

[Transcript] The News Agents / Is Rishi on 'the wrong side of history'?

Let me just ask you finally before you go, how are you getting up here to make this green announcement today?

Private jet?

I'll be flying as I normally would, and that is the most efficient use of my time.

But again, I think actually that question brings to life a great debate here.

If you or others think that the answer to climate change is getting people to ban everything that they're doing, to stop people flying, to stop people going on holiday, I think that's absolutely the wrong approach.

That was Rishi Sunak, the Prime Minister, unveiling his new North Sea oil drilling and carbon capture scheme, and he was speaking on BBC Radio Scotland in a very brief five minute interview this morning.

And that answer that he gave there is quite revealing, the way he turned it around on the interviewer, because that is the message that Sunak and the Conservatives are going to take all the way up to the next general election, and we've seen plenty of clues for it now.

We're seeing net zero front and centre, and saying that the Conservatives will implement it and manage it in a way which fundamentally doesn't change your life, and the other side will.

So today we're going to hear about those hundred or so new oil and gas sea licenses.

What does this tell us about the drilling and digging of and for fossil fuels in an age of net zero, and what does it tell us about the Conservatives approach more generally to climate, and how much they've been swayed by one by-election result two weeks ago in Uxbridge.

Welcome to the Newsagents.

The Newsagents.

It's Emily.

And it's Lewis.

And in a moment we'll be talking to you about what's going on in Niger, a military coup overturning a democratically elected president, and the Russia tentacles that lie all over that part of Central Africa.

But first we're going to be talking, as we said, about the Prime Minister's big announcement this morning, which is his unveiling of a new, well it's sort of new, it's been talked about before, carbon capture scheme off the north-east of Scotland.

If you don't know what carbon capture is, it is this experimental, new-ish technology that has been worked on for years without too much success, but which scientists think or some scientists think may be finally about to get over the line, where effectively we take some of the carbon that has been produced from energy production or from industry more generally, particularly in those more carbon intensive industries like cement making and so on, which are probably going to be dependent on fossil fuels or carbon production in some way for some years to come, and you take that carbon and you quite literally funnel it into the ground using some of the pipelines that have been used to extract gas and oil from the North Sea to bring it on shore and bury it into the seabed rather than letting it get into the atmosphere and thus exacerbate already severe man-made global warming. But at the same time, as he's talking about this brand new technology, carbon capture

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or what should have been a brand new technology maybe 20 years ago, he's also talking about handing out new licences to companies for oil and gas in the North Sea.

And yet he's trying to say or trying to put across this idea that it is absolutely consistent with his commitments to net zero carbon.

And he's doing that by arguing that actually first and foremost in people's minds is energy security and that you can't just transition overnight to having no fossil fuels.

So it might as well be our fossil fuels than let's say Russia or the Middle East that are giving us fossil fuels at much higher prices with all the political vulnerability that that entails.

The question is how many in his own party is he going to bring with him and how much of the country is he going to bring with him on this?

Because as we talked about last week when Lewis was in Spain, we were talking about the positioning of the parties vis-a-vis climate change.

We know that some 71% of the population, 71% of the population believes that the government should be doing more to combat climate change, should be doing more to help us reach our net zero targets.

And yet the bit of that polling data that the Prime Minister seems to be listening to is the caveat, which says people want it, they don't want to spend their own money on it.

And so it seems to me that my analogy is kind of like, don't start a diet by putting a chocolate cake in the fridge and going, I'll just finish the chocolate cake and then I'll diet.

You can start the diet without going for the chocolate cake.

And Rishi Sunak's approach is we're going to need that chocolate cake anyway, whether you have it in one go now, whether you have it bit by bit, whether you have a little piece each day, you're going to have to keep going on this because you don't want to hurt people.

I don't want to isolate people.

I don't want to put them off what the Conservatives are.

I want this to be painless.

And I guess the question for all of us really is, can that transition be painless?

Can we carry on living exactly the way we were?

Can we not pay higher bills?

Can we not cut down our holidays?

Can we not give up our old cars?

Can it be painless?

Which is the experiment really that the Conservatives are hoping to prove and to give them clear water away from Labour.

Well, I think Sunak, in a way, we heard it in that interview there.

Sunak is right, in a sense, which is that I think that net zero, I think, is probably doomed, at least in a country like Britain, if the impression is among the public that their lives are going to be substantially worse as a result.

I think he's right about that.

The microcosm of that bit there was when he said, I don't think we're going to persuade people to do net zero if we say you're going to ban flying and you can't go on holiday.

I think he's right about that.

I think the way we get to net zero is by really substantial government and state leadership

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investing in all of the technologies and extraordinary technologies that will get us there. And, you know, we've seen a little bit, I suppose you could argue with carbon capture and storage. I think the question is whether actually, Sunak gets that impression, understands that the public aren't going to be sold on that, but doesn't really get the leadership. Like, where is the leadership on all of the rest?

Where is the equivalent of the Inflation Reduction Act?

I mean, just on the North Sea oil point, there is now, and we should talk about the wider politics of it, there is now clear space, political space between his position and the Labour Party's position on North Sea oil and gas extraction.

The Labour Party committed to no new licenses after they come to power.

We should remember just for context that one way or the other, even with these new licenses, most of the oil and gas in the North Sea has already gone.

It's already been extracted.

We've already sold it.

So we're talking about relatively small numbers of hydrocarbons that are left in the North Sea. So even if we extract and give all of these new licenses away, the long term benefit is going to be quite marginal.

It doesn't mean you don't do it.

It doesn't mean that Sunak's wrong, that it's better to extract this stuff closer to home.

But I suppose the balance of the argument basically is between those like Sunak who say better to use this stuff, given that we're going to be dependent on oil and gas for some time anyway. And those who say, well, yeah, OK, you can take that out.

But given it's a relatively small amount and small volume in general, what is the effect of that in terms of disincentivising investment on the greener stuff that is actually going to be providing our energy for decades to come?

Yeah, I think what his argument misses is the economic imperative.

And we were speaking last week to the head of UK Energy, and she was saying, as soon as you look like you're backtracking on this, you basically lose inward investment.

Because a lot of these companies, we talk about the sort of the energy companies as if they are pro-fossil fuels and anti sort of modernisation.

And she said, actually, they're not.

They have the investment ready to go.

They want to invest in Britain.

As soon as you start indicating that you're going back to the old ways, they think, oh, right, OK, we'll piss off somewhere else.

You know, you see what Joe Biden's done.

A lot of places are doing it by the way.

A lot of places are doing it.

So all it tells you is that we will be further down the wrong of places that actually want to invest in this stuff.

Joe Biden, who has created the Inflation Reduction Act, which is basically this massive green energy boost for jobs is saying, we are going to put jobs first, even if it involves protectionism, even if it pisses off some of our neighbours, we're going to put all our energy into making sure that the actual economy is focused this way forward.

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And I think the signals that Sunak is giving off here, and I understand that within his own party, a lot of people will be delighted about hearing him say, I'm the friend of the motorist, no more eulers, no more low traffic zones, carry on digging, all the rest of it. But actually, for a Conservative party to not care about bringing economic investment into Britain in something that is absolutely fundamental to where the whole world is looking, I think is quite dangerous.

I think Sunak's approach at the moment can be characterised as all about short term political tactics and almost nothing or relatively little about the long term statecraft and economic strategy of where we're going to need to go, irrespective of whether you're a big believer or advocate in net zero.

It's the whole way the world is going.

I mean, Britain can sort of just stay on the sidelines if it wants to take an example.

I mean, we can talk about petrol and diesel cars and maybe extending the ban.

Sunak says he's not going to do that, but there's a lot of pressure.

He's been very firm about that.

He said 2030 is going to be the end of the diesel.

But there's a lot of pressure in the papers and from parts of the Conservative party to do it.

I mean, it's a good example of the wider problem.

We could do that if we want.

But you know, at some point, the manufacturers just won't make them anymore.

We'll be the only country to drive you on the land.

We'll be like having, yeah, but like still having like black and white tellies everywhere, right?

Like at some point, the technology just leaves the station and you've got to get on board with it.

And the bigger conversations we really ought to be having

are about where that leaves us and where it leaves the state and how we fund the state.

So for example, what's going to happen when Torsten Bell from the Resolution Foundation is making this point that we came, what's going to happen when we do phase out diesel and petrol cars?

And where do we get the fuel duty from?

Because electric cars don't get fuel duty.

That's \$28 billion a year for the Treasury.

You'll start paying your tax on electric soon.

On electric or maybe you have road charging.

No one wants to talk about that.

No one wants to discuss that.

And in terms of Sunak's kind of wider positioning, look,

in terms of what you were saying, Emily, about the signals that are being sent, look, we've got a bit of a catalogue now of, in some ways, relatively minor stuff.

But the signals are there.

You know, we saw the stuff of the weekend about and the friend of the motorist clamping down on low traffic, neighborhoods, 20 mile per hour, speed limits, talking about, you know, from with 15-minute cities, U-lares, carbon pricing, we've seen over the last 24 hours.

The government has essentially reduced the cost to factories in producing carbon,

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because there is a price for carbon in terms of industry.

So you're seeing signal after signal now from the government basically saying that on the surface, we are pro 2050 carbon neutrality.

But not yet.

We're still going to our targets, but not yet.

But on every single little measure, basically sending the political signal that this is something that we don't care about quite as much as everyone thought we did.

I'm sorry, it's back to my chocolate cake.

I am on a diet, but you won't mind if I just have a slice of chocolate cake before I start.

And all of this basically arising from the Uxbridge by election for 450 votes, and from basically a scrambling around among conservative strategists to try and find points of differentiation to try and find a strategic vote on which to scramble.

I think the interesting thing is that if you look to Labour to counter that, you're not going to hear a very loud message, actually, because they've already rolled back on the North Sea oil and gas, you know, ending new digging there.

And even the SMP is in a very curious position, because of course, all this is taking place off the coast of Scotland.

So we're going to talk to somebody who is admittedly quite nuanced about all this, Stephen Flynn, the leader in Westminster of the SMP.

And he also has, as it were, a dog in this fight, because he is an MP for that part of the world, Aberdeen South, pretty much where Rishi Sunak was speaking from this morning.

So I guess you're pretty conflicted on what you actually think of this plan, right?

So there's two big announcements to date. The first one is carbon capture and storage, which I think is a phenomenally good thing.

The SMP have been campaigning for that since 2005.

And ironically enough, in the lead up to the independence referendum in 2013, there was a UK energy secretary by the name of Ed Davie, who obviously is now the Lib Dem leader.

And he promised a billion pounds worth of investment in carbon capture and storage in the northeast of Scotland.

And then just after the independence referendum, coincidentally, that project and that funding was taken off the table.

And then again, the last couple of years, we've tried to get the project to go ahead to the Scottish cluster, as it's called, the Econ project.

And we weren't successful in projects in the north of England, which was very confusing given that the oil and gas industries housed in the northeast of Scotland, and that's where all the huge carbon stores are.

But today, to hear that Rishi Sunak, the Prime Minister, is in Aberdeen South and is going ahead with this plan now.

I mean, it's not his fault that Ed Davie didn't see it through.

You're pretty pleased, right?

Yeah, yeah. I am pleased that we've got to this point.

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I wish it hadn't taken 18 years,
because I'm almost thinking, where could we have been?
You know, we are where we are.
It's a good investment, 21,000 jobs.
It's going to take carbon out of the atmosphere
and put it back from whence it came.
I think that's a good thing.
And I think most people in the northeast of Scotland
are just glad that this is over the line there,
when we just want to see it come to fruition.
What do you make of the argument, though,
the critique that is made, including by organisations like Greenpeace,
to say that the problem with carbon capture
is that it makes it easier for polluters and for governments
not to take decarbonisation as seriously as they should.
Yeah, so I don't think it can be an excuse
for continuing to pump harmful gases into the atmosphere.
It has to be taken in around.
And that's why the Independent Committee on Climate Change,
when they're looking at the balanced pathway to net zero,
they're quite clear that carbon capture has a huge role to play.
And that's not just the ACON project in the northeast of Scotland.
That's projects right across the UK.
And that's where the big frustration is laid,
is that the UK government's kind of been a blockage to this.
But it can't be an excuse for further oil and gas extraction.
When we're looking at oil and gas extraction,
because obviously the Prime Minister has made
a pretty big announcement today in respect of that as well,
we need to be looking at it in the prism of two, maybe three things.
The first one would be energy security.
Do we require this to meet our domestic demands?
In the context of Scotland, which is slightly different from the UK,
we produce six times more gas than we consume.
Upwards two-thirds of our electricity already comes from renewable resources.
But do we need this to meet our energy demands?
And secondly, if we're extracting this and using it,
can we still meet our climate obligations?
And overlap amongst all of that is something
which is very important for me as a local constituency MP,
which is how does that impact upon the job situation?
Okay, so what's the answer to that?
Because we also know that Rishi Sunak's talking about
hundreds of new oil and gas sea licenses.

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Now, presumably from a jobs perspective, you're cheering that on.
And from a footprint perspective, you're saying, why on earth are we going for more gas and oil?
So I think it's probably a little bit more nuanced than that because the way I see it is quite simple.
An engineer who works offshore is an engineer first and foremost. And if you can create jobs in the renewable sector for them, then that's where the government should be focused.
So the position that the government have, the Rishi Sunak has at Grant Shaps, has as energy secretary is very much reminiscent of Donald Trump, you know, drill baby drill rather than looking at the rounded picture. Because if you focus too much on oil and gas, then you're detracting from potential investment in renewables.
So they shouldn't hand out these new licenses? I think when they're looking at these licenses, they should have done so on the basis of energy security and climate compatibility.
And I don't think they've done that. I think they've let their own dogma that they need to drill as much as possible. If you look at it through the prism of energy security and climate compatibility, that has to be your starting point. I don't think the Tories are doing that. When the independent committee and climate changer are looking at oil and gas usage going forward on that balanced pathway to net zero, what they are effectively saying, it forms a declining part of the energy mix. That's important.
So you still need to extract some because you're going to need it. But you shouldn't be reliant upon it because you should be transitioning.
The other thing that the Prime Minister was asked about today was the means in which he travelled to Scotland. Do you think that travelling on a private jet to get to Scotland is, even if you are the Prime Minister, is climate compatible as you put it? So I think the use of a private jet is probably unnecessary in terms of the Prime Minister flying from London to Aberdeen as someone who has to travel between London and Aberdeen on a weekly basis.

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I've got a fair bit of sympathy for that.
The only other route is to jump on a train,
which takes eight, nine hours,
or perhaps a sleeper train,
but for those of us who are quite tall,
getting a kip on a sleeper train.
Well, that's not a problem which afflicts for issues you see now, of course.
Well, I'll let you say that.
You'll get me in trouble this.
Apologies to the Prime Minister.
But just going back to this idea of the Conservatives
now being on the side of the driver,
everything we've seen since the Uxbridge by-election,
I suppose what he's doing is saying there's clear water now
between what the Conservatives are saying
and what Labour's saying.
And it sounds like you're not actually saying
what the government's doing is that off-beat, really.
No, I think huge aspects of our off-beat.
So look at where the United States is
with the Inflation Reduction Act.
Look at where Europe is in responding to that,
or Japan, or China, and India, and their investments,
in battery technologies.
And compare that to the UK whose priority
seems to be oil and gas licenses,
and 20 mile an hour zones in local communities.
I mean, it's absurd.
There's a global gold rush on renewables that is ongoing,
and we won't miss out if we don't focus on this.
And that's where my frustration is,
that in the medium to long term,
that's where Scotland's economic prosperity
is going to come from.
It's where probably the UK's economic prosperity
should be a main part of it,
which, of course, I've got quite strong views on that,
should be coming from as well.
It's where America's coming from.
And yet we are the ones with a UK Prime Minister
who are focused in a completely different space.
And I don't understand why that is the case.
And that goes back to my earlier point
with regards to carbon price

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in hand with the oil and gas license.
So presumably, the S&P has to be in favour
of new oil and gas exploration,
because you're thinking at some point,
this is your route to independence, financial success.
I guess if we were independent, which I hope we are,
I would like to see us take a pretty grown-up
and sensible approach to this,
to assess our energy needs.
But not yet.
No, I think we are, in fairness.
But I would like to see us take a sensible approach,
which assesses our energy needs,
the climate crisis, and indeed those of our allies,
and say where we need to be.
But attached to that,
why don't we have more robust climate compatibility checks
than what we do at the moment?
I mean, existing licences don't get climate compatibility checks
despite being 10, 20, 30, 40 years old,
which I think is moderately absurd, and should be changed.
Why is the Prime Minister not saying today,
look, there's 100 licences.
Why is he not attaching conditions to that,
that there needs to be concurrent investment
in renewable technologies,
be that green hydrogen offshore, wind onshore, wind tidal,
in whatever way, shape, or form you want it to be?
And they're just not in that space.
And this is the problem.
They're going to leave the UK relying on an energy source,
which is, to all intents and purposes,
a depleting energy source while the rest of the world
is getting on investing in renewables.
Just to finally, Stephen, talk the different topic.
Today is the last day of the recall petition
in Hamilton, rather Glenn, Margaret Ferrier,
no longer an SMP MP, but she's an independent,
and we'll find out if 10% of her constituents
have decided to sign it.
Are you expecting that by elections happen?
Genuinely, no idea whether 10% of folk
will have filled in the form.
You think you've got a good chance of winning it

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if it does happen?

You know what, I do, I do.

And the reason for that is quite obvious to me, and we've seen the Labour Party under Starmer in the last few weeks deviate and flip away from the two-child benefit cap.

We've seen them today, and we've put a pretty clear challenge to them today in relation to, over the last couple of days, in relation to the bedroom tax.

And the UK Labour leader is refusing to commit to getting rid of that, despite the fact that Scottish governments haven't spent hundreds of millions of pounds mitigating UK policies.

So I think in the context of that by-election, where the UK Labour Party is, and how different that is to the objectives and motivations of the people of Scotland, I think will come to a positive conclusion in the by-election for us.

Stephen Finn, thanks so much for coming in.

Thank you.

In the studio, off on to get your private jet.

You can't ask for more than that, can you?

No, you can't off to get your private jet back to Aberdeen now.

No.

No.

That's how he says.

Cheers, Stephen.

Cheers, Ness.

It's so fascinating listening to Stephen there.

Actually, the truth is there is not a great deal of space between where the SNP and the Conservative Party is.

These are difficult questions in terms of our transition and our weaning off fossil fuels and carbon.

And any party which aspires to government, in reality, has got very difficult compromises and difficult choices to be made on it.

What depresses me is really going back to the start, how small this debate is becoming.

When we end up with a situation where Rishi Sunak is talking about 20 mile per hour speed limits,

I mean, come on.

This is the prime minister we're talking about.

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I think local authorities are probably best suited to deciding whether or not neighbourhoods should be allowed to have 20 mile per hour speed limits or not.

And the idea that this is even really part of this debate when we're talking about such massive geopolitical forces is just crazy.

But he's not really talking about the speed limit.

He is signalling.

Yeah, sure.

And I think that's absolutely fundamental to understanding what he is as a prime minister.

He doesn't want to be the one that has a hard message for people on this.

And you could argue that he knows he's had to have a hard message on inflation.

He knows he's had to have a hard message to people on, you know, not seeing tax cuts.

He knows it's pretty awful.

And so in a way, these are his concessions.

He's saying, I won't make you give up your old banger.

I won't charge you more to go into central London.

I won't make you slow down.

I think being the friend of is a very clever sort of place for him to be, which is like, they're the scary lot.

Middle England, you stick with me.

No one's ever friend of the pedestrians, are they?

No one's ever friend of the walkers.

I mean, like, honestly, if there is one group in society, which has had a pretty easy kind of period over the last 10 years, it's motorists.

I mean, fuel duty has not gone up.

In 13 years, if it had gone up, there'd be about 60 billion pounds as it had done previously.

The Treasury would have an extra 60 billion pounds or so to spend revenue to spend on renewables and goodness knows what else, hospitals and schools and so on.

I would argue that the train passengers probably had an even worse time than anyone else.

Well, yeah.

And you know what?

What's also a bit depressing about all this obsession about cars now is that, A, when we talk about cost of living, the poorest people don't actually drive cars.

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B, obviously in rural areas or semi-rural areas, people need their cars.

In cities, which admittedly, many of which don't have particularly good public transport systems, particularly in the north of England, but nonetheless, you know what?

Cities are better without cars.

We saw that during the pandemic.

They are way better without cars.

But look who has the power in the cities, labour.

And look who has the power around the cities in the places that are on the, if you like, the fringes or the rural seats, the Conservatives.

So of course, this all makes huge electoral sense.

And yeah, but you know, it'd just be nice if the PM sort of thought about the lived experience of people in cities now and again, talking about lived experience and lived experience of that interviewer in Scotland that we should go back to at the beginning.

Rishi Sunet does have quite a way with handling himself in interviews.

And there was a good example of that.

At the very start of the interview with Good Morning Scotland, the interview had made it clear that they had only been given five minutes, which was shorter than they perhaps had anticipated.

So it got off to a testy start and it ended quite testily as well.

It's not about banning flying.

It's about investing in new technologies like sustainable aviation for you that will make flying more sustainable.

That's the right approach to this.

But I look forward to having that conversation with you again.

Thanks very much for having me.

We have to let you go.

Will you commit to coming back on and speaking to us for the long-term future?

I think this is the second time I've been on your show in the short space of time I've been Prime Minister, but I'm sure I'll be there again in the future.

Thanks very much.

Thank you very much indeed.

See, I love a quick goodbye.

I'm a big fan of a quick goodbye.

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That's how we end all our conversations every day.

Bye-bye.

Bye-bye.

Yeah, it just shuts everything down and it allows you to escape because otherwise you end up, you know, with the, I think it's called a French exit, isn't it?

Don't hang around.

Oh gosh.

Irish goodbye.

A French exit is probably not as exciting as it sounds.

It's just where you don't hang around.

I don't think we should soon have had a French exit.

There is a point though, which is that I do think he has to be a bit careful about his petulance and interviews often comes across that he thinks he's the cleverest person in the room and the cleverer person in the interview.

And a lot of politicians do think that anyway.

They probably think it all the time, but the key is not to let it appear that way.

And soon that really does let it appear that way.

And I'm not surprised there is all of this chatter about trying to limit the number of interviews that he's doing.

But in a general election campaign, which is not so far away, he can't get away with that.

And I would be pretty worried if I were one of his advisors about the potential for combustibility and his sort of slight brittleness in interviews, which is coming across time and time again.

Lewis, he just said bye-bye.

All right, bye-bye.

We'll be back in talking about Niger in a moment.

This is The News Agents.

That was the sound of a coup, a real, live, old-fashioned military coup in Niger.

And if you're not up to speed on this story yet, we thought this was a good opportunity just to kind of get you into a place where some of this is making a bit more sense.

Because what very few people realize is that Niger has been up till now in recent years a democracy.

It was actually quite a functioning, healthy democracy under President Mohammed Barzoum.

And it had had its first transfer

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from one democratically elected leader
to another democratically leader until this military coup,
a proper old-fashioned coup led by a general, General Tiani,
who decided that he would get rid of Barzoum.
And this is, just to put this in context,
the sixth military takeover in that part of the world since 2020.
But the question is now, not just about whether the army
and Tiani have got rid of Barzoum,
but who are the key geopolitical players in this?
And what often happens in this part of the world,
we call it the Sahel,
it's the strip of countries underneath the Sahara,
around the Sahara, across Africa, is that Russia has stepped in.
Russia, either in the shape of Putin himself,
although never directly attributable,
or else in the shape of the Wagner group
that you've heard us talk about before,
and that is Progosian, the leader,
the one who actually fell out with Putin
so dramatically about a month ago
when he also attempted his own coup against Putin's generals.
And what we're seeing now is that every time
a central African country like Niger, like Mali,
like Mauritania suffers from unrest,
then the Wagner group steps in.
And you can right now draw a line going across from west to east
from Mauritania, which is just under Morocco,
right through Mali, right through Niger,
right through Chad, Sudan, to Somalia on the east coast,
and see all the places that Russia has influenced.
And if Russia has influence,
then the appetite for chaos is probably immense.
Yeah, and geopolitics is fusing,
it seems with local politics across the Sahel,
because this is a mix of that geopolitics
and the fact that violent Islamist groups
have been gaining ground in different countries,
controlling more territory, conducting attacks in Mali,
in Niger, and Burkina Faso.
And that is the justification that so many of these generals
and soldiers and military forces, hunters,
are using to take power in country after country
across the Sahel, despite the fact that in countries
where these coups have happened,

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they haven't been able to be any more successful, particularly in cracking down on that Islamist violence. And even though we know that Niger is incredibly poor, it is one of the poorest countries in the world, if not the poorest country in the world, it is an incredibly powerful provider of uranium. And that is really massive to anyone who's coming in, looking for natural resources, i.e. the Wagner group, or looking for sources of energy, i.e. France, the former colonial power to Niger, who loves nuclear power, as we know. Throw into the mix as well, the story we're talking about last week, which is climate change, and the Sahel is one of the fastest rising temperatures, or has one of the fastest rising average temperatures of anywhere in the world, more and more desertification, and Emily just referred to it there, I mean, it's easy to get lost on the geopolitics, which we're going to talk about a bit more in a moment, but God, this is a nightmare for the people of Niger, just as it is for Burkina Faso, and neighboring countries in Sudan already so poor, and this instability must be absolutely terrifying. So let's talk about the geopolitics, with someone to whom we've turned before on this show, to talk us through what is happening in this region, and that is the journalist Tim Marshall. Tim, thanks so much for coming back on the show. Yes, well, thank you, sad news, and as you say, pretty complicated. Yeah, so let's just sort of go right back to the beginning, because as we've said, unsurprisingly, most people will not be including really ourselves, that familiar with the politics of Niger. What has happened over the last few days, Tim, and why does it matter? There's been a military coup, unfortunately, part of a trend in the Sahel region, and it has a knock-on effect, not just for the people of Niger,

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but for the wider region,
and actually for the wider world.
The president, Bazoum,
who remains president and remains alive,
was the first Nigerian president
to take power from another elected president
in the entire history of Niger,
which got independence in 1960 from France.
It's always been dictatorship, return to democracy,
another dictatorship, return to democracy.
But for the first time,
they actually had a democratic transfer of power,
and now it's gone that way.
So why do we care in the outside world?
7% of the world's uranium comes from there.
France, the former colonial power,
of course, is extremely concerned,
because it supplies a lot of uranium
for the 50 or so French nuclear reactors.
President Bazoum was a key ally
in the fight against Jihad
by many Islamist groups in the region.
It is a base, Niger, for an American drone squadron.
It's a base for French troops
who were forced to leave Mali after a coup there.
And the outside troops have been invited in
to try to stabilise the entire region from imploding.
Because if it implodes,
you're going to see a huge movement of peoples
in which direction will most of them go?
Northwards.
What is north?
Places like Libya and Tunisia, already fragile.
And north of them is Europe.
So if you're concerned about the mass movement
of peoples and migration,
this story is of interest.
Tim, what's the justification that they gave for this coup?
Well, the public are being told
that the president wasn't winning the war
against the Islamist groups.
Al Qaeda are down there and so are ISIS.
In fact, they're in all these Sahelian countries now.
But that's a pretext.

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Niger has been doing better than any of its neighbours
in keeping the Islamist groups at bay,
keeping them away from the main urban areas.
And they'd had a lot of military successes.
So it is just a pretext.
The real reason appears to be
that the guy that's taken over General Tijani,
he was the head of the presidential guard
and the rumors were floating around the capital
that he was going to get replaced.
And so at that movement moment,
he and some other senior military leaders
moved against the president,
surrounded the presidential palace,
arrested him.
And then the key moment came when the head of the army,
the head of the all of the armed services said,
I support the coup.
So we're now at an impasse
because the presidential guard is now inside the presidency.
The coup has held.
The military are all in it together.
So the question is now,
do they let this pass the outside world
or do they actually move to reverse the coup?
I cannot see them reversing the coup simply by sanctions.
It could take military action.
And when you say the outside world,
it sounds as if Russia
is actually part of the inside world in this.
Just explain the relationship between
Putin and Progosian,
i.e. the Wagner group leader,
as to who's got the power here.
This is when it gets even more complicated
because the outside world, of course, is France.
It's the UK because the UK has forces in the Sahel
at the invitation of Sahelian governments.
And of course, the ECOWAS,
the West African Union of Nations
are also calling for the coup to be reversed.
But this is where Russia comes in.
If the European Union, for example,
has already said we are suspending all aid,

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so they will look for aid from elsewhere.
If the troops are forced to leave,
the new military hunter will look for protection
from elsewhere.
And we know where elsewhere is.
Elsewhere is Russia.
So as we discussed last time, Emily,
the Wagner group,
which is a sort of commercial enterprise in its own right.
It loves protecting gold mines
and then taking a good cut.
But some of that gold ends up in Moscow
via various means in order to pay for Putin's war.
But it's also what we call plausible deniability for Russia.
If it wants to meddle in a country, Wagner can meddle,
and the Moscow can say,
well, that's this private military company,
not us gov.
So Niger.
There's no hard evidence that Russia is involved in this coup.
The Wagner group never want to miss an opportunity.
Gregorzin has already said,
oh, look, if you need any help,
I happen to know some guys that could show up and help you.
They're already in Central African Republic.
They basically run the Central African Republic.
They're already in Burkina Faso.
They're already in Mali,
all of which had coups,
and then said, would you like to come and help us?
So this is where the real tension is in the story.
If the European Union isn't going to help,
and if the foreign troops are going to leave,
that leaves this new guy,
General Tierney,
with an interesting choice to make.
And of course, the choice he will make is Russia.
And Tim, this matters, doesn't it,
in the sense that Niger up to now has been
one of the only reliable Western allies in the region,
US pouring loads of money into it.
France, obviously, as you say, the former colonial power.
Is that what's in it for Russia?
It's a chance to displace a strategic ally of the West

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plus resources?

Very much.

I mean, they play second fiddle to the Chinese in trying to move into, let's be fair, what were former Western colonial regions with a lot of Western influence still?

And this is the backdrop to it.

There's a group called the G5 Sahel Force, and these are the five Sahelian countries and their militaries, which together are trying to combat the Islamists. And they actually invited in the Western troops, notably the French.

They sent 5,000 combat troops down to Mali.

The British sent about 300 combat troops to Mali.

And then after the coup,

they were told to leave and in came Russia.

One of them falls, the next one to fall,

Pekina Fasa, the next one to fall,

Central African Republic.

So, of course, it's in Russia's strategic nation-state interests that another domino falls, and they get even more control of this region and push the Western influence out.

And, well, money-wise,

it suits the Wagner group absolutely fine.

The Wagner model is as follows.

Let's say you're the leader of a country, and they say,

look, we can protect you from whoever it is you think you might be frightened of.

Let's say it's 50 million pounds a year for security services.

The model is then, you take the 50 million,

you then give about 10 million back

to the very same leaders,

the military leaders, as kickbacks.

So they win their protection,

and they all get a million dollars in their back pocket.

Wagner take a cut of 40 million.

Everybody's happy.

We're not talking about good governance here, and this is another problem.

Western governments go in and try to help.

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The EU tries to help,
and they say, well, there are some strings attached.
Good governance is one of them.
And at a certain point,
sometimes the leaders get fed up with good governance.
It's a lot easier just to pay Wagner 50 million.
And Tim, is it Russia and Wagner
that is the commonality behind all of these coups?
Because you've already alluded to it.
It is extraordinary that across the Sahel,
there has been coup after coup,
quite recently, instability after more instability.
Is it Russia,
or what is the common link behind all of this political volatility
if there is one?
It's a good question, Louis,
and it's tempting to say that the commonality is Russia.
And in fact, it is up to when we get to Niger.
Because as I said, there's not any hard evidence,
or even that much circumstantial evidence
that they were actually behind this.
Where the commonality comes in
is that they would not let this opportunity go past.
If this coup sticks,
if the Western countries are not prepared to compromise
and say, well, all right, we'll recognize you
and we'll carry on giving you help
and just let us keep our bases,
if that doesn't happen,
then the commonality is Russia.
And we've already seen demonstrations.
Now, it's very easy to organize a demonstration,
especially in these countries.
You simply order various people out on the streets
and the French embassy has been attacked.
It also doesn't cost a great deal of money
to print up a few Russian flags and distribute them.
Because when you see those pictures
of people from Niger demonstrating outside
the French embassy and waving Russian flags,
it doesn't really mean that necessarily
that they support Russia.
It's just that it looks good
and it's a clear message

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by the people organizing the demonstrations,
the anti-Western demonstrations.
We do have another choice
because what the Hunter leaders would probably want
is carry on giving us hundreds of millions of dollars
every year, EU.
We're happy to have the Americans here
and their drone base and the French
and we're in charge now.
And the carities will carry on as normal.
The stick they have,
if we don't carry on as normal,
will bring the Russians in.
Oh, by the way, here's a reminder.
So go on then, Tim.
What should the West do with that?
Well, one of the great joys of being a journalist
is that we don't have to come up with solutions.
Simply problems.
It's a seriously difficult square to circle.
We'll find out within about two weeks.
The West would have to effectively give
a green light to another coup
and therefore perhaps encourage this trend
that we've discussed.
Yeah.
It's like paying for hostages, isn't it?
Yes.
And so you are then complicit in it
and then you can finesse it and say,
well, you know, as long as you say
you'll have elections within a couple of years
or whatever, but we've seen that in
Sudan and places and it simply hasn't happened.
So the alternative is we stick by the sanctions
that will be imposed.
The EU continues to give no money
to an incredibly poor country
and then pushes them into the arms of the Russians.
And this is the real stick
because I don't think the sanctions are the stick.
The stick is military action.
Now, the French have already warned
in fairly clear coded language

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if you seriously attack our interests,
for example, our factories that refine the uranium,
you will see us get involved militarily,
but they don't have to attack.
Why would they attack their own refineries?
They probably wouldn't, but the French have warned them.
The real threat now of military action
comes from ECOWAS,
the economic community of West African states,
15 nations.
They've already met once.
They've already suggested
if this isn't reversed, we might take military action.
They'll have a crisis meeting next week.
They've told their militaries already
to get a plan to put on the table.
So you cannot rule out entry
by several African nations to reverse the coup,
which of course would be opposed
and they would immediately have a large-scale war in Niger.
So there isn't actually, I can see,
I don't see a positive solution to this at the moment.
Tim, it sounds horrendous,
but thank you for talking through it, Tim Marshall.
Thanks, Tim. Thanks so much.
Thank you.
I think for us in terms of politics here
and how this potentially affects us,
Tim alluded to it there.
There is a world where in terms of the migration crisis,
this really explodes.
We've already started to see it
in terms of the instability
around Sudan and Burkina Faso.
And bear in mind,
the Nigerian government up to now
has basically been one of the forces
keeping people from traveling north
up to North Africa
and then obviously onwards into Europe.
And bear in mind,
I mean, again, we've touched on it already,
but Niger is unbelievably poor.
It is, by many standards,

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the poorest country in the world,
the lowest human development index in the world.
3.8 million in Nigeria
already required humanitarian assistance.
43% of Nigerians live in poverty,
earning less than \$2 a day.
It's got one of the highest fertility rates in the world
because so many children die, seven babies per woman.
And it was already home to hundreds of thousands of refugees
coming from Nigeria and Mali
and other unstable countries.
So if this explodes,
or if this becomes more unstable still,
this is going to have a big effect
both in terms of the region
and ultimately into Europe.
This is The News Agents.
Well, that's all from us.
You can now choose the two varieties of exit.
Mine, which will be a very brief, very succinct,
bye-bye for now.
Or Lewis, who will, in the manner in which...
I know where this is going.
Right, Rambalon forever,
because he doesn't want to see what was it,
rude or chippy or a bit abrasive or like the Prime Minister.
I would just like to wish you all a fond farewell
and salutations and hope that you join us again tomorrow
for more News Agents.
And Emily Maylis is currently looking at me
with the biggest death stare you can imagine.
So I'm just going to say bye-bye.
Good night and good night.
This has been a global player original podcast
and a Persephoneka production.