

[Transcript] The News Agents / Is the SNP falling apart?

This is a global player, original podcast.

Every single conservative.

Well, unless everybody else is hearing something else, Ash.

They are hearing something else.

No, I have never contradicted myself.

How are you going to deliver independence if the public don't have confidence in you?

That is the sound of something which you don't hear very often.

You might never have heard it at all.

Yellow on yellow.

SMP politician taking on.

SMP politician taking seven bells out of each other.

There has been a lot going on in Westminster these last weeks,

but as one political stage has been filled with Sunak,

more Johnson, the Windsor framework of Hunt's budget,

of yes, even Gary Lineker,

another perhaps more interesting show has been playing out as well.

The SMP leadership election.

The race to succeed, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon,

the first contested SMP leadership election for 20 years.

And it's as if all the tensions, all the disagreements, all the petty frustrations,

even a bit of political bloodlust have finally boiled over,

even with suggestions of the race perhaps being stacked in favour of one candidate.

On today's show, we're taking you inside that contest

and asking whether the SMP are finally running out of road.

It's Lewis here. Welcome to the News Agents.

The News Agents.

You're not scared of Labour?

No. I don't need to be complacent,

but I've not really had any reason as a SMP leader to be...

Kirsten Armand doesn't strike you as a more formidable opponent for the SMP.

Than who?

Than previous Labour leaders over the last decade.

No. In no way?

Not particularly, no.

That was Nicola Sturgeon speaking on the News Agents only seven weeks ago, at her most triumphant.

Yes, she was in political difficulty, but it didn't seem systemic.

Fast forward to today, and Sturgeon is gone or going.

And the race to succeed her is bloody.

Three candidates, the Health Secretary, Humza Yousaf, the Economy Minister, Kate Forbes, and former Minister Ash Regan have been taking to debate after debate

and savaging each other different parts of the Sturgeon legacy,

and the party's 16-year run in office.

This is unexpected.

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Over the years, the SMP have been known to be a fortress, not just in terms of their success, but also that they conduct their disagreements in private. At times, they've been almost monolithic, but the wear and tear of so many years in office have taken their toll. They actually disagree on quite a lot. And then there are the frailties of the frontrunners. Kate Forbes faced a maelstrom at the start of the campaign, with deep scrutiny of her evangelical beliefs. Just this week, she refused to commit to banning gay conversion therapy, a bit of a problem with a party where its voters have become deeply progressive, where one of the central themes of the Sturgeon leadership has been to make nationalism progressive. And the man, just about in front of the candidate of the party establishment, Hamza Youssef, well, he has his own questions to answer about his record as health secretary. And there's a worry after years of sure-footed Sturgeon that he might just be a bit gaff-prone. On Thursday, he went to meet a group of Ukrainian refugees, or women, and this is what he said on camera. So one question I have is, will it all of them end? What of course went unspoken, but for all to think, was that of course there were no men there. They're all fighting, or worse. Gaffs could be the least of their problems, though. There's been talk of a party split if Forbes wins. Into that mix, remarkably this week, there's been a bomb. Two of the candidates, Forbes and Regan, wrote a joint letter to the party chief executive, Peter Murrell, Nicola Sturgeon's husband, by the way, demanding to know how many people were actually eligible to vote in this contest, hinting that with secrecy, there was the potential for foul play. Kate Forbes' campaign said that there were questions about the integrity of the electoral process. The Regan campaign, backed by Forbes, have called for an independent auditor to oversee the vote. This is remarkable. They're basically suggesting that the party hierarchy might be trying to aid the use of campaign, or at least they're saying that that's what some members think. This led to one use of supporting MP saying this week that the party was being embroiled in, quotes, Trumpian nonsense. It is a remarkable descent. But there is another way of looking at this question, though, beyond the personalities and the acrimony,

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that Sturgeon, for all her gifts,
for all the advantages that Brexit, Johnson,
and years of Tory dominance gave her,
was still unable to get independence over the line,
either in terms of reliable majority support
or unlocking the route a successful strategy to another referendum.
And fundamentally, there isn't an articulation from any of these candidates
of a credible route to either.
Part of the unease that skittishness is because there is a worry
that for now the SNP is losing the battle against the clock,
where the sands run out, their bench exhausted,
and their voters' patience over their failure
to achieve their cherished independence aim just runs too thin.
It leaves strategists in a state of deep reflection,
Alan Little, with special correspondence at the BBC,
and is a deeply well-connected observer of the independence movement.
There are interesting conversations going on beneath the surface.
There's a generation of SNP members who are now saying
we have to start questioning the wisdom of the central mantra
of the Sturgeon years, which is a second referendum immediately.
We have to start questioning whether that's effective
and whether that's the right thing to do
and whether that country remains divided down the middle.
One young parliamentarian, in fact, a government minister
in Nicola Sturgeon's government, a junior minister, said to me,
look, we should abandon for now the demand for an immediate referendum
and start working with an incoming key Islamic government
to reform the constitution of the United Kingdom
and move towards a more federal setup.
Use the time between now and whenever the next referendum will be
to build up what he called state capacity in Scotland,
and eventually there is a second referendum.
The leap to independence will not seem so radical or so great.
So those conversations are happening in the SNP,
but not in this leadership debate.
And one pro-independence former parliamentarian said to me as well
that you shouldn't use referendums when the country is 50-50 divided.
A referendum should be like the 1997 devolution referendum.
It should be used to democratically legitimate or legitimize
as already a strong settled majority popular will.
And so that referendum in 1997 produced a three-to-one stonking
great majority in favour of establishing the Scottish parliament
and established beyond any reasonable challenge
the democratic legitimacy of that body.

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And that is the way some people in the SNP and the wider independence movement are beginning to think about the circumstances in which a future referendum should take place. But that's not being said in this leadership referendum. They're playing for now to the base. They're all saying we can have referendum within the next five years and Ash Regan is saying that Scotland can have its own currency within three months. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the party's poll rating has taken a real dip, although they still remain ahead. Polling shows there's been a softening of support for independence, though it remains high-ish. Labour, once thought to be in terminal decline in Scotland, is revived and gaining some ground. But it's also worth having caution. What about the prospects of the SNP, then about the long-term prospects of independence itself? Alan again. I mean, they're still leading in all of the polls for Hollywood and for Westminster. Independence is still nip and tuck, yes and no. Is there a danger of overestimating the peril that they're in? Oh yes, very much so. Perhaps not in the short term, but in the medium to long term, look at the age demographics of independence. Age groups under the age of 35 support independence by 70, 71% to 29, 30%. Even in late middle age, there are strong, sustained majorities in favour of independence, among both men and women. And you have to get to my age group, people in their late 50s and 60s and above, before you start finding strong majorities in favour of retaining the union. And many, many nationalists, maybe both in the SNP and in the wider movement, believe that the fruit of independence is ripening on the tree of age demographics and one day in the medium to longer term, it will drop into the lap of the independence movement. So I think the prospect that we face now is you'll see a decline in the popularity of the SNP, but that perhaps will not be mirrored by a decline in support for independence itself. And it may be that the SNP and the wider independence movement become much more decoupled than they've been traditionally. Right, we're going to get into this with one of the leadership candidates who is making those explosive complaints right after this. This is The News Agents. Welcome back. OK, as promised, Ash Regan, as I say, she demanded answers on how the election campaign is being conducted, cast doubt on the propriety of the contest, suggested that the company being used to run it. My vote wasn't truly independent of the SNP management. Lots to discuss with her. She joins us from Edinburgh, Ash. Thanks so much for coming on The News Agents. Thank you.

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We are entering the closing stages of this contest now.

You have been behind consistently.

Why are you staying in the race and do you think you can still win?

Of course.

I wouldn't say that we are in the closing stages.

The voting only opened on Monday and it's a two-week process.

So as far as I'm concerned, it's everything to play for.

And of course, I have had many members reach out to me from the SNP

and say that they consider me to be the only hope for the party going forward.

Why is that?

Because they think that the other two candidates are going to be the status quo, more of the same.

And as you'll have seen from the membership figures that were put into the public domain just yesterday,

as a result of my call for more transparency in the contest,

the SNP has lost a significant number of members in the last few months.

Now, we're still very successful and our membership figures are still extremely high at 72,000.

However, I think the fact that we have lost a number of members in the last few months is something that we should be addressing as a party.

And what do you attribute that fall to?

Because it is really quite striking, as you've already alluded to.

And you could argue that part of that maybe is around this extremely divisive leadership race where the party seems to be knocking seven bells out of each other half of the time.

What do you attribute that fall to?

No, I don't think it's got anything to do with the leadership contest

because that contest has only been going for a couple of weeks.

No, I think it's more systemic than that.

Anecdotally, I would attribute it to a perceived lack of progress on the independence question and the gender recognition reform bill.

And what do you think the cost of that is to the SNP losing those members?

Because it looks increasingly as if, you've already alluded to it,

the quest for independence, the independence cause, is stalling significantly

and clearly losing members is only going to add to that process and that dynamic.

Yes, it's not a good position to be in.

If I become the leader, many of those people have said they will rejoin the party

and I will certainly put a call out to ask people to consider coming back to us.

We want everyone to be a member, we want them to feel valued.

It's not ideal, is it, that the people you say are supporting you have left the party.

If they wanted you in, then maybe they should have stayed in.

Well, they didn't know there was going to be a leadership contest.

I'm just telling you what people have written to me, it's just anecdotal.

I think in terms of progress on independence, I think there is a perception

that we are not making as much progress on this issue as we might want to,

as the membership might want to.

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And so that's been a platform for my leadership contest.
I am setting out very clearly a plan for us to get to independence.
I want to begin making the case again for independence straight away
and try to get past that stalemate, if you like,
that I feel that we're in at the moment with regard to going around in circles,
asking for section 30 orders that never come.
Well, you've said during the course of this campaign
that if you become First Minister, Scotland would become independent within three years.
Are you still sticking to that? That would be the case, three years.
Yes, I think there's a high level of support for Scottish independence.
Opinion polling hovers around this sort of 50%, sometimes it's over 50%,
sometimes it's under, it is slightly under again at the moment,
but I think that's to be expected considering we do have leadership contest on at the moment
and that we haven't been making the case for independence, I would say, for some time.
Well, Nicola Sturgeon hasn't been making the case for independence for some time.
I mean, she's been making it consistently.
Every single year she's been First Minister.
What I think we've been doing is we've been making the case for the process.
We've been making the case to get a referendum.
That's what we've been talking about most of the time.
So I'm suggesting that we move past that stalemate,
that I don't believe that the UK government has a veto over the wishes of the Scottish people.
And if you think about it, a referendum is just an opportunity for the people of Scotland
to express their wishes at the ballot box.
The ballot box is the gold standard here, not especially the referendum.
And so if we're not going to be given a referendum and I don't believe we are,
then I think what we need to do is use the ballot box that is available to us.
And obviously in this case, in Scotland, that would be the general election for Westminster.
That was Nicola Sturgeon's plan. That's exactly the same as Nicola Sturgeon's plan.
That's what she was going to do.
No, it's nothing. It's not actually.
Yes, it was.
No, it isn't.
Excuse me. No, wait a second. She said she wanted,
it was going to be put to the SMP conference that has not been postponed.
She said she was going to use the general elections as a de facto referendum.
That's correct. So de facto referendum is not what I'm suggesting.
So perhaps if you've done a little bit more research,
you might have seen the difference between the two.
Well, I'm inviting you to educate me.
Well, you're not actually letting me answer any question that you've put to me so far.
So perhaps if you would take a little bit of time and listen to what I'm saying,
then I could educate you about the difference.
Please do. Please.

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So a de facto referendum, you're quite right to say, is what Nicola has set out laterally.

I think only within the last couple of months.

And I believe this also might be a plan that's been suggested by some other pro-independence parties.

I'm not suggesting a de facto referendum.

And for the main reason that I think the next opportunity for that would be the general election.

And I don't think having a single issue, single occasion event,

which is what that would be is appropriate at the moment due to this powerless state that the UK is in right now.

And the fact that, you know, people across Scotland are going to have other things on their minds.

So what I'm suggesting is called the voter empowerment mechanism.

And it is using each and every election as an opportunity for Scotland to express its will.

So these two things are different.

We would have in the first line of our manifesto that if Scotland chooses it,

it would be an opportunity for us to get together with the UK government and negotiate for exits.

It's not a mandate for a referendum or a mandate to have another election or any of those type of things.

This is to begin negotiations to exit the UK.

What's the difference between that and the de facto referendum?

It's the same thing.

And it's not just a single line.

So in a de facto referendum, it would just be a single issue.

So this will be the top line of our manifesto, but there will be other things on the manifesto as well.

But if it had worked, then you wouldn't need to do it each and every time.

What you're basically suggesting is you run each and every election asking for a mandate to have this

and to do for independence and to negotiate with the UK government.

And effectively, the suggestion for that is each time it would fail,

because you need to do it again the next time.

Well, we can't know whether it would fail unless you've got a crystal ball down the back of that chair that you're sitting on right now.

So we don't know the answer to that question.

What we know is when we started to think about doing this last time around, support for independence was something like 27%.

So I'm quite confident if we make the case for independence, if we put this back to the Scottish people,

especially considering the state the UK is in right now,

if you think about the effect that Brexit has had on Scotland, for instance,

especially when Scotland did not vote for that.

You know, obviously Northern Ireland's been offered a special deal.

That probably was something that could have been given to Scotland, but it wasn't.

Energy prices and so on. People are really struggling right now.

And I think many people would probably make a different choice if they were asked again about the

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question of Scottish independence.

I completely hear that and understand that and I completely understand the intellectual argument to say that

Scottish political will has been ignored time after time.

I'm just trying to understand what the difference is between your plan and basically what Nicola Sturgeon has done.

She has used every electoral opportunity to basically say this is a mandate for Scotland to seek independence.

She said that about the 2019 general election.

She said that about the 2021 Hollywood referendum.

It hasn't moved Westminster.

So I don't understand what the difference is between that and what you're proposing.

Well, first of all, I'm saying it has to be a trigger point of over 50% because that's the majority and that this used to be a policy.

So this was the party policy up until I think around about the late 90s, but it was a majority of seats cast.

Now, what Nicola Sturgeon's been doing and what the other two candidates in this contest are suggesting that they will also do

is they'll ask for a moral mandate based on election success.

What I'm suggesting is that if that's not been successful over the last few years, which it hasn't been, that we move up and we say we set the majority of votes cast.

And then we say that as a democratic choice by the Scottish people, not a mandate for a referendum, but a choice to exit the UK.

So it is quite a different thing.

And I think if you look at it, I mean, at the last I had a little look at the figures and the last Scottish election for the regional lists,

the pro-independence parties combined and it was at 50.3%.

So I think it's eminently possible that any election going forward, Scotland could vote to leave the UK.

Sure. And Nicola Sturgeon made that point repeatedly in the wake of the 2021 Hollywood elections, of course.

But I just want to ask you about the tenor of this contest.

How content are you with how this election has been run by the SMP?

I wrote for the national newspaper in Scotland and I set out that I thought for something as significant as this.

You know, we are obviously the leading party in Scotland. We're in the government.

And the person that wins this contest is going to be First Minister.

This timeframe made it almost impossible to be able to get into the substance of some of these issues and to create and put forward a detailed policy platform.

So yes, I don't think the timeframe is appropriate.

However, we're in the contest and I'm working to the parameters that have been set out.

Do you think the party hierarchy has tried to stack the deck in favour of one particular candidate?

There is certainly a perception out there that the leadership are definitely favouring one candidate.

And in terms of endorsements from the cabinet, et cetera, I think the whole cabinet actually have

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endorsed Thomas Youssef.

Kate Forbes has had some MSP and possibly some MP endorsements.

So you can certainly see that the leadership are favouring one candidate.

But I suppose there's a difference between them favouring because obviously any politician can endorse whoever they like.

And the party management, the party hierarchy, trying to use the contest in an unfair way.

And I know that you and Kate Forbes have talked about this or alluded to this.

Do you think that the party executive, the party management, is organising this contest in any particular way unfairly?

I can't answer that question because I'm too far away from this to be able to tell you what is going on there.

However, what I have said and what I will continue to say is that I do think that Peter Murrell, being in charge of this contest,

many people would consider that to be a conflict of interest.

Just to be clear to people because that's Nicola Sturgeon's husband.

Yes.

So the way to think about this for people that are maybe not familiar with these two is that it would be like Carrie counting the votes for Boris's successor.

Many people would consider that to be a conflict of interest.

So I have said right at the start that I thought Peter should recuse himself from this process, not because I think that anything will happen, but because it just creates more transparency and assurance in the process.

Do you think that there will be, as a result of these concerns, do you think that for at least some of the party membership,

that there will be, at the end of this process, potentially, doubt cast on the legitimacy of the victor?

No, I don't think so.

I will say to you, it's very unusual to be standing in any kind of election where you're not able to know or see how many people might be able to vote for you.

You can't understand what the membership numbers are.

So I'm pleased that the SNP have responded to that call and put some more data into the public realm.

I think that's important.

And I've also asked for an independent observer to be part of this process, which I don't see a downside to this in any way.

I think it can only provide more confidence in the process.

MP Gavin Newlands has said the idea of needing independent observers was Trumpian nonsense and fake news.

What do you say to that?

I don't agree with that at all.

I think that this, as we've discussed already, you know, there's a high level of scrutiny on this contest.

The countries, you know, it's not just the members of the SNP and members of the public and the country are very interested in how this is being done and want to have confidence in this process.

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I think it's perfectly appropriate to have an enhanced level of transparency for a contest taking place at this level.

Kate Forbes's team has actually asked for an independent auditor to be involved.

And I think Hamza backed our calls for the membership figures to be released.

So I think it's for all candidates, you know, I think that having this extra confidence in the process is appropriate.

Because the thing is, is that there will be people within the party who will listen to that and say, look, on the one hand, when I asked you, do you think there will be doubts raised about legitimacy of the victor? You say no.

But in making these calls, you are basically casting doubt on the legitimacy of the victor.

Because why would you be calling for these independent observers and so on?

If you didn't think there was at least the possibility of something rather awry taking place.

I'm responding to concerns that have been put to me by the membership of the party.

So I think if the members of the party have concerns, then surely it's appropriate for us to address them.

And that's all I'm saying.

And you don't think there's a danger that in this contest breaking down in that way, or taking that sort of direction, that that aids the enemies of the SMP.

Because at the end of the day, you're supposed to come together at the end of this and rally behind the victor, assuming that it even happens.

I think so. I mean, I've said, I think we all, the candidates have said that whomever is chosen as leader, that the others will rally behind them.

That is entirely right. And we will do that.

Ash Regan, grateful for your time. Thank you very much. Well, let's straight away put some of those complaints to a senior party figure.

Maybe an establishment figure, you might say.

Ian Blackford was the SMP's leader in Westminster.

He's supporting Hamza Youssef and he joins us from his croft on the beautiful Isle of Skye in his constituency.

Ian, we've just had Ash Regan on the show and she has repeated her call to have independent auditors oversee the remainder of the SMP leadership contest.

So unhappy is she with the way that it is being conducted.

What's your response to that?

Let's be honest, Lewis. This has been a turn beyond a few days.

It's not been our finest hour of mixing the metaphors a wee bit really.

Look, at the end of the day, this is a contest where members are voting and this has been done through a third party through my vote.

I think we should respect that process.

I know this is the first election of a leader that we've had for 20 years, but we've had other leadership elections, deputy leadership elections.

The processes and the procedures are in place.

I think it would have been better if we had been able to disclose what the actual membership levels were earlier than we had done.

But I understand that we had to go through a process. The candidates were told that that would

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happen.

I think everybody really just needs to calm down a little bit, Lewis, to be honest.

As you'll know, Kate Forbes' campaign has said there seems to be a perception that a third party company, which you've just referred to, operating the ballot process is A, independent, and B, responsible for the entire process, and they're not.

So they're rejecting the idea that there is any independence to this process.

I don't think that's fair. I think at the end of the day, the data has passed over to my vote.

They issue the ballots to the party members. They collect the data and the results will be published on the 27th of March.

This isn't a process which is managed and controlled by the SNP.

The responsible officer, of course, is the SNP national secretary.

And she will make sure that there's effective stewardship and scrutiny of that.

We have a national executive that are responsible for holding the office bearers, holding the national secretary, in this case, to account.

And I think we've got to let the structures of the party do its job.

I mean, it's not ideal for the party. I mean, it's the first time, as you say, for a long time there's been a contested leadership election for the SNP.

But it's now, we've got candidates calling into question the integrity of the process.

Then we've got other people talking about that itself being Trumpian.

Labour leader Anna Sauer joking about a cell-tie waving stop the steel rally outside Holyrood at First Minister's questions.

I mean, this is pretty potentially quite disastrous for the party, isn't it?

As I've said to you, I don't think it's been our finest hour.

And I'm not going to get drawn into some of that language for very obvious reasons.

Maybe these days there's a grandeur of the party.

I think it's right. What we do do is we reflect on all of this when it's over.

We've got a party conference coming up.

Of course, there are other bodies of the party that can reflect on this.

The NEC, I'm sure, will have oversight of everything which is going on.

You know, I think it's a bit rich for people to say there isn't effective accountability, that there isn't transparency.

There is an independent process. It's tried and tested. It works.

I think we need to get through to the end of this process on March the 27th, elect a new leader.

And let's remember that there are some thorny issues that need to be addressed in the period beyond that.

We've got to make sure the party's in a fit state to fight the next Westminster election.

And of course, the new leader is going to have to think about how he engages with the party and the wider movement on a way forward on the question of independence.

But most election contests, they don't even internal party election contests in other parties.

They don't end up like this. They don't usually end up with contenders calling into question the propriety of the process.

Do you think they have ulterior motives? Do you think they're doing this in good faith?

What I would say is that one, I don't think this reflects very well on us. That's demonstrably the case.

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But I know that party members up and down the country are looking on at this.

And I think they are aghast to a certain extent that some people are behaving the way that they are doing so.

This ought to be about the future of the party, who is best placed to be the leader and ultimately to become first minister.

Let's just respect that we've got a party where I actually believe that the processes are very much fit for purpose.

They are tried and tested. There is that independent aspect of my vote being the body that administers the ballot itself.

I think people in the party have got every faith in the processes as they exist.

Do you think the party can actually come together at the end of this, such as the acrimony that there's now been?

I would say to everybody that the SNP has been in government now since 2007. We all know it's been a long time.

But you have to show, you have to demonstrate that you're worthy of the leadership of the people. You have to act in a responsible manner. You've got to show effective leadership and show that people can vote for you and the next elections can.

Are the other candidates not being responsible in your view?

I'm not saying that. I would give gentle advice, hopefully constructive advice to everybody to remember how the public would expect them to behave

and the leadership that they expect, not just the party, but what will be the government in taking this country forward.

There are massive challenges that we face with the cost of living crisis.

I'm heavily engaged at the moment on a green industrial strategy review.

I think one of the key things is how do we drive the economy forward? How do we make sure that we deliver the investment, the jobs that people want,

deliver the increases in taxation receipts that allow us to invest in public services? Let's do our job, and I think that's what the public expect of us.

You're, of course, supporting Hamza Youssef, talking about responsible leadership.

What do you make of this critique that he's proving himself a little bit gaff-prone?

We saw what happened yesterday when he was with a group of Ukrainian women and he said, well, where are all the men?

And of course, we all know what the answer to that is. He doesn't seem to be showing himself as the steadiest pair of hands.

I think what we've got is a fairly intensive period for all the candidates when they're under the spotlight.

I suspect what will happen once the leader is declared in the 27th is that they will have a team around them, a team of advisors, a team of ministers,

others that they will rely on for support and advice as well.

And I'm sure whoever emerges as the leader of the 27th of March will demonstrate that they're a worry of the office.

Did your heart sink a little bit, though, when you saw that clip?

Well, I think, tell me a politician that hasn't made a gaff from time to time, therefore, the grace of God, go all of us.

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Not you, Ian. Of course, you're grand ears. You've just said yourself, surely not you. You're learned by experiences, Lewis. Let me say that.

Ian, we'll let you get back to your croft on Sky.

Well, I've got meetings this afternoon, but I will be out...
Seeing to the lambs.

I'll be feeding the sheep later on this afternoon as we look forward to laughing in a couple of weeks.

Well, now there's an image to leave with our listeners. Thanks so much, Ian.

Thanks, Lewis.

Right, that is enough Scottish politics for one week.

What am I saying? You can never have too much Scottish politics.

But just after the break, we are going to do something a little bit different.

And to find out what, well, you're just going to have to keep listening.

This is the news agents.

Welcome back. OK, so we know this is Friday weekend news agents.

We know a lot of you listen right through the weekend.

So we wanted to just now and again bring you something a little bit different away from the heat and fire of everyday political news and interviews to ease you on those dog walks and gym sessions, Sunday lunch prep, which frankly can be hard enough.

So every now and again, we're going to bring you a slightly different sort of political interview with someone who is really interesting in politics, exploring what brought them into politics. As someone you may have guessed by now, who loves politics, is gripped and captivated by it. I'm really interested in what made someone enter what Teddy Roosevelt once called the arena. So we sent our guests a list of things, their inspiration, their political aspiration, their political hero or villain, the event which still stays with them and fires their politics to prepare and step into the news agents HQ and talk about them with me.

And we thought we'd start with someone who is so well known in British political life, someone often controversial,

Diane Abbott.

And whatever you think about Diane, she is destined for the history books. She's already there, Britain's first black female MP, elected all the way back in 1987. What brought that young Hackney girl, daughter of West Indian immigrants, to the citadel of British political power?

And what keeps her there? What is her political makeup?

This is our conversation.

Well, Diane Abbott, thank you so much for joining us on the news agent.

We're here. I mean, it would be remiss to not talk about a few things that are going on this week and over the course of the last week as well.

I mean, we're actually recording this midweek.

And last night we had the second reading of the so-called, indeed the called illegal migration bill. What do you make of this bill?

And did you think you'd see the day when the UNHCR would be effectively condemning a British government for its asylum policy?

I think it's performative.

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I think they know that it almost certainly will not be deemed to get passed. They're trying to prove to a certain sort of voter, red-walled voters, if you like, that they can be tough on immigration. That's what it is. And the content is pretty nasty because basically it's abolishing the right to claim asylum. So that can't get passed, the legislation.

All right. Well, let's get on to the meat of it, talking about you and your career and going through these questions to try and explore kind of how you ended up being where you are.

You were elected in 1987, Britain's first black female MP.

I mean, how old were you at the time? You were in your thirties?

Yeah, my early thirties.

Your early thirties? It must have been quite a moment walking through the House of Commons doors for the first time as an MP.

What was that like?

Well, it was extraordinary.

Obviously, I'd been to establishment institutions. I went to Cambridge, for instance. I worked in the Home Office and so on.

But it's still extraordinary, the Parliament, the architecture, the men in tailcoats running around, the formality.

You know, in the cloakroom of the House of Commons, when I went there, they had a peg for everybody with their name on it.

And every peg had a long loop of red ribbon. And the loop of red ribbon was to put your sword in. Now, nobody's worn a sword to Parliament for hundreds of years.

But that's how long it takes the House of Commons to adapt to change.

I mean, how did they respond to you? I mean, at that time, the House of Commons was, you know, the late eighties.

It's overwhelmingly male. It's pretty old, very narrow range of backgrounds from which it was drawn.

How did they respond to you?

There were four of us at Black MPs who came in in 1987.

There was myself, there was Bernie Grant, there was Paul Bartok and there was Keith Vaz.

So the speaker of House of Commons got in a panic.

Partly because I think Bernie Grant had said something about burning things down and that worried him.

But also thought he'd be like the Fenians in the 19th century.

You know, because they were hugely disruptive, big Philly busters cutting the wires to the individual world.

Yeah. So what he did was called a meeting of MPs that he trusted and so on, Labor Tory, MFB, Lib Dems, even.

So he had a discussion about what they were going to do about us.

And one of the MPs he called in was Jonathan Etkin, who later got himself into quite a bit of trouble. But I knew Jonathan Etkin because I had worked for TVAM when he'd been the chief executive briefly.

And so he was able to say, oh, no, I know Diane Hubbard, you know, she's okay.

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She's not going to burn anything down.

So they felt a bit reassured.

Amazing, though, that they had that meeting because they were so perturbed by the, and worried about what might happen that you had these four Black MPs that might try and ruin the business

and not be able to control themselves.

Exactly. That's what they thought.

And so what happened was for quite a long time, the attendants, because, you know, House Commons is full of attendants.

There's more security now than there was when I first started, but a lot of attendants.

And so at first they didn't think any of us were MPs.

They kind of got to know me.

I had these long braids at the time, so they kind of got to know me.

But the boys, Bernie, Paul and Keith, they kept confusing them and they looked completely different.

But they kept confusing them.

And everywhere they went, they were challenged as to whether they should be there.

Well, let's go on to the first question, then, which is your political inspiration.

What was that? Is this sort of a moment or event which inspired you to want to go into politics?

I don't know about going into politics, but the thing which made me realise that it was important to fight

for equality and justice was actually going up to Cambridge.

In those days, not to go to Oxford or Cambridge, you had to sit her in the exam.

If you were doing what they call an art subject, a non-scientific subject, you had to sit a Latin exam. And then you went for interview.

And so I had to say to my history teacher, I want to do Oxford and Cambridge Entrance.

And her lip curled and she said, but I don't think you're up to it.

And I said, but I do. And that's what matters, isn't it?

So I went up. And I think it was the second day in my college, Newnham.

And all of the history, people studying history had to go and see the history tutor.

And we were all sitting on the floor cross-legged.

I looked around me and I thought, oh my goodness, they're all these upper class white girls.

I thought, what have you done now?

And it was the contrast really between the people I'd grown up knowing, my parents, everybody else, and the girls I was at college with, which made me aware of what an unfair, unjust, unequal society it was.

And so I've always been committed to fighting that.

Second question. Has there been a speech or a political figure specifically who's inspired you?

Oh, well, I mean, the speech has to be Martin Luther King and I Have a Dream.

And also we've all lived to see that dream lived out with the black man as president of the United States.

So I found that an inspirational speech.

Who would have guessed before them that you could have a black president?

Who would have thought immediately after that that that could happen?

But it happened.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Is the SNP falling apart?

What about a political villain, someone who inspired you but in a different way?

Well, maybe it's on my mind because we were debating the legal migration bill.

But it's well a brother man.

And I was thinking about this because I knew you were going to ask me this question.

I was thinking how or why is she different from any other right wing woman?

Because honestly, there's a lot of women.

And there was Mrs. Thatcher and so on.

And I realized what the difference was.

The thing about Margaret Thatcher is she believed a lot of the stuff she was saying.

She really believed that the private sector was better than the public sector.

That's why she privatized so many things.

But with brother men, I just think she's trying to advance her career.

You don't think she believes it?

If she believes it, why does she stick in so much cheap rhetoric about tofu, eating, woke her up?

It's nonsense.

You don't hear a serious politician talk like that.

Not on the floor of the house.

I think she's pandering to an element in the Conservative Party in order to advance her career.

And she's willing to sacrifice people's lives and life chances to advance herself.

Because she says that when people say that she shouldn't or can't really truly hold those views

because of who she is,

she says that itself is racist.

No, this is nonsense.

The reason she can't...

Well, it's not even that she can't hold those views.

Margaret Thatcher held views which I think in their own way are just as bad.

It's not that she can't hold the views because she's a woman of colour.

It's that she can't hold the views because they don't make much sense.

I mean, her illegal migration bill, she knows, because she put it on the face of the bill,

that this bill may be found to be in breach of whatever international legislation she knows.

She doesn't care.

And the next question, what's your aspiration, your political aspiration?

You've been in politics.

I mean, you've been in the House of Commons now.

I don't want to bring it up.

For longer than I've been alive since 1987.

That is a long time.

You know, you're one of the longest-serving MPs.

What would you still like to do?

What I'd still like to see is the Labour Government,

because the worst Labour Government is better than any Conservative Government.

That's what I'd still like to see.

Under Keir Starmer, and you wasn't helping in any way.

Sure, sure, sure.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Is the SNP falling apart?

You know, I remember when we won in 1997.

I was on the left.

I didn't support new Labour, anything like that.

But when we won in 1997, the night we won, the night that we knew we'd won, I cried.

Because at the end of the day, as I say, the worst Labour Government is better than the Tories.

Getting it is going to be a bad Labour Government.

I don't know. I hope for the best.

That's not the most ringing endorsement, though, is it?

Keir Starmer's 20 points ahead, he doesn't need my ringing endorsement.

No, but you're very long-serving MP, and it doesn't sound like you're necessarily absolutely terribly excited by the prospect you want it to happen, but...

No, I think that this Government has reached such depths that it's really important to get a Labour Government now.

Do you think it could be a good Labour Prime Minister, Starmer?

We have to hope for the best.

We haven't had many in our history, we've only had six.

Yeah, that's right.

You don't see much there that...

I think we always have to hope for the best.

I mean, I didn't support new Labour, but to be completely fair,

Tony Blair did invest in the health service and education in an unprecedented way.

I've just come from a picket outside my local hospital,

and we all agree that despite everything,

new Labour had put so much money into the health service.

And if I could wave a magic wand and one thing could happen,

one political reform could happen like that,

and it would endure, what would you want to see?

Housing.

You can't live in Hackney and not be aware of what terrible housing conditions some people live in, and there'll be two things.

One, it should bring in rent controls, quite stringent rent controls, and a lot more social housing.

And how would you like to be...

I mean, this sounds a little morbid and I don't mean it that way,

but one day when the history books are written,

and there will be a place for you in those history books,

how would you like to be remembered?

A nice girl of Jamaican origins who did her best.

Dan, thanks so much for joining us.

Thank you.

Right, so interesting, wasn't it?

As I say, we'll do that every now and again.

That is it from me, John and Emily.

They weren't here.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Is the SNP falling apart?

You will have noticed this Friday.

They're actually drowning their sorrows at Cheltenham at the Gold Cup.

Not only did they miss out on the new hosting spot

on the Great British Bake Off to Ellison Hammond,

but their 100-to-1 nag in the Gold Cup race,

booze agents didn't make it to the finish

after they've drunk their own body weight and Krabby's ale.

They should be back next week.

Remember, you can catch up on all our shows from this week on Global Player,

thanks to our production team on the newsagents,

Gabriel Radis,

Ellie Clifford,

Georgia Foxwell,

Will Gibson-Smith,

and Rory Simon.

Our editor is Tom Hughes,

our executive producer, Dino Sophos.

It's presented by Emily Maitlis,

John Soaple,

and me, Lewis Goodall.

We'll see you on Monday.

Have a lovely weekend.