthony Fauci just did.

And I watched Russell fairly closely during the pandemic.

I also, you know, I've been on his show a couple of times.

And I also followed him because early in the pandemic, I wrote an article called The Great Reset Conspiracy Smoothie, and it was about how this conspiracy theory, but air quotes around both conspiracy and theory, were spreading.

So Russell read that entire column on the air, and he's done this with me before.

You know, he just, sometimes he just reads articles and just with emotion.

And this was early in the pandemic.

I don't think he had a million subscribers at that point.

But he marketed it with the tagline Great Reset, and he got, I think, probably more views from that video than he had been getting from his other videos.

And then what was interesting is that even though the video was saying, there's kind of no there, there on this Great Reset, he got so many views and new subscribers because he was tapping into the culture that he went back to it again and again and again. You know, there's an audience capture that happens where you give, you give them more of what they want.

They want more Bill Gates conspiracies.

They want more Fauci conspiracy.

Something that we've covered on this podcast a number of times is where populism gets wrapped up as a conspiracy theory, where people are being told things that are utterly false.

How do you challenge it?

There are very old conspiracy theories like anti-semitic conspiracy theories that, you know, that are present here and that are always present here.

The elders of Zion.

Yeah.

And I think that that's related to how one might fight them because I think they are, they always tap into a sense that you're being screwed over, something is being hidden from you and people don't like money lenders.

And so if there's mass immiseration going on, people are going to look for someone to blame.

So I think that what conspiracy culture does is says, well, there's a room somewhere and in that room is maybe it's the Jews, maybe it's the World Economic Forum, but it doesn't look at systems.

George Soros, whoever it has to be.

Yeah, it looks at individuals and then it holds out the promise that you can fix it just by getting rid of these individuals.

And the point that you make in the book, Naomi, is that actually the left or the progressives or the center has a responsibility here because sometimes they fail to spot the thing that people are getting worried about, whether it's the power of big pharma, the power of big tech.

And I guess that folds into John's question, which is, you know, when people come at you with what might be a conspiracy, but what sometimes has a grain of truth, let's take Hunter Biden, right?

Is Joe Biden going to get impeached over something his son may or may not have done?

So the question is probably people were a bit stupid about the Hunter Biden stuff, right?

They didn't look into the stuff or didn't give the sense that they were looking into the stuff at the time it mattered.

How do you work out whether you play towards the gallery or you pull away from it?

Well, I think part of what's happening is there's such a sense that media is so partisan that news decisions, that reporting decisions are being made basically because of your team, not because of the relative news value, that there is a crisis of faith.

That drives more people into unreliable sources because another example of this would be the origins of COVID itself, right?

Very early on, the idea that it might have come from a lab was cast as a right-wing conspiracy and people were punished online, you know, punished by media platforms, some of them

[Transcript] The News Agents / Is it too easy to be considered a refugee? Suella says so.

were actually deplatformed or they had their accounts suspended if they amplified that. And now I think we mostly understand that that is a legitimate avenue for journalistic exploration.

I was with Steve Bannon at the very beginning of the pandemic.

I was sitting in his house and talking to him about the origins of the pandemic.

And I remember thinking, I could believe it was the lab, I could believe all this stuff actually.

And as soon as he said it, I was like, oh my God, sorry, that's about shit crazy thing.

And I tried to put it out of my head because it was something that he was espousing.

It's almost the, you know, it had that effect on me.

So to get us back to John's earlier point, which is, okay, this is the 12-step plan, as it were.

What do you do to counter conspiracy without putting yourself in the position where you are then tarnished with being the out-of-touch?

And I'd add a sub clause to that question, which is, do you feel optimistic or pessimistic about the future?

Which is the great polling question.

I wrote this book out of a sort of feeling of almost speechlessness of just like seeing such political scrambling and seeing people who I trusted act very, very strangely.

Also seeing a way in which big movements for social change were falling apart.

Yeah.

Then there was another moment where it felt like maybe we're going to really change things.

After George Floyd was murdered, you know, I was still living in the States and I'll

never forget that moment when my entire neighborhood, I was living in suburban New Jersey.

It was not a radical place.

And it seemed every single one of my neighbors was on the streets shouting Black Lives Matter.

And there were all of these discussions about how do we really come out of this learning some of the lessons of we want time in nature.

We want more time with our families.

We don't want to work in the same way that we were working before.

I mean, this is why people re-evaluated their lives.

And there was a lot of political work that was going on.

I was feeling hopeful in that period because there was a lot of thought about when we come out of this, how do we do it in a way that is low-carbon?

How do we do it in a way where we actually act like essential workers are essential and not disposable, not sacrificial?

And then the grind of normal started returning and it started slipping away.

But I'm not a sunny optimist right now.

And the reason I'm not a sunny optimist is I see the right appropriating a lot of absolutely important messages, ideas that-

I mean, today we've just heard the Home Secretary, Soelle Graveman, talk about the need to rethink or re-word or reconfigure the UN Convention on Human Rights because there are too many refugees coming to our country.

She's using the language of, you know, if you're gay or if you're a woman, that doesn't

give you the right just to enter as a refugee.

But is she right to raise the prospect that this needs changing?

Right?

I mean, that's a classic example.

A classic example is for her to raise the prospect that there could be nearly a billion people claiming asylum.

And that is that if every person left their country where there is a bit of oppression and the idea that every person is going to leave their country is a false one.

So what should I do?

So what should I do?

I mean, this is the same government that is rolling back their climate commitments, their net zero commitments.

And, you know, I think they're tapping into a deep, deep fear that a lot of people have that they know that that the very life support systems of this planet are failing us right now.

And we are entering an age of mass migration and we who live in wealthy countries have a duty, I believe, a moral duty to, yes, open our borders to a lot of the people who are being displaced because we're burning carbon and they're not, you know, at nearly the same rates.

And these are very, very tough discussions.

I think this is part of the reason why people are severing ties with reality and just making it up because actually looking at where we're at right now with surging authoritarianism, with the climate crisis banging down our doors, with extreme levels of inequality and consolidation, including in our media systems where everyone can rail on Elon's platform at Elon and it changes absolutely nothing, you know, it's a hard thing to actually look at directly unless you have some kind of a plan about what you're going to do about it.

And right now, it's the right who is saying, you know, batten down, close the borders, turn on each other, you know, giving people targets, whether it's sort of a chimera of the elites or vulnerable people who did not cause this.

Personally, I think, is it a 12 step plan or whatever the plan is, you know, I actually think it's only a strong left who can beat surging authoritarianism and they're offering a counterfeit response.

And I think we need real responses that are actually going to improve people's material circumstances so that they don't go looking for scapegoats in the way that they are right now.

Nemi Klein, thank you very much indeed for being with us.

Thank you.

Thank you very much.

Welcome back, or I've sort of lost track, do we say welcome back or not welcome back anymore?

I think we say welcome back to you from Bondi Beach, but now we go to Bournemouth Beach.

Yeah, Bournemouth Beach, even better.

And how were the Liberal Democrats?

You know, it's the first Liberal Democrats I've been to since 2014, which you might

[Transcript] The News Agents / Is it too easy to be considered a refugee? Suella says so.

work out why we stopped going after 2014, of course, when they went from 57 MPs to eight. And I don't know, it was kind of like it was nice to see them again.

They were in quite good.

It was their first conference, actually, since 2019, and the first that Davy had been as leader because they weren't, of course, going to have it last year post-COVID, but then Queen Dine.

Well, you struck me, funnily enough, watching the Davy pictures and having talked about doppelgangers with Nemi Klein, is that Davy is sort of being visually the doppelganger of Boris Johnson.

He likes getting himself wet.

He likes knocking down walls.

He likes a stunt, you know, where Boris gets stuck on his zip wire now, we know, intentionally. Davy collapses in his canoe.

It's almost like he said, just look at us.

That's all I'm asking.

We're Lib Dems.

Just look at us.

Give us some attention.

They were giving out little Saupati bags of blue bricks and mallets that you could then sort of knock down the blue wall with yourself.

Yeah.

Yeah, they were doing that.

That was nice.

And of course, people haven't been to Lib Dem conference, which is, of course, is most people, normal people.

Although I did discover that I think we have a lot of Lib Dem listeners, by the way.

Oh, really?

I think the Venn Diagram.

Well, let's not be rude.

No, no, no.

And then people, or to a man and woman, you know, I think the Venn Diagram of Lib Dems and news agents listeners is quite a darkly shaded bit in the middle, but I did go to their Glee Club.

Ah, the famous Glee Club.

You know that?

You ever know that?

Oh my God.

Yeah, they're famous.

They were back and forth.

And you didn't stop believing.

Didn't stop believing.

And they certainly haven't.

But no, look, they were in...

The interesting thing about this conference was that...

Two things from me.

One was that, you know, they felt relevant again for the first time basically since 2014, because although everybody, you know, is now expecting because of the state of the polls, you know, a Labour majority government, maybe a handsome Labour majority government, the fact is, Stammer needs to win 126 MP seats to get a majority of one.

You know, bear in mind Blair were on about 145 in 1997, Cameron won 90 in 2010.

You know, it's a huge, huge mountain to climb.

And so, you know, the Lib Dems could very easily, particularly with the run they're on in Southern England against the Tories, they could easily find themselves in the position of being king makers again.

So what they're thinking and what they're saying matters again in Westminster for the first time, basically a decade.

And the other thing that sort of changed by comparison to last 10 years, and I suppose in some ways does take us back to the 90s with them, is that, you know, for quite a long time, particularly obviously in the coalition years before that as well under Labour, they had become the kind of split the difference party, depending on where you were in the country in particular, you know, they ran to the left of Labour in Labour seats, since the right of the Tories in Tory seats sometimes, you know, they are now very much an avowedly anti-conservative force, you know, in every single way.

I mean, Davy, you know, has been very clear that now, despite the fact, of course, he was in coalition himself with a Conservative-led government and cabinet, you know, he's not going to do any deals with the Tories under any circumstances, but obviously leaving the door open, a scans to the Labour Party and working with the Labour Party.

You ruled out a coalition with the Conservative Party.

Is a coalition with the Labour Party, is it possible for you, or did you find the experience of a part as a party of coalition last time just too scarring, no matter what the parliamentary issue? First of all, you're right to say that I

ruled out working with the Conservatives in any shape or form, and it's important that people understand why. I fought the Conservatives all my life, I took my seat off them, I fired them in every general election again. I fought them actually in the coalition news, it was difficult, but we fought them in government, and in order to get this discredited Conservative out, we got to defeat a lot of Conservative MPs, so it would be illogical, illogical to then say having beaten them and fought them to want to put them back, so we're not not going to do that. Do you think Stalman could be a good Prime Minister?

Well, I do think that he's, from the Labour perspective, he's a better official compared to Jeremy Corbyn. I mean, Jeremy Corbyn actually calls for problems for Liberal Democrats, there were lots of people who were minded to vote Liberal Democrat in the last election, who didn't like Boris Johnson, didn't like Brexit and so on, but they stopped short of voting for us, so they were worried about Jeremy Corbyn, and in our target seats in the Blue Wall that we talked about, was to help counties in the West Country, where we used to be strong and I think we will be recovering in the next election. I don't think Stalman scares people, and I think that's quite important. If I sort of start speculating about that sort of thing that you're inviting to do, I think I'll be accused, rightly, of taking B for granted, I'm not going to do that. When you saw the re-join march at the weekend, what did you

think?

You know, there are lots of people who are pro-European in that country, and the Liberal Democrats are a pro-European party. I've said time and again that Britain should be at the heart of Europe, and we've got debated policy this weekend in that pre-manifesto that you referred to.

Well, indeed, in your pre-manifesto it says, we need these measures, well, that you're proposing will help to restore the British economy and prosperity and opportunities of its citizens, and are also essential steps on the road to EU membership, which remains our longer-term objective. How long term are we talking?

What I deal with, particularly for the actual manifesto and the next parliament, is things that are on the table, and that's not on the table currently.

But you're putting it on the table. No, it's in your pre-manifesto.

We passed a very detailed motion, and more detailed than you could in a pre-manifesto document. We're setting out what we call the four steps. The four steps are re-engaging with Europe, which we want to do, because we are pro-European. What we found was people felt, both sides of town, actually, that the relationship between Britain and our European friends have been soured very badly, and you're going to spend quite a bit of time and very patient to rebuild that. The trust that needs to be there has been broken by people like Boris Johnson.

But to be clear, your pre-manifesto is correct. What you've written, it is your longer-term objective to rejoin the EU.

Britain should be part of Europe.

Well, it's in your document.

But, Lewis, I'll insert you, and it's really important that I get a chance to explain this to you.

No, no, but, sure, I just want to say, if I remember the public thinking, what does the Lib Dems think about rejoining the EU? And I went on your website, and I saw your pre-manifesto, and then it says, our longer-term objective remains EU membership. Surely, I would be right in thinking that your policy, your long-term policies, rejoining the EU, but you're not willing to say that.

In order to improve our relationship with Europe, we have a small step approach.

What was so interesting about it is that, obviously, as I say, he's leaving the door open to Labour, of course he is. And they always say the Lib Dems, which is true, which is that a quote-on-quote more moderate Labour leader helps them, because in Conservative facing seats, there aren't Conservative voters who are afraid to vote for the Liberal Democrats in a way that they were when, say, Corbyn was there.

What's amazing is there is, literally, as I was saying to Davy, on their party's pre-manifesto, on their website, it says, our long-term objective is to rejoin the EU. And I asked him, again and again, if he would just accept that that's his party's policy, he wouldn't do it. He wouldn't actually say it, even though that is literally on his website, it's part of their pre-manifesto. And it shows how far the Lib Dems have moved. Three, four years ago, this was the revoked party, the revoked Article 50 party. Now they're in a situation where, not for the first time, perhaps, they're looking both ways. They are still trying to sort of keep their toe in the water around pro-EU sentiments in the country. But he has

moved to a point where he can't even quite say it.

You could also argue that they're trying to be a party of realists. You know, he's not going into it saying, I'm going to be Prime Minister, which is what Joe Swinson did four years ago. And he's not going into it saying, Europe's dying to have us back, which they are not. You know, if you ever talk to sort of ambassadors of EU countries, I do quite a lot weirdly, they will tell you that there is no question on the table about the UK rejoining. It's not even an issue. So I wonder if David's just taking the Lib Dems out of that position of looking slightly detached from reality on that one, even though I can see you could still say long term, you know, in 10 years time, in 15 years time, this will be something we would like to see.

I suppose the only argument that goes against that, and it's, I think, an important one, is that what distinguishes, then, the Liberal Democrats from the Labour Party, who are saying very much the same thing on Europe, if you are pro-European and you feel really angry that Britain has left the EU and you want to get behind a political party that is going to say, right, we're going back, the Labour Party couldn't say that because of the problems it would have in the Red Wall seats, which voted so decisively for Brexit. Liberal Democrats could say that in a certain number of seats where around London, for example, where probably people voted very decisively for a remain must be so hot.

I mean, I'm wondering about sort of, you would have said Cornwall, South West at one stage would be sort of Brexit Lib Dem. There aren't many Lib Dem seats there anymore, frankly. No, but they are targeting them.

They are targeting them.

And I think this is, what the last few days also tells us is that, in a way, that the Lib Dems are moving in terms of the sort of political terrain they're trying to contest, because it was not just the Brexit issue, and I don't think, in a way, John, it's a surprise that he's sounding like Starmer, because, of course, that could potentially suit them very well in a hung parliament situation on Brexit. But also, the big row that they had at this conference was about housing and about housing targets. So the leadership wanted to move away and they put a motion down, which said that they would abandon centrally imposed housing targets and just allow local areas to decide. In the end, they actually lost that vote on the conference floor. Lib Dems are a very democratic party. The leadership often loses votes, partly because younger Lib Dems, some of whom I spoke to, had mounted this kind of rearguard action against it, saying, we already lost a youth vote once. We're at risk of doing it again by becoming the sort of NIMBY party. But there is no doubt that in their crosshairs, more rural seats in the south of England, like mid-beds, for example, which tend to be anti-development, that is where the Lib Dems have moved to. That's the point. In the bi-elections, they picked up the seats where people were pissed off with the Conservatives because of HS2 going through their backyard. So, of course, they want to play to both sides, right?

And that is with the sort of new areas and the new terrain that they're moving to. And that is where they're going to fight the election.

Now that you've said pissed off, do we have to give a bad language warning?

No, I'll take it out.

Will you?

[Transcript] The News Agents / Is it too easy to be considered a refugee? Suella says so.

They were very unhappy.

Peaved.

Cheesed off.

Cheesed off.

Hard cheese.

Yes. See, I got a lot of grief on social media saying that I was the pottymouth.

You both as bad as each other.

No, she's...

I'm much worse.

I'm much worse.

No, no, no.

Fucking way worse.

You sure what I say off mic?

We do.

We'll be back tomorrow.

We'll see you then.

Bye-bye.

Bye-bye.

The news agents with Emily Maitlis, John Sopel and Louis Goodall.

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