

[Transcript] The News Agents / Partygate: Boris Johnson breaks the rules (again)

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

If the news agents were to release an album with their Christmas greatest hits, that track would have to be on it. Boris Johnson in the Commons, no rules were broken. The reason we're playing it again today? Well, fresh allegations have emerged.

That's right. In the last 24 hours, the Prime Minister has been referred to the police by the Cabinet Office over brand new claims he broke more lockdown rules after his own ministerial diary revealed where he was and who was with him during lockdown. We're going to investigate what that means because his allies say it's just a witch hunt. Welcome to the news agents.

The news agents. It's John. It's Emily. And it's Lewis. And we are in news agents HQ. And in a moment, we're going to be hearing from Gitto Harry, who was Boris Johnson's last director of communications, wasn't there for all the parties during party gate, but was left to clear up metaphorically the mess, some of the glasses, the plates afterwards. News agents HQ, we should add, is our grace and favour residence, which comes free with the job. Is it? Is this all we get? This is what we get. We get to hang out here. So Boris Johnson last night learns that there is a fresh police investigation, kind of number two, number three, into what happened when he was Prime Minister. And there's a sort of element of bizarre karma about it as well, because the taxpayer was paying for his lawyers at a cost of 200 grand when he's earned millions. And they turn up all sorts of entries in his diary, which they go, huh? Well, that's a bit odd, because that was during lockdown and there were events going on. They pass it to the cabinet office, cabinet office, pass it to the police. And now there is an investigation. It was described yesterday by Gary Gibbon as sort of hot bricks moment where nobody quite wanted to have their fingers on it. So there are new claims that he broke lockdown rules after his ministerial diary revealed these visits by friends to checkers, which is the grace and favour country house in Buckinghamshire during the pandemic. And it sounds as if the lawyers suddenly found this stuff almost accidentally when they were trying to help him in the inquiry. And they threw it onto the civil servants game. We don't want to have our fingerprints on it. It's for you lot.

The civil servants get it and think, oh, my God, we don't want to have our political fingerprints over this, threw it onto the police, two police forces. One was Thames Valley in Buckinghamshire, and one was the Downing Street police, which is now the Met police. So they basically have to decide what happens now. It does raise questions, of course, of how the police that are looking into this had turned a blind eye to anyone who was coming and going, who had to be signed into the houses through security measures if, in fact, they did turn up during lockdown.

Yeah. And inevitably, this sort of old scandal is fusing with the kind of tectonic plates and the factional intrigue and war that is just going on beneath the surface all the time that we talk about all the time within the Conservative Party, because already the allies of Boris Johnson, so-called friends of Boris Johnson, people on the right of the Conservative Party, have responded to this by doing two things. One is to once again, accuse the so-called blob, which isn't like a sort of 1950s film, but in fact, basically the answer that Conservative MPs, part of the Conservative Party, constantly gives as to why things have gone wrong. Accusing the blobs is basically the sort of civil service machine of trying to damage the Prime Minister or the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The thing about that is, what we've got to remember here is that imagine the situation, I mean, it's just nonsense. Imagine what people would have said about the civil service, the so-called blob, if they hadn't done this, if they hadn't handed it over, and it later emerged that these documents, these diaries did show, and we don't know for sure if they do or not yet,

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but did show that there was extra all-breaking going on. They would have been accused of acting politically, of suppressing the story. And this blob thing, which they constantly keep coming out with, it really is pathetic. I mean, look, did the blob make these parties happen that we know happened in Downing Street? No. Did the blob come up with Liz Truss's economic policies? No, they absolutely didn't. Did the blob make Suella Braverman speed? No, they didn't. You know, it's just... It's a blob lie in Parliament, not actually in the middle of the country.

But this is what I saw, month in, month out, during the Trump years, where there would be something egregious would happen in the White House. So it was clearly a breach of the rules or conventions of what was normal presidential behavior. It would get picked up, and the accusation would come from the Trump acolytes, this is the deep state, not the blob, but the swamp, and this is not a hit job, but it's a witch hunt. And it's just the same playbook being played out now. But I give you breaking news on the news agents. Well, by the time you listen to this, of course, it will be broken news, but Boris Johnson is severing ties with the government appointed lawyers representing him at the COVID inquiry after he was referred to police. He has lost confidence in the cabinet office. He's going to appoint his own legal team, who will be funded by the taxpayer. What? Right. So we're still paying. Long story short, we're still paying for Boris Johnson. This is the point, isn't it, that all you do when something like this is levelled at you, if you're Boris Johnson, is call it a witch hunt. And then you say you're going to sue the lawyers involved. And then you are basically trying to silence anyone who thinks that they should be bringing wrongdoing to the surface and make it publicly known. I mean, as John says, it's sort of textbook stuff. I do think there is a question around Suella, because you mentioned Suella Braverman. And she, in the face of a lot of persistent pressure on her to go over her response to the speeding fine, has now written this very detailed letter in which she sets out how difficult she found it to make the choice between taking the points or doing the course, the speed awareness course. And what she sets out is that she did ask advice from civil servants. They did push back. And at that point, she was directed to her special advisors, and she couldn't find a way of doing the course herself. And has now said, as a result of all those investigations, she chose to take the points and the fine rather than do the course. I do think in the interest of sort of clarity, it is worth considering that this is a sort of fairly neutral and basic response. I mean, she looks a bit chaotic, to be honest, you know, just do the thing, just get on with it. And don't fundamentally lie to a reporter who asks if you have been found to have been speeding. But I wonder whether there was more to this story and whether it tells us more about the people inside Cabinet who would like to see the back of her.

I thought since the weekend when this story broke, to be honest, as sort of political scandals go, I mean, yeah, it would be inappropriate if she was trying to get special treatment. I actually think that that letter does set out a pretty credible case of what she may have been trying to do. And she apologizes if it sort of got close to the code and so on. There's been a bit of a tendency recently, I think, in the media discussion, to think every time there is even like a quite minor breaking of the code, oh, that must be resignation. No, it doesn't. That's up to the Prime Minister. There could be very minor things that really don't warrant

resignation. And yes, she's had many other things go on. So it is part of a wider picture. But I think, as John mentioned on the show earlier in the week, the bigger problem is around special advisors potentially lying to journalists about the events. And that is a problem because that

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is a breach of the special advisor code. But also, I think it's representative of how, frankly, lying and misleading has become more common within the machinery of government, possibly going back

really to the Boris Johnson era and how this has just become a sort of natural reflex. And that is a really big problem. I mean, going back to the Boris Johnson thing, I mean, look, at the time of the party gate stuff, I had heard, and Emily, you know, Newsnight at the time, we were sort of working on this a little bit, there were whispers that there perhaps were other events, including potentially at checkers that were potentially in breach of the code that had been redacted from the Sue Gray report. Yeah. And that we were sort of trying to stand up. And I remember asking Downing

Street about the time and they fly out denied and I deny deny deny. Now we know that those denials were not worth a text or WhatsApp messages that they were digitally printed on because they have since admitted that they misled and lied to journalists at the time. And that is just a really toxic culture and a real toxic development in our politics that we as journalists can no longer necessarily rely on what special advisors and political operatives tell us.

Yeah. And that is a very important point. You can obfuscate. You can say, I don't know. You can be economical, isn't there? There is a line. Just don't tell a bare face lie. You can say, I'm unaware. I haven't been told. I'm not been briefed. Why this is a personal matter. Why would it even cross my desk? No idea. But to say no, she was not done for speeding. When she had been done for speeding, that's just untrue. There's a Peter O'Born piece that has come out recently which talks about the legacy that Boris Johnson left as being one of lying in public office and making it okay to lie in public office. And his argument is that basically what he did was he got rid of all the framework, all the rules, all the bits that made it unethical. And so now, if people do it, they just think they're following a precedent that's been set.

So let me ask this question then. And this is a defense that friends of Boris are going to put.

Hasn't everybody made up their mind on this? Haven't we had enough of this?

Don't we know that things happened that shouldn't have happened and that the punishment has been meted out? And can't we just move on from all of this? And we heard it a bit from Matt Hancock last week when he came on the podcast over COVID. And that they're going to try and do

the same again of, oh, for goodness sake, this is just turning into persecution. And actually might lead to sympathy going to Boris Johnson of, oh my God, they're at it again. I don't think it's down to the defendant in the dock to decide whether we all move on. If I was being done for murder, I wouldn't stand there and go, look, do you know what? It was sad, but they're dead. It was five years ago. Look at Ukraine, look at other things going on in the world. I kind of assume that at some point punishment would be meted out. And I'm sorry, that's a really horrible example to use. I don't mean to be flippant about Ukraine. I don't mean to be flippant about murder. But I don't think it's for the people at the center of these scandals to decide when the rest of us move on.

Completely. And we should remember that even now, there are people still going through the courts found to have been in breach of lockdown restrictions and law and regulations and receiving huge fines for it, fines that often that they are simply unable to pay. And the other thing is, is this, this is not purely retrospective. Let us not forget, the privileges committee inquiry is still yet to report. That will determine Boris Johnson's political future. It will determine whether he might end up in a by-election for a seat that he might not even end up defending.

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And this potentially, this latest revelations could delay that inquiry because it is germane to what they're looking into. And could be helpful. We should be honest. It could be helpful to those who would like to make sure that he doesn't ever return to public political life. Because they're examining whether or not he misled the House of Commons. And if there is more evidence from these diaries that potentially that he did that, then it is germane to our future politics.

I think the other thing is this, there has been so much revisionism about Boris Johnson's fall from politics, from the Premiership. You know, there are so many of his allies that say things like, you know, this was all the sort of witch hunt, this was again the blob, this was Sunak and whatever. This is a reminder of the real reason why he went, which was that conservative MPs, even people who are quite friendly to him, who in the past thought that he was a political asset, could see that this story was not over, that it represented an ongoing political instability and volatility to the Conservative Party. And that view has been vindicated by the reemergence of this story. And it is a story that is not even over. We'll be back in a moment with Gitto Harry, Boris Johnson's last director of communications. This is The News Agents.

Welcome back. And we are now joined by Boris Johnson's last director of communications, former journalist, former BBC colleague of mine, Gitto Harry. Welcome to you. And with a rather successful podcast that you've got going on at the moment, which we might talk about in just a moment. So we've got a fresh police investigation. Lawyers acting for Boris Johnson don't like what they see in his diaries. They refer it to the Cabinet Office. Cabinet Office refer it to the police. Isn't that the way things should be done? I struggle, John, to think that anyone in the UK at the moment needs to know more about Partygate to make up their mind about how they feel about it and what the punishment should be for it. There's already been ample punishment of the Prime Minister's involvement, the former Prime Minister, as it is, that says it all.

So in whose interest is it to rake over old ground yet again, trying to open up a new front, spending precious resource, money, attention, and keep us all talking about Partygate ever more? It's almost exactly a year since Sue Gray brought out a report that was meant to bring closure on this. We're still waiting for the Privilegeist Committee. This is going to delay it even further.

And I just think we're all bored. When you say in whose interest, I mean, there's a phrase we use in journalism, which is, could we bone it? Do you think somebody is profiting from doing this now? Is that what you're suggesting? No, I think some people have just got addicted to Partygate and they will never, their appetite to express their rage over it and try to sort of

extract revenge upon Boris Johnson in particular, will never be satiated. Surely at this point in time, we've had enough inquiries, the police inquiry, Sue Gray inquiry, privileges inquiry.

We all know, you know, basically what went on and we've decided, surely most of us, whether we agreed with it, actually disagreed with it, thought it was distasteful or thought it was outrageous. And Boris was largely brought down by Partygate. So how many times does he have to be killed before we say, that's it, we're done? Wow. I mean, that sounds like the Matt Hancock defense, which is, I'm finished talking about this. And if the public feel outraged, and if the public are recalling that time when they didn't go to their parents' funerals, or they couldn't grieve, or they couldn't see newborn grandchildren, or they couldn't do the things that they so desperately wanted to do, we should just all get over it, because Boris Johnson has been through this. No, I'm not saying that people should feel differently about the people they lost. You know, I lost someone very close to me during COVID, that's never going to go away. But what I'm questioning is whether precious civil service resource, precious police resource, precious

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public money, which is so tight, should be spent exploring this even further. But if you find fresh wrongdoing, and stuff that you didn't know before, isn't it almost negligent? Not to say, I've seen something here which just cannot be reconciled with what the rules or the laws were at the time. I mean, I think if I, you know, retrospectively handed over something to a lawyer, and they saw there was evidence of criminality there, I think they would feel duty bound to act on it. I see where you're getting at. I think if the bar is set pretty high for that, then fair enough. But I think it would have to be pretty outrageous for it to not to be one of those things that's already been considered to a large extent, and accounted for in terms of the allocation of blame, and in terms of punishment. And I would also question, John, do you process here a civil servant without reference to any sort of democratically accountable person like a minister? One problem for me, second problem, doesn't, before it all goes public, before the damage is done, before the police engage, doesn't at least send a note to the former prime minister who has an office to say, what would you say to this? Because maybe it could be cleared up in no time at all. If it can't, then maybe it does warrant investigation, but the bar should be pretty high for that. But Alex Chalk, the justice secretary, has come out and said those civil servants acted properly. Because they're following the civil service code. And if that's, you know, I sort of understand that. I just think, you know, it's not in anyone's interest that the police put down other things that they're working on to pursue this even further. Isn't the wider picture, Gito, that after the chaos of the Johnson years, and the rule breaking, and the insouciance and the carelessness with which he seemed to deal with things that needed due process, people are really keen to be seen to be doing the right thing. If lawyers find something, they hand them over to civil servants. If civil servants find things, they hand them over to the police. We want to live in a laws rules based society, don't we? Yes, but not something that's so over processed that, for instance, this week, today, actually, Suella Braverman has just been cleared of wrongdoing. Her fault, apparently, according to people who put this in the public domain, it could have been cleared up very easily, was just to say, oh, I've got a speeding type. Can I, can I do a course at some time where it doesn't drag me away from, you know, anti-terrorism and immigration and all that? Is there a course that I can do on my own at some point, merely asking the question prompted outrage and some leaky people in her department put that in the public domain? I don't think that's right, either. I think that's a really good point, and I want to come on to this, Suella, I think, but can you see how that culture grows? It grows out of having people in power who are consistent liars to the public. And the truth was that Boris Johnson misled not just parliament, but the whole, the whole country. Now, we don't know whether he deliberately did it and we're going to find out when the inquiry reports next month, but he continually misled this country. You went to work for a man, you knew was lying and misleading and had lied to the Queen about the prerogation of parliament and had lied about party gay and had thrown Allegra Stratton under the bus. I mean, there's always buses with Boris. You knew that was the culture in which you were working and people can feel rightly furious that this stuff is still going on and still coming out. It won't surprise you that I see it slightly differently. And I think at the last election, despite you wouldn't have said it at the time because you're in a different organization, but despite people making that accusation about him, 14 million people chose to vote for him. A lot of them people who would have never in a million years contemplated voting for anyone else. If you don't think that the personal stamp of Boris Johnson as the pitch of

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the last election was greater than the conservative brand, I don't know what is.

And where do you put Jeremy Corbyn in that equation exactly?

Well, he was part of the pitch for Labour as well. And people, a lot of us felt disenfranchised for many years because the choices we're offered at the general election were bad ones, but I don't think the liar thing is, you know, okay, choices offered at the general election were bad ones. You've just said that. No, they were polarised. So, and in previous general elections, I did not feel comfortable and neither did anyone else in previous ones. But with Boris Johnson, I think, to counter the liar thing, what people saw was what they got. Nobody voted for him and then thought, God, I didn't realize that he cheated on his wife. I didn't realize he was going to do Brexit. What they voted... No, they thought that he was going to get Brexit done. And he did. And we're still here three years later waiting for it to work.

We're all agreed about Brexit. It's a disaster. I thought it was going to be a disaster. I've never changed my view on that. But he said he would do it. And despite the global pandemic, where any other politician was said, do you know what? Let's drop this Brexit thing. It's really not the time or the place. He did it. He went into work. He went into Brexit to help his career. I mean, you know that. Well, that's raking my view. And there's a whole chapter in unprecedented. Not the next one, but another one. There's a whole chapter on Brexit, where I address that. But to give you the headline, it's essentially,

I think Boris would have been Prime Minister anyway. And if he hadn't done Brexit, he'd have gone in there as a less divisive figure and he'd probably still been power now. Brexit was massively divisive. And Brexit was the start of this allegation that he's a liar. Because in all the time I've known him, which is decades, and all the time I worked for him at City Hall, nobody thought he was a liar then. He got fired by Michael Howard for lying.

For not spilling it out of a fair. And he made up a quote. I'm sure he's not the only person to know that. I'm not going to defend that. But in a career as public and as high-profile and political as he is, they're two quite minor charges. As Mayor of London, he got re-elected in a left-leaning city, mid-recession, mid-term of a Conservative government, after Romney Chambl's government. Because in the first term, he delivered almost everything that he promised the people of London that he would do. I'm not many politicians do that. I don't doubt that he's just serious, but I don't doubt that he's got great talent as a politician. But he's also straight, Gita, can I just tell you something? The first time I interviewed Donald Trump, he lied to me about having the biggest ballroom in New York. And I let it go, because it was like, who the fuck cares? It's a ballroom. And in 2020, he lied about winning an election he lost, and it created a riot and the attempt to overturn democracy.

So there are lies and lies. There are lies that don't really matter.

No, there are consistent patterns of behaviour. And perhaps you should have seen that.

We're not going to agree on this.

You went to work for a man you knew was a consistent liar. And when you say Brexit was divisive, it was worse than that. It was destructive. It has destroyed so much of the fabric of this country.

We're all going to agree on Brexit, so we can park that.

Okay, I tell you what, I want to ask you about something else, which is, and you know, Emily mentions Donald Trump. I feel there is something so Trumpian. Last night, when this news broke, a spokesman for Boris Johnson said, this is an establishment hit job.

Donald Trump, whenever he got in trouble and was found to have done something wrong,

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the line went up, this is the swamp or the deep state, and it's the witch hunt.

We've got an independent civil service here. Isn't it really corrosive slash dangerous to be talking in those terms?

Let me just raise something that I think a lot of people out there will think is odd, that a career civil servant who last year was meant to carry out a quasi-judicial objective report with massive consequences for the sitting prime minister, soon afterwards, went to work as chief of staff for the leader of the opposition. Now, if you look at that, do you think that's a mad conspiracy to say that there are civil servants who are opposed to the government of the day, or do you say that is pretty strong evidence that the heart of the establishment, there are people who are politically motivated, and do you actually think that you get a job with Keir Starmer, because you bump into him in the street and say, can you come work for him?

You think the two-gray support was tarnished. Do you think she didn't do the right report because she liked Keir Starmer more? Is that what you're actually saying?

I actually think that she was motivated to be destructive about Boris Johnson, and my problem with Partygate, which is in this episode,

But everyone at the time calls her impeachable, right?

Most people don't know her, so they've no idea whether they're impeachable or not.

Let me just tell you that I know.

We just know what she's in next.

I know senior civil servants at the Treasury who felt they were being bullied by Sue Gray to do Boris Johnson's bidding when he was at number 10, and that she was far too willing to accommodate Boris Johnson and do stuff that was kind of on the wrong side of the line in terms of public appointments because she was so keen. I think she did her job when you say that, and also just to say about Sue Gray, once she hasn't yet been approved to be able to take up the job. That's about the process. It's not her motive.

Hang on, hang on, hang on. We know what she wants to do.

You are assigned a motive to her, but she does have a motive now to get Keir Starmer, if she's not going to be his chief of staff, unless she's going to help do everything within a pact to bring him to number 10.

If I agree just about what you've just said, is you have gone from the specific

Sue Gray to make a general point about the civil servant.

You worked with me at the BBC and went to work for Boris Johnson. I didn't doubt the fact that when you were at the BBC, you were a great impartial journalist, and then you'd go and work for Boris Johnson. Other people have done it. Ed Llewellyn was in the Foreign Office, and he goes to be David Cameron's chief of staff. Go back further. Jonathan Powell was working in the Foreign Office. He goes to work for Tony Blair. It's always happened, and people can do their jobs and still go on to do something that may be party political.

Robbie Gibb was my deputy editor at Newsnight. He was a fantastic deputy editor.

So I'll tell you what my problem is, is the conclusions of the Sue Gray report is not that a whole load of individuals, adults, in positions of authority, grown-ups are super intelligent, all of whom, you know, the ones that are relevant here, got pin-pointed by the police for specific breaches. None of that was reflected in the report. Instead, it's all pinned on an abstract noun, leadership, as if leadership can actually do all these bad things, as if

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leadership is lurking around at two o'clock in the morning, being sick on the carpet, or coupling on the sofa, or being rude to staff. That was the conclusion of the Sue Gray report, that it was a failure of leadership number 10, not the actions of Tom, Dick, Harry, Sue, and all the rest of them. These were grown-up individuals with moral agency, which was completely wiped off, so that it was all pinned on one man, as if he was responsible for the behaviour of 25-year-olds, who have moral agency, who have capacity to make decisions themselves. Somehow, it's all Boris' fault. He wasn't even there on the most offensive vision. So, to get there, you have to presume he knew nothing about the culture over which he was presiding. I just think there's so much more.

No, just answer that one. He knew nothing about the culture over which he was presiding. I'll answer that part of that. He knew, he had no idea that people had been rude to staff, for instance. One very specific thing that came out, well, we can go through a number of things. Did he know parties were going on every single week at Downing Street?

He did not know that people were at it at two o'clock in the morning with carry-on machines. Did he know parties were going on in Downing Street?

So, then, you pretend that these things are simpler than they are.

Yes, or no. There's a difference between the three of us now opening a glass of wine, which doesn't stop this being a work event, much as I like being in your company. I'm here to be interviewed,

and if you gave me a glass of wine, it doesn't turn it into a party.

This is not a party, and that was not what we were talking about in party case.

And it takes a lot to get from that to people at two o'clock in the morning with a carry-on machine, incidentally bought by Sue Gray. But Gidget, you've raised the...

Not that I faulted for that. That shows that she was a...

Slip that one in. A lot of fun.

Gidget, Gidget, you've raised the question of leadership.

Let me put a slightly different question to the one that Emily's just put, which is, could you envisage that sort of thing happening if Theresa May had been Prime Minister or Gordon Brown?

Don't know about those two, but I'll tell you when Boris went round to apologize that some of the people who confided in him about being on the receiving end of rude people traced it back to David Cameron's days when they said there was some entitled trust afferents would be the, you know, abusive term for them, came into number 10, thinking it was an extension of the Durham campus or wherever, and behaved in a way that they found surprising and distasteful for the heart of government.

It wasn't a breach of law or regulations then, because there was, you know, wasn't a pandemic, but it's behavior that they didn't like.

Gidget, can I take you back? And I'm not ignoring the rudeness to the staff.

But I'm going to grant you, for one moment, that Boris Johnson thought there were parties between the three of us and a glass of shitwine, and not that they were going on until two in the morning. When he was made aware that he was wrong, he had a choice. He could have said, that sounds terrible. Let me look into that. Or he could stand in the commons and frankly deny it outright and choose to throw Allegra Stratton under the bus for something he said didn't even happen. Why wasn't that his first port of call to go and check if he had been wrong? Again, we're going to agree on this, actually, because I wasn't there.

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You sound really sad about that.

No, I love agreeing with you, but it makes it less entertaining maybe for the listener.

But I wasn't there when the so-called parties happened, and I wasn't there when the fatal decision was taken to deny outright. And as I explore in the next episode, which is all about Partygate, the next episode of Unprecedented, the cover-up traditionally is always worse than crying. And had he come clean then, had he known and had he gone to the commons and said, look, let me be straight with you.

So that's why, to take you back to the very beginning,

why people are still angry and still want to know if there were more parties and more broken rules is because of that cover-up. So if you ask why we're still asking about something that you find quite boring, I guess that's why. The point is that if you elect somebody to be the Prime Minister of your country, you hope that they can do the day job. You hope that they can actually see to people's daily concerns and help improve the country.

Get them through a pandemic, create the conditions where we are the first people in the world to get a vaccine, get that vaccine rolled out and into people's arms.

Gito, I hear all you're saying, and I know you're going to address this.

That's the day job.

I understand you're going to address this in the podcast. But psychologically,

I feel like you feel in some ways. I can't bear to remind myself of how bloody awful the years of COVID were. They were terrible. You were locked down.

The reaction from so many people, and I think this is where there is a lack of emotional intelligence from the people who are in the trench fighting for Boris and who want to defend him and say, look at all the great things he did. The visceral anger that there is when they are reminded of the privations they went through psychologically, emotionally, and what was going on at number 10 Downing Street. I think that politically, if I may say so, you underestimate that anger that boils in 30 seconds when a reminded of it.

I totally get it. I understand it. I could see from the outside where I was when this broke, out toxic, it was. But I now know things about that whole thing that put it in perspective.

So the perception does not match in many ways the reality.

I promise you we'd get back to Suella Braverman. Is there something you want to say about that?

Do you think that she is being set up? Do you think there are people in cabinet who are out to get her? But do you know what? I think it comes back to a lot of what we've been discussing.

What I find frustrating about politics at the moment and about debate in the UK is that it's polarized. But the idea somehow that Suella should be brought down because she actually asked a perfectly reasonable question as an extremely busy, high-powered woman whose job is very, very important for all of us. The idea that she should be brought down because of that is ludicrous. If you object to what she's doing on immigration, which I don't know if Keir Starmer does, then fight her on that turf. Play the ball, not the woman.

And you've got unprecedented out every Thursday. So this is on party gate tomorrow. So I will give some of the color, some of the perspective, share my frustrations, which overlap with yours on many fronts about why this thing ended up consuming so much energy, so much resource, and why it eventually brought down somebody that two years previously won one of the most successful elections. Any juicy bits? Any good quotes that come out?

There are. And there's a very, very jolly story about how I had to calm Boris down on the eve of

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publication of Sue Gray's report, which is worth listening. It was really quite bonkers. Okay, you've tempted us. Gitto, thank you very much indeed. And unprecedented, available on Global Playup from Thursday. And in a where worlds collide special, having talked about Boris Johnson, we're now going to be talking about Donald Trump and talking about the man who wants to take on Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential election, Rhonda Santis, the Florida Governor.

This is The Newsagents.

Welcome back. Tonight, around 11 o'clock UK time, which is six o'clock in the US, we will be presented with the latest Republican presidential hopeful in the form of Ron DeSantis. And he will be speaking live on Twitter Spaces to Elon Musk, and that will be hosted by one of his donors, a kind of friend, David Sacks. Now, Ron DeSantis, who is nicknamed by Donald Trump, Ron DeSancdemonius, is nearly half Trump's age. That is probably one of his top selling points. He is 44, Trump is 78. And he gets to offer voters two terms compared to Trump's one term, because he's only allowed to serve one more term. And the question is, does Ron DeSantis offer up something which is Trump light, Trump extra, Trump zero, Trump without the drama, or just a younger version of Donald Trump? How are Republicans, first of all, gain respond to his launch of the campaign? Well, Donald Trump would have it, that it's none of those things. It's not Trump without the drama, it's Trump without the personality. Listen to this. The problem with Ron DeSancdemonius is that he needs a personality transplant, and those are not yet available. I would say that when it comes to lack of personality, Ron would be in a class with Asa Hutchinson, and that's not good.

And we are joined now by Courtney Supermanion, who is the White House reporter for the LA Times.

And when I was the BBC's North America editor, I worked with Courtney in the BBC Bureau before she went on to so much bigger and better things. So, Courtney, fabulous to see you. Where the hell are we in the Republican race? I think we're at the most exciting part, which is when Ron DeSantis enters the race. And he is really considered the only candidate who actually stands a chance against Trump, right? But we're also at this point where we're starting to see other candidates jump in. We have Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina entering on Monday. We have former vice president, like Pence, just around the corner with a possible announcement. And so this is the point where the field really expands. And I think no one's more excited about that than Donald Trump, because in the end, this all stands to benefit him.

And Ron DeSantis has decided to do it live on Twitter, in Twitter spaces. Just talk us through what that's going to look like. So, he is going to be joined by Elon Musk, a controversial figure in his own right. And it's going to be moderated by David Sacks, who is a tech entrepreneur, who's friends with Musk and DeSantis supporter. This is all a bit, I think, thumbing his nose at Donald Trump, who notoriously was booted from Twitter. He's been reinstated by Musk, but has chosen his own social media platform through social over Twitter. And then an hour later, DeSantis is holding an interview on Fox News with Trig Audi, who is a former congressman, and a former Trump supporter. So, you know, any stumbles, any fumbles on Twitter, he can clean it up on the Fox interview an hour later. Is this Musk won Murdoch Nill, in the sense that he is choosing Twitter as the first place to go, where traditionally, a few years back, you would always go to Fox first? Yeah, I think so. I mean, it's feeding into Elon Musk's quest to sort of cement Twitter as a space for the right. I don't think that you have too many Ron DeSantis supporters

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on Twitter, but it gives him a new platform. And then he can go on Fox and reach the sort of mainstream right wing audience. Anything that Trump does seems to be greeted with a kind of low level, almost silence, or it's a witch hunt, or we don't believe in juries or whatever it is nowadays. From the other Republican candidates, is Ron DeSantis the one to actually stand up to him, do you think? Up until this point, he's really been sort of shadowboxing in his criticism of Trump. And so this sort of sets up the direct confrontation. Trump's campaign has been clamoring for this moment where they can, you know, now directly take on each other. The question is

polling has been waning since November. I mean, I think there was a sense that he would come off his victory in Florida for the gubernatorial race and sort of build momentum and crash land into the presidential race. But in that time, Trump has only doubled his lead on Ron DeSantis in the polling. Courtney, great to have you with us. Thank you very much indeed. Thanks. Bye. So I was listening to Adam Kinzinger, who is former Republican senator on the anti-Trump side of the party, and he was describing Ron DeSantis, who he knows and has worked with. He said, he's not great with crowds. And then he said, and he's not great one on one.

So you're sort of stuck with thinking, who is he great with then, his family, animals, pets?

Because the story we heard about Ron DeSantis was that in an airport lounge,

he puts his airpods in so that he could pretend he's on the phone when somebody approaches him.

Now, I have a lot of sympathy with that personally. It's the kind of thing I would do,

but I'm not standing to be president. Well, that's exclusive breaking news.

On the news, agents, Make List is out of the race. We'll be back tomorrow. Bye. Bye.