

[Transcript] The News Agents / Our billionaire PM and his £1 million tax bill

We're going to play you a clip in just a second of Rishi Sunak talking about his taxes. Well, he's asked about his taxes, but just listen to how little time he spends on that before he goes much wider about what he's doing to help the British economy. Well, you know, I said I would publish my tax returns. I was pleased to be able to do that yesterday in the interest of transparency. And the most important thing is, what am I doing to help people of this country with the cost of living? That's their number one priority. That's why at the beginning of the year, I set out five priorities. The first of those was to halve inflation and the budget recently extended our support with people's energy bills, just to remind everyone, you know, I took a decision to tax the windfall profits of big energy companies, 75% tax rate. So today on the news agents, we're going to be talking a bit about Rishi's tax and whether we mind having an exceptionally rich Prime Minister in this country, but also looking more broadly at the state of play and polling between the two main parties and their two leaders. Welcome to the news agents. The news agents. It's John. It's Emily. And Lewis is in Paris. Yes. Lewis is talking complete garbage. More of that later. He's talking about the French strikes and he's in the middle of them with piles and piles of Parisian garbage at its very best. Yes. Smelly. Yes. But here in the UK, the Bank of England have raised interest rates again from 4% to four and a quarter. And I guess if you have a mortgage, it is going to be uncomfortable because there is a cost of living crisis and the cost of owning your home or even if you rent a home because rentals will go up, are going to increase and make life even more unaffordable. And this is the 11th interest rate rise on the Trotton. I think what makes it even more difficult is that for a decade, for longer than a decade, interest rates didn't move at all and suddenly they're going up. It feels like every single time the Bank of England meets and they're not going up because things are going well and because the economy is booming, they're going up because we're worried about inflation as a result of the price of oil and the Ukraine war and all the rest of it. But we're still really, really feeling the pinch in individual households. And one person we kind of feel pretty confident to say won't be too worried about the latest rise in living costs in terms of his own family is Rishi Sunak because as we mentioned at

the end of yesterday's podcast, his tax returns have come out and it seems that, well, they're pretty well off and he has been paying his taxes, but it works out at a marginal rate of about 21 or 22% because so much of his income is from capital gains rather than from income on work.

And that sort of started an office discussion just to show you our workings a bit, which is whether we as a country mind having a Prime Minister that can afford to pay a million pounds, more than a million pounds a year in tax.

And on the one hand, of course, it makes him seem almost entirely out of touch with like 99.9% of the population.

But on the other hand, I find personally, when I hear about the helicopters that he pays for or the swimming pool heating that he pays for or the tax that he pays at least, I sort of find that I'm quite relaxed about it because we have just come out of, you know, three years of scandals under the Boris Johnson government, 80%, 90% of which went back to fudges over money and the compromises that caused, whether it's Richard Sharp facilitating the £800,000 loan, whether it's Wallpapergate, whether it's your free flights to Mustique, whether it's who's decorating, who's redoing the whole of your flat and Downing Street. There is all this stuff that seemed to be tied to Boris's finances. And I'm not saying that you have to be rich to not have those scandals attached to you. But I find that I'm just actually quite happy to have a Prime Minister who pays the taxes now.

But is that a false comparison? That would be my question to you because, of course, what happened with Boris Johnson was egregious. I mean, he was getting a salary of whatever it is as Prime Minister, nearly £200,000 a year. And most of the time, everything you need to spend is spent by the government because you're an official business. So if you can't live within your means, well, then you've got a real problem. I mean, Boris Johnson was exceptional. He needed huge sums of money. It seems he had lavish style in terms of wanting to refurbish the Downing Street flat and had to borrow money for that.

Yeah, but I just don't think that being excessively rich, and we might as well say it is excessively rich, necessarily means that you can't put in place policies that can be incredibly good for the majority of people. Of course. But does it stick in the craw that in the budget, you are getting deliberate policy to help swimming pools in leisure centres to stay open because local councils can't afford to heat them at the same time as you know that Rishi Sunak is putting in a swimming pool in his constituency home in North Yorkshire at a time when councils can't afford to heat their own? I just wonder whether...

Yeah, but we're not Saudi Arabia. We don't have a king giving decrees and sort of handing out swimming pools from his own personal finance and wealth, right? That's not how we operate. So yes, of course, maybe it sticks in the craw. Maybe it is a really uncomfortable comparison to make between leisure centres and one person's heated swimming pool. I get that. But I'm not sure fundamentally that matters. I guess the question is, you know, if you are living in a council flat and you have damp and you have all these problems and you see your prime minister paying a million pounds in tax and at a marginal rate of 21, 22%. That I think is different. And that is different. And it's not because he's done any tax dodging.

It's because that if you have, you know, you're getting income from investments, that is the rate at which you pay tax. And whether that just kind of, well, how can he possibly represent me? I also thought it was interesting. Yeah, but where does that start? You know, how does

it mean that everyone has to have had a childhood in a council flat before they can be prime minister? Where do you draw the line between what's obscene wealth, incredible wealth, wealthy and kind of comfortably off? Yeah, of course, I accept that as a point. And you know, one of the things that Americans used to say to me when I lived in the US, my God, class envy in your country is still off the scale. You know, whereas you are venerated in the US, if you are wealthy, you're kind of attacked. Well, you literally can't stand for president unless you have huge amounts of money, huge amounts of money or the ability to fundraise like Donald Trump. And so what you've got with Sunak is a position where people are saying, this is uncomfortable, but you can see that Downing Street feel uncomfortable. Why did they release the data on his tax return? While Boris Johnson was still speaking in the comments, if they felt that there is no big deal about this and there's nothing to hide and they've got no problem with it whatsoever, they could have just put a press release out today, midday or whatever it was. And they didn't. I agree with that. And I think there is an embarrassment and there's no getting away from that, certainly from the occupants of number 10. This is all part of, I guess, a wider discussion, which we're having about the feeling in the waters of where British politics now lies. Because we've commented on the news agents that Rishi Sunak's had a pretty good, pretty robust last couple of weeks. The budget seems to have gone on the whole fairly well for him. He's beaten back the ERG, got his Storm and Windsor Framework Agreement through Parliament. He has seen his nemesis in the shape of Boris Johnson pretty much crumble under pressure and under questioning. And Keir Starmer, who has, frankly, been sailing high in the polls since around last September, I mean, has had huge leads, is now seeing that lead considerably narrowed. And the other interesting point about Keir Starmer's position is that normally, when you're 25 points ahead, you're also seen to be the best leader by 25 points. They kind of go together. And there isn't that gap. Rishi Sunak is much closer in popularity terms to Keir Starmer than I think Labour should feel comfortable about. Yeah. And Labour should have had a good time because they've seen what's happened in Scotland with the departure of Nicola Sturgeon. They're starting to think about the possibility of gaining back many more seats north of the border now. And yet, when you see Keir Starmer versus Rishi Sunak, you realise that they're actually slightly too similar to create big gulfs of character and indeed polling. And there's the classic story of the American driving in Southern Ireland and stopping a guy for instructions on where to go. And the guy says to him, well, I wouldn't have started from here. And the Labour Party keeps saying that, you know, and so they seem like they don't have answers on the immigration policy. Well, I wouldn't have started from here on the economy. Well, I wouldn't have started from here on tax and spend. Well, I wouldn't have started from here. And I think that that leaves a vulnerability to Labour that you can attack the Conservatives all you like, but you have to do a bit more. That said, Keir Starmer was in stoke on Trent today at Port Vale Football Club. One Conservative MP warned him when he was coming ahead of time that he would not be coming to wake on Trent. It was stoke on Trent. How we laughed. That was Jonathan Gullis in case he couldn't work it out. I'm sure he thought it was really funny when he wrote it. But what I would say is that Keir Starmer was sounding punchier today, I thought, than he has done on many of his more recent sort of media outings. And one of the clearest lines was when he said, I'm sorry, you cannot stop blaming the opposition for the state

of government today. Just listen to the question and the answer that he gives.

Jack from the Sun. Jack. Thank you, Zakir. We've learnt today that dangerous foreign criminals went on to commit even more awful crimes after you campaigned to stop them being deported just three years ago. Do you now regret that and would you like to say sorry to their victims?

Well, Jack, what I would say is this. I think most people are fed up to the back teeth with the government that is seeking to blame everybody else but themselves for the problems in relation to crime. If there's a problem with confidence in policing and there is, then ask ourselves who broke it. If there's a problem with our criminal justice system and there is, then ask yourself who broke it. If there's a problem with our asylum and deportation system, then ask yourself who broke it. And frankly, for a government 13 years into power to cast around and blame people, anybody else but themselves for what's going on shows just how desperate they are. I'm afraid it's casting around. You can't blame the opposition for the government's failures. I'm sorry about that, but it is a rule in politics.

That was Kirsten Armour in Stoke-on-Trent. I'm so sorry. Sounding rather more upbeat and energised. It's worth considering some of these polling crosscurrents because they are fascinating about just how strong is Labour's position compared to the Tory party and Rishi Sunak and we're going to be doing that just after the break. Welcome back and let's consider what the political polling impact might be on some of these forces. And delighted to say we've finally lured into the studio, James Kanagasuriam, the pollster from Focal Data because we've been trying to get you for ages and you've always said no and you're here now and we're very... Delighted. Delighted to talk to you about all of this. If you're the Labour Party and you've been enjoying these 20 point leads for ages, should you start feeling worried that in terms of popularity as an individual, Rishi Sunak seems to be doing much better? Yeah, it's a great question. I think, look, there's a massive disjunction going on here between voting intention polls, as you've mentioned, 20 point leads. There's been a YouGov poll released out today which is a 27 point lead with Labour at 49 points and the Conservatives at 23. But we have this picture when it comes to how people think about the two leaders of the main parties where it's much closer. There's anything between a five to six point gap between them. But that has persisted actually since Rishi Sunak became Prime Minister. So it's actually not a new thing. This disjunction has been here right from the beginning of his premiership. I think it's particularly acute now. But do you see that often? Do you see that often where the leader is? No, you don't at all. It's pretty unprecedented in terms of its gap. So just to kind of put me on the bones there, the current gap between how people view Rishi Sunak and in terms of their satisfaction with his job as PM and the satisfaction ratings that people give for... Labour is the leader of the opposition. And the satisfaction ratings that people give to Rishi Sunak as the Prime Minister, they would imply a kind of national poll lead for Labour between three to seven points. And that has been the case pretty consistently. And no, generally, leader ratings are very, very predictive of outcomes. So the firm Ipsos-Mori have been measuring this stuff since the 70s, since 1977. And every single election, the leader ratings have been predictive of the final outcome in terms of the government's lead or discount to the opposition. Even in 2015, where we had the polls indicating a hung parliament, Labour and the Conservatives kind of juking it out for kind of 33... This was David Cameron, Ed Miliband... George Osborne, that whole structure there. In the end, the leader ratings won out. So the lead that David

Cameron had over Ed Miliband in the leader ratings implied a certain government lead versus the opposition, and that's what ended up happening.

Basically, Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak are now looking quite similar in terms of their temperament in terms of what they're offering. Keir Starmer was a much better proposition for voters against previous Conservative leaders like Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, where there was a big gap in difference between them.

So there's two different things going on here, which is what's the gap in terms of brand, and then what's the gap in terms of how popular they are. And yes, there are quite a lot of similarities between Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak. When we polled people what they thought about both leaders, the same adjectives cropped up about competency, about professionalism. There's been, more pejoratively, you could call it quite technocratic. But I would argue that generally the public are in an age where that's actually what they want more. I think in a way, you could argue that's a response to where the public are.

What about if I go really specific and say, do people like having a very rich Prime Minister? We saw Rishi Sunak's tax forms released yesterday. He's paying an astonishing amount of money in tax, more than a million pounds, right? It's kind of 100 times what the average person might pay in a year in tax. Does the public like that, trust that, not mind? Where does that sort of thing?

I'm not sure it's hugely relevant to the public because we're in a world where Rishi Sunak's ratings are at 10 to 15 point premiums for the Conservative Party's ratings. Actually really where we are today is about the brand damage that has been done to the Conservative Party rather than the kind of personal life of the Prime Minister. I mean, it's certainly his numbers on competency, on execution have all gone up and that the real problem is where the Conservative Party is polling in terms of its delivery on all the cool kind of policy issues where it's currently behind the Labour Party on almost every issue.

If you're Kiyostama, listening to your analysis, you're thinking, why aren't I more popular? Given that my poll lead, and maybe my poll lead is not really representative of what might happen in an election, if you're Rishi Sunak, where is the area where you think you can claw back support, popularity in terms of policy to narrow the gap on voting intention? So I think it's very much continue what's happening, which is delivery on the core issues, whether that's immigration with his deal on small boats, critically the economy.

How big an issue is the small boats?

Well, the history of immigration and salience is quite a complicated one, but basically from the referendum, 2011 to 2016, immigration was around 50 to 60% a top three issue in the country. Basically, straight after the referendum, that declined precipitously to only around 10 to 15% of people would say it was a top three issue. But over the last year, that has climbed up considerably, not back to its previous levels. But we are seeing immigration now come up as a top two, top three, top four issue, which it hasn't before. And what about something like Brexit? Because we can't go a whole episode of that much at least once.

Oh, you ruined it.

Seriously. I was doing so well. Rishi Sunak, who is obviously a core Brexiteer, doesn't come across as a cultural Brexiteer, if I can make that difference. He feels like a pragmatic Brexiteer. He wants to work through the issues, the things that aren't working like the Northern

Island protocol. Kirstama is playing from a previous remainder position, we can make Brexit work. And I think it was polling for the Constitution Society that said, if Kirstama went all out and said, actually, Brexit isn't working, he would end up getting not just the red wall who've already decided they've moved on, but many more people who actually want to hear the Labour leader spell that out. Do you think that's right or is that completely overblown?

I think it's overblown, but let's take a couple of steps back, which is what's happened to the polling on Brexit over the past month or two months. So basically, until about three months ago, the polling on Brexit, so how would you vote again if there was another referendum, has been very stable. The country has continued to be 50-50 split with 15% or so of Remainers opting to vote Leave, and 15% of Leaveers opting to vote Remain, with generally a lot of stability there. What's happened since then is that people's view on Brexit has become stable to the government approval that they have. So people no longer identify Brexit as this thing that can exist separate to the government. And what's happened since then is obviously support for Brexit as a proposition has declined precipitously. So we polled and modelled down to constituency whether people felt regret or happiness at their Brexit vote or Remain vote. And we found that it was only two or three constituencies in Lincolnshire on the wash that still-

In the whole country.

In the whole country.

In the whole of England.

In GB.

In GB.

Out of 632 constituencies, there were only three. But is it as simple as then saying, right, we can now return to the issue? And I'm sceptical because Brexit is a proxy for lots of other things that sit on the kind of cultural war axis. And by reopening that up, you're effectively reopening up the debate on which the Labour Party's coalition from Hampstead to Hull broke. Because effectively it had some of the safest leave seats and the safest Remain seats.

If you were advising Kirsten Dahmer now then, and you're not obviously, you're a neutral pollster, but if you were advising Kirsten Dahmer, you wouldn't say you should be talking about the damage that Brexit has done to this country and you should be going all out to say it's not working.

The key for anyone is it's not the relevant issue. It's one of the lowest salience issues that are going on in politics. All of the public polling suggests really critical concern with the cost of living, with the NHS backlog, with delivery on economics, concern over rising interest rates. Why would you choose your moment to reopen an issue that is closed and which the polling favours you anyway?

James, you touched on culture wars. What is the salience, the trans issue, for example, where labour seems to get itself slightly tied up into knots about over what is the correct thing to say? So-called woke issues damaging potentially to labour.

Completely depends on the sub-issue that you're talking about. The main feature of the culture wars, if we're going to call it that, is that by issue, the progressive or regressive majority of Britain massively changes. Even on the trans issue, if you divide it into sub-issues, public opinion sways wildly. So, if you're talking, for example, about participation

in women's sport, the vast majority of people would believe women's sport should be a protected category. But if you were looking at the polling for should people have the right to self-identify, the polling is much, much closer. And actually, the British public is remarkably flexible, much more flexible than the protagonists in the culture war. My answer to you is, is there a single cleave? You know, we've got used to the referendum providing us with commentators with a really helpful, simple 52-48 device, right? And so, someone's a leader or a remainder. But the reality that we sit in now is that actually on every single sub-issue, people hop over the fence. If there was an election tomorrow, the polling still suggests that Keir Starmer would win that for labour. If we are looking at an election a year away, or more, 60 months away, let's say, would you say there is every chance that Rishi Sunak could win this for the Conservatives? I think he's got an uphill battle. The brand damage for the Conservatives is quite extreme on almost every policy issue. But there are three pieces of evidence that suggest that this isn't completely done. The first is leader ratings that suggest a much closer election. And remember, the boundaries have changed as well. England has 543 seats instead of 533. We haven't mentioned Scotland, I think. We probably should at this point. So, first of all, the leader rating suggests a much, much tighter election, a hung parliament being much more likely. And then those circumstances, anything can happen in an election. The second is, if you look at voter expectations. So, we did some work three weeks ago, which basically wanted to look at historically, can people forecast the election in the UK accurately? And we found, actually, since 1987, the British public, if you ask them, who do you think is going to win the next election? And you did some modelling, they basically predicted the seat counter every single election except for 1997. This time round, the voter expectations modelling does suggest Labour wins still, but a much, much narrower one. And I guess the third exhibit that makes me give pause for thought is the local election results. So, generally, a government's lead or loss to the opposition is a fairly good reflection of trailing local election results for the previous three to four years. So, generally, a government will do eight points better than the average of its performances across the preceding three or four years. If you roll that forward, currently, local elections imply a Labour leader of around four to eight points, not 27 points, not 25. So, there was a huge disagreement going on here. That's made even more complex by two other things. First of all, it's not clear from the polling firms the direction about whether the Conservatives are doing better or worse with the good news. So, we've had some polls out today that imply Labour up four points, but two days ago, we saw a poll from Delta poll where the Conservatives were 10 points, right? So, we've got a 10 to 27 point spread spread. Because we, the public, haven't decided yet. Yeah, I think there's a lot of noise. I think there's clearly not an election. But people haven't focused in yet. No, but people do know how to answer more simple and intuitive questions on who's doing well on the economy, who should be the best Prime Minister, how someone doing as their leader. Fascinating. Just do mention Scotland, because we haven't done that. Scotland feels like it's all to

play for now, because the SNP very possibly weakened with the departure of Nicola Sturgeon. Labour seeing that surreal entry into a whole group of seats they never thought were in play.

Yeah, so we're releasing a Scottish poll tomorrow with a whole load of results that are super interesting. But I'll pick out some highlights there. First of all, the SNP are down. They're down below 40%, which they haven't been since the 2017 election. The Labour Party are now touching 30%, and the Scottish Conservatives are actually around 20%. And the critical thing here is that the aggregate unionist vote, if you can think about it like that, which is Labour, Lib Dems and Conservatives, is substantially higher than it has been for a couple of years. There are no votes, so no to an independent Scotland is higher than it has been for a couple of years. The fundamentals don't look great for the SNP. And actually, if you go under the bonnet, how the Scottish public view the two key contenders is actually pretty poor and a huge gap to Nicola Sturgeon.

I suppose the question then becomes, and that is not a polling question, it's a tactical voting question, which is what do people do if they're in a constituency where the SNP might be in the lead and Labour are on 30 and the Tories are on 20 or vice versa. Does the unionist vote consolidate in constituents? If they don't, then the SNP at 40 points would still do very, very well.

Yeah. So the key question there is, does tactical voting to promote the union, is that a bigger force than tactical voting to reject the Conservative government, if that's what people are thinking? In general, in Scotland, the division on the independence lines is much stronger. There is very, very strong evidence of unionist and nationalist tactical voting for the past two or three elections, whether that's Holyrood or Westminster. I mean, the thing to really, really know in Scotland is, yes, Scottish Labour up a lot. It's also really noticeable quite how little the Scottish Conservative vote has fallen. It's still at around 18 to 20 points, which is higher than it was in 2015, 2010, 2005, 1997. It's still at a level that's closer to 1992.

Fascinating.

Yeah, it's really good to hear all this stuff. James, thank you.

Have you enjoyed this because you're going to come back, you know? We're going to get you back. Can we get a guarantee?

Don't threaten him. It's not a fact. Go and have some nice lunch.

And so, of course, there is no read across between general elections and local councils, but it will be the first time we can directly compare, if you like, Conservatives under Theresa May of 2019 with Conservatives under Rishi Sunak in 2023. And that will be, I think, quite a good indication.

Coming up next, we're going to be crossing the channel to France, where there is virtually a general strike going on. And Lewis Goodall, fearlessly, is knee-deep in garbage.

This is the news agents.

Or welcome back, or indeed bienvenue, as I feel Alan Partridge would say at this bit. Lewis has gone off to Paris and, helpfully, soaps and I were offering him little friendly tips about which museums to visit in the Marais until we realised that he was actually... The Castle Museum is a must.

It's a must. But Lewis is, in fact, standing surrounded by about a hundred riot police

at the moment, bags of garbage.

I think more like 500.

500. Go on, tell us what it feels like.

Well, I mean, it's extraordinary. I mean, I've covered quite a lot of protest in the past. I don't think I've ever seen as many armed police as I'm seeing right now. It's not a bad day to commit a crime on the outskirts of Paris, is what I would say, because it feels like half of the French police are here in central Paris.

It's this sort of very weird, slightly surreal kind of atmosphere, because we are flanked not just by police, not just by protesters, with huge banners, as far as the eye can see, of Emmanuel Macron being decked up as Louis XVI, talking about taking away retirement, not to retirement at 64, but, as I say, flanked on the other side by hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of armed police.

It's pretty calm, pretty peaceful at the moment, but the expectation just generally is, as people have said to me multiple times already, you just wait for tonight, because there basically are at the moment two types of protests. There is the trade union-led protest at the beginning of the day, and that is gradually replaced. This is the expectation for the evening by the Gilles Jeun type protest, younger people, what Macron calls illegitimate protests coming out in the evening, which have been much more violent.

Of course, it's just worth underlining to people, you know, listening in the UK, that this is about the increase of the retirement age from 62 to 64, which we would dream of in this country.

Yeah, it is. But, you know, as you know well, John, this is something that cuts to the absolute core of French identity, and it has been infused even more over the last week, because although this was very unpopular before, Macron's decision to essentially force it through using a pretty arcane constitutional measure, a perfectly legitimate constitutionally it's been used before, but to force it through without a vote in parliament, has taken this to the next level, to another level of intensity, because now all you are really hearing is talk of illegitimacy, of democracy being undermined, and you're hearing it from both sides, because everywhere you look at the moment, you can see posters and placards talking about the idea of Macron now being an illegitimate president, and Macron is turning around to all of these protesters and saying the same thing. He's even compared them in an interview yesterday to January the 6th, and the protesters have tried to essentially amount a coup. That is how charged it is getting here. Look, Paris has been here before, France has been here before, other presidents have been here before in terms of pension reform and seeing people take to the streets. It is an arena of French politics, a street in a way we just don't recognise or have in the UK, but that decision by Macron to rally it through has taken it to a different level, and who is benefiting from that, and this is something we'll be exploring in the show tomorrow. But of course, the woman who is perennially waiting in the wings in French politics, but Marine Le Pen and her National Rally Party, who are reinventing her themselves as the kind of daugherty defender of French values and the French social contract. And just to set the scene, Lewis, there's like bin bags from 17 days of garbage protest strike, right?

Yeah, Paris stinks. Not to put too fine a point on it, it stinks, and that is because yeah, there have been more than two weeks of a lack of bin collection for separate reasons

but connected, and they are describing this today, and there are little signs that the Post is all over Paris, talking about Grève Générale, a general strike in a way that even in Britain we really have not seen for a very long time. And you know, the fact is I mean, if you talk to people here, they just say, this is Macron or it's the people, that is how they see it. Macron isn't showing any signs of breaking or giving any ground, and neither are they. And so the expectation is, although this is going to be the biggest day yet, that there will be more to come.

And just with your kind of knowledge of the way politics works, how precarious do you think Macron's position is? Because this has become an arm wrestle between the power of the streets and the power of the National Assembly, if you like.

Well, his position in terms of his presidency is not precarious in the sense he's got another four years to go. There's plenty left of the Macron show to run. How far he's able to get anything else done after this now is another question entirely. He doesn't have a majority in parliament. He's basically spurned. The different parties who no longer want to work with him, even his sort of natural allies, don't really want to work with him. So his ability to get anything further done after this is, you know, up in the air and difficult. But you know, in a way, Macron's in a funny position. The French don't usually have lame duck presidents, right? Normally they just kick them out after one. Macron cannot run again. That's a new constitutional innovation that they've had. So he's in this unique position. He sees it as, I've got this unique opportunity to conduct reforms, to be that gallist factor that they all dream of being. But the resistance that he is, the encountering that he's generating is completely fierce. But there's no doubt now, this is a battle of wills and ultimately there can only be one victim.

It's so interesting. I remember one of the earliest battles that Macron picked was about speed limits on country roads. And you would have thought there was no way that could turn into, you know, a cultural issue or a sort of a cultural war issue. And yet even that became a sign of you don't understand how France works. You don't understand country people. You don't understand how reliant we are on our cars and the speeds at which we need to go. And Macron backed down. This is something he picked, you know, back in 2020 and he had to back down on it. So it's a real insight into some of these battles, whether it's pensions, whether it's sort of country roads, they're very specific to France, but they could be quite debilitating to whoever's in charge.

Lewis was saying about the kind of the cultural difference between France and the UK. And France, obviously, a much greater history of revolution. You know, they're onto their Fifth Republic at the moment. But when I was based in Paris, one of the things that was said to me is the thing you have to understand is that laws are made on the streets, not in the parliament. You know, une seule solution, la manifestation, protest is the only way you get anything done in France. And these people who are turning out on the streets today believe that.

You have a giant bit. As I say, it's taken on that slightly different level, which is that now they're saying it is between the streets, and not even parliament, but the Elysees Palace itself. And there are people who are talking about actually this is a moment not only to reform the Fifth Republic, but to have that Sixth Republic. You know, that is the kind of pitch that people are now talking about, the intensity that this has gone to.

So it is a fascinating moment for France, and one that is obviously being watched pretty nervously across the different capitals of Europe, precisely because there is this feeling that this could be that final moment that someone like Marine Le Pen needs to make that final jump as she's been advancing in every presidential election to the next.

It fits though, doesn't it? Because Macron, you know, Macron is, he's always going to be portrayed as the posh boy, even though he's a centrist. He's a sort of well dressed, well fitted out. You know, he looks sort of side by side with Rishi Sunak as the sort of the Gucci president. I guess that's why when Lewis says the Elysees Palace, he means the protesters picking a fight with Macron, who embodies this, even as a centrist, this very soire, very cultured, very well dressed, slightly elitist lead.

When I was in Paris, it was Shirak, the president, he tried reform, failed. Sarkozy took over, he tried reform, failed. Macron is still determined to push through reforms, and he has had some success already, but he's made himself incredibly unpopular in the process. And, you know, as Lewis was saying, this is the people versus the Elysees Palace.

We're going to end with your favourite French idiom, which is what, Sable?

Je m'appelle John. Lewis.

J'ai 11 ans, je bite à Birmingham, as we used to say. Love that. Plim de ma tante.

Absolument. J'ajoute et donne le jardin.

Well, I'll bring you back a couple of baguettes for next week. Please, noe somme's off now.

OK. Ademois. Au revoir.

Au revoir.

A bientôt.

Yeah, that was like, we kept it deliberately low caliber for Lewis. Should I tell you my favourite French idiom? Go.

Écraser le champignon, which means to put your foot down on the accelerator, because the accelerator button is like a little mushroom, and it means to go for speed. Yours?

Oh, I love the franglais, literal translations of je repose ma valise. I rest my case.

Cop out.

Au revoir.

Bye.

This has been a global player, original podcast and a Persephonica production.