

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

If the BBC had been hoping that Gary Linnicka would eat a huge dollop of humble pie after saying that he found Suella Braverman's policies on asylum seekers as awful, repellent, a bit of 1930s language in there as well, they're going to be disappointed.

Because Gary Linnicka today has said, I have never known such love and support in my life than I'm getting this morning.

England World Cup goes aside possibly.

I want to thank each and every one of you.

It means a lot.

I will continue to try and speak up for those poor souls that have no voice, cheers all and a punch emoji.

And he also made clear, perhaps by talking about the love that was coming his way, that he doesn't feel remotely out of step with public opinion on this one.

And I raise that question of public opinion because possibly it shouldn't matter.

It was used by the immigration minister, Robert Jenrick, will hear it later, as a form of castigation in his interview with Nick Ferrari as a way of saying that if your licence fee is being paid, then you have a duty to be in step with British opinion.

And it's a weird, slightly authoritarian, slightly sinister thing to say about how you're allowed to think if you work at the BBC.

Welcome to the newsagents.

The newsagents.

It's John.

It's Emily.

And it's Lewis.

And Emily, have you stopped laughing now?

Because as you were recording the pre-intro there, I noticed that your hysterics were barely contained at John's uses of the phrase, humble pie.

I've never heard anyone use that phrase in broadcasting podcast land, except for you.

You can't see this, but John actually looks quite the few of us.

I mean, I'm just thinking, what is she on about?

I mean, I just think you know what humble pie was, John.

Well, exactly.

And, you know, unless it was made of a certain type of flower, she would say, I will eat humble pie, but it can't have many calories in it.

No carbs.

No carbs.

Plutum-free.

Exactly.

Lactose and tolerant.

All that sort of stuff.

So what is today about?

Today is a curious one, because I don't think we're doing what you think we're going to do.

We're not really going to argue about whether or not Soella Braverman was using Nazi

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

language, which is what Gary Lineker essentially accuses her of doing.

But we are going to explore the language and we are going to explore the response to Gary Lineker by the BBC and by leading conservatives and also by the public and ask a question that, in a sense, takes us right into the heart of our old lives and our old jobs, which is what you can and can't say if you work for a public, not state, but public, broadcaster.

Yes.

So just in case you haven't seen this, last night, Gary Lineker quote-tweeted a home office video where Soella Braverman lays out some of the details on the policy announced yesterday on what she calls illegal migrations, more boats crisis, etc.

And he says, good heavens, this is beyond awful.

Now that could get someone like Lineker who does work for the BBC in trouble in itself.

But what has really generated a lot of the fire today was his response to someone who tweeted him, quite random person who just tweeted him about it, complaining about what he said.

And he replied, there is no huge influx.

We take far fewer refugees in other major European countries, true by the way.

This is just an immeasurably cruel policy directed at the most vulnerable people in language that is not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the 30s.

And I'm out of order.

That tweet has been seen one million times, received over 40,000 likes.

Now what I feel uncomfortable about is anyone in any argument saying, well, this is like the Nazis or this is Godwin's law.

Yeah.

It just kind of invokes something that is so extreme that it probably actually doesn't help your argument because let's face it, there's been nothing in human history that's been quite as appalling as six million Jews and all the others being put into concentration camps and killed.

And to invoke that as your benchmark against which you judge a government, I just think is kind of probably not that smart.

You just lose straight away.

Yeah.

I think that's what Godwin's law means.

Yeah, it is exactly.

When you're having an online argument and you mention Nazis, it's kind of a sign that you've lost all.

Yeah.

And the longer the online chat goes on for, the more likely at some point, Nazis will come up.

Right.

And I think it's about the language that has been used, deserves scrutiny because some of what the government has said and some of what Sewella Brotherman has said and talking about there are a hundred million people.

This is what she said in the common statement, there are a hundred million people waiting to come to the UK.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

Really?

I mean, there are 48,000 so far who've come.

That is a very small fraction of one hundred million.

And in a mail article talking about billions, where do these figures come from?

And that is the sort of stuff that is causing fear, causing alarm.

It's rhetoric that doesn't dial down the temperature at all.

Right.

And I think, we're not apologists for Gary Linnaker.

We're not speaking on his behalf here at all.

But I think what he was talking about in terms of language wasn't specific to the video that she posted yesterday.

It was talking about the language around the policy.

She has used the word invasion.

We've talked about this before.

She's used the word invasion in the House of Commons, which I think is unprecedented for a government minister.

And let's not forget the Holocaust survivor Joan Salter, who's 83 years old, who rebuked her directly for that kind of language and said it was exactly the language that was used by Nazis to make her parents' lives in danger.

And so I don't think that this is a totally arbitrary thing.

I don't think Gary Linnaker is talking specifically about the video and I don't think he's talking specifically about the Holocaust.

But if he is looking at the way that language was used by the Nazis in order to create a climate of fear, then I think you could say that there are elements to what this government is doing now, which is trying to create that same climate of fear.

I think John is right that as soon as you bring Nazism into anything, it instantly leads you down a rabbit hole that you don't want to go down.

So that is not advisable.

And look, actually, in lots of ways, all the familiar, the usual suspects, the people that Linnaker is himself called, the free speech champions, they are up in arms this morning.

It suits them to be up in arms this morning.

It suits them to have a convenient foil.

You combine something that they really dislike, the BBC, with other stuff that they dislike, which they call sort of liberal metropolitan views on this stuff, and they have a convenient whipping boy.

You know, we all know what that's like.

We all kind of know what it's like to be at the centre of something like that.

But in terms of the language overall, look, we've talked on this show before, we've gone and reported from far right rallies, which are quite literally using the Home Secretary, not just some random politician, not some backbench MP, but the Secretary of State who above all is responsible for law and order and community cohesion in this country.

They are using her language of stop the invasion, or she is either implicitly or explicitly knowingly or unknowingly using theirs, either way, that is not a good position to be in.

And it isn't just about the invasion comments.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

It's also about the general climate, the general sort of discussion and words she uses. She constantly talks about being overwhelmed.

I mean, look, yes, the numbers are getting bigger, but we're talking about 45,000 people. Britain is not going to be overwhelmed.

This is a country of 70 million people.

This comes in a context, as we said yesterday, where she herself has talked about these figures of 100 million being displaced, 70 million refugees around the world.

Britain is not being overwhelmed.

And of all cabinet ministers, it is incumbent upon the Home Secretary to be the person who's trying to douse the flames, not put coal and fuel on the fire.

But that is what has happened.

And a lot of conservatives, as you just said, Lewis, have taken their lead from that to pile in on Gary Lineker as somehow that what he has said is egregious.

And I think we should need to consider what constitutes BBC impartiality, because all three of us sitting in this room, sitting in newsagents HQ, have had our own battles with it.

But listen to Robert Jenrick, government minister, the way he framed it when he was interviewed by Nick Ferrari on LBC This Morning.

No idea if you're a football man, you'll know where I'm going with this question, but the comments made by Gary Lineker likening the actions of your government and the language to the Germans in the 1930s, should he be shown a red card, a yellow card?

What action should the BBC take with Mr. Lineker?

Well, he should certainly be shown a red card.

I think it was very inappropriate, what we're doing is taking robust but fair measures on behalf of the British public.

Gary Lineker is paid for by the British public, British taxpayers through the license fee.

And it's a shame that he's so out of step with British public opinion right now.

I think that is the place that we want to start our next bit of exploration.

Robert Jenrick is the immigration minister.

And I think you can now park whether you agree with Gary Lineker about the inflammatory language

and whether you should go to Germany in the 1930s over that.

You might disagree with that.

But let's ask ourselves whether a government minister should be in the position of telling everyone who works for the BBC that they have to be his comments in step with public opinion.

Does that sounds, frankly, a, authoritarian, b, impossible, and c, like, it doesn't matter whether he'd gone too far, if his thoughts were out of step with public opinion, he shouldn't have voiced them?

I mean, that is a very strange place for us to be.

Let's frame that slightly differently.

He seems to be saying the BBC should be thinking what the government is thinking.

No, the BBC shouldn't be thinking anything at all.

The BBC should be asking questions about what policy is and whether it will work and whether it is effective and, indeed, whether it is cruel and goes back on Britain's long record.

And we should say we don't know what public opinion is on this.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

I mean, we haven't seen any polls that suggest whether the public is for or against what the government's currently doing.

So even that is a massive assumption in its own right.

But you're right.

The job of a public broadcaster is to ask questions.

It's not to agree with everything that's going to change.

We certainly know from the polls, look, the public are very exercised about this issue and they're concerned about it.

Of course.

But this thing about like what the BBC or the media is supposed to sort of reflect the country back in itself politically is always puzzled me.

We all heard it so much during the Brexit years.

The BBC is so out of step with the country on Brexit.

They were surprised by Brexit.

You know, we were surprised by the result.

It's like the BBC isn't an opinion poll company.

Or a predictor.

Or a predictor.

We didn't go around.

We're not like a soothsayer.

Oh, gosh.

How is the country going to vote?

No.

The BBC and any sort of broadcasters put out the issues before the country and then the country decides.

It's not like after a general election, we go, right, now 35% of the country is voted Labour and 30% is voted Conservative.

The BBC should look like that as well.

That's not how it works.

If the public could 70%, 80%, 90% think something, it doesn't mean that the BBC should think that.

It shouldn't think anything.

It should be asking questions.

Today's minority opinion is tomorrow's received wisdom.

That is where the BBC and every other sort of broadcaster should be.

I know you're going to mention a bloody Overton window in a minute and how public...

We'd had Godwin's law over the window.

Going back to the central issue, which is Gary Linnaker is, as they say, a football pundit, the Deputy Conservative Chair, Lee Anderson has made clear he should carry on, I think his words, flogging crisps.

This is what they want to do.

They want to reduce somebody who's got opinions to somebody who shouldn't have opinions.

And I think we can explore that whilst remembering that when Gary Linnaker was fronting the World

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

Cup in Qatar, the BBC gave him plenty of room to talk about Qatar's human rights problems. It's the most controversial World Cup in history and a ball hasn't even been kicked.

Ever since FIFA chose Qatar back in 2010, the smallest nation to have hosted football's greatest competition has faced some big questions.

Some accusations of corruption in the bidding process to the treatment of migrant workers who built the stadiums where many lost their lives.

Homosexuality is illegal here.

Women's rights and freedom of expression are in the spotlight.

Also the decision six years ago to switch the World Cup from summer to winter.

Against that backdrop, there's a tournament to be played, one that will be watched and enjoyed around the world.

If it's a football safe FIFA, well, we will for a couple of minutes at least.

They clearly worked with Gary Linnaker to make sure that he was delivering something that they felt was in lockstep with what they wanted to say.

So how on earth does that work, that you're then allowed to ask questions about Qatari human rights abuses, but you're never allowed to raise the question of Britain's human rights policies?

And the thing that I noticed, I've spent about a third of my BBC career as a foreign correspondent, I spent some time in Paris and then some time in Washington.

And the thing I noticed, because I'd also spent a long time at Westminster, is that

when you're abroad and you're, say, me reporting on the Trump administration, I was given huge amounts of latitude to call it as I saw it.

You know, if you think that Trump has lied, say he's lied.

And I got backing from BBC bosses absolutely down the line that I could say these things and be pretty clear in my coverage, and there were times when outrageous things had happened.

And I did say that's outrageous.

And I don't think I was being breaking impartiality laws, because I think impartiality is about telling you the public how you see it as the correspondent who is trusted to do that.

But I know that when you're at Westminster, you are acutely conscious of the government of the day breathing down the BBC's neck and the pressures that that brings.

And I think that, so Gary Lineker calls to question the Qatari government, that's fine.

Call into question the British government, whoa!

You can't do that.

And you could argue as well, is that, look, I think that, you know, if any of us, while we were working at BBC News, had tweeted that, we probably wouldn't have been working for the BBC.

Well, to put it in VAR terms and football terms, yeah, I mean, you know, if you were a journalist working for the BBC and you had tweeted that, you wouldn't need VAR to tell you how offside it was.

I mean, it was a mile offside.

But I think Gary Lineker is in a different position.

Yeah, because he's sport.

He's sport.

He's not adjunct.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

And I think just from a sort of commercial point of view, the BBC, the BBC is in a lot of competition, obviously, for forget about news, talent, presenters, all of that sort of thing.

And in a way, the Lineker thing will become a test case because you're going to have people, you know, talented people working in entertainment, whatever, who look at this and they're already acutely aware that working for the BBC comes with all sorts of extra difficulties that you have to consider.

And they have to watch everything they're going to say.

And they're not even kind of employed in a staff way by the BBC, but they just do it on a kind of ad hoc basis.

Gary Lineker is almost certainly earning more money outside the BBC, I would guess than inside.

I mean, that is considerable, but I don't know this, but I'm just looking at what he does outside it.

And I'm thinking it's probably not a financial commitment that keeps him to the BBC. It's because he loves his job and loves doing it and loves being right in the centre of the football commentary, right?

Yeah.

If someone else tweeted something that was anti-labour, anti-green, anti-SMP, would it be as much of a problem in the current circumstances?

No.

No, I don't think it would, because the BBC is not conscious of that in the same way, because as John is saying, BBC is conscious of what the government of the day thinks. And we have a director general now, Tim Davy, who has made the cornerstone of his directorship the general ship, the importance of impartiality, and you have to raise one potential problem. The BBC has said publicly that it is going to talk sternly to Gary Lineker about what he said.

Imagine the conversation if Gary Lineker went in to see the chairman, Richard Sharp, and the chairman, Richard Sharp says to him, Gary, you should not have done that and you need to apologise to the government.

And Gary Lineker turns around and says, I didn't facilitate an £800,000 loan for the prime minister while we're on the subject of impartiality.

But this is exactly the problem, John, because this is where it is summed up perfectly, which is that what the conservatives have managed to do is convince the BBC, and not just the BBC, but the wider people around it, or media or ecosystem, if you like, that impartiality only goes in one direction.

We all heard on that day when Richard Sharp, on the day that that story came out, was literally doing a kind of a way day with BBC executives.

And you brought the story to New York, you know, we all heard it from different people who were their top BBC staff, 300 of them later.

I spoke to someone about it late and said, we were all, you know, our jaws were on the floor.

We're literally being lectured about impartiality by a man who that day was bringing impartiality in the organisation into disrepute.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

But the reason they can do that with a straight face, the reason that like when I was at the BBC, Robbie Gibb, you know, made my life really difficult day after day.

Robbie Gibb is the former director of communications for Theresa May, who then went to be on the board of the BBC, former communications.

And also helped found a rival broadcaster, GB News.

Yeah, exactly.

And you know, not really talked about this before, he made my life really, really hard at the BBC.

You know, day after day, I would hear from people saying, just watch it, Robbie's watching you.

Because they had created this sort of confection that somehow I was sort of labour supporting or, you know, doing labour, you know, my, by comparison to Robbie Gibb, my sort of grand summit within the Labour Party was vice chair of Birmingham, Northfield CLP and youth officer when I was 17 years old and I'm sitting there going, hang on a minute, I'm being lectured about impartiality from a man who until checks notes like 12 months ago was literally head of comms in Downing Street for the Conservative Party and for Theresa May.

You know, it's just crazy, but they do it because I actually think someone like Robbie and some of these people, they genuinely think that they are being impartial because the country is more conservative than the Metropolitan Liberal Elite.

And so in their own way, they are representing a break, a genuine kind of representation of where the public are in a way that someone like me or someone like the rest of the BBC just isn't.

And it's just crazy.

It leads you down a completely blind alley.

I think something very clever and very insidious has happened, which is that the government, and I think it started under Boris Johnson, but it might have been earlier, but I don't remember it in the Cameron Osborne years.

The government convinced the BBC that they were off target and it goes back to the generic thing that they were not in lockstep with public opinion and that they, the government, would help them become more impartial.

And the BBC clearly is constantly struggling against everyone pulling it in all directions. We know that.

It's a spider whose eight legs are being pulled in different directions.

But when the licence fee is being granted by the party of the day and you are hearing the party of the day saying, I think you might be struggling with impartiality, it's very difficult to then pull away and say, no, we'll go our own way.

Thanks very much.

We don't need you because you realise, you know, I've had that conversation with Tim Davies where he's talked to me about the amount of money that he needed to get from the government, right?

And as soon as money is mentioned in the same context as editorial policy, the waters get very, very muddy indeed.

And they should not be muddied.

There should not be pressure on journalists in that way.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

Look, if we commit a libel, if we get something wrong, absolutely bloody right, we should be hauled over the coals for it.

But we should not be aware of the pressures.

You know, when people used to say, which bit of the BBC do you work for?

I used to say the B and not the C.

I work as a broadcaster, I'm not part of the corporation.

And the two should never mix.

And the worry is that they're starting to mix a bit as you've just articulated.

And I think this comes to the nub of it of what they're going to do about Gary Linnicka.

It's one thing to say we're going to give him a good telling off and he's going to go to bed without any dinner.

I mean, if Gary Linnicka doesn't turn around and say, I apologise, then it makes the BBC look pretty weak and feeble and toothless, which leaves them vulnerable.

But is it a hanging offence to what Gary Linnicka has done?

I think that very few people would say that it is.

I'm not going to speak for public opinion here.

But I think your point is absolutely critical that it makes it the whole Richard Sharp question.

And I know we've spoken about it in the past.

It seemed complicated.

It might have seemed that there were lots of things that were an inside conversation about who knew what and what money was loaned and where the cousin was and when they had dinner.

But if the perception is that the chairman is very closely linked to a conservative prime minister in whatever way, it makes that chat now with Gary Linnicka almost impossible.

The one thing I'd say, though, is for all the time that Gary Linnicka is the headline, the Conservatives are delighted because nobody is looking that closely at the immigration, the asylum policy itself.

They can just throw stones at the BBC.

The BBC can throw stones at Gary Linnicka and everyone can quietly forget about the real substance of this whole policy, which we're going to do in a moment.

That's all coming up next.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back.

And not surprisingly, the issue du jour in the House of Commons for Prime Ministers' questions.

That's worse than humble pie.

Du jour.

Now, I like all du jour.

The issue du jour is terrible.

Oh, it's terrible.

I'll tell you what, what we need from Paris is for her to draw up a list of phrases that I am and I'm not allowed to use are free speech champion over there.

You're not allowed.

He's going to walk out one of these days.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

He's going to just say, you can't say this and you can't say that.

That's what this episode is about.

Yeah.

Honestly.

Anyway.

Getting a bit tense in here.

Yeah.

So Prime Ministers' questions.

It was the bill that Soella Braverman introduced yesterday.

What I thought was fascinating about it politically was that you had Rishi Sunak, very keen to talk in generalities and with big rhetorical flourishes.

And you had Kirstama wanting to get into the detail.

One of the standout details was that of the 18,000 people who've applied for asylum and been deemed not fit.

It's cold in here.

So she sneezed du jour.

That's the sneeze du jour of a sway.

18,000 people's applications have been rejected for asylum.

Under the Nationality and Borders Act, the number who have been returned is 21.

Maybe that is partly why Rishi Sunak was just going on the attack on a rhetorical level against Labour and Sakeer Stalmer.

His position on this is clear.

He wanted to, in his words, scrap the Rwanda deal.

He voted against measures to deport foreign criminals, Mr Speaker, and he even argued against deportation flights.

Well, and we know why, because on this matter, he talked about his legal background.

He's just another lefty lawyer standing in our way.

That to me sums up the political absurdity, I think, in a way of how the government is attacking this issue, because he just cited two things which literally point to how none of this stuff is going to work or it's not going to work for a long time.

He just attacked Stalmer for not supporting the Rwanda deal.

The Rwanda deal has not worked.

Not a single person has been deported there.

His whole program that he announced yesterday relies on there being a Rwanda-type deal because most of the people who arrive are from places like Yemen or from Syria or from Iran and you literally cannot send them back.

You just can't under international law.

And then he says, oh, he's just another lefty lawyer standing in our way.

This has been the point from the beginning.

It is not a solution to propose something that is illegal.

I mean, we could all propose all sorts of illegal things.

I mean, I could be like, I've got money problem.

I'm going to go and rob a bank.

Oh, but I don't want to do something that's illegal.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

Then it's not a solution then, is it?

That is the point.

And literally on the front of the bill that was put before Parliament yesterday, as a result of legal requirements, they had no choice but to put on it.

This may not comply with the European Convention on Human Rights, i.e. this bill that we're putting before the House may not be legal.

That is a hell of a position for a Home Secretary and Prime Minister to be putting before Parliament today.

They said there was a 50% chance it would break international law.

But I also think that Labour is very lucky at the moment that none of these solutions are working because the debate that Rishi Sunak wants to have is that Keir Starmer represents open borders.

He represents freedom of movement.

He represents, if you like, a remainder take still on the whole immigration process.

And Keir Starmer at the moment can keep saying, yeah, we didn't support Rwanda and that didn't work and we didn't support patrol boats and that didn't work and we didn't support that and that didn't work.

And for as long as they can keep doing that, Labour doesn't actually have to talk about what the right number to allow in is or whether they would extend more safe routes and how they would do it.

Yes, they can talk about better comms with the French.

Yes, they can talk about better returns agreements.

But Labour don't need to address that big question still, which is, where do you sit on whether the number is too big, too small or about right?

Well, the interesting possibility and tell me I'm a conspiracy theorist is that maybe the government wants this to be declared illegal because it knows that there is no instant solution.

But if you can blame the courts, lefty lawyers, for having blocked all of this, and this is what the Trump administration used to do, ad nauseam, you think of the ban on people coming from mainly Muslim countries, which was declared illegal, and then Trump blames the courts.

Look, I'm trying to get rid of these Muslims from our country.

I'm trying to stop transgender people in the military.

I'm trying to do all these things, but it's the establishment that is stopping me.

And same, actually, same with the European Convention on Human Rights.

Yeah.

If you say, oh, we might be breaking this, you're probably pleasing a lot of your own party in so doing.

Exactly.

That's true.

But that's a gamble on what the politics is, right?

Because there's two ways that could go.

Yeah, John, you're right.

Maybe they can point to the courts and say, they're political.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

We would have solved it.

You know, it's a Scooby-Doo excuse.

We would have gone away with it.

We're not for these people, not for the courts.

But the reaction could also be, well, hang on a minute, fine, but you still haven't dealt with it, have you?

And if you keep, basically, what the government are doing at the moment is hyping up the problem at every single turn, pointing to the problem and saying, we're being overwhelmed.

They're not trying, as I said earlier, they're not trying to take the heat out of it.

They're turning the heat up.

And yet at the same time, at each and every turn, not providing a solution.

Yeah.

So the politics of that could also go very badly for them.

Yeah, but I don't think you even have to wait for the lawyers to stop this because really simple questions, like when you're detaining people for 28 days, where do they go, right?

And when do you start to turn them, and how can it be retroactive, which means that even people that have already arrived are facing that same thing.

It's not like we don't have a problem with where to house people already.

So they haven't...

They're probably big here.

Right.

They haven't even started addressing the practicalities of that first 28 days of detention, even if it wasn't blocked by lawyers.

And the other thing that I think we've had in this debate is some really absurd figures banded around by the Home Secretary about the numbers who may be on their way for this invasion.

And shout out to Susanna Reid on Good Morning Britain this morning, because she really did take the Home Secretary to task.

There are 100 million displaced people worldwide.

That is true.

Only a quarter of them have left their own country.

So even the 100 million figure doesn't hold up, let alone the billions that you have flagged in the Daily Mail this morning.

I think we can look at...

We can argue about the numbers of the millions of people around the world who would like to come in the United Kingdom.

It's not an argument.

I'm sorry.

It's not an argument.

Only 26 million have even left their own country, and 45,000 were in boats coming over to the UK.

Yes, and that is a very high number.

So yes, what we're dealing with here is tens of thousands, isn't it?

What we're dealing with is an unsustainably high number on any count of people coming

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

here illegally, not just in the last year, but actually over the last few years.

Since 2018, 85,000 people came here on small boats.

If you're suggesting to me that that's an appropriate and acceptable level, then I would respectfully disagree with you.

I don't think it is.

I am not disputing that it's an ethical issue, whether you think it's acceptable or not, but it is a fact that we are dealing with tens of thousands and you have used the word billions.

And I think that people want you to explain the justification for the use of the word billions when it is a fact that there's only tens of thousands have made their way here on the boats.

In a way, this is another of the tensions, which is that Prime Minister talked about in the Commons today, they are locating the source of the problem, but they're not really recognising the solution in a sense that Sorella Braverman there was talking about the global refugee crisis.

There is a global refugee crisis, or rather there are a lot of refugees around the world, 30 million refugees, the world is becoming less stable, not more stable.

By the way, that could get even worse with climate change.

It's like, well, yeah, what you're saying is that this is a problem, a worldwide problem of refugees, which is getting worse, you're accepting that there are more refugees in the world.

But all she ever talks about and says at the border is that these are illegal economic migrants.

Well, hang on a minute.

You've just said that there's a refugee problem.

Are you that surprised that a tiny percentage of those people end up on our border?

Because right now the British government is basically saying, well, yeah, there is a global refugee problem, but it sure as hell ain't our problem.

Sorry, Lewis, I think it's simpler than that.

She's messing around with facts.

She's exaggerating facts.

It's the same as using language like invasion.

Don't bandy around a figure of a hundred million when you know it's not true.

And when you get called out on it by a journalist, have the grace to say, okay, I accept that.

What I'm talking about is still a pretty large number.

But don't carry on bashing the door on a fact that is blatantly false.

The following will pick that up.

Yeah.

Obviously they will.

They'll pick that up.

They'll start talking about a hundred million people at those rallies.

Guaranteed.

Yeah.

But do you expect really for a nanosecond that Suella Brafman was going to say, yeah,

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

fair point?

I mean, she was.

Well, in that case, do you know what?

It takes us back to where we started, which is like, either you think language doesn't matter, or else you think you have to back off everything the government says because you can't touch it, or else you say, you know what, sometimes we get our metaphors wrong and sometimes we go too far.

But if we're not analysing what the government of the day is telling us, in any capacity as journalists, or as human beings, or as commentators, we're probably not really doing our job.

And look, we were discussing what is the job of journalists and what is the job of inquiring minds.

It is to call stuff out like this.

And sometimes the rhetoric being used by this government seems to bear no relation to reality.

We'll be back after the break.

This is the news agents.

Welcome back.

Now, some of the harshest criticism about the BBC and its lack of impartiality has come from Lee Anderson, the deputy chair of the Conservative Party, Jacob Rees-Mogg, former cabinet minister, and Nadine Dorris, former culture secretary.

They have been really having a go that journalism has lost its way, particularly in the BBC, and that this needs to be called out.

Which kind of brings us to what they might be doing now.

Luckily, they've all now got jobs in television.

Lee Anderson is the latest.

He's the deputy conservative chair, and he's got himself a gig now on GB News.

The channel has just announced that.

If you're scratching your head thinking, oh, I didn't know Lee Anderson was there.

I thought it was somebody else.

Well, it was.

It's also Jacob Rees-Mogg and Esther McVeigh and Philip Davis, three other Tory MPs, one former big beast in the cabinet who are GB News hosts and contributors.

But we shouldn't, of course, leave out Talk TV, which hosts Nadine Dorris, and her groundbreaking interview with Boris Johnson.

Where there was no stone left unturned.

It was tough.

Oh, my word, it was brutal.

And we should just make clear as well, these are all serving MPs.

They haven't left Parliament yet.

Some of them, like Dorris has said, that they are going to leave Parliament, but they still are MPs.

They have constituents.

Some of these shows, by the way, are on a Saturday, which is normally typically when MPs go to their constituencies and do their work and so on.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

But I don't know.

For one, I just think it's reassuring that having been leathered over many years that the traditional broadcast media just is a cesspit of partiality.

It's just good to see sitting cabinets as MPs taking impartiality onto television, which the public have long desired and clamoured for.

Well, Lee Anderson has said GB News is the true voice of the Great British Silent Majority, and I'm joining the People's Channel to ensure their voice is heard.

The serious point about this is that, look, in an era where politics is so visceral and it is so important, it is really, really important that politicians are subject to proper scrutiny and proper interrogation.

And their answer, or at least on the conservative side for this, has been to say, oh, well, lambast traditional broadcasters for being against them or not being truly impartial or whatever.

But the answer surely cannot be that we end up in a situation, allow America, where we have different television stations for essentially different political points of view.

But we don't really have that at the moment.

Because the truth is, whatever they say, as we know, whatever they say about traditional broadcasters, they are not representing a particular party in a way which, increasingly, you would never get a sitting cabinet minister on the BBC, say, given just their own show, to go and say whatever they like.

Look, in fairness, we should say that LBC, who we work alongside, hosts David Lambie, who is a sitting Labour minister, a shadow minister, and Kiss Dahmer has had a call-in show and Nick Clegg has had a call-in show.

I think the difference, though, seems to me that they are taking calls from the public.

Which is really hard.

They are sitting there.

And Matt Hancock actually has done it as well, maybe to his peril.

But they have sat there taking calls from the public and having to answer for their policies and their words and their parties as they have done to the public.

I'm not sure that these stations are necessarily offering that direct communication with those people.

And the goal of politicians to be able to speak unmediated by the media, that I just want a platform to get my message across and to a soapbox.

And it seems that these people are being given soapboxes where they will not be challenged on their views.

They will not be held accountable for the actions that they've taken or the decisions that they've made or the policies that they've introduced.

And that is kind of scary for democracy.

Just on the LBC point, someone who does an LBC show, obviously six to nine on a Friday, as you know.

You're both listening at all times.

Well, I wouldn't go anywhere else.

The point, there is nothing that is more dangerous than taking questions from callers, either if you're a presenter or you're a politician, because you never know what they're going

[Transcript] The News Agents / Should Gary Lineker be free to speak his mind?

to say.

That is interrogation par excellence, hyper interrogation and scrutiny.

There is a world of difference between that and just giving a politician their own show where they interview their mates, their friends and give them soft soap questions.

It is a fusion between entertainment and politics that we should be very wary of.

We will be back tomorrow.

I'll be eating humble pie over some of the language that I've used in this podcast.

We'll see you then.

Bye.

Bye.

Bye-bye.

Global Player, original podcast and a Persephoneka production.