

[Transcript] The News Agents / Speedy Suella: How long can she last?

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

Any regrets, Home Secretary?

Are you subject to different laws than the rest of us, Home Secretary?

Is it time to go?

Well, that was the Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, except, of course, it wasn't the Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, because answer came there none to the shouted questions from reporters who were on the doorstep as she was swept into her chauffeur-driven car where there's no chance of getting speeding points when the police are driving you. But a little while later, we did get an answer of sorts.

This is a classic of the pool clip genre.

Last summer I was speeding, I regret that.

I paid the fine and I took the points,

but we're focused now on delivering for the British people and working for them.

Did you ask civil servants to put you on a one-on-one speeding course?

In relation to the process, I'm focused on delivering for the British people, do my job, but what I will say is that, in my view,

I'm confident that nothing untoward has happened.

What are you focused on?

I'm focused on the future.

I'm focused on delivering for the British people listening to the news agents.

I'm focused on not having to answer that pesky question

about whether I did indeed ask for a one-on-one course

and whether, when my advisers were asked about whether I'd had a speeding ticket four times by the Daily Mirror, they said,

no, don't want to focus on that particularly either.

I'm also focused on being the next leader of the Conservative Party.

Which, of course, is what might be being played out here.

Welcome to the news agents.

The news agents.

It's John.

It's Emily.

And later, we're going to be talking to the former Justice Secretary, Robert Buckland, about the position Suella Braverman now finds herself in.

But let's go back to all of this,

because it starts really small, insignificant, minute, tiny even, about the fact that she got done for speeding.

No big deal.

But she didn't want to take three points on her licence, well, fair enough.

And of course, if you've got no other offences in the previous three years, you get offered the chance to go on a speed awareness course.

It sounds as though I'm speaking from experience.

I am.

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Me too.

I got offered a speed awareness course.

But she wanted a speed awareness course without the peskiness of having anyone else around you, just like a one on one.

It's like being on a plane.

You'd much rather be on a private plane where you're by yourself, rather than having the general public there too.

The weird thing about a speed awareness course, and weirdly, I never got to do mine because COVID came along, and so they kind of find me and that was it.

But the weird thing is, from friends who've been on it, they say it's a great experience,

because actually, you are with really interesting people.

And the only thing you've got in common is the fact that you all spared along different parts of the highway,

and you all have to go through the same thing.

But you would have thought a politician who was actually looking to speak to her wider constituency would quite like the chance to speak to people,

meet more of the public, talk to people on a one on one basis, show a bit of humility as a leader.

OK, we're not going to see I2I on the joy of speed awareness courses.

I did one. I wanted to kill anyone who started talking about their own driver experiences, because I thought this is taking another 45 minutes.

What, of course, is unusual about Zuella Braverman's position is she is the Home Secretary.

She is in charge of the laws of the land, if you like,

and yet she was seeking a favour by all appearances

of trying to get someone to do her a one on one course so she didn't have to mingle with the public.

That is not an option that is open to you or me or anyone who's listening to this podcast.

That was the first thing.

The second thing which came out, and I think this gets really interesting,

is the Mirror reported in the newspaper today that they'd also heard this story that she'd been done for speeding.

So they ring the Home Office, they speak to her special advisers, and they categorically deny that she has been done for speeding.

So you're lying to a newspaper.

So if they had accepted it and no one else leaked it, the lie would have stood.

And that is corrosive.

So it might go back even further than that,

and it might go back to the very night that Sunak found himself in a position to accept the Conservative leadership.

And on that night, and I remember because we did a newsagents emergency episode, you can go and hear it, Boris Johnson had just pulled out of the leadership race.

And from what we learned subsequently,

Suella Braverman had essentially gone to Rishi Sunak and said,

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I will drop my bid if you appoint me to a central role,
i.e. Home Secretary, in your cabinet.
And at this point, I was told much later that Rishi Sunak had gone off to sort of friends and associates
to talk about what was on offer and had said,
I could be the Prime Minister, but I'd have to have fucking Suella,
his words, apparently, in my cabinet.
So I don't think those two ever saw eye to eye.
So you might choose to frame this with a bigger question,
which is whether Rishi Sunak would be quietly, subtly happy to see her go fall on her sword
for something like this, if he thinks that she is getting pretty jumped up in her own position.
And when he was at the G7 last week in Japan, he was asked a question about it.
Just listen to the response.
Will you ask the independence adviser on Minister's interest to look into your Home Secretary's
conduct
after she asked civil servants to help her deal with being caught speeding,
and do you have full confidence in Suella Braverman?
Did you have any questions about the summit?
Others will, I think.
Well, Chris, I don't know the full details of what has happened,
nor have I spoken to the Home Secretary.
I think you can see firsthand what I've been doing over the last day or so.
But I understand that she's expressed regret for speeding,
accepted the penalty, and paid the fine.
Do you have full confidence?
It may have been oversight on his part, but did not answer that question.
And normally, all the time that I've been reporting politics,
you have full confidence in a minister until such times as you don't, and they go.
So it's perfectly possible your theory is that Rishi Sunak might be quite happy to see the back of her.
The alternative theory is that Suella Braverman wants to see the back of Rishi Sunak,
extricate herself from the cabinet, and then she can be the torch around which people rally
as the alternative pole to Rishi Sunak, so that she lines herself up
that if there are bad things happen to Rishi Sunak in the coming months,
she's ready to step in.
And if Rishi Sunak loses the next election, she has been outside the government
and can present herself as the voice and conscience of the Conservative Party
to take it forward into this new era.
Yeah, and just before we leave that clip completely, a lot of people have read into that
or heard into that his anger at being asked this question when he was at the G7 in Japan.
It wasn't that hard a question for him.
It wasn't like when Tony Blair turned up in Japan after the death of David Kelly
and somebody yelled, have you got blood on your hands, Prime Minister?
And there was this absolutely deathly silence.
I wonder whether Rishi Sunak's anger is slightly overstated there.

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And if he was delighted to be asked about that stuff because it makes him look as if he doesn't really want to be dealing with these very pernicious, unimportant, tiny, insular rouse. But actually he gets to make sure that everyone's understood that she was doing something or has understood to have been doing something which made her different to normal people. And it's also not a bad look for the Prime Minister to try to make the press look like they are trivial because they're asking about these minor domestic matters and he's thinking about the future of the world and, you know, West China relations and what's going to happen in Ukraine there with Zelensky. And he can present himself as this high-minded global statesman. I mean, this obviously plays into a much bigger story and the biggest story will become clearer on Thursday when we get the net migration figures. And the worry for Rishi Sunak is that those migration figures will be huge and could be as high as 700,000, significantly higher. I mean, three times higher than at the time of the Brexit vote, which, you know, in no small part was about trying to give us control of our immigration numbers. So there is a question over Suella Braverman and her success as Home Secretary in bringing these numbers down and whether she is actually trying to get out of this role before the numbers emerge. What we're saying, essentially, is there are a lot of politics going in. This is about something much bigger, which is a power struggle on various levels and the speeding ticket is basically just the emoji for that story. I was contacted yesterday by someone very close to Cabinet circles who was saying there is widespread discontent with Suella, that her appearance at NatCon last week, the National Conservative Conference, this weird conference that took place, infuriated a lot of people because they thought it was grandstanding and they thought it was her positioning herself for becoming the next leader of the Conservative Party. And there is a feeling that she's not getting on with the job that Rishi Sunak has asked her to do. And there's this whole sidebar story, which on one level totally trivial, on one level kind of really important, that she tried to get out of voting on her bill on the small votes. And you just think, really, that feeling in the Cabinet, I think that's felt by a number of Cabinet ministers, is that she is a law unto herself and is not a team player collegiate in that sense. She's done it before. She's got form. She's got form. She resigned when she felt that Liz Truss was about to tumble. She resigned citing a breach of the ministerial code over an email. She had sent a document on her private email that was an official document to another Conservative MP and presumably you send it on a private email so that there are no fingerprints that you have leaked this to somebody. So once you've recognised one breach of a ministerial code and considered that worth resigning over,

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is this another one? And is she intending to resign over it as soon as the breach is exposed? It's so complicated and it sounds slightly like we must be inventing these layers of complexity. But I think that this is a psychodrama which goes to the heart of what the Tory party itself is suffering right now, which is Rishi Sunak on the one hand trying to actually be the pragmatist and the Prime Minister and get on with the job. And all these offshoots, these organisations springing up, whether it's the National Conservatives, the New Conservatives, the Conservative... I can't remember all the names of the different Conservatives. There's quite a lot of factions at the moment and it's quite hard to work out where one group ends and another one starts. And there's one other thing that I think you need to address in all of this because I've had a lot of pushback on social media on Twitter saying, Oh my God, get over yourselves. This is just about someone who has been caught speeding. No, it's not. If it was just about someone who had been caught speeding and immediately either paid the fine or signed up to the speed awareness course. We'd all get over it. There's nothing to report. We've just happily admitted that we've both been done for speeding. And you just think it's no biggie. This is part of driving. It's a civil offence. It's not criminal. It doesn't matter. She would have been able to carry on as Home Secretary with three points on her license. Of that, there is no doubt. It is about the behaviour that has turned something that is utterly minor. The smallest little molehill that you could possibly imagine in your garden into something that is colossal because of the way... You have to say mountain now. You can't say molehill and then colossal. I was trying to avoid it because I think molehill mountains just sounds, you know, clichéd. I don't want to be clichéd. OK, in our little obituary to Martin Amos, we will be clichédless today. Yeah. But we're going to talk to Robert Butler now who is, was the Justice Secretary and formerly the Solicitor General and get his sense of what's actually going on in the heart of the party. That's coming up. This is The News Agents. Welcome back and we are now joined in the studio by Robert Buckland MP, the Member of Parliament for South Swindon but has also been Secretary of State for Wales, has been Justice Secretary and who better to talk to you about some of these matters that are now before us. Do you quite understand, Robert, the fuss over... That was a growl. That was a growl over taking three points or... No, you don't.

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Well, I don't really.

I mean, look, these are things that happen to millions of people every year.

You know, a lot of us are driving.

We get caught by automatic cameras.

Options are given to us and we deal with it as private citizens.

And, you know, there's equality before the law, isn't there?

It's always a bit of an occupational hazard, I think, for politicians and ministers to end up with the story

becoming something, you know, quite relatively speaking, I suppose, big.

But that perhaps says more about the way in which these things are managed and dealt with and about the fact that as ministers you are bound by a code and you're in the public eye.

You don't think she has followed the code?

Well, I gather the Prime Minister is now asking for advice from Laurie Magnus.

He's the advisor on ministerial code.

So there's question to be answered, I suppose.

But, you know, there are different options open to Prime Ministers now.

Of course, the code was changed at the end of last year.

So it doesn't automatically mean a resignation effect.

It could be a reprimand or some sort of other remedial action.

That's what the code now says.

So I don't think we should just rush to a conclusion that somehow this is a hanging offence.

But, you know, there was a previous infringement last year, so that might be weighed in the balance.

What we do understand, Robert, is that she asked civil servants to get involved.

There's a question about whether she went to them for advice or whether she told them that they had to help out.

And that her spokesperson denied that she'd been caught speeding four times when a national newspaper asked them.

How does that sound to you?

Well, I mean, making a denial sounds rather unfortunate.

It doesn't sound as if the Home Secretary herself was in the business of denying it if she was looking for ways either to do the course or take the points.

So that's an unfortunate complication.

When you say unfortunate complication, I mean, we're in the business, obviously, trying to make sure, as responsible journalists, that our stories stand up before we ever publish, right?

We don't want to base what we're writing or what we're broadcasting on half truths, right?

So they clearly went, not once, not twice, not three times, but four times, and they were lied to.

I just wonder what that does to the relationship, actually, between politicians and journalists.

Certainly, when I was in office, I felt that, whilst I had special advisors who were there to gatekeep and to help manage things, you know, misleading people wasn't part of the brief.

Being straightforward and honest or not being able to answer a question saying, I don't know, was certainly the way that I think my advisors worked.

I think straightforwardness is always the best policy when it comes to relationships with the media and, indeed, the public.

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And if it's the case that somebody wasn't straightforward and wasn't direct about it, then that doesn't help the Home Secretary and it doesn't help, as you say, that important relationship between ministers and journalists.

Robert, you said a moment ago there has been a previous breach of the ministerial code. In other words, she's got form.

You've also been critical of the speech that was made at the NatCon conference last week. You're now saying it is unfortunate that her advisors lied to journalists about whether she got a speeding fine or not.

And you're saying it wasn't very helpful that she got involved about whether she could have a one-to-one tuition.

Isn't it time she left, perhaps, the job as Home Secretary?

Look, I'm glad you sort of summed it up in that way, because I'm, frankly, much more interested in the issues

relating to migration and the policy areas that she has responsibility for.

And I make no bones about it.

There are clear differences between the approach I think that she wishes to take and the one that I think would be better for the country.

And I'd rather have a debate about that.

It's not for me to...

Let's let us debate that in a second.

It's for the Prime Minister.

But if she was to fall upon her sword, you might think that's the right thing to do.

Well, I have to say, I think that this sort of issue boiling up now is helpful to nobody.

I'd much rather the issue be resolved by way of a disagreement about policy.

I think that when you're in cabinet, you're boned by collective responsibility.

I've seen signs of that being, should we say, rather elastic in the last week or so.

I think the Prime Minister's approach has been pragmatic, hard-headed, practical, and is actually yielding some results.

I think his approach to it is the one that I would prefer everybody in the cabinet supporting.

Robert, when you say it's helpful to nobody, actually, that might not be true.

It might be very helpful to Rishi Sunak if he feels that Suella Braverman is getting ahead of herself or taking the policy of immigration in the wrong direction.

You will know that allies of Suella Braverman think she's the victim of a smear campaign by opponents of people who don't like what she's doing as the Home Secretary, don't like her attitude to immigration.

I'm asking you to consider whether it is possible that the Prime Minister is sending out agents, friends, colleagues who might be appearing on podcasts or shows in order to quietly get rid of her.

No, I'm certainly not part of anything like that.

I've always been up front about my views, and Suella and I actually get on very well, and we work together in cabinet for a number of years.

I disagree with the elements of her approach on this, not all of it, but I disagree with some of it.

I certainly wouldn't be at all part of an attempt to smear or to do anything backhanded.

Let's be direct and have a debate on the issues rather than use some...

Hang on, I've asked you a direct question.

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I asked you a direct question.

Should she fall upon her sword on the basis of all the transgressions there have been?

And you want to be direct? Be direct!

Look, I'm not going to get involved in this current issue relating to what the adviser or minister of code might do.

It's a matter for the PM. I'm not going to be picking his team for him from the sidelines.

I know that I would be deeply irritated if it was the other way round.

You know, I thought actually the much-maligned...

Pretty but tell, it was pilloried by people for being hard-line and hard-nosed and extreme on this.

It's actually got the balance right when she talked about exploitation and the criminality that often led to people ending up on our shores.

And she and I worked together very effectively on a number of measures, including the bill that became an Act of Parliament last year.

So conservatives can come together and agree on this.

So what is it that Suella is doing now then that you think doesn't work?

I think that in particular I do take issue with the approach to the European Court on Human Rights.

I think that it's a massive red herring.

I think that the Order 39 decision, the decision on Rwanda, was one that at the time I said I didn't agree with and found concerning, but I thought that Rishi's approach at Reykjavik and indeed Dominic Raab, remember him, his approach to try and negotiate with the Council of Europe was a better one than advocating withdrawal from the European Convention.

I think that would be a strategic disaster.

You voted for the Rwanda deportation bill, right?

You voted for the bill that would see migrants deport to Rwanda.

You don't have a problem with that?

I don't have a problem with it in principle.

A number of other European countries are sought to do the same.

I think the practicalities of it are still yet to be worked out.

I gave the current bill a second reading,

but with misgivings because I made a speech about my concerns, particularly relating to the EHR and safe and legal routes.

Some of those issues on safe and legal routes have been dealt with by the government.

I think there were amendments that came forward that were welcome,

but they've put in a clause now relating to, in effect, dis-applying or disregarding the provisions of the Convention that I don't agree with.

I think that is an unnecessary hostage to fortune.

There are large swathes of the country that you will tell me are very, very worried about immigration

and there are large swathes of the country who think Preeti Patel was awful as a Home Secretary and Suella Braverman has managed to be even worse, even less humane and even clumsier in the kind of legislation that she is now putting before the country to direct people's attention to a small boats crisis over and above everything else that is wrong in Britain right now.

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Lack of growth, lack of productivity, lack of NHS sustainability, lack of public worker help of all these things that are confronting us right now.

You've got a government just focusing on small boats talking to the right of the party.

Well, I don't think that's a fair characterization of the government.

I think the Prime Minister's priorities on inflation and growth are absolutely clearly set out as equal to stopping the boats having grappled with this issue myself.

It is one that causes genuine and understandable public concern.

Where I think the government has to be very careful and the Home Secretary has to be careful is in making sure that the language used is balanced.

Yes, we can be very firm and clear and tough about the fact that this country will not tolerate and will deal with unlawfully legal migration, but at the same time we've got to understand that this country has a proud tradition in taking refugees in, which people celebrate.

Look at what we've done on Ukraine, on Hong Kong, on Afghanistan.

Without any new safe routes, which obviously is a big problem at the moment for people who do want to make that.

Yes, which is why the government's right now to commit to plan for more safe and legal routes because the flip side of cracking down on illegal migration

is to create more safe and legal routes for a migration crisis that continues.

What the Prime Minister actually wants to do?

Look, she's a member of the Cabinet, she's burned by collective responsibility.

I would like and hope to believe that she will support agreed measures by the government.

I think that some of the rhetoric that I've heard recently suggests that perhaps there's a straining at the leash

and participation in a so-called conservative conference that was nothing of the kind, nothing to do with a conservative party.

It was a group of people from perhaps the far right of politics who wanted to make a statement.

It certainly wasn't anything to do with my party.

Well, not a statement that I think reflects a conservative party that accepts the world of disease as it is,

rather than the world as they would pretend they would like it to be.

Do you get the impression that Suella Braverman would rather be outside the Cabinet and maybe kind of running a flag for herself as a future leader?

I've heard that said as a perception.

If that's the case, that's a very foolish course to take.

We're coming to an election period where it is vital that conservatives rally around our Prime Minister and our leader

and that we remember that we all hang together or we all hang separately.

But then you have a now-con conference like that, a year and a bit before an election.

That's the sort of thing that you see after an election when you're trying to kind of pick up the pieces if you've lost.

As I said, it's got nothing to do with the Conservative Party

and the platform for Cabinet ministers is surely the Conservative Party Conference,

which will be coming up in October and should be a great opportunity for a platform to be set out for the next election.

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Do you have a problem with Michael Gove being at that conference?

Well, I don't think any Cabinet ministers should have been there.

I'm surprised, frankly.

That was a bit of sort of wonkery going on on the sidelines of the mainstream of politics.

I think serving ministers need to make sure that when they choose their diary engagements, they're very careful about where they choose to speak and who they choose to engage with.

You sound rather irritated with her.

Well, I'm irritated by anybody who gets in the way of the need for us to have a very clear message at the moment.

Last year was, shall we say, a bit of a problem.

And you think she's doing that at the moment?

Yes, I think that anybody who isn't focusing relentlessly on the five priorities and then thinking ahead in a constructive way about what could be a winning platform for a centre-right Conservative government at the next election really should get out of the way and let other people who believe in that cause get on with the job. Get out of the way?

Well, what I mean is yes, let other people handle the responsibility of government if somehow there's a perception that, oh, we're going to lose and therefore we need to be looking ahead to life beyond a Conservative government.

Would the cabinet be better off without her?

That's not it.

It's a matter for the prime minister.

He makes his choices in prime minister.

I think the cabinet is better off with people in it who truly support collective responsibility and who have the discipline to behave in a way that is absolutely consistent with high office.

That's a yes, then.

Well, look, John, I'm not going to have words put in my mouth and call for cabinet ministers to go.

It's not my role.

I'm a participant in this.

I'm not a commentator.

And there are certain things that I deeply care about in politics.

One is which the Conservative party that I joined 36 years ago sent a right force for good in politics, not some extreme fringe that imagines a country in a mythical past as opposed to a country whose best years lie ahead of it.

Robert, can I just ask you a very specific question?

We understand that Swela Braverman wanted to get out of her own vote on the small boats.

Well, I don't know about that.

I mean, you'd have to ask her.

I really don't know.

What I do know is that by amending the bill in that way relating to the European Convention on Human Rights,

an almighty fight has been set up with the House of Lords.

I'm pretty sure that they will want to strip the bill of things like that,

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and it will set up quite a conflict between the two houses when the bill comes back to the Commons in a couple of months' time. Now, some people like that sort of thing. They think that sort of thing is constructive. I personally don't. I want to see legislation that actually works and policies that actually deliver rather than audience pleasers that might serve a short-term purpose but don't serve the interests of the government at all. Robert, you perfectly reasonably said to me that I shouldn't put words into your mouth, but you do sound pretty aggravated slash pissed off with some of your colleagues. Well, look, I've been in politics a long time, John. I've fought many general elections. I've lost quite a few, and I know what defeat is like. It's absolutely bitter. You're eating dust. You can't do anything in opposition. You can talk from the sidelines, but you can't drive change and drive a positive conservative agenda. So for colleagues who say, oh, a little time in opposition would be good for the Conservative Party, I say fiddlesticks. Politics should be all about the privilege and opportunity of governing and making grown-up choices in government that are designed to make our country and indeed our world a better place. That's the best traditions of the Conservative Party that I'm deeply proud to be part of, and that's what I expect to see from all colleagues. Self-indulgence and personal agendas drive me potty, frankly. Robert Bucklin, thank you. Thanks for coming in. Well, thank you for having me. Thank you very much indeed. This is The News Agents. Welcome back. So Robert Bucklin has now left the studio and left us slightly slack-jawed because sometimes you talk to a politician who is saying one thing with his words and another thing with his eyes and his body language, and he was very, very careful not to tell us that Suella Braverman should go or that she should be fired or that she wasn't competent, but he almost said it several times. He was 99% there, but doesn't actually want his fingertips on it. And that's fair enough, but what he was doing, we would ask a specific question about Suella, and he would say people. People have a responsibility not to do certain things. And you're saying, well, are you talking about Suella? I'm talking about people should not do this.

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Yes, you are talking about Suella, but there is no quote in that interview where you can say he calls for Suella Braverman's resignation.

But if you listen to it, you're just in no doubt whatsoever that that is what he means. So just to deconstruct, what becomes clear is that Robert Buckland is not just speaking for himself. There is a suggestion that actually what he is now saying carries quite a lot of weight within the Cabinet.

He's not in the Cabinet.

He supported his trust in the leadership race in the summer for reasons we won't go into here. But from listening to him, you get the sense that there is a lot of Cabinet support, maybe wider party support for what he is saying right now, which is that Suella Braverman doesn't actually have that big a base, doesn't have tons and tons of followers, and that maybe she wouldn't be that missed if she went because she's pissed off a lot of people. Not only that missed, is she able to cause as much trouble for Rishi Sunak? Are they fearful that she becomes the lightning conductor for the anti-Rishi forces? And they seem to be quite confident that she does not have that following. Maybe among grassroots at the NatCon conference last week, but that's slightly different from the parliamentary party and being able to upend Rishi Sunak. You know where we're going now.

We're doing the pissing in versus the pissing out, the Lyndon B. Johnson, which is essentially you have to have dangerous people inside your tent because they're better inside pissing out than on the outside in.

How much bad language are you going to use in one single podcast?

This might be a personal best.

Worse.

But anyway, what he's essentially saying to us is she's probably not got quite that influence outside the party.

So would she be dangerous on the back benches?

Yeah, we got the sense that he doesn't really think so, right?

Well, let's watch this space because it's far from clear to me

that when we get to the end of this week that Suella Braverman will 100% still be in the government or not.

Fascinating.

Bye for now. Bye-bye.

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