

[Transcript] The News Agents / Matt Hancock says sorry for Covid

And if I may say so, I am profoundly sorry for the impact that had.
I'm profoundly sorry for each death that has occurred.
And I also understand why, for some, it will be hard to take that apology from me.
That was Matt Hancock today at the COVID Inquiry.
We have talked often on the news agents about why it is that politicians find it so hard to say sorry.
Today there was an abundance of sorrow and regret from the former Health Secretary.
So today we're going to chat a little bit about what has come out of Matt Hancock's appearance before the COVID Inquiry, what it tells us about our relationship to our health service and to those who work within it, and also to the attitude that the government now has towards those asking to have their wages paid.
Welcome to the news agents.
The news agents.
It's John.
It's Emily.
And it's Lewis, who is looking annoyingly brown and tanned from his holiday in Spain.
Have you two left this room since I've been away?
We haven't been together since June the 9th.
June the 8th, I've been corrected.
That was the last time the three of us were in news agents HQ.
Does someone keep a little record of that?
Yes, Gabriel.
The Annals.
Oh, Gabriel.
It gets very excited when there are actual three people.
Yes.
Anyway, look, later on in the podcast, we've got a treat for you.
It's not Emily singing.
We're not bringing that back.
No, thankfully.
It's someone who starred in this particular show.
He's joking, of course.
I do sing a little as well, but that is White Lotus and Tom Hollander had the most incredible role in that.
And he's currently performing in the West End Play Patriots about Vladimir Putin.
All that is to come.
But we're going to start with the COVID inquiry, which promises to be a long, exhausting, exhaustive investigation into the lead-up to COVID, what happened during it, and the aftermath.
And today, we're very much in the lead-up.
So Matt Hancock gave evidence for three hours, but he's going to be back again.
And it was a really striking picture that he painted of a government that worried about body bags and having enough of them, but really didn't care much about PPE or anything that might mitigate the scale of the disaster.

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Let's just have a listen.

The attitude the doctrine of the UK was to plan for the consequences of a disaster.

Can we buy enough body bags?

Where are we going to bury the dead?

And that was completely wrong.

Of course, it's important to have that in case you fail to stop a pandemic.

But central to pandemic planning needs to be how do you stop the disaster from happening in the first place?

He also said there was no central plan to protect care home residents.

And you will all remember that famous phrase that he said, he'd thrown a ring around the care homes and members within it of those communities.

And today we heard there was no central plan to protect elderly care home residents from the catastrophic impact of a pandemic.

He said the government didn't even know how many elderly and vulnerable people were in social care heading into the pandemic.

And I think it's fair to say that whilst there is this very grave and very profound apology, there is also a sense perhaps of it being slightly at arm's length to what he was able to do as the health secretary.

Yeah, I think that Hancock's appearance and then Osborne's appearance last week is knitting together the kind of a long period, if you like, of conservative government over the last 13 years and lots of it is coming together just to take Hancock first.

One of the really striking things that has come out today is the extent to which no deal Brexit planning consumed so much bandwidth and time of central government in the obviously immediate period, 2018, 2019, that preceded the pandemic.

Hancock said in some ways it was helpful that we had extra PPE as a result, I mean, sure.

But I mean, in terms of the bandwidth that was consumed, that is of no surprise to me whatsoever.

I remember talking to officials in Whitehall, loads of officials in Whitehall during that time, they were consumed by it.

And of course, they had to be because that was technically a no deal Brexit with all of the cataclysmic, economic and political and social effects that would have resulted from it was government policy, successive government policies, the May government and then the Johnson government.

So they had to do it.

But just the sheer extent of the resources it consumed, something else that came out, the pandemic influence preparedness board as late as 2018 identified a shortage of PPE equipment and respirators that was required.

That was never corrected.

The pandemic flu readiness board didn't meet for a year before the pandemic.

That was revealed by the inquiry today.

Hancock said he wasn't aware of the failure to meet.

And you just sort of see, and this is reflective of, I think, of the inquiry's work and what we'll continue to see, just mistake or problem after mistake and problem.

And we heard from Osborne the week before trying to sort of thread the eye of an eagle

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to try and say, well, austerity was actually deeply helpful in some way to preparing the UK for this pandemic, which again, independent commentators saying it's pretty hard to see. And then you bring it right up to the present day in terms of knitting the different periods of the conservative governments together.

And you see COVID's continued effect right now in terms of the economy and the inflation, the stickiness of the inflation we're seeing, partly because, and not a lot of people talk about this, partly because Rishi Sunak, actually his chancellor, even though we think of him as being very parsimonious kind of figure, spent more money in terms of the reaction to COVID than comparable economies.

We've also lost 400,000 people from the workforce as there is since COVID.

And that means that there's a shortage of labor and that means that labor costs are going up if you want to hire anybody.

And that means that inflation is even more stubborn and much more stubborn and Brexit is a part of it.

But also the post COVID environment in the UK, where we've lost so many people to the workforce that our inflation problem is so much worse than say the US or France or Germany or Spain.

You forget how concertinaed that timeframe was that Boris Johnson only won the election on the 13th, 14th of December of 2019.

We left Brexit by the 31st of January of 2020.

We were in lockdown by mid-March.

Well, the 31st of January, that was our first COVID case.

I mean, you couldn't write it.

Yeah, you couldn't write it.

I mean, it was extraordinary.

It was like a new chapter.

Yeah, it was extraordinary.

But I also think if you take yourselves back to that frenzied, horrible, catastrophic time of COVID, when we could not have been more grateful or more cognizant of the work that the Health Service were doing to protect lives, to help us to look after our loved ones and having to put together protective clothing, whatever they could find, go in day after day into places that they knew were frontline of what felt like the COVID war zone and how we were on the streets thanking them, clapping all the rest of it, you fast forward two years and you've had a government who has seen the disquiet amongst medical staff, nurses, doctors, junior doctors and the strikes, who has said that they will abide by the pay review guidance, as we've heard so repeatedly from the Education Secretary, Gillian Keegan.

Well, what we do is obviously the independent pay review body looks every year independent.

Is it independent?

It is independent.

Yeah.

What we will do is we'll go to the independent pay review process.

Obviously, there's the independent review bodies, you know, our door is always open.

They've said essentially they'll live or die by what the independent pay review body sets as a pay rise and just yesterday it sounds like the Prime Minister's changed his mind.

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I think everyone can see the economic context that we're in with inflation higher than we'd like it and it's important that in that context the government makes the right and responsible decisions on things like public sector pay.

I'm actually very pleased that over a million NHS workers represented by half a dozen unions accepted the government's pay offer and I'm very grateful to them for that and for the incredible work they're doing.

It's very disappointing that the junior doctors have taken the decision that they have done. Over half a million people's treatments have already been disrupted.

I don't think anyone wants to see that carry on.

It's just going to make it harder to bring waiting lists down and I think people need to recognise the economic context we're in.

At least of all the junior doctors themselves, they don't want to be taking industrial action over this but they feel that they're not getting the rub of the green particularly now that Rishi Sunak has said that they may not abide by the independent pay review recommendations and you remember a year ago they were saying oh yeah well we have to accept this as you were saying a moment ago Emily we have to accept and I'm sorry it's below inflation but that's what the pay review body is recommended and now that there's talk that the pay review might recommend 6% for police, prison officers and junior doctors and 6.5% for teachers the government is saying hmmm might not be able to have that.

I also think and this is a separate point but we have spoken on the news agents before about so how it's slightly reassuring to have such a wealthy prime minister after Boris Johnson where he was always borrowing money from this one and that one actually to have Rishi Sunak telling people to hold their nerve over their mortgages when you've got the wealthiest prime minister and the wealthiest chancellor that we have had in this country in absolutely decades I just think it probably thinks well it's easy for you to say that.

Hold your nerve is a phrase that you use if you're gambling you know if you're sitting at a poker table you have to hold your nerve this isn't gambling for most people this is literally trying to pay their mortgage or their bills.

The idea that you have any control over your nerves at this point is absolutely mocking us.

But also I mean hold your nerve and do what and if you've got no disposable income there's nothing that you can do and that's the point is that you know lots of comparisons are often made between what's happening now with interest rates when they're hovering around 5% and what happened in the 1980s and you often hear older people sort of say well we had 14-15% well yeah fine but house prices relative to incomes were so much lower then so we basically are at the point now when there is an equivalent between the 1980s and then having interest rates of 6% now is basically the same as it was of having 13 or 14 or 15% then and I just think on the public sector pay point you know this is going to be a big conflagration politics it's going to make if it happens if he decides not to go along with the public sector review bodies it's going to make the prospect of resolving industrial unrest that much harder because you'll be looking effectively at having year after year of real term significant real terms pay cuts and we should remember that pay in the private sector is rising and is rising quickly so that makes the disparity between the public and private sector bear in mind the public sector already has significant recruitment problems even worse why be a nurse

or why be some of these you know really tough sometimes public sector jobs when frankly you could go and work in a resale job not that that's easy either that's really difficult or you go to Australia or you go to it or if you're more senior you go to Australia it's a period victory actually if you think that you've solved inflation by not raising people's wages and all that happens is that quantities boundless nurses and junior doctors decide to work in the other side of the world you haven't really solved your problem particularly when you bear in mind that of course halving inflation which looks easy at the time is looking much more difficult is only one of the prime minister's pledges or priorities he also wants to cut NHS waiting list significantly difficult to do if you exacerbate recruitment problems the key question also of course is this which is if you control if you have restraint in the public sector in terms of wages does that even have a deflationary effect i.e. if you increase wages how inflationary is that and there are plenty of economists who would say the increasing public sector wages isn't as inflationary as in the private sector why because of course the public sector isn't charged for anything so if you're in the private sector and you have to increase your wages what happens with that how do you compensate for that you raise your prices you raise your prices to accommodate it and yes there may be some impact in terms of those public sector workers then going to spend that money elsewhere of course but the argument is is potentially quite muted and there is another element of this as well which gets far less attention and i'm not saying any of the answers here are easy by the way the choices soon i have to make because of the inflation environment are difficult but there's something we talk about far less which is corporate profits and the role of corporate profits was an interesting report from the IMF today actually highlighting that corporate profits which have actually been going up quite significantly across Europe not just in the UK they identify as a major driver of inflation not only in Europe as i say but in the UK as well and there is far less discussion about any of that everything is always about wages which bear in mind as well corporate profits over the last decade have done pretty well so companies have quite a lot to fought back on workers and their wages not so much yeah this is what the european central bank were talking about at their conference

they were actually saying that profit margins have shot up during the past two years and they are the ones that should be now absorbing the high cost and the argument is they're doing the opposite they're actually passing it on through not all companies of course but some arguably potentially profiteering from the inflation crisis so look we've talked extensively on the podcast about the five targets that Rishi Sunak has set himself and when they originally came out we were kind of almost joking that the bar was set so low how could you fail to get over that bar so were we wrong yes and i think were we wrong yes and i think that Rishi Sunak probably thought actually this would be easy to get over halving the rate of inflation and you look at how stubborn and how unique the circumstances are in Britain compared to our European counterparts over inflation that presumably this must feed into the mood at Westminster among conservative MPs as the election comes ever closer on the horizon is Rishi Sunak saying i mean have we been unfair is he saying hold your nerve because he actually knows that whatever mortgage paying people are in will not be long-lasting he knows something's around the corner which will dramatically cut inflation within two months i think as much as anything he was talking to conservative MPs as he was to the

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way he's talking about hold their nerve because i mean i was talking to a few conservative MPs last night i mean the mood is sort of subarctic in terms of how cold it is and how worried they are i mean in fact most of them there is such despondency actually that not only the polls haven't shifted but that they're getting worse and there is an awareness that the early part of the cost of living crisis okay it was bad for everyone but frankly it affected their voters less tend to be lower income people who are renting just on basic goods like core inflation and so on food inflation now it's spreading to people with mortgages in a really really significant way who are absolutely classic more conservative voters more conservative voters although the most conservative voters don't have mortgages at all but nonetheless and there is just an awareness that look in a year's time extraordinary stat from resolution foundation just today in a year's time britains will be paying an extra 16 billion pounds a year in mortgage interest payments as a result of higher rates and that's with just the predictive rates if it went higher still it could get higher and higher and that is just a ticking time bomb that is happening in constituencies and among the electorate month after month quarter after quarter as people remortgage and it is just a real political problem i think we said at the time when we were talking about the five tests i think i remember i think we said that look these tests particularly the inflation one looked easy to me but if they don't meet them then we are in serious trouble because it implies there is something more fundamental about the inflation problem within britain than we might have thought at the time and that is exactly where we are and it is very worrying he reminds me more and more soon of a sort of ted heath type figure in the sense that you know we've had 30 years or so of economics and politics where there were weren't necessarily easy answers but there were usually levers that you could pull without creating massive damage or problems elsewhere partly because even after 2008 we had easy money we had loose monetary policy governments had a lot of room for manoeuvre now we are in a very very tight economic situation just as we were in the 1970s and almost no matter what you do the outcome is bad and that is just a disaster for incumbent governments well that was the callahan quote wasn't it went to bernard donahoe's advisor where he said you pull the levers and nothing happens he also said if i were a younger man i'd emigrate not ideal in a prime minister right well we're not emigrating we'll be back after the break and we're going to be back with tom holland actor extraordinaire

this is the news agents

welcome back well as promised on yesterday's episode of the news agents we have tom holland with us in the studio who is quite simply one of our greatest actors he's currently appearing in patriots a play by peter morgan in the west end about putin's rusher the rise that kind of creation of putin so we'll start there but you might also know him from white lotus you can maybe remember him from rev the vicar you know the vicar one the night manager with the lobsters i always think the lobster scene and tom you're welcome tom we've got to start with patriots it must have been such a strange weekend to be acting a role about putin when putin's grip on power is under question yes when y came offstage in the matinee the revolution had started and the brilliant will came who plays putin said he's left he's in his plane we don't know where he is he may be going to st petersburg and we we react to it as if we're somehow involved in the whole story but of course we're not we're just actors in a play in london but we're quite emotionally invested in the story and will of course is concerned about how to play putin now if putin is cracked he's no longer this sort of monolith of impervious kind of powerful figure if he's now

weakened does that affect the way that the audience receives the character in our play you see putin go from being a broke taxi driver who's just lost an election to being the all-powerful dictator who destroys perzovsky perzovsky's the sort of first martyr of the putin era in the play an original oligarch who set putin up who then goes against putin and ends up dying still screaming about democracy and freedom and condemning putin as a statist nationalist dictator and there we are the act is going but are the audience now they're confused because they think putin is a broken figure we're not sure we've only done one performance within the new putin era the new putin is does it change it i mean does it change it when there's so much turmoil because you you launched it when ukraine was already under attack look it's made us it's made

the production particularly relevant from from the outset the terrible irony of the situation is that our show is benefiting from the enormous suffering created by the ukraine war to an extent in that we become relevant people are more obsessed with the putin story than than ever the actual detail of it the real nuances of it in a way we're limited by the script unless peter wants to do simultaneous rewrites and send them to us you know we can't actually incorporate what's happening in the news feed but you didn't we'd need to ask the audience how it feels i'm tempted to say it doesn't make any difference because actually this is the origin story of the putin that we've been living with for the last 20 years that's what this play is and about the forces that were at work in the eltsin period on the one hand free libertarian capitalism berezovsky those original are they kleptocrats are they liberators are they patriots and they all are patriots that's you do get that is the the point of the play and that was peter's original intention before the ukraine war was to write a play about different versions of patriotism but you know berezovsky is not just a criminal capitalist he was fighting to save russia to bring it out of a dark 70 year period of repression and he saw the potential of a democratic free market future which is why he got involved in the ukraine as the ukraine turned to the west he was involved in the independence from the former soviet union and putin obviously sort of brings back the ghost of the soviet union by becoming a dictator and tom we talk a lot about putin's enemies berezovsky was one of putin's enemies and now you are embodying this man i wonder what it does to your sense of your own safety

i know it's a character but do you ever feel that you're slightly crossing i did feel i did feel when we opened this time in the west end i did slightly think gosh if there was a very overzealous fsb agent wandering around london with not enough to do on their hands who wanted to draw attention to themselves and curry favor with the kremlin they could sort of send us all poison fan mail and i'm not opening any of our fan mail just in case but that's really to exaggerate our significance we are actors doing a play isn't it amazing that we can it's one of those moments where theater becomes as interesting as it's supposed to be it's an environment where the issues of the day can be debated in sort of real time in a kind of town square environment but it's interesting that you have to think about it because i can't believe it's dangerous because i can't believe there are many roles that you have acted you don't feel like that when you're doing hamlet do you no perhaps not of course it's it's strange to go we're tiptoeing around a subject which has become very dangerous and the war has become much nastier since we started so yes there's a vague sense of i hope something horrible happens to any of us and do you hear from not fan mail but sort of any propagandists who try and tell you you've got the story wrong or you've misunderstood putin are there supporters who who tell you that you've you've

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misread funny i haven't been exposed to anything like that i studiously avoid any press that mentions our play that that's because i always do just in case they say something that i can't recover from what we have been exposed to is obviously people who like it and feel it speaks to them when we did it at the alameda we had a lot of russian exiles crying on the pavement afterwards because the story spoke to them of what people who've left russia and can't go back the opening lines of the play are in the west you have no idea you think of russia as a cold bleak place full of hardship and cruelty but ask any russian what would bring tears to their eyes if denied it and they will tell you off and then a list of things that they would tell you off that's what the play is sort of explicitly about to be exiled from the country that you love from what i recall tom you were looking at the script you were sort of discovering the world of barozovsky whilst you were playing this

really evil kind of malignant character in the white lotus i was in new york when the white lotus came out and within two days a friend of mine sent me a film that they'd taken on their on their phone in a club in a basement in kings cross where somebody had turned it into a dance anthem with people going nuts to that music sped up okay we're gonna start dancing the studio where we listen to this that was very very exciting you know it's a hit when that happens you will work with jennifer coolidge yes i mean i think we're past spoilers can we just say there is a sort of greek tragedy element yeah we are right we're past spoilers you all die at the end yeah is it terrible sort of being killed off yes i actually thought i possibly wasn't being killed off because when we shot the last scene and i was lying there in my pink suit covered in blood and ketchup and i did my last line and then i closed my eyes as you do when you die and you're acting dying and uh and mike went no no don't close your eyes you want to be dead and i thought no i don't want to be dead i want to be in seasons three four five six seven so i went oh okay mike i'll keep my eyes open got it wink wink but apparently i'm dead oh no so there's no coming back no he won definitely there must have been a moment maybe at that moment

mike was thinking that you killed your career by shutting your eyes i haven't watched it so i don't know what the edit is but there's definitely a series three to come yes there is a series three to come which is set in asia and that's all i know but like everything else it's on pause for the writer strike so they can't actually shoot it they can't write it i think they know what the story is so sorry mike white is on strike himself the he can't write it because you'll be thrown out of the union yeah i mean you wouldn't want to you'd be a scab so what is happening then now i mean is there a massive sort of stuck pipeline where nothing is coming through there is stuff that's been completely signed off that needs no editing can keep going i suppose that can be put out but you can't make anything i don't i'm no expert here but the impression i get is development

is stopped production is stopped you can make stuff here as long as it's not american unions do you agree with them on the strike do you i agree that all creative industries are not just creative industries all industries that are potentially destroyed by ai need to protect themselves so that's what this is about as far as i understand it ai being the mechanism by which future scripts will be whatever but will be written i want to adapt war and peace andrew davis is too expensive or not available and i'm going to put it through an ai machine and i'll get a i'll get a workman like adaptation or you might get a can i have this adapted in the style of andrew davis exactly and would you have a problem as an actor acting that stuff i i mean as an actor you

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read a wide variety of scripts some of which might have been better if they'd been written by ai so i mean i don't want to exclude an ai script in case it was a really good one but you'd you don't really want actual creativity to be replaced by a computer so don't we always think that though about everything i mean don't we think that about cinema taking over from theater or television taking over from cinema i mean isn't that just haven't we haven't had an existential threat that removes human beings from the creative process of we i mean human beings have been removed from manufacturing industries which hasn't ended very happily for the human beings it works well for the owners doesn't it maybe i've been misty eyed about this but surely when you pick up a script like white lotus or patriots or the night manager which are beautifully written craft well exactly do you believe that ai could generate something of that quality because i think the ingenuity of that and the nuance and the subtlety of is so evident i think we have to believe that you you can't replace it you can't replace the random you can't replace the exceptional the counter intuitive the truly original i i'm sure there will be some ai zealot who'll go no no no no you don't know you're wrong i know i could we could produce i don't think i i pray that they can't do that yet what i can imagine is it being much easier for a producer to get an ai created script this is sort of base level and then and then to get a real writer to do a pass on it or something like that to turn the language into something that's more like them there will be sort of hybrid versions of it i want to believe that you can't have true creativity like that but monkeys and typewriters isn't that what that's about leave them long enough and they'll recreate shakes a bit yeah i just wonder whether something else that we're seeing and it's true of patriots and the director of patriots we're talking to tomorrow on the podcast rupert galt he's doing dear england at the national theater at the moment is there too much theater that is too current that these are not historical figures that we're dealing with we're dealing with putin who's still in power we're dealing with gareth southgate not the same but who is still the england manager and isn't this an argument for theater i don't know i'm just wondering sounds like it well i just wonder whether we need distance before we can start engaging with people as kind of well dramatic characters i think it depends if it's a live debate the play might have a longer life if it was if it became the historical document that told you the the agreed truth on any given subject but that's not this if it's a live subject then it's it becomes a different format as we were saying earlier it's a sort of town square debating thing which i i mean i've spent i definitely remember spending having lots of conversations with people going what's the point of theater is theater relevant theater fighting for relevance was often a conversation you used to have well this is this is this is clearly the opposite of that i mean i'm now having to this is great it's never been more it's never been more relevant in that it can take subject matter that's that's current and also it's never been more relevant because it's not a digital experience the live experience the more we're on our screens the more on our phones the more exciting paradoxically theater becomes because you can't replace that and you can't replace that with ai with luck talk about replacement during the covid pandemic there were these adverts that i think the government was putting out with a you know ballerina called fatima saying oh maybe she'd want to think about retraining as a into cyber now it was a time that was very difficult for the arts very difficult for actors i wonder what when you think back to that time that's right not very long ago and you and now you know just today we're looking at matt hancock in front of the covid inquiry and

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i don't know i wonder how you sort of view that whole period and the message that was being sent out which was you know sort of do proper jobs because you can't do your your job well i mean that's that's that was ridiculous at best you could say they were trying to say something positive in a impossible situation they didn't know how to how to manage at worst you would say that's one example of a fundamentally philistine anti-arts party that has no business making statements about

the creative industries but what i do remember is there was a fundamental existential threat to the performing arts obviously presented by covid which sort of killed everything off for a bit and the fact that it's come back with a great surge great wave of energy now with all these things you're mentioning is a wonderful thing and thank goodness we still have that and we can still do it you know

so much has changed so much of in our in our national life has been diminished in the last seven years our theatre seems to be alive and kicking why did you say seven years 2016 i kind of think is a sort of bit of a tipping point where a lot of stuff has been diminished the brexit vote yes yes and of course then you know trump covid and everything else covid in the ukraine where it feels like we're diminishing the whole time so it's nice when things are not diminishing just a final thought i mean we talked in passing about dear england the play that's just started at the national which is a sort of it's a kind of reflective essay through the england football team of where we are as a country yes and there are some of it that's actually very optimistic talking about our better angels i mean i just wonder whether you set this 2016 as the marker point the classic polling question is are we heading in the right direction or the wrong direction well we're heading aren't we there are optimists and there are pessimists there's lots that's in the news feed that is calls for pessimism the truth is that optimism is actually a superpower if you can grasp it and there's been so much sadness and negativity that i'm training myself to go actually that's no good you have to go this is where we are we have to build from this point you know whatever you think of boris johnson boris berazovsky and boris johnson have something in common which was their astonishing positivity and clearly r1 bojoe was infectiously positive and that took people along with him even whether you agreed with him or not that that kind of life enhancing optimism is incredibly powerful and we need to access it somehow it would be great if we accessed it in ways that weren't deranged but we do need to access it i'm i'm not going to be negative about our future because we can't be we've got to we've got to find ways of being looking upwards tom thank you so much thanks um thank you this is the news agents

and just to say that if you haven't seen patriots i want to go and see it and you should because it's fantastic it's only got another eight weeks to run at the neil coward theater in london but our run is going to be going on a lot longer well we think it is so i wouldn't count your chickens young man well i can't you say theater by the way theater oh was that was that was on the grand you were on the thespian there john theater yeah exactly that's your east end boy east east end yeah yeah no so it's going for another eight weeks and the news agents will be back tomorrow with any luck bye bye for now bye

this has been a global player original podcast and a persophonica production