

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

That's not the sound of people on the streets of Paris.

This time it is hundreds of thousands of people, 600,000 people were told, on the streets of Israel, blocking off the main roads into Tel Aviv.

Why?

Because they believe that their country, under the leadership of their perennial Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is backsliding away from its democratic traditions.

They think that their country is on the verge of not being a democracy anymore.

And so what we have seen is the raw assertion of people power, airport closed, ports shut down, diplomats going on strike, universities stopping, a general strike across Israel has blown up in 24 hours over Benjamin Netanyahu's attempts to hobble the courts.

Welcome to the news agents.

It's Lewis in the studio.

And it's John with a cup of Lemsip by his side at home.

Honestly, John, I inhaled some tear gas on Friday.

Where are you now?

At home with some Lemsip.

Actually, to be fair, you sound worse than I did.

Tear gas, if you've got a gas mask on, it's fine, mate.

I've got a real man's cold and it's flu and it's very, very serious.

Yeah, I can tell.

So I'm sparing you my germs.

If you say so.

If you say so.

No, no, I'm very grateful.

Look, I mean, it's been another extraordinary weekend of news, hasn't it?

I mean, like last night, looking at those pictures from Tel Aviv, absolutely astounding seeing the sheer numbers of people pour into Israeli town and city, obviously particularly centred on Tel Aviv, but also Jerusalem against a man who has dominated Israeli politics for so many years.

What I find fascinating is that at the end of last week, when you were in France, Benjamin Netanyahu came to see Rishi Sunak in Downing Street and there were protesters at the top of Downing Street.

Nothing unusual.

There you might think.

Palestinians often protest about Benjamin Netanyahu, but this wasn't Palestinians.

This was Israelis thinking that democracy, the beacon of the Middle East since 1948 where you have been able to vote in and out governments, was in jeopardy as a result of him trying to fix the courts, and it just so happens that Benjamin Netanyahu is facing prosecution himself over corruption charges.

So how convenient to suddenly emasculate the courts so that they would have to do his bidding?

Yeah, it was perhaps indicative of Netanyahu's troubles, but also potentially damaged status in the democratic world.

I think that Sunak did not do a press conference with him.

Yeah, he walked up Downing Street itself, went into the famous front door, but there was no press conference, there was no attempt to ask questions, lest, I'm sure, Sunak was put on the spot about what he thinks about what is going on in Israel, but we should just rewind a bit in case you haven't been following it.

This particular, as John's already alluded to, this particular set of protests has actually been going on for some time.

It's been going on for 13 weeks demonstrating against what Netanyahu is trying to do, basically giving his government much more power, almost total power over who is appointed to the courts, who are going to be judges, and this follows, you know, many other quote unquote reforms that the Netanyahu government has conducted, has orchestrated, which many Israelis think means that Israel is becoming less and less of a democracy, but the kind of ignition was struck over the course of the weekend when Netanyahu was in London, but the defense minister, the Israeli defense minister, who is kind of considered in a very far right government, is considered by many Israelis to be the kind of voice of common sense and moderating force on the government. He said that the government should not go ahead with these reforms, and Netanyahu's response, whilst out of the country, was to sack him.

And of course, Benjamin Netanyahu has been the great survivor of Israeli politics because he never gets himself cornered. He just always finds a way out. But now he finds himself in a position where if he backs down on these reforms, then he is going to be seen as a total toothless tiger, and that he has led the far right up the hill only to lead them down again, and that could lead to the collapse of his coalition government. And if he doesn't, it looks to me as though the whole apparatus of the Israeli state is moving against him. And when I say the Israeli state, you're talking about military reservists in the IDF, in the Israeli defense forces. There is protest in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament. There are diplomats who are saying they are not going to serve their country. I think this has gone beyond what is normal protest, which you would say is manageable and is part of democratic life, to something that is much more fundamental than that.

Yeah. I mean, it feels like Netanyahu has essentially for years, both when he was in office for such a long period the first time and since he's come back, when he was elected most recently with some very far right forces in his government. I mean, his party and he is probably one of the more moderate elements of his government, which many Israelis would find surprising. But he is pushed and pushed and pushed. As we've seen in other, for one of the better word, populist governments, have pushed and pushed and pushed the kind of boundaries of their respective democracies. And it feels like this time it's snapped back. You've just got to think that there are certain fundamentals to a liberal democracy. And one of the key fundamentals is that you have an independent judiciary. You do not have a judiciary that is controlled by politicians. And that is exactly what Benjamin Netanyahu is seeking to do with these, as you say, quote unquote reforms, but which could leave Israel prey to autocrats and demagogues who just might say, well, you know what, I don't think we fancy an election right now. We won't have one. And that is why it is such a critical safeguard and a line that Netanyahu has crossed that people are finding intolerable. Well, particularly when you have a prime minister who is himself going through the court on various charges of different descriptions, obviously that is a particular problem. We

should I suppose also just step back and say, look, this is fascinating in and of itself. But the reason it really matters to the rest of the world, of course, is, as John's already alluded to, this is the longest standing democracy in the Middle East. Israel is obviously a very close ally of the West and the United States in particular. What happens in Israel has huge ramifications across the Middle East and in terms of our relationships with countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia and so on. So anything that happens in Israel does have a tendency to ricochet outwards and drag us all, whether we like it or not, into the Maya. Well, we're joining the studio by Ayala Panyevsky, the Gates scholar at Cambridge and specialist in populism, power, and democracy and has been on the podcast before and we're delighted to have you back. What do you make of what is unfolding in Israel at the moment? Because protests come and go, but this seems to be on an epic level. Yes, definitely. So it should be understood as a dramatic and historic event in Israel. These are the biggest demonstrations, the biggest protests in the history of Israel. We have 600,000 people marching on the streets, blocking highways.

You need to remember Israel is a small country, so it's about 6.6% of the population that is literally marching on the streets shouting. It would be like four and a half million Brits marching down the streets, basically protesting against the government. Apart from the marches and the protests and the demonstrations, you have a full on strike today. Our airport, the only airport in Israel, shut down today. Basically, Israel is not functioning at the moment and words like civil war are being spread around very frequently. The talk of civil war, I mean, how hyperbolic, how exaggerated do you think that is? There's no doubt. I mean, it's extremely, extremely divisive right now. Yes, it is. The reason I think this is not very likely is that, in fact, there is a pretty solid majority at the moment against the judicial overhaul. And the protest has become so powerful. And the people around it and the economic elites, the tech industry, the military, everybody seems to be against it at the moment, then it might not end up being a civil war, but we are definitely in a constitutional crisis. And just on the background, because obviously, you know, a lot of our listeners won't have followed it very closely. Why are the reforms that Netanyahu is proposing to the judiciary so controversial? Why has it generated this extraordinary backlash? So basically, the thing about this, what the government calls a legal reform, but is actually a judicial overhaul, is the attempt of the government, the Israeli government, to basically get rid of the courts, of the ability of the courts to strike down legislation, to serve independently. And what they were trying to do in this package of laws is to appoint themselves, to appoint judges, basically, to ban the court, the Supreme Court, from stopping them from doing anything. And the thing is, because Israel has no constitution, and we have no second house of a chamber of parliament, the courts are extremely important in the role as checks and balances on the government. So they are basically more or less alone there. And once you take over the courts, you can do anything, you can postpone the elections, you can decide there are no elections, you can do whatever you want. And moreover, you remember that Netanyahu is standing trial in four different charges of bribery and breach of trust. So basically, we have a prime minister who's trying to nominate the judges in a system that is currently making its decisions about himself, and will he go to prison? What kind of price will he pay? So the suggestion is that Netanyahu will try and use this to evade potential criminal sanction against him. That's what the protesters believe, 100%. That's what it looks like. And in fact, it's bigger than Netanyahu, because what we have now, the government that we have now in Israel,

is very much detached from what the mainstream, what's the consensus, what Israeli people want. And it is the most far-right government in the history of Israel by far. And its representatives are far more extremist, religious, racist than the conservative population. So people are suddenly seeing, for many years, Israelis were doing anything not to be political, right? Especially people on the left and in the center, were trying to avoid politics. And there came a moment where they couldn't anymore, because they've seen this tiny but powerful minority of Jewish settlers, of religious Zionists, of ultra-orthodox politicians, and of Netanyahu lawyers, just collaborating to change the nature of Israel, to change the face of Israel, what it looks like, what it feels like to live there.

So Ayala, how do the pieces fall if, as we suspect, that Netanyahu is going to have to give ground and say that he is going to abandon these legal reforms? Because you've still got the ability to form a majority with these far-right groups elected to the Knesset.

And unless there's a big political realignment, it looks like the right and far-right would win again, wouldn't they? That's a good question, because we did have five rounds of general elections in like two years. So it's not like it was a clear cut. And it's not like they have a very big majority or that the people of Israel are with them. It's true that in the end Netanyahu managed to form a government because of all kinds of things that happened and many mistakes that were

made on both sides. But it doesn't mean that people are standing for this or supporting this legislation, because in fact, in all the surveys that were done in recent weeks, two thirds of Israelis are against this. And this was not the platform that these parties ran on. They promised people to take care of the cost of living, to make sure that we are strong against Iran and all this sort of stuff. This was the message. They didn't say we're going to take over the courts. That was not the promise. And now people realize and this protest is much bigger than the left and the center of Israel. There are many people on the right who are now joining this because they realized that this government is not what they voted for. It's not what they wanted. Yeah. Where does this leave Netanyahu? Because he has been the great escapist of Israeli politics, where you think he's out and then he comes back and he's always found a way. But if he has to climb down, surely he's going to be in a position where the right thing he has betrayed them and he's damned if he does and he's damned if he doesn't.

I would never bet against Netanyahu. But what happened here is much bigger than what happens tomorrow. I think what we need to realize is that a huge portion of Israelis were politicized and mobilized in ways that they haven't been in decades. And there is sort of this liberal, secular, large group of people that are now seeing themselves as a political camp, which they haven't in the past for many years. And I think in the long run, this might have serious ramifications. At the moment when it comes to Netanyahu, he's basically trapped between very powerful people who are more extremist than him and are trying to squeeze things out of him. So the coalition in Israel, we talk a lot about Netanyahu, but it's actually kind of alliance of three groups on the new right in Israel, which is Netanyahu and his people. You have the religious Zionists and the Jewish settlers that have a very powerful lobby and they are overrepresented in the government. And then you have the ultra-orthodox communities. And each one of these groups have their own issues with the courts and with democracy in general. So each one of them, for either ideological or religious or in Netanyahu's case, personal reasons, wants to make the courts weaker and wants to make Israel more religious and more

hawkish. And on that, Ayla, we should say, right, that this stuff about the courts, although it's been a kind of match which has lit the fire, in terms of the concern about Israeli backsliding from democracy under Netanyahu, this doesn't come from nowhere, right? That this is a longstanding critique of Netanyahu and his policies and his allies, that in some way, they are undermining Israeli democratic traditions.

Definitely. And this is not different than what we saw other leaders doing elsewhere. And I think in what way? What are the leaders? If you think about Viktor Orban in Hungary, or you think about what happened in Poland, so we see them trying to do very quickly and all together things that populist leaders elsewhere have done more slowly in a way that was more difficult to counter. And actually, protesters in Israel are getting now a lot of support from people in Poland and in Hungary that feel like they lost their liberties and rights and democracy because they didn't stand up in time. So what sort of things has Netanyahu done and been doing in that camp? So we know that this kind of center-left camp didn't do much in recent years to protect Palestinian rights, right? But now that the war is against LGBTQ rights and women's rights and things that Israelis are used to think of as given, you know, that we live our lives as a Western-ish democracy. And if you don't go to the West Bank, then you're good. You live in a normal country. You can live your life. You can be secular. You can be religious, whatever. And now suddenly, they are saying that you can't bring pita bread to hospitals during Passover and that people will look through our stuff in our bags to say that we don't have pita bread, things that are seriously religious, and it keeps coming. So you have every other minute, you have a new initiative. They want to exempt rabbis. They want to grant them immunity against anything because they are rabbis, so the law doesn't about it. These things for the kind of average Israeli sound insane. So it's an attack on secular liberalism within Israel. Yes. And that's what's generating or is one of the currents which is underpinning or the things which is underpinning these protests. Definitely. People are feeling like this government is trying to reshape Israel, to create a different type of Israel that they are not willing to be part of, something that is more fundamentalist and more religious and more authoritarian. And those groups didn't mind so much when that fundamentalism was directed at, say, the West Bank or directed Palestinian areas, but now it's sort of coming their way. Exactly. And they mind it more. Exactly. And what we could hope for or the optimistic take would be that now that you do have, again, a political force that is aligned with democratic values in general and has the sentiment of pro-democracy and liberty and human rights, perhaps it would be

easier now to also draw them into the struggle for human rights beyond the green line in the West Bank and in Gaza. But that would take, these are long-term processes we're talking about.

It's hard to draw people back into politics. It will take time.

And I suppose the thing that is worth really underlining is when you hear the IDF, the Israeli Defense Forces, the reservists are saying, we're not coming to work. When you hear diplomats saying,

we're not going to work, you realize this just isn't like any other protest you've seen before.

True. And you have people who Netanyahu appointed to be leaders of the intelligence community in Israel for years, all coming one after one and speaking against him and talking about how dangerous this is. So this is not some fringe anarchist protest as the government tried to make out of it. Like they said, it's orchestrated by the CIA and that people, protesters are being



paid by foreign agents. But in fact, this is the vast majority of Israelis who are opposing and trying to fight back. What happens next in a sense that assuming Netanyahu backs down or says he's back down, do the protesters pack away and go home? I mean, they've been going there. Actually, we should make clear as we said at the start, this has been going on for 13 weeks, not at this scale, but it's been going on for a long time. Does the energy dissipate if Netanyahu gives in? Netanyahu will have to do something very dramatic at this point to demobilize these protesters. And I think probably his best shot is to try and convince someone from the center, some politician, to say, oh, I'm going to join your coalition if you just drop this and that. And this way you save your political career and you let go of these laws that nobody's interested in at the moment. But since this has been going on for months now, people have been leaving everything and marching every week now, more than once a week. In the middle like in weekdays, you had all kinds of interruptions and activities and people were burning stuff. So you cannot just go back from this, especially because what happened yesterday was that Netanyahu, because his defense minister talked against the judicial overhaul, Netanyahu decided to fire him. He's no longer about a judicial overhaul. Is this about an unhinged prime minister for these protesters who cannot take care of Israel's national security even? Because in the middle of this very tense time of the year, this is the Ramadan, it's usually there's a lot of tensions with Palestinians and Israelis in the West Bank, in Jerusalem, et cetera, there are protests on the streets. He's just firing like that, his defense minister. So for many Israelis, this is the proof that not only is the judicial overhaul dangerous for Israel and for its democracy, but also Netanyahu is unfit. And therefore, even if he backs down from this reform by now, for many Israelis and for many protesters, that wouldn't be enough. He needs to go. Ayala, thanks so much. Thanks so much for coming into the news, agents. Thanks so much for having me. Sorry, John, couldn't be here with us, but you know, you don't want his germs. But we will be keeping obviously a very close eye on this because this just feels like a story which is going to develop one way or the other over the coming days. Right, we're going to turn our attention to domestic politics. And there is, for the first time in nearly nine years, a new first minister, or there will be a new first minister of Scotland, a new leader of the Scottish National Party. And after weeks of some turmoil within the SMP, as we've covered on this show, we finally know who it is. You can find out if you keep listening. This is the news, agents. Welcome back. Nicola Sturgeon unexpectedly resigned some weeks ago, about six weeks ago now. And there has been this ongoing rumbling contest to succeed involving Hamza Youssef, the health secretary, Kate Forbes, the economy minister, and the former minister, Ash Regan. We now know, as announced this afternoon, who is going to succeed Nicola Sturgeon as SMP leader, and therefore, almost certainly, as first minister of Scotland. And it is Hamza Youssef, who had been the health secretary, and really the kind of favourite of the party establishment. It was, though, a very, very close contest. On the second preferences, once Ash Regan, who was a kind of no-hopper from the beginning, was eliminated, it ended up being Youssef 52.1% to Forbes 47.9%. So basically, 52.48%. Where have I heard that row show before, John? Seems vaguely familiar. Yeah, it just keeps coming up, doesn't it? This country's cursed. I know, exactly. But I would think that if Hamza Youssef, who has made a speech of conciliation, of unity, and all the rest of it,

which you would expect having just won, it's also going to be quite difficult to achieve that because, let's face it, the party does seem to be very, very split indeed. And the contest has been ugly. And I think that for the SMP to restore itself to its pomp in the heyday of Nicola Sturgeon, who has been the most formidable politician, north or south of the border, I think it's going to be a really tough ask. Yeah. Well, let's just listen to a little bit of what the new SMP leader had to say earlier this afternoon. I am not just humbled of that. I most certainly am. I also feel like the luckiest man in the world to be standing here as a leader of the SMP, a party I joined almost 20 years ago and that I love so dearly. Friends, it was the late John Smith and he got it absolutely right when he said, the opportunity to serve our country is all we ask. To serve my country as First Minister will be the greatest privilege and honour of my life. Should Parliament decide to elect me as Scotland's next First Minister tomorrow? I think you're completely right, John, in the sense that look, we should just say actually before we go on and talk about the sort of politics for the SMP. What this does mean is that Scotland is going to be led by a Muslim man. The SMP are saying this afternoon that this is the first kind of Western nation, let's put it that way, to be led by a Muslim. It's no unimpressive thing. That means the two main Scottish party leaders are going to be Muslim men, Hamza Yusuf for the SMP and Anasawa, the Labour leader in Scotland. And of course, got the Prime Minister and Rishi Sunak being an ethnic minority himself. I mean, this would have been pretty unimaginable 10 or 15 years ago, so it's a pretty significant change. I think in terms of the politics, look, it's a double-edged sword for Yusuf, being the continuity candidate, which he basically was. He's like Sturgeon before him. He's been in the Scottish government, different portfolios for a very long time. He's got the party establishment support behind him. But as you say, John, with a 52-48 mandate, I mean, literally a couple of thousand votes, it would have gone the other way. It's going to be difficult for him to knit the party back together. And we come back to the fundamentals as well, which are twofold. One, the SMP have been in office for a long time. Some of the most controversial bits of the SMP's domestic record have been under him, for example, as Health Secretary. And secondly, one of the reasons that Sturgeon went ultimately, there were lots of little micro reasons and things which pushed her towards the door. But ultimately, one of the main factors, underwritten factors for why she went is because she had not been able to chart a compelling path to the next independence referendum. And one of the tasks during this campaign had been for these candidates to come up with a credible route to it as well. That has not happened. And Yusuf doesn't currently have one, which is a different plan from what Sturgeon has. You saw in his speech, he was going to focus more, and the idea has been the SMP needs to focus more on delivery, on showing that they can govern credibly and competently, which of course they say they have done already, but really focus on those issues. But there hasn't been a grand new plan or grand new vision of how to get there. And at the moment, there still isn't one. So I suppose my question to you, Lewis, and I know you spent a lot of time up in Scotland, and you spoke to a memorable interview with Nicola Sturgeon just before she stood down, which is this, that I've heard a lot of kind of, I don't know, how can I put it, that Humza Yusuf is a low-energy light bulb next to Nicola Sturgeon's bright light. But maybe people were saying the same thing about Nicola Sturgeon when she was taking over from Alex Salmon. She wasn't that well known, and that people didn't expect her to rise to the challenge in the way that she did and become this dominant force in Scottish politics. How do you assess Humza Yusuf?

Because a lot of people, I suspect south of the border, particularly, will be coming to him relatively new and thinking, so who is he? Well, look, John, I think you have to think about the counterfactual here. What if that few thousand votes, because it literally was just a few thousand votes, had gone in the other direction on the second preferences and Kate Forbes had emerged as the leader? We would be having, in a short term at least, a much more interesting conversation, because there would be a big, big question mark about whether the SMP coalition with the Greens in Holyrood, the Scottish Parliament, would continue. They had been clear that they didn't think it would be sustainable, given Kate Forbes' views on a whole array of social issues. There would have been the possibility of a formal split, a fissure within the party, Mary Black, the deputy leader in Westminster, had raised that prospect for the same series of objections about Forbes' views on social issues. And so we would have been looking at a party which was obviously divided. With the use of victory, albeit very narrow one, those immediate questions go away. We have a slightly more interesting long term conversation instead, which is that although there's not going to be going to be an immediate split, there remains what this vote shows is the party is deeply divided over its future direction. There is a really, really strong portion cohort of the party, 48%, who have voted for a substantial change in direction, who are unhappy with the sturgeon legacy, where the SMP is basically a kind of pro-independence version of the Labour party, a social, democratic, deeply progressive force. In a way, Forbes represented a shift from that, something back to the SMP's more historic roots in the more rural, socially conservative parts of Scotland. And as I say, this vote highlights that there is a lot of discontent about the sturgeon legacy. And Yusuf is the continuation of that. So it is his job now to try and knit those forces, knit that party back together on a mandate which is pretty weak, which is pretty feeble. And on top of that, he's got to do something which frankly he hasn't shown during this leadership campaign. And none of the candidates were, and was a primary factor in the downfall of sturgeon, which is to chart a course to how the party achieves not only that second independence referendum when Westminster keeps saying no, but a course to 55, 60% consistently in the polls, saying yes. And sturgeon hadn't been able to achieve that. Yusuf and none of the candidates really did manage during the leadership campaign to articulate what that path could be. And on top of that, Yusuf has to try and achieve self-renewal for the SMP in office after 16 years and being perceived as the continuity candidate. Very, very hard to do. Yeah, sure. Well, let me add a footnote while you talk about the possibility of a Labour government. You know, three, four months ago, Labour would have been hoping to get a handful of gains in Scotland if things went well with Nicola Sturgeon, still the leader of the SMP. And having seen the cratering to some extent of SMP support following this whole leadership contest, I mean, cratering I should have used that maybe is a bit over the top because the support has dipped, let's say dipped. Labour are now looking to get a number more seats potentially as a result of the upheavals that there have been in the SMP. And that will lead to a good deal more Labour confidence about the winability of the next election as a result of these upheavals that the SMP are going through right now. You know, John, I'm going to surprise you, I'm going to use a football reference. Right? I reckon... What? Yeah, yeah, yeah. Isn't it a bit like Ferguson and Moyes? How do you like that? Yeah? You didn't expect that, did you? Jesus. Lewis Goodall in football metaphor shock. The news agency's over. I mean, that's, we've got to rethink everything. But it is amazing how that phenomenon, that trend of succeeding a kind of titan, it really doesn't matter what the field



is, right? Whether it's sort of football or politics or business. It is such a well-established trend in all sort of research, political science and, you know, business studies, all of these sorts of things. It is just really, really hard. And there is no doubt Starma himself said the other day, Sturgeon has dominated Scottish politics, Titanic-like for so long. And so it is a very, very difficult task in front of it. Now, hopefully on social media, you're not quite as sad as Lewis and me where you spend all weekend just scrolling endlessly for new tweets and seeing what's up. But if you did, and if you are as sad, well, as sad as Lewis, I'm obviously not at all sad, then you might have just seen led by donkeys and then posting a series of videos of Tories appealing for lots of money to work for a non-existent South Korean company. We'll tell you more in a moment.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back. So you probably have seen on social media this weekend something which has set Twitter

and elsewhere alight. It is a video, a preview to a full film which is dropping later from the campaigning group led by donkeys, who nothing has to do with donkeys, rather it's about MPs. And it is a video which shows a sort of quite old-fashioned sting operation, really, involving the reporter, Anthony Barnett, who's been working with the group. And they have basically set up a fake company, in this case a fake South Korean company, and have approached a series of MPs asking for advice, asking to engage their services for significant remuneration in an attempt to get these MPs to say what they would be able to do in terms of connecting with ministers, departments and so on, to give them regulatory legal advice in British politics. Now, nothing about this is against the rules. This is entirely within the rules for MPs, as long as it's declared. But it has proved a little bit embarrassing for a couple of MPs, including our old friend Matt Hancock. Let's listen to this. So we were wondering, do you have a daily rate at the moment? I do. I do. Yes, it's 10,000 sterling. So John, I mean, you'll have, I mean, this happens from time to time, doesn't it? We should say, so every couple of years, there is one of these stories, someone sets up a kind of fake company, approaches MPs, and there are always a couple who fall for it. And in this case, it is Matt Hancock, former chancellor, quasi-quarteng and so on. Yeah. And the one person who sort of fell for it and then thought, I'm not having anything to do with it, was Gavin Williamson. So when you're even outwitted by Gavin Williamson, you're in a pretty rough state of affairs. And I kind of thought, oh my God, here we go again. As you rightly say, Lewis, it's not a question of breaking House of Commons rules because they have done nothing that is wrong because second jobs are not banned. But it's just the sort of, I kind of felt the mix of stupidity and avarice that you would have yourself being recorded saying, I want 10 grand a day to do this without ever checking whether the company was kosher or not. And then it's the avarice of just thinking, well, look at me, I must be worth £10,000 a day. And if you kind of think about it for a minute, you think, what would they bring this South Korean company that would be worth

£10,000 a day? And so you get this inflated sense of MP's sense of self-worth. And I think that quasi-quarteng Matt Hancock would be kind of cringing inwardly that this tape is out there. I mean, for Matt Hancock, it's just the latest in a whole series. He can't stay out of the news, can he? And he's never for the right reason. No, well, quite. I mean, quasi-quarteng, you asked John what you can get for £10,000 a day. Quasi-quarteng said that he was pretty sure he might be able to arrange a meeting with Boris Johnson, cheaper, twice the price,

£10,000 a day. Well, we are joined now by Antibarnit, who as I mentioned has been working with Lead by Donkeys on this investigation. Antity, thanks so much for coming on The News Agents. What was the genesis of this project? Well, I think John mentioned that it happens every few years. I've been responsible for a few of them when I used to make dispatchers documentaries for Channel 4 and was approached by Lead by Donkeys. And I thought, you know what,

it's a good time. You know, we've had the Owen Patterson scandal. You've had the concern over Jeffrey Cox, Matt Hancock going into the jungle. They were supposed to bring in new rules. These new rules were coming in, but they'd all been watered down. No one kind of even knew they were coming in. And so that's the genesis. So I said about working out a way of setting up a fake company and looking for all the justifications and working out who we should approach. And that's the genesis. Yeah, Antity. And do you think in the edited version that you put up on social media on Saturday, you gave fair representation of where they were and what they were saying?

Oh, yes, we've been very strictly fair. Sorry. And you make clear they're not breaking any rules.

Well, obviously, we don't say that. We say there are no rules that prevent them from working for foreign companies or having third or fourth jobs or indeed,

how much they can earn all the time. There are rules banning them from lobbying or offering paid parliamentary advice. And I think it's open to question about agreeing to or advising a company on who to approach in government, which officials to approach, whether you do that directly or indirectly, is actually paid parliamentary advice. And over the years, this has been one of the issues where there's been a, well, it's just not been very clear.

So, you know, if you're paying 10,000 a day for a former cabinet minister, and they can tell you actually the person to approach is this civil servant or this official, where does the boundary of paid parliamentary avoid? Certainly, you know, if you're a constituent and you're trying to get some help with a problem, you know, can you call up your local MP on his mobile phone or her

mobile phone and say, can you tell me who's the best person? Maybe you can. So I think we and, you know, maybe it's one for the commissioner for standards to look at.

Isn't it okay just to go back to John's point on editing, though, Anthony? I mean,

you could argue that what Quarteng says, when he talks about making introductions and so on, you could make an argument as you're alluding to there that that might be brushing up against the rules. But isn't the case that, for example, with Graham Brady, he is basically very clear,

very, very clear about what the terms of engagement are, that he couldn't possibly lobby on the company's behalf. He would only be able to do everything transparently and within the rules. And Gavin Williamson as well actually decides to turn down the offer. But when you edited it at the start, Brady's there, Williamson's there, it gives the impression that these are people who are, if not breaking the rules, but then certainly they have questions to answer. And I'm not sure on the basis of what has been shown that necessarily they do.

I think we've been incredibly fair and accurate. And when you've watched all the episodes, you'll realize that the first episode which you're alluding to, we said that we were interested in asking how much time they were prepared to give during cost of living crisis

when their constituents might need them more than ever and how much they want to be paid.

We don't set them up as if they are breaking the rules. We just simply say, this is what happened

and we make it very clear right through it. And I think, you know, if you watch all the episodes, you'll be in no doubt that we've been very fair and balanced.

That's it. I think you approach 20. Is that right?

Yeah.

Were you, and in the end, what about five responded, five or six responded?

Five kind of agreed. We had a couple of responses that politely declined.

Somebody was quite interested at one point and then kind of dropped out.

But five went agree to do the first stage effectively, which was to do the kind of Zoom call with our undercover reporter.

I suppose in a way you could say, there's two ways of looking at that. I mean, obviously that's still a pretty large percentage of those that you approached.

On the other hand, at least a couple of them, Hancock and Brady, they're on their way out, not standing at the election. In some ways, you can imagine a situation in which MPs then sort of start to think about what's next and make contacts and so on.

I mean, is it in some ways at least encouraging that the clear majority of MPs you approached either declined or didn't get back to you at all?

Probably. I mean, I think it's also worth mentioning that the vast majority of MPs, you know, don't have second jobs or outside.

Exactly.

That's earning. So, you know, I have no idea how many will respond.

You know, I suppose part of me as a member of the public was hoping that no one would respond.

Obviously, as a journalist who was trying to set up this experiment,

we were hoping for, I have to say personally, and have been kind of done this thing before,

I was surprised that there was that many. I honestly thought that we might get given it so close to the Paterson, the Jeffrey Cox and the Hancock and everything else going on.

And, you know, so I was generally surprised. So, if you think about out of the 16 conservative MPs fall, that's 25%. I mean, that's not a, you know, other judges whether it was significant.

But, Anthony, you've probably picked who you thought were the most likely to rise to the bait, to kind of nibble at it.

No, that's not the case.

What, they were just a random selection of MPs?

No, there was not random. I mean, I went through the register of interest.

Just let me make my point. Isn't the point that what you've done is you've fostered a cynicism by highlighting the behaviour of four or five MPs when that's all you could find and the overwhelming majority of MPs are doing exactly what you say, are working very hard for their constituents and, you know, maybe one or two are trying to find ways of on their way out, finding loopholes or finding ways in which they can have a second income.

And actually, you're just spreading cynicism by what you're doing.

Well, thank you for putting that to me. I mean, first of all, there are dozens of MPs.

You know, I don't know, probably about 200, I think that some of the latest research shows that are earning have outside interest. So, it's just not one or two. And I did look through all of those that had worked for corporate interests or had track records that might raise what is called kind of evidence of concern. So, it wasn't just the ones that you thought might respond.

But yes, I mean, unless you kind of do a survey or you do it to all 600 plus MPs and you ask them

all the same questions, you're probably not going to perfect example. But I went through the whole register and looked at those that I thought had a case, a potential case to answer. And that's how we came up with the list. I'm sure that you might come up with another list. And, you know, if you take Mr. Quartain, obviously, he'd set up his own consultancy company in December, which hasn't yet declared. So, in issue of transparency, maybe he should have declared it. I mean, that's another one maybe for the someone else to look at. But we thought, for example, that was a genuine case where we should approach him to see what type of work he was offering and how much he would charge.

And see, where can we expect the rest of the episodes to drop?

The job interview with Stephen Hammond is out. And over the next 24, 48 hours, we will be airing the interviews with Sir Gavin Williamson and Matt Hancock.

Anthony, thank you so much for coming on The News Agents. Really appreciate your time.

Yeah, thanks, guys. Thanks, John. Cheers.

Thank you.

Shall I tell you what I find interesting about that, John? I don't know what you think in terms of, I mean, obviously, we're pushing them quite hard there about actually what it tells us about the public interest. But one really interesting thing is we alluded to at the start, these things sort of come up periodically. And there is the vast majority, I think all of the MPs that go back to them were conservative MPs. And I think it's really interesting to just sort of think about like why that is. I think there are two broad reasons. I think one of the reasons actually is, is it's nothing to do in a sense with the big conservative MPs. It's just reflective of the fact they've been in government for a long time. Of course.

Yeah. But you know, we had, I mean, I remember, do you remember, I think 2009, 10, there was a very similar thing, Patricia Hewitt. Jeff Hoon.

Jeff Hoon, exactly. And because they've been in government for a long time, that's who companies want to employ. They have the contacts with the departments, with ministers. And there is quite a narrow window now. Look, most conservative MPs expect to be out of office in the next, or the government to be out of office in the next 12 to 18 months.

There's quite a narrow window. If there were to be an MP who wanted to, let's say, exploit some of those connection commercially, there is quite a narrow window now for them to do that. So not surprising in a sense that, I mean, obviously this was a sting, but there will be lots of companies who are thinking about this and having these hushed conversations with a relatively small but nonetheless significant minority of MPs.

You know, in the 1970s, 80s, there was a Tory MP who used to write a column for the Observer, Julian Critchley. He was the MP for Aldershot. And he had a rule of thumb. He was very anti Thatcher. So that kind of limited his career development when Thatcher became leader. But he had this rule of thumb that Labour scandals were about money and Tory scandals were about sex

because Labour wanted money and didn't have any and Tories had money, but they wanted something

else. So their scandals were sexual. And I think what's happened is that actually, no one's making that much money. And so now many more Tory scandals are about money than ever used to be the case. No scandals here on the news, agents, of course.

None. None. Rightly so. No skeletons. No skeletons. No skeletons rattling. Gleaver,

Covert, shut. Exactly.

Lemsip and Parasetimal permitting. I'll hopefully be back in the studio with you tomorrow, Lewis. Well, I can only hope. I can only hope, John. You'll probably get some well wishes come around, some news agents come around to your house later on just to wish you well. A vigil. A vigil for John. Candle it, please. Thank you. Absolutely. Bye. Bye-bye. See you tomorrow.