

[Transcript] The News Agents / Raab Resigns

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

The Brexit Secretary Dominic Raab has resigned.

This is Seismic News for Theresa May.

My name's Dominic Raab and I'm a Tory.

I don't support the Human Rights Act and I don't believe it in economic and social rights.

Would you describe yourself as a feminist?

No, probably not.

Fairness is what I've been fighting for all my working life.

We live in an age when the actions of competent leaders and good government can and should go a long way to making the world a fairer place.

The stuff about me paddleboarding, nonsense, the sea was actually closed.

So you haven't read the Belfast Agreement in its entirety?

I haven't sat down and gone from, I've used it as a reference tool.

Dominic Raab has been confirmed as the new Justice Secretary, Lord Chancellor and the Deputy Prime Minister.

Dominic Raab has been a big figure in the Conservative governments which have dominated politics in this country for the past 13 years.

At his peak and the country's nadir, he was even acting Prime Minister whilst Boris Johnson lay in an intensive care ward ravaged by Covid.

For the arch-Brexiter, his career is for now at least, perhaps forever, over.

Adam Tolley, the KC and Lawyers report into his behaviour as a Minister has been published.

The findings?

Raab has bullied.

He bullied his own officials in several government departments.

The whispers over his behaviour have been echoing around the halls and corridors of Westminster for years.

They are now broadcast for all to hear.

On today's episode, why Raab got to this point?

What the enquiry has said?

What he's said?

Why he's not going down without a fight?

And what it says about a man with whom he was so close?

His ally?

His patron?

Rishi Sunak.

It's Lewis here.

Welcome to the newsagents.

The newsagents.

I am confident that I have behaved professionally throughout.

Dominic Raab insisted he had never bullied or intimidated anyone.

Initially, there were no formal complaints, just whispers.

But when formal complaints were made from within the civil service, a couple at first, and eight all told, an enquiry was established.

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60 interviews were conducted for Tolly's investigation, including 17 hours of talks with Raab himself, investigating allegations going back to 2018.

Now, we don't know much about the individual complainants or much of the detail of what they said to protect their confidentiality.

It's important to say that in the end, six of the eight were not upheld for myriad of reasons.

Tolly didn't necessarily think that the baseline for bullying in those cases had been met.

Raab had perhaps been abrasive rather than abusive.

There was insufficient evidence to conclude one way or the other, or difficulty improving what was in the deputy prime minister's head at the time.

After all, only he can know.

Tolly's report is an interesting thing.

He has a lawyer's ability to lean both ways with his words, dexterously refusing to be too committal about much too categoric too often.

He says that Raab is extremely hardworking, extremely ambitious, and yes, extremely exacting.

He says there's no evidence of Raab swearing.

He would work from seven in the morning till half ten at night.

Tolly accepts that given with many of the allegations, so much time has passed, it was difficult for Raab to recall specific meetings with precision and that it is difficult for him therefore to make full account of himself.

He also says that at no point was it ever directly put to Raab that he was being a bully or that he was accused of being such.

But that is not the whole story.

Tolly also says that at different departments, top civil servants felt compelled to raise Raab's behaviour directly.

Raab disputed that.

And though Tolly is often ambiguous or qualified in his conclusions, about two of the complaints, the two he upheld.

He absolutely isn't.

It involved an abuse or misuse of power in a way that undermines or humiliates.

He introduced an unwarranted, punitive element.

His conduct was experienced as undermining or humiliating by the affected individual, which was inevitable.

He goes on.

He ought to have realised earlier that some individuals would find it difficult to cope with his style and should have adjusted his behaviour accordingly.

And in another department, Raab acted.

In a way which was intimidating.

In the sense of going further than was necessary or appropriate in delivering critical feedback and also insulting.

In the sense of making unconstructive, critical comments about the quality of work done, whether or not as a matter of substance any criticism was justified.

He complained about the absence what he referred to as basic information or the basics and described some work as utterly useless and woeful.

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Soonak received this 48 page report yesterday morning, then there was silence. Soonak doing what Soonak does, methodically, carefully weighing up his options, assessing the pros and cons, the balance of risk of each course, wants a city analyst, always a city analyst.

But sooner or later, the silence had to break and almost 24 hours on, on Friday morning, it did.

Just across to Rob Powell, who's in Downing Street now, because we have some breaking news concerning the fate of Dominic Raab.

Yes, so Dominic Raab in the last few minutes has published his resignation letter. He has resigned.

On Twitter, he's published this two page letter.

It's quite lengthy, I was just trying to quickly go through it.

Raab tweeted that he was going.

Ultimately, he had boxed himself into a corner, saying if any bullying allegations were upheld, he'd resigned.

And two were.

Own goal.

Checkmate.

But he wasn't withdrawing from the chessboard without one last gambit, one last parry.

His resignation letter was indignant.

In setting the threshold for bullying so low, this inquiry has set a dangerous precedent.

It will encourage spurious complaints against ministers and have a chilling effect on those driving change in your own government and ultimately the British people.

Indeed, before the actual report into his conduct was even released, much less any of the public having had the chance to read it, Raab had penned and published a column in the Telegraph entitled, The people of Britain will pay the price for this Kafkaesque saga. The man accused of being, at least on occasion, unable to control his temper was sounding, well, quite angry.

I was subject to trial by media for six months, fuelled by warped and fabricated accounts leaked by anonymous officials, breaching the rules of the inquiry, the civil service code of conduct, or both.

In any other workplace, HR guidance would apply.

In my case, claims should have been put to me in writing straight away, giving me an opportunity to respond.

That this never happened was improper, but also shows senior officials didn't think claims were credible at the time.

He goes on.

This precedent sets the playbook for a small number of officials to target ministers who negotiate robustly on behalf of the country.

If this is now the threshold for bullying in government, it is the people of this country who will pay the price.

And Raab actually isn't alone in thinking this.

His former PPS, a ministerial bag carrier, Joy Morrissey, now a government whip, an MP for Beckinsfield, tweeted this.

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Totally gutted.

In all the time I worked for Dominic Raab as his parliamentary private secretary, he was always professional, courteous and exceptionally hardworking.

We have lost a great justice secretary.

Sadly we now live in a country where the definition of bullying includes telling someone to do their job, where the slightest upset or annoyance is indulged with endless reports and inquiries, where whining, taking offence and narcissistic victimhood have become the defining characteristics of our times, as the uncomplaining and silent majority look on in disbelief.

This is a quite commonly held view on the Tory benches.

There had been something of a quiet campaign going on to support Raab and certainly to argue that due process must be upheld.

There is a sense, a hangover of the Brexit wars, that the organs of the British state are always geared against conservatives and conservatism, a whiff of what the Americans would call the deep state.

And this episode, and the way Raab has framed it, appeals to that paranoia.

Henry Hill is the deputy editor of Conservative Home.

Because there is a body of opinion on the Conservative benches, isn't there, which does think, essentially, that there is a culture of frailty within the civil service, that Raab was simply trying to exact high standards and deliver high standards, and in a sense that he's been a victim of that?

The problem with trying to talk about this is that we don't know the specifics of the individual cases.

And so we always have to caveat any of this discussion, but certainly reading some of the things that were described in the report.

Yes, there is this idea that ultimately, yes, our understanding of what is acceptable behaviour shifts over time, but also that doesn't necessarily validate each of those shifts. And I think that there is a sense in which you're kind of developing a sense of learned helplessness.

If you think that your boss telling you that your work was inadequate, or to pick a recent sort of high profile example in Tory circles, the recent complaint that Alok Sharma called staff who are working from home without warning them first, and this was a complaint level against Alok Sharma, there is a sense that actually you're inculcating a culture of complaint, a culture where what five, 10 years ago would have been seen as direct, but acceptable management is not acceptable.

And that will be causing disquiet amongst conservatives.

And disquiet among other ministers, potentially.

This is what Dominic Raab, unfortunately, titled, I think, his op-ed in The Daily Telegraph by saying your Britain will pay the price.

And obviously his critics have gone and said, ah, well, saying that your pay is definitely not the sign of a bully.

But what he means is that all of this is corrosive to the working relationship and the trust between ministers and civil servants.

Civil servants do a conscientious and excellent job.

It's important to say that, and most ministers will say that.

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Also, most ministers, after 13 years of conservative government, have managed to come and go from office without having lots of complaints leveled against them by civil servants.

So we shouldn't catastrophize the problem.

But it is nonetheless the case that in certain departments, specifically the home office and to a lesser extent justice, there are civil servants, a small minority, perhaps, who are consistently sort of leaking to the press, undermining the secretary of state.

And ultimately, what that means is that ministers will end up more reliant on their political staff.

It will lead to demands for more political staff.

It will lead to more secrecy.

Ministers will be more reluctant to have conversations on the record.

We already see the data, Freedom of Information Act has had a devastating impact on the public and historical record inside government.

So there are big diffuse costs to this kind of development, which aren't necessarily immediately obvious, but will make government worse in the long run.

Others disagree.

They say ultimately.

It hasn't been a problem for hundreds of other conservative ministers for over 13 years.

Sunak acted pretty quickly here.

He's shown a ruthlessness you need as Prime Minister, dispatching his First Minister and foremost Lieutenant quickly.

Had he not, this would have lingered and lingered.

He quarterised the wound.

He's replaced Raab as Deputy Prime Minister with an even older friend, Oliver Doudin, as Justice Secretary with Sunakite Alex Chorke.

The party is quiet, if uneasy.

But the fact remains, he has now lost two senior ministers to bullying allegations.

And a man who is trying to sell himself as the Prime Minister of order and of a fresh start has had a day where reminders of previous Tory scandals, a little frisson of the old chaos, has dominated.

And there are questions about what he knew and when.

Unease about Raab, as I say, has been well known in Westminster and Whitehall for some time.

Whenever Sunak has been asked about what he knew, he's stuck to one line, religiously. Someone who has been there in the heart of moments when decisions like this have had to be made is Sir Craig Oliver, who was head of communications for David Cameron.

I think the first thing to talk about, about what it feels like being inside number ten is, of course, there's the media pressure and the frenzy and the expectation and the build up to is this person going to resign or not.

But I think what people don't necessarily see is that there's a real pressure inside number ten, inside parliament for there to be due process from your own side.

Lots of not only the minister themselves want there to be due process and a fair hearing, but actually other ministers and back benches because they kind of figure that at some stage this might be me.

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I think he would have wanted to keep him, that would have been his first thing, but he also knew that if he put himself in a position where it was clear that there were accusations of bullying, not only had Raab himself said, if there is a finding that I have bullied somebody I'm going to go, but also because he said, look, I want there to be real standards of integrity, it would have been a real problem for him and he'd have created a kind of running sore for himself where endlessly people were saying, look, you're keeping this person, it's unfair, it's wrong, you don't get the modern world.

So that's what he would have been putting that into his calculations too.

I mean, the other notable thing about this has been Raab's reaction, which has been sort of dual headed, hasn't it?

It has been to say on the one hand, look, I accept this, I said I was going to resign if they found me guilty of bullying, I've done that.

But in many ways he doesn't accept it.

He doesn't accept that he bullied.

He has a problem with the way that the inquiry is conducted in all sorts of ways.

He's talked about this being a kafka-esque process.

What do you make of that?

And what do you make having worked inside government?

His assertion is that this could create a precedent, a dangerous precedent where officials use the threat of bullying to dislodge ministers that they dislike.

I think it's a fascinating assertion by him.

But this week we've seen two examples of very prominent leaders who were forced out because of indiscretions and both of them saying, look, what you are calling an indiscretion or a series of indiscretions wasn't as bad as you are now, as people are saying.

It doesn't merit me losing my job, losing my career and all the problems that that entails.

I think it's really interesting because actually, look, times have changed and a lot of people are in positions where they almost haven't really caught up with the fact that in the modern world it's not a great idea to be following all of your employees on Instagram.

People are going to ask questions if you're inviting.

The CBI story is a big one.

And also, I think that what was allowed in terms of bullying, certainly when I was in my 20s, would never pass today.

So in newsrooms in this Wednesday's set, because you push you to work for the BBC?

Yeah, so I worked for ITN.

I was a trainee for ITN and then went to work for the BBC.

In my first couple of weeks as a trainee at ITN, there were five of us and all of us had effectively one program editor who pushed us up against the wall and said, look, you're useless.

Don't get above yourself just because you're an ITN trainee.

The rest of the newsroom sort of looked on and I can still remember the sort of flex of spittle in my face and nobody doing anything about it.

That is completely unacceptable.

But I think a lot of people look at the world today and think, is it snowflakey or whatever and can't really get over the fact, look, times have shifted, times have changed.

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Rob talks about expecting and Tolly talks about his expectation of this as well in his report that Rob expects a certain level of what he says is resilience from his officials. So you think that Rob is sort of slightly out of time or out of his attitude towards this stuff is just out of date now?

I think he is out of time because clearly he's been forced to resign over this issue. He's been in a situation where a reporter has found that, you know, two aspects of bullying to him and he has to go.

So whether that is right or wrong, you can sort of argue the toss about that.

But in reality, in the modern world, some of his aspects of his behavior were found to be bullying and not acceptable and that's a real problem for him.

And I think a lot of people really struggled with that because they say, well, when I was younger, people used to do that all the time.

It used to be common practice in newsrooms, in the workplace for people to bathe inappropriately.

There's lots of women writing lots of very interesting articles about the moment about basically the sexual harassment they had to put up with not that long ago.

There has been a profound shift.

It isn't acceptable anymore and people are going to be forced out.

But there will be conservative MPs and people in the wider Conservative Party who have sympathy with them, aren't there?

We're already seeing some people saying, yeah, this is an example of, I don't like the word, but it's their word, you know, quote-unquote snowflake culture or all this sort of thing that, you know, you've just got to minister.

We saw an MP, he used to be his PPS, Joy Morrissey, tweeted that this is just an example of in the modern day where you can be accused of bullying for just telling people to do their jobs.

There will be strong constituency of conservative opinion who agree with them.

I think they will and they will also say on top of that, look, these are incredibly high pressure environments.

You are under the, you know, people are turning the screw on you all the time, you're expected to deliver, you're expected to do well.

The flip side of that is that there are certain behaviors and aspects of behavior where people that do make people feel uncomfortable.

There were people in this report saying that they felt physically sick going into a meeting because they didn't know how this person was going to behave.

That sounds like it wasn't shouting and swearing or there isn't any examples of that, but it is possible to intimidate people.

I suspect Dominic Ramb is probably deep down, can't quite believe that he's in this situation, never really intended some of the things he did and not really self-aware enough to realize that he probably made a lot of people feel very, very bad.

Self-awareness is the problem.

Self-awareness, the fact that times have changed and that we are now in a culture where you have to be very, very careful.

Did you ever see bullying in government or things that could be close to bullying?

Not really.

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Or maybe we consider bullying now and maybe even compared to when you were there in the early days, in the early part of the last decade, attitudes have changed.

I wasn't aware of it.

I certainly was aware of a high performance culture where expectations were high.

David Cameron set the tone at the top, which was, I remember him saying to me when I first took on the job about 11 months into his government, he said to me, look, I want number 10 to be the place where the nice people are.

And what I don't mean by that is that you're a bunch of pushovers, but I want it to be a place where we can never be accused of being unreasonable.

We can never be accused of behaving in a way that makes people feel bad or is unethical.

And I think that actually, it does sometimes just get set from the top, does that person get it?

And just more broadly, you can imagine the conversations that have had to have been had with Rob.

Were there occasions where you or others had to have those conversations, it must be very difficult.

Yeah.

There's two examples that really spring to mind.

The first one was Maria Miller.

There was a lot of issues around expenses and that kind of thing.

And I remember calling David Cameron on the Sunday having read the Sunday papers and just saying to him, look, we can spend the whole of the next week defending Maria Miller, but my judgment is she's going to have to go by the end of it.

And he said, look, for all sorts of reasons internally, I don't feel able to be pushing her out.

She doesn't want to go.

And for all sorts of reasons, I don't feel able to push her out.

Horrible on just a human level to have that conversation.

A very horrible thing to do.

It's not pleasant.

But I also remember him having gone to a dinner at Windsor and on the Thursday night calling me when it had finished around midnight and saying, okay, you were right.

This has just been such a terrible week.

We have lost so much in terms of political capital and time defending this.

We are just going to have to say, I'm afraid you're going to have to go.

The other one was Liam Fox.

There was a big scandal about one of his special advisers, a guy called Adam Warrity, in the appropriateness of that relationship.

And I remember Ed Llewellyn, who was the chief of staff at number 10 and I, were dispatched to go and tell Liam Fox, I'm sorry, time's up.

This has been going on for so long.

And we went over to Admiralty Arch.

And to be fair to Liam, he sort of realized the fact that we were there.

You were the men in grey suits.

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We were the people that the silent assassins sent over.

And to be fair to him, he sort of realized within a minute or two of us arriving that this was what was going on and he said, look, I'm going to have to resign.

And we talked about it for a bit and then he went off to make a cup of tea and I called David Cameron.

And David Cameron said, look, to be honest, I just feel so relieved because I've been in this pressured environment where I've been defending something that I haven't felt comfortable with because I wanted this due process to go through.

But the fact that he's willing to go now just feels like intense relief to me.

And I think that that's probably what Reshi Sunek, a bit of that is going through is he wouldn't have wanted to lose Dominic Raab, but he knew that he was going to become an even bigger problem.

And actually it's a relief that he's done the honorable thing, albeit saying, I think this is grossly unfair and it's not okay.

Something tells me that we haven't heard the last of this, that Raab will be made into something of a martyr by some on the back benches, that this idea of conservatism under attack will continue to linger even under a prime minister who has less truck with it than his immediate predecessors.

One thing is for sure, though, and it won't get enough attention today, Raab's record as a minister in the things he did as a minister, exacting standards or no, was often patchy at best.

His handling of the Afghanistan withdrawal as foreign secretary was roundly criticised and not just for refusing to quit his holiday.

The justice system is in a complete mess, with court backlogs as far as the eye can see, made worse by a barrister strike where Raab was criticised for refusing to engage.

His Bill of Rights, which would replace the Human Rights Act, would be a massive change to our human rights law and legal framework.

Again, off-criticise was very much his baby, and may well now be for the chop.

His departure, in that sense alone, in a real policy way, will matter.

His legacy, the fact of his move, bully or not, one way or the other, is a significant one.

We'll keep following the Raab story on the news agents, but we'll be back just after this.

This is The News Agents

Welcome back.

As you know, on a Friday, we sometimes like to just ease you into the weekend with a different sort of political interview, where we try and get at the real politicians that you rarely get to see or hear from, where we ask, what is their political makeup?

We send them a list of questions about what inspired them into politics, their political heroes, their political reading, etc., etc., and then they come into News Agents HQ and we get to grips with who they are and what keeps them in the political arena.

This week, it is Conservative MP Caroline Nokes, and it's really interesting, but just to be clear, we did record this earlier in a week before the Raab resignation.

Enjoy it.

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So joining us today is an MP who has been in Parliament for the Conservative Party since 2010 through all of the ups and downs of that tumultuous period, I think it's fair to say, and for her, in terms of politics, goes back further than that because she's the daughter of a Conservative MP, someone immersed in the Conservative Party and its politics for many years.

She's ascended the greasy pole, rising to become Minister of State of Immigration, only to slide back down again when Boris Johnson dismissed her from the government back in 2019, something she said she only found out about through Twitter.

And since then, she has been a bit of a thorn in the side in some ways for her party.

At one point, lost a whip, perhaps when presenting a thread of conservatism, perhaps a more liberal conservatism, which has been on the way.

Just last month, she made it clear she would not vote for Soella Braverman's illegal migration bill, which would effectively criminalise claiming asylum irregularly in Britain.

She said, I might be an outlier in my party, but I think we have an absolute duty to treat people humanely, to keep people safe.

I have absolute horror at the prospect she's, of course, Caroline Nokes, Chair of the Women and Equality Select Committee and MP for Romsey and Southampton North.

Caroline, thanks so much for joining us.

Hello, that was quite an introduction wasn't it?

It was, wasn't it?

I'm quite proud of that now.

Well, you should be proud of it.

It's quite the Korean.

We'll talk about it a little bit.

Just on that, you used the word outlier within the Conservative Party.

Do you feel that's what you've become?

Yeah.

And I can honestly say that when I was first elected in 2010, David Cameron as Prime Minister, that was a Tory party that I really felt I was part of, I belonged in, I was happy, and it felt like there was a common purpose.

I would say nowadays I feel out on the periphery a bit, but the Tory party's a broad church, and so there is room for me.

And why, why do you think that's happened?

Why do you feel, why have you moved to the periphery?

I assume you think you haven't changed particularly, your politics hasn't changed particularly, it's just that the politics of the Conservative Party has changed.

Yeah, I think that would be fair to say is that I don't think I've changed at all.

I've certainly found myself more confident in voicing my views even when the going is very difficult indeed, but I didn't get a sense that I've moved very much at all.

I certainly haven't suddenly overnight become much more liberal.

I think I've always been there.

And I reflect that I'm a product of Romsey and Southampton North.

It's where I grew up.

It's where I've spent my entire life pretty much, and I don't think that my views are

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in any way out of tune with those of my constituents.

Do you, not even with, I mean, because on paper, some people might think well Rishi Sunak kind of represents a turn back to a slightly more Cameroon type of conservatism.

Yeah, I think he does.

You think he does.

So did you feel more comfortable now or do you still feel a bit of an outline?

I mean, I just mentioned what you said about Searle Braverman's latest bill.

So it's clearly that it hasn't clicked back all the way in your view.

So look, what I just said about growing up in Romsey and Southampton North, don't ever forget that that's where Rishi grew up.

Indeed so, yeah.

Did you go to his chemist?

No, I didn't.

But that's because there's a chemist in the religion which I live, and his mum's pharmacy shop in Bassett was incredibly popular.

You go knock doors, canvassing in Bassett now, and so many people either tell you that they used to go to his mum's pharmacy or his dad was their GP.

So it's, I think, incredibly helpful to me to have a prime minister who absolutely understands my constituency.

So yeah, I'm very happy with Rishi as PM.

That doesn't mean that as a politician, you're always going to be 100% happy with 100% of the policies that your own party puts forward.

And I think I left the home office in 2019, absolutely determined that I was never going to talk about immigration again.

However, I was the last minister that put in place a resettlement commitment.

I think we do have an important role to play in resettlement of refugees globally.

And we've always had a proud history in this country of doing that.

And I think what I see now concerns me.

It concerns me that there are no safe and legal routes in place at the moment, unless you are from Hong Kong or under pitting and the operation in Afghanistan.

But pretty much, apart from that and a little bit of refugee family reunion, show me the safe routes.

There aren't any.

And so from that, do you conclude that Swallow Brosman doesn't really care about that?

I think immigration has become such a contentious and difficult issue since it was discovered that it was possible to cross the channel in small boats.

And I would argue that we had always been a little bit reassured by the presence of the channel. It's one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world.

It's really dangerous to cross.

And it was always assumed, if you were to wind the clock back to the 2015, 16 period, that it wasn't possible, that we looked at what was happening in the Greek islands and could see that Turkey was only a mile away from Samos.

So of course you could navigate that in a small craft.

The channel, whole different challenge.

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It's really choppy.

It's dangerous.

And I think we'd always assumed that it couldn't be done.

And when you had the first small boat crossings, it was demonstrated that it could be done.

People traffickers moved in, were smuggling people at enormous costs, both financially and in cost to human life, and found a business model that I think the government is absolutely right to try and smash that business model.

However, I don't think that you should do that on the backs of the world's most vulnerable, on people who have fled war, conflict and discrimination.

And I just feel really uncomfortable about saying, let's make that Rwanda's problem.

Do you think Suweila Braverman as Home Secretary has behaved responsibly in how she's spoken about this crisis, talk of invasion and so on?

I spent 18 months as immigration minister and I knew that not only every word I said would be analysed, but the tone in which I said it.

It's an incredibly difficult, complicated subject and unfortunately you cannot boil it down to simple sound bites.

You can't make it about slogans that almost inevitably will lead to failure.

And so I was always very careful, but I recognise the scale of the challenge has got much, much bigger and in many ways, I feel that in casting around trying to find a solution, we've all lost sight of the fact this is human life, this is desperate people and you cannot go around dehumanising people.

And that's what Suweila Braverman's done?

Well, I feel very uncomfortable with use of the word invasion.

I find it horrendous that we are trying to criminalise people.

Use of their circumstance and I always use this analogy, I will continue to use this analogy that under the Afghan scheme, there were Afghan female MPs and judges who were brought to safety in the UK and others who were not so lucky to make it out if they were to pitch up on the beaches of Dover now would be criminalised and sent to Rwanda.

That's just wrong.

We have to look at people's circumstances.

They're absolutely right.

The government has been bang on in trying to find a solution with Albania for fast removals back to Albania, but the stark reality is that Afghanistan is not, Iran is not a safe country for women.

We know that there are still issues in Syria which is not a safe country and I just think it is wrong to criminalise people coming from those locations.

I always get the sense about you and some of the other MPs in your wing of the party, particularly you, that you just feel sort of instinctively quite uncomfortable with so-called culture war issues.

Do you think the Conservative party has just leaned too hard into these culture war questions so-called?

I know as well as any other colleague that general elections are won and lost on the economy and how you deliver public services on whether people have confidence in a government that is going to do the right thing on education, on the NHS, on law and order.

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Other wars, when it comes to determining how people vote in any given election, are so far down the average voter's political radar that I don't know why we're seeking to stoke division and hatred.

General elections are won on the centre ground by whichever party people feel have confidence to deliver for them.

Do you think that the party has sorts of stoke, division and hatred or some elements of it?

I mean, it's a usual word just now.

I think that it would be fair to say that by continually focusing on a few narrow issues where there is real division and toxicity in the debate, that it does stoke people up.

I mean, I only have to look at, I've spent all day today talking about a report my select committee has done on black maternal health, where black women are dying four times more in childbirth than their white counterparts.

You should see the racist bile and rant that has come into my inbox as a result of an issue where you would have thought that the average person would go, that's horrendous.

And that's because politicians are insufficiently alive of the power of their words when talking about these issues.

Well, I think we need to be very alive to othering people, to trying to find wedge issues.

I think that makes me very uncomfortable.

I'll hark back to, I think it was 2019 when we were at the height of Brexit wars in the Tory party and the word that was used again and again and again was traitor.

You're betraying the Brexit vote, you're betraying the 52% and I can remember being in the marketplace

in Romsey.

Look, Romsey is a beautiful market town and somebody screamed at me in the marketplace, he deserved to be shot, you traitor.

And I just went, wow, that's the power of language, isn't it?

That's what using that language has done.

And indeed, then he was shot.

Absolutely.

In that year.

Yeah.

And it stirred people up.

I absolutely endorse all of the aims of the campaign to restore civility in politics.

I think we need to work out how to have a political debate that is courteous reason.

And of course we can disagree with each other, but we don't have to do that in a vile, bilious way.

So to turn to your political career and sort of what has led it and these questions that we've sent you, what made you want to go into politics?

What was your political inspiration?

So everyone expects me to say my dad and when I was 17 and busy failing A-level economics, he inspired me to do politics as an evening course, taught by him, never put yourself through that.

Really?

Your dad was teaching it?

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And I did an evening course in politics and his reason to encourage me to do it was he said I'd find it easy and interesting.

And to a certain extent, he was right.

And I always add at this point, look, I passed the A-level economics, but I chose to do politics at university because I'd found it interesting.

And I never saw that as a stepping stone to a political career.

In many ways, I envy my colleagues who have wanted to go into politics since they're about 10 years old and have got a real burning zeal to be part of that.

But you don't have that?

No.

No, no, no.

For me, it was really accidental.

And I saw people of my age, when I was in my late 20s, I saw people of my age who were going off and becoming conservative candidates.

You know, I had a very political upbringing, a very political family.

So these were people I knew.

And I suddenly thought, if they can do it, I can do it.

Is there a view that you maybe had about politics back in 2010 or the commons or parliament or whatever, that if you could sort of speak to Caroline Ella 2010, you were just abuser of or some advice that you would give yourself?

Oh, there's an awful lot of advice I'd give myself.

So firstly, I was kind of overawed by the commons.

I was used to compare myself to Ken Clark and think, I'll never be that good.

I'll never have that confidence.

I'll never stand in the House of Commons with my hand in my pocket and just orate and have the whole place sit there in rapt silence.

So I think I was very, I think I was very nervy.

I think I made a nervy start.

And it's very obvious that I didn't become a minister until six years in and it wasn't until Theresa May became prime minister that I got a sniff of a promotion.

And so I would tell the how old was it?

I have been sort of 37, 38 ish, Caroline Nokes to be more confident to use your voice.

And that's the thing that I try to do now.

People may not agree with me.

People may not agree with the issues that I choose to champion, but at least I have the confidence to speak up for some of the most marginalized.

Was there a political event or speech or something which inspired you about politics or moments which inspired you?

So the moment was actually the 1997 general election.

I remember this vividly.

Not an ideal time for you.

Not an ideal time, but about two days after the election, my husband and I went on holiday.

I'd always remember this.

We were on a balcony looking down at a little cafe in Kefalonia and there was a woman reading

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the mail.

And the mail had a big front page of Cherie Blair picking up those flowers on the doorstep of Downing Street.

And I think my then husband was much more right-wing than I am.

And he said, somebody needs to do something about this, you know, Labour lands like somebody has to do something and then looked at me and said, you should do something.

And I think that was the moment I went, I should do something.

Maybe I should.

And so, yeah, 1997.

Actually not a bad time to set off on a fledgling political career, is it, in the Tory party?

Because, you know, when you'd sunk that low, the only way was up.

And was there and has there been a political book or political piece of writing, which has inspired you or something which has kept you going in politics?

So nobody's going to like this answer because it's terribly flippant and terribly Caroline Noakes.

I think it was Julian Critchley who used to write a book at general elections.

I'm sorry you were in when I called.

And it was political anecdotes of things that you'd found on the doorstep.

It's something that every politician has lived.

We've all got those wall stories.

Come on then, what's your best doorstep story?

So my best doorstep story was, and this was in a local government by-election, two o'clock in the afternoon.

I'm knocking up.

That's where you go and encourage people who've pledged to vote conservative to go out and vote.

And I encountered a lady wearing a red satin negligee.

She had massive black curly hair and had a cigarette and a cigarette holder.

And she came to the door and I said, oh, hello, I'm calling on behalf of blogs.

Who's your conservative candidate in today's by-election?

And she looked at me.

She pointed with the cigarette and the cigarette holder and said, and you are really not who I was expecting.

And the vice versa, I suppose.

Yeah, but you know, it's things like that.

So it's a really serious business.

It's really hard work.

It's really tough.

And there are moments of extreme hilarity that just keep me going.

Which you need, right?

Absolutely.

Which any politician needs.

Do you have a political hero or a political villain?

You know, political villains, not so much.

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You know, focus on the positives.

And I think I always say this to...

There must be people in politics you dislike.

I venture to guess Caroline.

There are plenty I don't necessarily agree with.

But even those who I don't agree with politically, I can find, you know, incredibly courteous, civil.

And I think that's the truth.

Everybody thinks that we're all sort of at each other hammer and tongs the entire time.

It's just not true.

What's your high point and low point since you've entered politics?

I mean, low point.

I mean, when you...

I mentioned you having to leave the government in 2019.

Is it true you found out?

Yeah.

Absolutely true.

No ifs or buts about it.

And I can't even remember who it was who tweeted it.

I think it was Steve Swimford.

Someone like that tweeted and leaving government, Caroline Nokes, I went, oh, thanks for letting me know.

You haven't heard anything?

Unfair to say I hadn't heard anything.

I knew that I had a five minute appointment scheduled for the prime minister.

Now look, your five minute appointment is not a promotion, is it?

But certainly they had had the ill manners to let journalists know before they'd had the courtesy to tell me to my face.

Something you haven't forgotten, I'm sure.

No.

Or didn't forget during the Boris Johnson period.

Was it a difficult period for you, Boris Johnson?

It was a very difficult period for me.

And...

Why?

Why was it so difficult?

Well, he took the whip off me.

That was quite difficult.

He sat me by Twitter.

That was quite difficult.

It was also quite difficult to see what I thought would be extremely damaging, a no deal Brexit, potentially being steamrolled through the House, through the use of an illegal prorogation of Parliament.

That I found very difficult.

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Do you think he was a liar, Boris Johnson?

Absolutely.

I don't think that the truth mattered to him.

I think what mattered to Boris Johnson was getting his agenda through, regardless.

Do you think that the Conservative Party will come to look at his period with more regret than perhaps it does right now, in the fullness of time?

Oh, I don't know.

Look, you know, a week is a long time in politics, isn't it?

I think it was very difficult.

It was really difficult in seats like mine.

And I remember the local election last year.

I remember the by-election in Cheshire and Amisham when people were openly saying on the doorsteps, I've been a Conservative voter all my life, I'm sending a message to Boris Johnson this time.

Do you wish he'd just get out of Parliament, just leave?

A hymn?

Yeah.

But I think he will.

The thing that Boris Johnson has always had is a brilliant political instinct.

And I think he will know that it's time to go.

And if you just find, if you could do anything in politics, if you could have a magic wand and you could just make a reform happen, something you'd always wanted to happen, you don't have to bother with Parliament, you don't have to bother, it's just going to, the media, it's just going to happen.

What would you like to do?

So, look, I think the one thing that I think makes the biggest difference is education.

And it makes a difference to children and it makes a difference to their parents.

And I would love to see the school day extended, making it easier for women to go back to work full time and making sure that kids in the state sector had all of the same advantages of those in the independent sector when it comes to things like sport, drama, art, music.

And you can do that if the school day is longer.

I look back at my daughter's education and she played every sport under the sun and

I could work full time because she was in a school that would keep hold of her even when she was still teeny tiny in primary until five o'clock in the afternoon.

Makes a big difference to working women.

Caroline Nugz, it's been an absolute pleasure.

Thanks so much for coming on The News Agents.

Huge honours to say thank you just in case you didn't think I'd had a miserable experience.

It's actually been quite fun.

Is it good? There you go.

This is The News Agents.

Now, as usual, Emily and John aren't here today.

But for once they've split up to divide and conquer.

My understanding is that Emily is on a spiritual retreat to the Greek island of Patmos,

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mourning the loss of our Twitter blue ticks.

But John, while he's back in his natural habitat no less of Washington, D.C., where the Supreme Court justices themselves have invited him for breakfast over Kejri and scrambled eggs.

The only thing apparently a divided court can agree on is that they love John Soaple. And Joe Biden himself has evidently caught wind of the Soaple return to D.C.'s thought over the next few days that the 80-year-old president will announce his official intention to stand for a second term.

John very kindly left the court dining room for just a few minutes to send us his thoughts. Greetings from Washington, D.C., where it is the most stunning spring morning.

I landed last night after recording the podcast and the importance of my arrival is clear because it now looks like Joe Biden is about to announce his run for the presidency.

In the next few days, possibly while I'm here, you see, Soaple's presence was just so required.

This happy coincidence means that the Biden campaign, along with campaign video, will be launched in coming days.

That will then be the trigger for the most enormous fundraising drive by Biden and his associates.

He likes symmetry, does old Joe.

It is almost exactly four years ago since he launched his first bid for the presidency.

Bid 12 years since Barack Obama, when he was on the ticket, was seeking re-election for a second term as president.

And that seems to be driving some of it.

And I think that Democrats had also reached the point where they could no longer answer the question, why don't you just say whether you're running or not?

And that, of course, is going to help shape some of the debate in America now about some of the big issues, about the choices for 2024.

The one other thing it is worth adding into this mix is that if you look on the Republican side of the ledger, all this talk about Ron DeSantis, well, his numbers are falling.

Donald Trump's are rising.

We could well be heading for a rerun of 2020 with Joe Biden against Donald Trump, except this time around, of course, it will be a 78-year-old taking on an 82-year-old.

Just think of that.

In a country of 350 million people, the best they can offer are a septigenarian and an octigenarian.

Wow.

Well, Justice Soper has a very nice ring to it, don't you think?

Thanks to all of you from all of us for this week.

Remember, you can catch up on all our shows from this week on Global Player and send us story tips and feedback to newsagents at global.com.

Thanks to our production team on the newsagents, Gabriel Radis, Laura Fitzpatrick, Ellie Clifford, Georgia Foxwell, Will Gibson-Smith, Alex Barnett, and Rory Simon.

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It's presented by Emily Maitlis, John Sopel, and me, Lewis Goodall.

We'll see you on Monday.

Have a lovely weekend.

This has been a Global Player original podcast and a Persephoneka production.