

## [Transcript] The News Agents / SNP - it's getting worse

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

In late January of this year, Nicola Sturgeon was telling anyone who'd listened that she had plenty in the tank, that she was going to go on and on.

He's now April and a lot has happened since then.

Part of serving well would be to know almost instinctively when the time is right to make way for someone else.

In my head and in my heart, I know that time is now.

Detectives departing after more than 30 hours.

Time spent scouring the home of ex-SMP chief Peter Murrell, the husband of Nicola Sturgeon.

Now it's reported another police raid, this time at Peter Murrell's mother's home, 50 miles away.

The £100,000 luxury motorhome was reportedly wheeled away from the house in Fife, as part of the active investigation into SMP finances.

Thank you all for coming along on Easter weekend.

The last few days have been obviously difficult, quite traumatic at times, but I understand that is part of a process.

This is LBC.

From Global's newsroom at 11 o'clock, detectives investigating the SMP's finances and funding have made another arrest.

Party treasurer Colin Beattie is being questioned in the long-running inquiry into the use of money earmarked for independence campaigning.

Just when you thought you'd got over the rapid resignation of Nicola Sturgeon, the arrest of her husband, that weird blue tent in the garden, the removal of the camper van from the mother-in-law.

This happens.

Colin Beattie arrested into that inquiry into party finances as the chief treasurer of the party.

And this is quite a moment.

The second high-profile arrest made by officers examining concerns that £600,000 raised by supporters to fund that second independence referendum campaign had gone missing.

Welcome to the news, agents.

The news, agents.

It's John.

It's Emily.

And it's Lewis.

And a little bit later on in the pod, we're going to be talking about what is happening in Sudan and the weird path that takes it back to Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

But it has been quite a few weeks for the SMP.

And Lewis, I guess the timeline on this is really interesting, to watch the arc of this all unfold.

It has been a real slow burn of a story going back to May 2021.

So May 2021, a guy called Douglas Chapman, who is an SMP MP, who was the party treasurer before the guy who just resigned, Colin Beattie, and slightly confusingly after as well, but I'll return to that, resigned.

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He resigned from his role as party treasurer, saying he had not been given enough information to do the job.

Now, that was a bit cryptic at the time.

People didn't quite understand what he meant by that.

Nicola Sturgeon at the time disputed that assessment.

And Joanna Cherry, another SMP MP, senior one, and a bit of an enemy of Nicola Sturgeon really also resigned from her role for similar reasons from the National Executive Committee of the party.

Now, shortly after that, in July 2021, Police Scotland confirmed that they were investigating after seven complaints were made around donations to the SMP.

In August 2021, the party acknowledges that there is concern.

Colin Beattie, the guy who just resigned, the treasurer, has said there was concern.

In December 2022, so there's a bit of a time gap, this loan, a potential loan from Peter Murrell, the Scottish chief executive of £100,000 emerged, and Nicola Sturgeon, his wife, said the resources that he lent the party were resources that belonged to him.

In February 2023, Nicola Sturgeon resigned.

In March 2023, Peter Murrell resigned.

In April 2023, Murrell is arrested.

Today, the treasurer has been arrested.

So it's our slow burn story with a spider's web of connections right across the top of the SMP.

But I'd say if there's one thing that links it from that resignation of the former treasurer to where we are now, the continuum, if you like, the meme is that short phrase that has been sort of attributed now to Nicola Sturgeon that there is nothing to see here, that her answer to any suggestion of impropriety or any missing thousands or any questions that delve a little bit deeper, whether by journalists or by her own National Executive Committee or by former colleagues and treasurers is like, well, don't go looking for problems that, honestly, save yourself the time, there's nothing to see here.

And I think this is where the comeuppance is starting to hit home now, because the people asking those questions were not just asking them since January.

They were not just asking them since last week.

They've been asking them for two years.

And I think a lot of people who are closer to this story probably than we are in the Scottish press and the Scottish media have also been onto these questions of where the money went and why questions haven't been answered.

And I think there is something about a party that has been in power for so long that feels it somehow isn't as answerable as it would have been in the early days, certainly not as answerable as in opposition, that you sort of think, we've got this, don't worry about it, we'll be OK here.

Trust us.

You know, I was Paris correspondent 20 years ago and there was this huge scandal about the fact that money would be distributed to private ministries in cash for ministers to spend how they want.

And it was a leftover from the resistance that they felt they needed to do this.

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And it's as almost as though the SNP has found itself a revolutionary army to start with, has grown into this big organization with vast membership in Scotland and yet was still operating in a way that was somehow above what was normal practice for a conventional political party.

And I think there has been a degree of comeuppance in the way that this has unfolded.

As you said, Nicola Sturgeon, there's nothing to see here.

It turns out there was quite a lot to see and a lot that caused concern.

One of the things you left out of your very comprehensive timeline was that the auditors sacked the SNP and said, we no longer want you as a client.

Now sure, sometimes auditors do refine who they are having, but it's kind of normally the client that sacks the auditors rather than the auditors who sack the clients.

And it was all part of that thing that I think that they just felt that they didn't operate in a conventional way and needed to operate by conventional means.

What it speaks to, and we should of course, reiterate that the players involved in this, including those who've been arrested, maintained that they've done nothing wrong, and indeed Peter Murrell, Nicola Sturgeon's husband, the former chief executive, was released without charge.

Yeah, there have been no charges.

No, there have been no charges.

No charges.

And so the other thing with regards to what we can say about the treasurer today is very limited by the fact that this is obviously a very lied investigation and we are legally limited about what we're able to say beyond the fact it's happened and we pretty much know who it is.

But I think what it speaks to was just the hegemony that the SNP have enjoyed for so long within Scotland, where almost with the SNP the interest, certainly how they've come to perceive it, that the interest of the SNP and Scotland itself were one and the same that they were coterminous, but of course that wasn't the case.

But more than that, also just the deep hegemony that Sturgeon and Murrell as a married couple enjoyed within the SNP, that they were beyond scrutiny to some extent.

And just the very fact, and this did raise eyebrows throughout that period, just the very fact actually that Sturgeon as the leader of the party and her husband could be the chief executive, could wield that kind of power itself isn't really normal for a Western democratic party.

I mean it would sort of basically be the equivalent of like Boris Johnson being prime minister and Carrie Johnson being chairman of the Conservative Party.

I mean imagine the questions that would have been generated if you had a formalised arrangement like that.

It wasn't normal, it isn't normal, and to some extent this is unwinding.

Yeah, I think the irony is it probably wouldn't have raised questions within the Conservative party itself or the Conservative membership itself.

They probably would have thought that can operate great as all sort of in-house.

And so I suppose it depends whether you think that the SNP saw itself as so aligned with the Scottish people at the time because it was hugely successful.

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I mean that's the point.

It was such a hugely successful electoral being, body.

It was in government pretty much since almost the beginning of devolution.

We forget that.

It's won every election in Scotland since 2007, apart from the general election of 2010.

It's won every single election pretty much since then.

So at that point I think you start thinking well actually I have got a democratic mandate.

I can start deciding what the party does or doesn't do because it feels as if you are being reinforced each time an election comes around and you win.

And you add into that as well the SNP up to this point again remarkably has been so homogenous.

It has acted almost always with a single voice.

They of course have disagreements, they're a big party, but nearly always they've been conducted internally to the point that people have described them as a monolith, that everything is done on the inside, not the outside, they don't air their dirty linen in public.

My word, boy, that has changed now.

Yes.

And it's worth going back two years because a leaked recording emerged this weekend of Nicola Sturgeon talking to the executive of the SNP apparently on a Zoom call where she is trying to tell them that everything is just hunky-dory.

The party has never been in a stronger financial position than it is right now and that's a reflection of our strength and our membership.

So just a bit of context for us all to remember.

Secondly, I'm not going to get into the details, that's for Douglas, that's what he's elected to do and of course this body is the governing body of the party.

But just be very careful, all of us, about suggestions that there are problems with the party's finances because we depend on donors to donate, there are no reasons for people to be concerned about the party's finances and all of us need to be careful about not suggesting that there is.

And lastly, we've got to be careful as an NEC, we don't reap what we sow.

If we have leaks from this body, as I said earlier on, it limits the ability for open free and frank discussion.

This body is the governing body of the party with the responsibility to pass a budget and if we, so in all the years I've been on it, there has been good quality, detailed financial information given by national treasurers and that's how it should be.

But if there are leaks, as with everything else, that gets more difficult to do.

So everybody has to be very clear about that and you know, if I was a betting person and just to be clear, Alison, this is not directed at you in any way, shape or form, but if I was a betting person, I would bet we'll see the statement that's just been read out in public this afternoon.

You see, two years ago, that probably sounded great, but now knowing what we know, be careful about suggestions that there are problems with our finances.

We depend on donors, we mustn't put them off.

I, we don't tell them the truth of the situation and there better not be leaks from this because that would be damaging.

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It sounds like that that is kind of, you guys better watch it.

You step out of line one inch, but you can hear her dominance in that, can't you?

I mean, you can hear how firm she is and how much she controls that body.

But of course, the S&P isn't now being led by Nicola Sturgeon.

It's being led by Humza Youssef and he essentially got the job partly as a result of being continuity Sturgeon.

Now, I bet you he's wishing that he hadn't been quite so close to the former leadership because he has to make some really serious decisions now.

He only won that election by, as we know famously, 52 to 48% against Kate Forbes.

Kate Forbes, I'm imagining, is running round with bunting and balloons and birthday cake thinking, thank God, I didn't inherit this massive shit show.

He's the one now who's got to decide, is he loyal to what's gone before?

Does he build on everything he knows about how successful she was at least electorally?

Or does he get the knives out?

Does he cut them dead?

Does he say, I had no idea of any of this and I, again, no charges have been made?

But what does he have to do politically?

Does he cut himself off completely?

Does he wield the knife?

Well, two points on that.

I mean, the first point is that I think if you're Kate Forbes, you think, actually, my job would be relatively easy now because I'm not continuity Sturgeon.

I can say, my God, it was even worse than I thought it was.

What a shower these people have been.

We need to change direction.

And I think she would have found that quite an elegant and swift move to make on that.

But also, you know, Hamza Youssef today was due to be launching a speech on a reset for the SMP, the future of the next three years as a party.

And on the day he's due to do that, the treasurer gets arrested.

It was like the major years where every time that John Mank to try to relaunch, some ghastly skeleton would come tumbling out of a cupboard and completely blow apart the efforts to relaunch.

And you just feel that the SMP is in that space.

This is how he addressed the position just a short time ago.

It certainly is not helpful, of course.

I wanted to, and I will still in the terminal, of course, to articulate what my vision is as a new leader and a fresh start for the government.

So I'll still do that, of course, at 20 minutes past two, and I hope that we can move on to speak about those issues.

Look, I'm not going to take away from the fact that the table of this is far-providing.

But this is the point, right?

Hamza Youssef, again, completely out of his control.

He has not had a beginning to his administration, his government.

He has not had basically a single day when he's been able to set the terms.

The political terms have all been set for him.

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This is long-sturgeon, just as in a way you've had exactly the same Conservative parties had the same experience of Long Boris Johnson.

It's very similar dynamics.

And there's two other questions for this as well now.

Again, speaking to the extraordinary fall of Sturgeon, how rapid the descent of her reputation has been, there is now even talk about her having to resign as an MSP.

Because the suggestion is at any time that she tries to make any kind of intervention in the Scottish Parliament, that she tries to do anything, it's always hard for former leaders anyway, will be such a further distraction for Youssef that it's a huge problem. He's already being asked about whether he thinks she should resign and so on.

Again, that long Sturgeon.

And the second point we heard in that clip there from a couple of years ago, Sturgeon talking about we have to be careful in terms of donors.

Well, my God, has the SNP, if you talk to SNP people at the moment, their concern will be about getting donors now.

Because quite frankly, with this poll being cast over the Scottish National Party, what donors are going to want to touch it?

And we've got a general election coming up in 12 months to 18 months time, which will be absolutely crucial, which will probably determine whether or not Youssef is able to continue assuming he gets that far.

It is just a nightmare scenario in every direction.

There's also an extra detail that I'm going to quote from Mandy Rhodes, actually, who is an editor of Holly Roode Daily.

And that is that Colin Beattie, the MSP, the member of the Scottish Parliament who's just today been arrested, Party Treasurer, is also a member of the Public Audit Committee in the Scottish Parliament.

And their job is to push for greater transparency in public expenditure and in public life.

It's feeling like a very small party indeed, where all these issues are interlinked.

The one other question I'd raise is about independence and whether Scotland and independence can ever be separate from the SNP?

Because if you look at the polls, the SNP has massively tumbled, maybe not unexpectedly.

They're still fast, but yeah.

They're still first, but I think they've lost about nine percentage points in the last three or four weeks.

And yet I don't think that has necessarily knocked the place of independence off.

So now we're looking at this really interesting place where, in my head, certainly, I'd always assumed that the Yes campaign for Scotland had to be linked to the SNP.

Now you're starting to think, gosh, is there another route or is there another opening?

Is there a way for another party to come through on that or does one bring the other down?

I think most independence, pro-independence people are now looking at this thinking that the short-term prospects for independence have fallen off a cliff for all sorts of reasons, the Westminster dynamic, what's going on in London, but also in terms of what's going on with the SNP.

But the long-term, they're just much more sanguine because you look at the polling and you can

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see that particularly...

And you look at the generation...

Exactly.

The 18 to 24s, the under 30s, even the under 40s, much more in favour of independence to sometimes an overwhelming extent.

But obviously, if you've been fighting for this, if you were at the top of the SNP and been fighting for this last, you know, 10, 20, 30, 40 years, the prospects of independence in the 2030s or the 2040s is not exactly the happiest one.

But nonetheless, they are more sanguine about it over the long term.

Absolutely fascinating.

And after the break, we're going to be talking about what might seem the most intractable incomprehensible dispute in Sudan.

But there is a thread to that with what is happening in Ukraine, to what is happening in other parts of Africa, which is about this shadow mercenary army called the Wagner Group. And we will be looking at the impact they're having on geopolitics around the world.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back.

Now, on The News Agents, we try to bring you stories where there is something that's really interesting to talk about that we think, you know, there's a debate to be had.

And I heard the story about what was happening in Sudan and the fighting around Khartoum and the terrible civilian injuries and thought, this is awful, but I don't really understand what this is about and how do we make it relevant to people?

And yet you came up last night and said, actually, I think there is something really interesting. And I was fascinated by what you came up with.

Yeah, because the deaths and the violence in Sudan, which is horrific in its own right, becomes central to the whole question right now of where geopolitical power lies.

And essentially, it's Russian power.

But it's not just the Russian state, or at least it's not only the Russian state.

It is the Russian mercenary group called Wagner.

And Wagner is this very shady presence run by a guy called Prigoshin, Evgeny Prigoshin, who got an extraordinary backstory.

He started life as a petty criminal.

He spent time in prison.

He emerged from prison in St. Petersburg in early 2000s, ran a hot dog stall, got into the back chains of money and command through what was happening in St. Petersburg, and essentially started this mercenary group.

And he would go to the prisons and say, you're allowed to be free if you give us six months of your time working in places that are useful for President Putin.

One of the early places was Syria back in 2012.

Then it was Crimea, the first invasion into Ukraine in 2014.

And we have now seen this mercenary group or network wrapping its tentacles around lots of very unstable countries in Africa.

And the latest one is Sudan.

And they work by getting not paid for necessarily in sort of orthodox means, but by getting gold,

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diamonds, oil, natural resources.

And it's not like it's one army.

They have 3,000 militia in Africa, and they sort of deploy them to different places depending on where Putin can see and in.

It's a mixture of sort of mafioso gangster sort of warfare and stuff that is really going to unsettle states and hopefully give him a strategic alliance or a strategic in.

And so that's where for me, this all got really interesting.

And for me too.

And then I started reading about it and you realize what the Wagner group is up to.

I mean, it's a sort of neocolonialism in some ways of going into a country thinking, oh, yeah, well, we'll have your gold and your diamonds and your rare metals.

We'll have that because that will do us good.

We can also exercise some influence.

So you think of West Africa, where the French have had a very traditionally historically a very strong footprint, France starts pulling its troops out, the Wagner group goes in backing the rebels, supporting them and destabilizing countries so that Russia's influence in those places becomes stronger.

And what we don't know is the extent to which the Wagner group is just like one of the old trading companies of the 18th century or 19th century that was enriching itself on the.

You mean like the East India?

The East India Company, I was thinking of exactly, although not by the same means or whether it is taking its orders from the Kremlin because at the moment we've also talked a lot about the siege of Bakhmut in Ukraine, which is being fought by the Wagner group.

Are they taking their orders from Moscow because they are causing enormous resentment within the Moscow Defence Ministry because Prugoshin has been saying how useless Russian forces have been, but his guys can get the job done.

And I think if you take us back 10 years, when you looked at influence in Africa, we always talked about the Belt and Road China initiative.

China had worked out really early on that actually if you go and build hospitals, motorways, airports, big infrastructure projects in Africa, they will do business with you.

And I think this is Russia coming in the back door, right?

Not actually building anything, just kind of killing and taking.

But essentially, Africa is now in the grip of these two superpowers, China and Russia, that are essentially both building it and pulling it apart.

Well, we're joined in the studio now by Tim Marshall, journalist, foreign affairs expert, bloody successful author annoyingly with another new book out, *The Future of Geography, How Power and Politics in Space Will Change Our World*.

Tim, thanks so much for being with us.

How important is the Wagner group?

They're a player.

They're a player in domestic Russian politics, which is quite new.

They're a player in Ukraine, which a lot of us know.

And they've been a player in Africa since at least about 2016.

They have changed.



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In 2016, they go into various African states and they are there for two reasons, plunder, gold, particularly gold in several countries.

But also to prop up, whichever dictator hires them.

They become more and more important, they're in more and more, they're in at least 10 African countries now.

They're as far down as Madagascar, very big in the Sahel.

They love a vacuum.

So when the French, for example, pulled out of Mali, they go into Mali because the warlords need protection.

But where they've changed, I think, is in the last 12 months and the invasion of Ukraine, because they are one of the major fighting forces among the Russian forces.

In fact, without the Wagner group, the Russian forces would not have achieved what little they have.

The head of the Wagner has fallen out very badly with the chief of general staff, with Gerasimov, the Russian general, and with the Russian defense minister.

To the extent, this is slightly outlandish, but it is something that is spoken about.

In the event of Putin falling under a bus and a power struggle, the Wagner group will be a player in Russian politics.

I tell you what I want to ask you.

We call it the Wagner group, but that doesn't quite do it justice.

Is it an army with a conventional command and control structure?

Is it a series of militias that do their own thing?

I mean, I'm just trying to work out, is it got a foreign policy?

Does it have a foreign minister?

No.

Does it have a defense secretary?

What is it?

It has an accountant, I'm pretty sure, because that's what it's for.

It's to make its leaders incredibly rich, and it has done exactly that.

If it had a different name, you would call it an army.

It has a structure.

It has generals, colonels, privates, you name it.

It has equipment.

It has specialists that know how to use certain types of artillery.

It has special forces within it, and it has rank-and-file infantry.

It's a militia because it's not an arm of the state.

The name comes actually from the call sign of the founder.

His call sign was Wagner here, and that's why it's called Wagner.

Probably a lot of thunder and lightning going on with the Wagner element as well.

The new guy is clearly the head of it, and you probably know he goes into the Russian Jails.

He gets the...

Progression.

The worst of the worst out of the Russian Jails.

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It says you can be free, but you've got to fight.

You've got to fight mass murderers, rapists, you name it, out you come, get on the front lines, six months, if you survive, you're free.

You can imagine the elements among them.

I know the Russian army has a bad name in many respects, including its behavior, but these guys are at another level.

Even the ordinary Russian military, not the ones that do the war crimes, but the ordinary Russian military, look at various scents at these people.

They are the lowest.

So does Putin feel threatened by Progression?

Because what I'm trying to understand here, Tim, is the chain of command.

Individual African countries and the opponents, the opposition parties that are bringing them in, is it Putin that's sending them here?

Are they completely autonomous?

This is also the change, because in 2016, Putin ran, does no longer run a tight ship, he ran a tight ship.

And they are a wing of Russian foreign policy, a wing of the state.

You know what I mean?

If the Russian government supported government X and the Wagner group wanted to support an opposition leader, no, that would not be on.

So they are secondary to the apparatus of the Russian state.

If you want to steal the gold, or be paid in gold by the warlords near the gold mines in these African countries, Putin hasn't got a problem with that, you know, take as much and kill whoever you want.

I don't care.

But you are an arm at a distance of the Russian state.

But I just think because they've become so powerful, I think they've moved on another level and they can make their own decisions.

And Putin is pretty busy at the moment.

I mean, Russians have called for a ceasefire in Sudan.

The fact is that the Wagner group are closer to one of the two factions and they will do whatever it takes to come out on top and carry on making all the profits they do out of the gold mines.

Is it almost like Putin has created a Frankenstein monster that is now more powerful than Putin?

It's an open question as to whether they're more powerful.

You know, we're not sure just how much control the Kremlin has over its various factions.

I mean, he does appear to be in the Kremlin whose walls are closing in on him.

And as I said, the relationship between the Russian army and the Wagner group is very, very poor, very poor.

Which is presumably a risk for Prokosian.

The Russian army decided, sorry, you are in the way now.

And vice versa.

Because as I said, it is fairly outlandish but not unthinkable.

Putin falls under a bus.

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This guy has a shot at running Russia.

I mean, you know, from being Putin's chef, as he was called, and you know, running the hot dog stand, got a small cafe, began to do the food for the Kremlin, Putin made in what he is.

And then as you say, John, he has turned into a bit of Frankenstein's monster.

So as we're speaking, Tim, we know that the generals in the Sudan conflict have agreed to this 24-hour ceasefire in Khartoum.

That was basically at the request of Tony Blinken, the US foreign secretary.

Talk us through the impact the Wagner group are having in Sudan right now.

What are they doing?

Well, that is something of a mystery.

I suspect the elite amongst them will be very close to the head of the RSF.

The RSF.

The Rapid Support Forces.

This is the background to what's happening in Sudan.

Even further back.

Let's start again in 2016.

Bashir, then the president of Sudan, brought in the Wagner group to shore up the regime.

He was then deposed by the current president and vice president.

The current president runs the army.

The vice president runs the Rapid Support Forces, this paramilitary force that grew out of the Janjawid militias in Darfur.

So you've got two armed groups with two powerful politicians, each of which wants to be in charge.

And then the army, realizing it's got this paramilitary group, wants to integrate it into the army and bring it under its own command.

I mean, I don't want to go too quickly to Nazi Germany, but you know your history and you know there was the brown shirts and on the night of the Long Knives, this paramilitary force in Germany were all taken out and that left the Nazi party is the only power in town.

That's a vague comparison because you've got an armed faction, the RSF, run by the vice president.

You've got the army run by the president.

Those are the two groups that are fighting.

And then to bring it home, the Wagner group are closer to the RSF, much closer to the RSF than they are to the president and the army.

I don't know if they've got quite enough troops there to make the difference.

I suspect the elite are surrounding the head of the RSF, the vice president, keeping him safe and they're watching to see what comes out.

I'm glad there's a 24-hour ceasefire.

It gives them something to build on.

The Americans do have some sway there.

So is there an end game here for Putin?

I mean, if you had to say this is not part of former Soviet, right?

This is not him trying to rebuild an empire.

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Putin has very successfully made Russia a player on the world stage.

He invaded Georgia.

He planted himself right back in the Middle East, intervening in Syria.

And as you see the Russian influence grow and grow and grow, it begins to grow worldwide.

Not as much as China's, places like Latin America, but they are in Latin America as well, the Russians.

Didn't the Wagner group step in to keep Maduro in power because they realised they were Russian in Venezuela because they were Russian oil.

And this is the point.

They began as both plunderers and a wing of Russian foreign policy with deniable implausibility in this particular case, but they grow more important.

So when you look at what they're doing in the Sahel region, particularly Mali and increasingly Burkina Faso, the French have pulled out there is a vacuum.

The leaders there need someone to shore them up, make sure there's no coup against them.

And into that vacuum becomes Russia in the guise of the Wagner group, because that then increases Russia's influence in Africa.

And remember, of course, there are gold mines, but there's also a yellow cake in Niger.

I mean, that regime is not tottering yet.

What's the yellow cake?

I'm sorry, yellow cake is something you use for.

Yellow cake goes back to the Iraq war.

The search for yellow cake in the intelligence.

You make nuclear bombs out of it.

It's a nuclear ingredient.

There's a nuclear.

Yes.

Thank you for being so succinct.

So as well as that, there's other elements that people want in that part of the world.

And so this is 21st century technology.

Some of it runs off this stuff.

You need to have a presence there.

We partially have taken our eye for the ball.

The Americans certainly would rather the Europeans took more responsibility for what they regard as their, their, almost their backyard on down from the Mediterranean.

And so into that vacuum comes Russia to make itself a global player.

Tim Morshal, absolutely fascinating.

Really great to have that sort of spelled out for us.

And good luck with the new book, Tim.

The future of geography out next week.

We'll be back in a moment where we'll be talking about red balls, yellow balls, and all those orange balls too.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back.

And now we're going to hear from a man who's had a pretty traumatic 24 hours.

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John Perry.

Well, I don't quite know what that was for.

Well, these are terrible, terrible scenes here.

The Crucible.

You're tittering.

No, actually, you're roaring with laughter.

You big snooker fan, mate.

I've seen a lot of terrible, terrible scenes.

I've actually been very many times to the Crucible in Sheffield where I grew up.

I've never seen anything that was described in quite such apocalyptic terms.

Born with a snooker cue in our hand.

Yeah, mate.

We've obviously got a bit of a theme running this week on The News Agents, which is protest.

Yesterday we were doing Animal Rising and the protests at Aintree, and last night we had a man turning himself orange on a snooker table.

Well, there's someone who used to excel only in my PE lessons where we did snooker, which we literally did do.

I have to say I did find this particularly grossly offensive.

How did you get fit playing snooker?

Well, I mean, you know, some serious cue action.

Hang on.

Sorry, I'm much more interested in this now.

You did snooker in PE.

You didn't do rugby.

You didn't do football.

You didn't do cricket.

If you don't mean when I was 14, John, I would definitely not have done rugby.

We had an option.

I was about 14, and we had an option at my school in Birmingham to go to...

We could either do football.

Well, I hated that.

Rugby was no way I was doing that.

I mean, bear in mind as well, I was 14 and about 15 stone.

I was rounder than I was at all.

And snooker.

And I was like, well, fantastic.

But the thing was, it was actively bad for our health because we would go, we'd walk there, which was, I suppose, all right, but then we'd go via the Moby Dick fish bar, fish and chip bar, and then go to the Q Club in West Heath in Birmingham.

And it was even then it was pre-smoking ban.

So we used to go in and the air was thick with smoke about two o'clock in the afternoon, and the teacher would just come in and have a pint and say, everything all right, lad.

As a consequence, I'm quite good at snooker.

So I did find this grossly offensive.

## [Transcript] The News Agents / SNP - it's getting worse

Did you?

Did you find it?

I mean, do you think they ruined?

It was absolutely hilarious.

Do you think, oh my God, this is just stop oil, we have to say.

Yeah.

The same guys that have done the Van Gogh throwing paint and the M25 and all the rest of it.

Did you find that a stupid, idiotic disruption of a great evening?

Or did you think, yeah, well done, we're all talking about you?

Well, it was worth it with the commentary, right?

I mean, terrible scenes.

No, well, look, I'm really ambivalent about this.

On one hand, maybe it is true that ultimately I can absolutely see that they're basically winding a lot of people up and making them really just like them.

But on the other hand, it is true.

We are all talking about it.

And the question clearly is, what is going to be next?

It's not, have we got a big event coming?

I can't think of anything.

A big national event coming.

Are we making anyone?

They might be making some authorities sweat.

Yeah.

Look, I felt a bit sorry for the people who'd gone to watch snooker last night.

They loved it.

Yeah, they watched it.

Would you really mind?

That's what I don't know.

I'm not a snooker fan.

But if something happened in the middle of a snooker game, I'd be so bloody delighted.

I mean, it is a game based on the colours of the ball.

So it's a little bit of an issue when every ball is orange.

Yeah.

So I kind of thought last night, when I heard about this, I'll, you know, but I also thought well, what does that mean?

Oh, you know, well, I thought that come on, you know, what is this going to do to affect whether we use oil or not?

It's a soapbox coming out.

And I don't think BP shall be thinking, oh my God, there's been disruption at the crucible.

I don't think so.

But does everyone in the country now know Just Stop Oil?

Yes.

But what a genius bit of protest that didn't injure anybody and has got you on the front page of most national newspapers because it's so visually arresting what they have done.

## [Transcript] The News Agents / SNP - it's getting worse

Do you know what I once did?

Twenty years ago, fathers for justice were the people that were the equivalent, if you like, of Just Stop Oil.

They had purple powder in the House of Commons, sort of famously dusted Tony Blair's shoulders.

They clung onto machinery, they climbed amazing monuments, they did all the rest of it.

I kind of want to know whether fathers for justice have disappeared now because they've got fathers' rights or because it didn't work.

They're grandfathers now, of course.

Grandfathers for justice.

Grandfathers for justice now.

I don't know.

I mean, if you don't hear from a pressure group ever again, does it mean they succeeded?

They changed the conversation.

I think there were legal changes after that one.

So it did work.

I think if you're from fathers for justice and you're listening to this, please tell us what actually happened.

I've got a quiz question for Lewis Goodall as a snooker aficionado.

Why is it so popular?

An ex-player as well.

Why is it so popular?

Well, because it's such a great exercise, John.

It got popular.

Such great exercise for all slightly overweight 14-year-old boys.

Well, there's that, obviously.

But it got popular in the UK when colour television came in.

Of course, yeah.

Because when it was black and white, there was a famous piece of commentary where the commentator said, for those of you watching in black and white, the blue ball is next to the green.

And you had no idea.

What was what?

Millions.

Yeah.

Last night, it was the same problem because every ball was orange.

It's just not as good as that unforgettable bit of cricket commentary, is it?

The boulders holding.

The batsman's willy.

That was one of the great pieces of this.

And apparently, it wasn't rehearsed.

Of course it wasn't.

Because they couldn't speak afterwards.

If only we could replicate something magic here.

We'll be back tomorrow.

**[Transcript] The News Agents / SNP - it's getting worse**

Hopefully.

We're off to the Moby Dick fish bar.

Bye for now.

Bye.

Bye-bye.

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