

## [Transcript] The News Agents / Sunak, Starmer, and the death of the political interview

This is a Global Player original podcast.  
Why did the Transport Secretary know about it yesterday?  
It's important that the government...  
Excuse me.  
It's very important that the government acts on concerns...  
This is some sort of joke.  
I mean, how can you possibly have as a number one priority cutting the deficit when you choose to spend and underspend in funding a tax cut?  
Do you ever wake up in the morning and think, my God, what am I going to be told today?  
I wake up in the morning and know, actually, that some of my constituents will really value not having to pay that little bit more on fuel prices come August.  
Do you ever think you're incompetent?  
I think it's valuable to help real people in this way, and I do think that is valued by people who drive.  
It feels, for good or ill, like we've come a long way from that. Jeremy Paxman, savaging then-junior minister Chloe Smith on Newsnight back in 2011, a world away from ministers even willing to be interviewed on shows like Newsnight regularly, taking the sort of aggression that Paxman employed against Smith. Ministers these days often just back away.  
How often now do we hear the phrase, we ask for a minister, but no one was available? Prime ministers do fewer and fewer interviews, too.  
Rishi Sunak did a couple this week in fairness, but he doesn't much care for them, clearly.  
His awkward LBC exchanges yesterday, his terse chat with Good Morning Scotland earlier in the week. Part of a prime ministerial diary done, you get the sense with dread, rather than relish.  
We're about a year away from a general election, this summer being Westminster's last real breath, drop in pulse before the countdown starts.  
And yet, in Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer, we have two political principles who in so many ways don't always seem to enjoy communicating, don't always seem to enjoy the arena where still so much of politics is done, the wider media and the broadcast media in particular.  
And they're part of a trend.  
So on today's episode,

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we thought we'd turn our gaze onto what,  
to some extent, is our own game.  
And ask, is the political interview dying?  
Why are politicians now so much less keen  
or able to be challenged?  
Why are they so much more brittle?  
And does it matter if they are?  
It's Lewis here.  
Welcome to the news agents.  
The news agents.  
Right, Emily and John, can't be with me today.  
They're currently being escorted from Rishi Sunak's roof  
by North Yorkshire Police  
after taking part in the Greenpeace protest there.  
So it's just me,  
although we're going to have a special appearance from Emily,  
later on, I'm picking that question  
about the dying art of the political interview.  
But first, as the name implies, we do start with the news.  
And the news which really mattered today was economic.  
The Bank of England raising interest rates,  
or the Bank of England base rate,  
for the 14th time in a row,  
now standing at 5.25%, a new 15-year high.  
And that change has been rapid,  
as recently as the end of 2021,  
rates were barely above zero.  
And though inflation is dipping,  
the Bank of England says that food inflation,  
currently at 17.3%,  
will still be at around 10% by the end of the year.  
So for a quick update on what this means,  
we turn to Thorsten Bell,  
director of the Resolution Foundation, think tank.  
So Thorsten, this wasn't really a surprise, was it?  
I mean, it had been entirely priced in  
that they would rise by at least a quarter of a percent,  
which has happened.  
Yeah, I think it was blindingly obvious  
this is what the Bank of England was going to do.  
Some people in financial markets seem to think  
they might go for a twice as big a rise  
as they've actually done.  
There wasn't a lot of evidence to back that up,

but those people have been surprised,  
but no, generally, not a surprise.  
And I suppose the only thing,  
one of the only things anyone listening  
might want to know,  
particularly if you're not on a fixed-rate mortgage,  
or it's about to expire,  
or you've got a lot of debts, for example,  
is this the end of it?  
So first of all, anyone having a lot of confidence  
about what's going on right now  
should take a deep breath.  
But with that caveat,  
then my view is, yeah,  
basically we are near the end of this cycle.  
Maybe one more rise, maximum two rises in  
before we start to see a plateauing,  
and then at some point falls.  
And my view, and again, with due humility,  
is that we'll probably see,  
or at least could see,  
faster falls in interest rates  
than markets are currently expecting.  
Because if you look at what's changed since May,  
like the average interest rate  
that we were expecting in May over the next three years  
was around 4%,  
and today it's 5.5%.  
Now, yes, there has been some data,  
particularly on wages,  
that make inflation look a bit stickier since then,  
but the world hasn't changed materially.  
So that is a very big market response,  
and I think that might end up looking like an overreaction  
come Christmas.  
Although the Bank of England has said today,  
to expect rates to remain high-ish for some time  
in order to get them a headline inflation rate down  
to target them around 2%.  
Yeah, the surprise today is not that the Bank of England  
has raised rates by a quarter of a percent.  
What they've done, though, is to signal,  
okay, markets, you maybe were more right than us  
on how long interest rates will stay high,

because maybe inflation looks stickier than we thought a few months ago. So that is what they are signaling. Again, my personal view is that may end up looking like it's overly pessimistic, but we'll find out, and as I say, it's very uncertain. Isn't it true that ultimately, one of the things that is driving this inflationary situation is a good thing, which is that despite so far, despite the rapid rise in interest rates, despite the slowdown in the economy, the labor market has remained pretty buoyant? Well, I think we should split the labor market into two things. So I think on quantity measures, jobs, numbers, unemployment, I think the labor market is tight, but it's definitely starting to loosen quickly now. If you look at the most recent data on unemployment, quite a chunky rise there. If you look at vacancies down by about 250,000 in the year, so I would say our labor market is starting to loosen fast. If you look at what firms are saying on their recruitment difficulties, the world of last summer, where it was impossible to get anyone, that is long gone. So I think the labor market is loosening quickly on those kinds of measures. The problem for the Bank of England is that that isn't yet turning up into wage growth slowing, and that's ultimately what they care about. Now, my judgment would be it will. Wage growth is a lagging indicator. It will in time follow the rest of what's happened in the labor market. That's what we've seen happen in the euro area. It's what we've seen happen in the US. But I can see if I was sitting in the Bank of England, I wouldn't feel comfortable seeing wage growth as fast as it is right now. Do we still think that there is a theory

that British inflation is unusually sticky?  
I mean, we still have the highest in the G7.  
Do you think it is something specific and structural  
that we have an inflation problem,  
worse than everyone else,  
or is it that it's just lagging everywhere else?  
Yes, and where I would describe it now  
is that the UK still looks bad,  
but it doesn't look like a basket case  
in a way it maybe did a few months back.  
So we've started to see those falls in inflation  
that we had seen elsewhere coming through.  
There are reasons for thinking the UK might be worse affected  
by some of this.  
We're very reliant on gas.  
So the scale of the initial shock was big.  
We use lots of gas for other things.  
So the second round effects,  
the long-term effects of those higher gas prices,  
even if they were a year ago,  
coming through into prices takes longer to happen.  
But I think people saying that the UK  
is somehow totally different to other countries,  
particularly other European countries.  
The US is a different case,  
but other European countries are overstating the difference.  
They tend to say things like,  
the UK is totally different  
because we've had a rise in labor market and activity,  
which other countries haven't seen.  
That is true, although it's falling now.  
But the scale of that difference isn't big enough  
to explain a kind of long-lasting fundamental difference  
in the UK compared to other European countries.  
So I think the UK is in a bad place.  
I think people are saying it's completely different  
to what's happening in the rest of Europe at overdoing it.  
And where does this leave household finances  
and household budgets in the sense that,  
I mean, this increase or set of increases  
in interest rates has been really rapid.  
You don't have to go about that far just to the end of 2021  
for interest rates to be at near zero.  
And now here they are at 5.25%, as you say,

maybe they'll add short 6% at some point before the end of the year.

Where does this leave people in terms of household budgets?

I suspect not a single listener needs to be told that it basically is very bad news for households.

The way to think about this cost of living crisis is it's gone through quite distinct phases.

The big energy shock initially in through last winter, some of which is still with us, then food prices through the spring now, obviously food is the main driver of that high inflation rate.

And the back of it can still say that that's going to be food price inflation will still be at 10% by the end of the year.

Yeah, and the thing to remember, food price inflation is falling.

So people keep saying headlines, including from Sainsbury's the other day, saying, don't worry, we're past the peak, but they mean the peak of food price inflation not the peak of food prices.

And most punters care about the food price is not the rate of inflation.

So yeah, I completely agree.

Food prices are a big problem and they're going to continue for some time.

And those two things are worse for lower income households and middle income households.

But then we've got a different phase of the crisis coming through, more driven by the interest rate rise you're talking about, which is very large, the largest rise we've seen since Norman Lamont was fighting to keep Brent in the ERM 30 years ago.

And then that's going to be more affecting middle and higher income households.

Remember, half of households, the richest households have a mortgage and they have bigger mortgages.

Anyone listening that sees themselves vaguely as middle-aged or around 40-year-olds, they're the ones that have the largest mortgages,

they're the ones that are going to be hardest hit by this next phase of the crisis.

And we've only probably seen around half the mortgage pain that this rate rise cycle is going to drive coming through so fast.

There's a lot of pain ahead of us.

Which has implications for politics and that's just what I want to finish on.

To what extent, if you're actually Suneck and you're looking at where we are in the economic cycle now, and of course, inevitably, you're thinking about the political cycle, how much confidence can he have that the best possible way the economic cycle might unwind is actually going to happen, i.e. that what he really hoped for, which is inflation by, say, October-November next year, which is most likely there, I think, in the next general election, that by that time inflation will have come down, wages will have started to grow in real terms, and that he is therefore in the best possible position he can be for that general election.

So, I totally agree with you.

I think October-November is when we should see an election.

We've actually done a bit of work looking at, has any Prime Minister ever called an early election when they're this far behind the polls?

I don't understand all this stuff about an early general election.

No one has ever done it, ever.

So, yes, I agree.

A late-ish election but not actually on Christmas Day is basically where we are headed towards.

Merry Christmas.

What I think we are then looking at, the best case for the Prime Minister is that inflation does fall faster than people have expected, like we've seen in the United States more recently, where there's very big falls in inflation, where the problem has to a significant degree abated, and that wage growth that has been stronger than we've expected means that as inflation falls,

but wage growth is slower to fall  
than what you see is some real wage growth  
over the course of the year ahead of the election.  
And that is looking more plausible  
than it was a few months ago.  
As I say, wage growth is surprising.  
On the upside, inflation is surprised on the downside.  
Remember, June was the first month for 18 months  
when we've actually seen wages rise in real terms,  
what you can buy with your wages going up again.  
So I think that is the best case scenario  
and that markets are wrong then  
about how high rates have to stay.  
And so basically, even though rates haven't got back down  
to the near zero levels, people might have been used to,  
they're looking more like 4% than they are 6% come  
a general election.  
I think that is as good as it gets for the Prime Minister.  
I mean, to be honest, that would be as good as it gets  
for the country.  
I hope we do see that world playing out  
because it's been a pretty grim few years.  
And remember, the backdrop obviously is wages today  
at the same level they were 15 years ago.  
So we all need a bit of luck.  
Right then, when we come back,  
that question that we started with,  
is the political interview dying and should we care?  
That's next.  
This is the news agents.  
Welcome back.  
So what got us thinking about this in a way was  
Rishi Sunak.  
He's not brilliant at interviews.  
He has a sort of techiness, a brittleness when challenged  
as if he finds it mildly insulting to be asked a question.  
And we've been talking about that all week.  
Here's a couple of examples, which I mentioned earlier.  
It's not about banning flying.  
It's about investing in new technologies  
like sustainable aviation fuel  
that will make flying more sustainable.  
That's the right approach to this.  
But I look forward to having that conversation with you again.



Thanks very much for having me.

We have to let you go.

Will you commit to coming back on and speaking to us for a longer future?

I think this is the second time I've been on your show in the short space of time I've been Prime Minister, but I'm sure I'll be there again in the future.

Thanks very much.

Thank you very much indeed.

You cannot keep the NHS running with the staff shortages that it has.

And to keep us here, you have to keep us happy.

That is your job.

None of us are happy.

I would just say, Olivia, if you look when you have the time, please go look at the long-term workforce plan.

I've read it.

I've read it.

I get it.

It's great.

I love the fact that you're bringing in tons of new people, but there's going to be no one there to train or educate or supervise them.

And you cannot be safe without seeing your staff on the wards, training, educating and supervising.

So there's three parts of the plan, actually.

So one is to train more people.

The second one is to retain more people.

So there's a whole section of the plan about improving retention.

And Sunak isn't alone in this far from it.

Starmer can also seem pretty pained at times.

Trust remains as awkward as anything, preferring to talk only to the converted.

Corbin abhorred the media, perhaps with some justification.

Lewis, I'm sorry.

That is absolutely disgraceful.

Whoever it is, they increasingly prefer to simply rely on their ready-made comms, plastered all over social media, sometimes about the oddest of subjects.

Home ownership is a dream everyone aspires to.

Getting the keys to your first place is such a special feeling.

But for too many people,

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the dream of home ownership feels just like that.  
A dream.  
So we're building one million new homes  
by the end of this parliament.  
The smell of cut grass takes me back to  
beginning to play grass football.  
And, you know, going on to a pitch that's been cut.  
So when I was probably...  
The first time I went on a decent pitch  
was probably when I was about 10, playing in an under-11s league,  
where they cut the grass.  
And it's that smell of fresh grass that's just been cut.  
Then there's the proliferation of the now ubiquitous  
so-called pool clip.  
I've done loads of these.  
One broadcaster or reporter is selected from the so-called  
broadcast pool to interview the PM or minister  
when they're on one of those interminable visits,  
wearing a hard hat or surgical scrubs,  
or in front of an electronic whiteboard.  
You get three or four questions about the news of the day.  
You can't really interrupt,  
because you're not there as yourself or your broadcaster,  
but just as a representative of everybody else.  
Then that clip is played everywhere,  
perfect for a politician or a spin doctor.  
You feed the beast.  
You do it with little scrutiny or risk.  
Though sometimes, because politicians know  
they'll only get 30 seconds of whatever message they have,  
they do repeat that message a little bit too much,  
like Ed Miliband here in 2011.  
These strikes are wrong at a time  
when negotiations are still going on.  
But parents and the public have been let down by both sides,  
because the government has acted in a reckless  
and provocative manner.  
After today's disruption, I urge both sides  
to put aside the rhetoric,  
get round the negotiating table,  
and stop it happening again.  
I listened to your speech in Rex,  
and he talked about the Labour Party being a movement.  
A lot of people in that movement

of people who are on strike today,  
and they'll be looking at you and thinking,  
well, you're describing these strikes as wrong.  
Why aren't you giving us more leadership  
as a leader of the Labour movement?  
At a time when negotiations are still going on,  
I do believe these strikes are wrong.  
And that's why I say both sides should,  
after today's disruption,  
get round the negotiating table,  
put aside the rhetoric,  
and sort the problem out.  
Because the public and parents  
have been let down by both sides,  
the government's acted in a reckless  
and provocative manner.  
I spoke to Francis Moore for our cane here,  
and the tone he was striking was a very conciliatory one.  
Do you think there's a difference  
between the words they're saying in public  
and the attitude they're striking  
prior to in these negotiations?  
Are there negotiations in good faith, would you say?  
What I say is that the strikes are wrong  
when negotiations are still going on,  
but the government has acted  
in a reckless and provocative manner  
in the way it's gone about these issues.  
After today's disruption,  
I urge both sides to get round the negotiating table,  
put aside the rhetoric,  
and stop this kind of thing happening again.  
We were thinking to ourselves,  
who do we interview about this?  
We need really one of Britain's best interviewers,  
someone who's seen it, done it, been there before.  
We couldn't really think of anyone.  
Oh, wait.  
Political interviews.  
In the time that you've been doing them,  
how do you think they've changed?  
I think that the drama of combat  
was really important when I first started,  
and I, you know, I came to Newsnight

when Jeremy Paxman was kind of in his element,  
and he was the big beast.  
It was like 2006, wasn't it?  
Yeah, it was. It was 2006,  
and I, you know, felt, gosh, I'm here,  
and I'm learning from the very best.  
But the first thing I discovered  
was that I was a big beast.  
The very best.  
But the first thing I discovered  
is that you can't ever imitate somebody else's voice.  
So the worst thing that I could have done  
was try to be Jeremy Paxman,  
because that's not me.  
And Jeremy was very good  
at being Jeremy Paxman, funnily enough.  
And I think at that time,  
there was a sort of bombastic nature  
to the interview that was allowed.  
And if you watch back through things like The Thick of It,  
and, you know, the sort of Capaldi portrayal  
of Malcolm Tucker,  
it was all about who's going to emerge unscathed  
from this pugilistic fight.  
Nikki, this, it's a war, right?  
It's a fucking war.  
No, you can't change a thing unless you win the war.  
And you cannot win the war unless you are prepared to fight.  
I feel this is all about for you, isn't it?  
It's just about fighting and fucking power.  
Does it never occur to you  
that your poisonous male obsession with conflict,  
which is making people despise politics?  
And by the way, don't ever fucking call me Nikki.  
Spare me your fucking sack or fanny, right?  
And then I think that has changed.  
And I don't know if it's changed  
because there are no more female interviewers.  
I don't know if it's changed because people feel  
that actually it's not necessary a level playing field,  
or if the kind of viewer listener  
just got a bit bored of it.  
And I think the way it sort of reshaped itself,  
and I don't mean that one was right and one was wrong.

I just mean that these things always go through trends, don't they?  
There is a sort of pattern to what we like at any one time.  
And I think we've moved away from something  
that tries to shout down the interviewee  
just because it feels a bit ugly and a bit unfair.  
And quite often our viewers and our listeners  
tell us we'll make up our own minds.  
We don't need to have them silence.  
We want to hear from them.  
And sometimes the best interview you can ever do  
is the ones where you just allow people to speak.  
You know, we call it a sort of give them rope, as it were.  
Which doesn't necessarily mean,  
doesn't at all mean that they're going to hang themselves,  
but it means that you have a much more controlled role.  
You are facilitating them telling you whatever they want  
with the occasional prod.  
But do you think politicians have started to approach it differently?  
The sorts of politicians we have,  
I mean, they are more controlled, aren't they?  
I mean, then you would have,  
even when you were starting on Newsnight in 2006,  
or certainly maybe even before that.  
No, I don't think they're more controlled.  
I think they were very, very controlled  
under Alistair Campbell and the new Labour years.  
I remember interviewing John Prescott  
and he didn't realise he was live  
and he was so determined to give me  
just one answer that I would use.  
He said the same thing five times,  
literally the same thing five times whilst we were going live.  
And that was clearly the sort of Campbell voice in his head  
saying, just don't deviate from your one message,  
say the one message.  
So that was always very controlled.  
I think what's happened now is if I'm honest,  
they're less confident,  
most of them are less intellectually confident  
of getting their point across.  
So they don't really want to be interrogated.  
They don't want long format.  
They don't want time to develop an idea  
and be challenged on it.

And I think that's also to do,  
sorry to be so utterly boring,  
but it is to do with the digital age, the TikTok age,  
the democratisation of how you get your knowledge out.  
They don't need us as much quite simply  
if they want to tweet something  
or if they want to do a sort of happy raps on, you know,  
they can stand at Westminster and do that.  
But also the risk is high.  
Because even in say 2006, you know, things like YouTube  
and Twitter definitely didn't exist.  
Facebook was its infancy.  
YouTube was just basically sort of getting going.  
The sort of cost of doing a bad interview  
was such lower, right?  
I mean, people might see it or get written up, whatever.  
But now, I mean, it's with you forever.  
I mean, there's interviews that you'll have done.  
As you guys, I've done that sort of,  
and that's bad for you as well, potentially sometimes.  
Yeah, I think that's what I'm saying.  
Or there's a risk, there's a risk on both sides, right?  
It works both ways.  
It works both ways.  
And as we saw, I mean, I'm going to cite the Elon Musk interview  
and maybe the Andrew Tate interview,  
which turned the rulebook upside down.  
And I think one thing I realize now  
is that the television interviewer  
is not necessarily dominant.  
You might come in with all your big cameras  
and your heavy equipment and your microphones  
and all the rest of it.  
But if they've got an iPhone  
and they just get the whole thing out first  
on their platform to their 8 million fans  
or subs or whatever,  
then they might have the lead on you  
and they can turn the books on you.  
So there is a kind of weird democracy  
about how we do interviews now,  
which is not always comfortable for the interviewer.  
So here's a question.  
I mean, we've talked about this before.

When you do a political interview,  
what do you think we're sort of looking for?  
I mean, because there's a balance, isn't there,  
between, and this is something,  
again, we've discussed and I struggle with,  
what's the balance between accountability,  
interest, news lines?  
Because I think people don't,  
obviously, who have never been involved  
in crafting an interview and thinking about it,  
aren't aware that this is basically the kind of balance  
that you're constantly struggling with, right?  
When you're about to do an interview,  
approaching it, what you're looking to get out of it,  
what do you think the balance is?  
And do you think the balance has changed?  
I think it's wrong to think of an interview  
as just a sort of series of random questions.  
It's a construction, quite simply.  
And I know that if I go into an interview,  
I will spend the first half trying to ascertain facts,  
what is true and what isn't true, right?  
And that has to come from them.  
So you have to be the one that says,  
can you just clarify whether that's true?  
I read this leak, but is that true?  
Do you know whether that was actually said to you?  
You're trying to build, if you like,  
your case based on what they tell you.  
So before you interrogate a policy,  
or an idea, or a morality,  
you have to know what they've actually told you as fact.  
And then you can have your sort of clash of ideas,  
because the worst thing you can do is go in saying,  
I've heard, or, but it was reported,  
and you make yourself very vulnerable at that point,  
because if they go, that's not true,  
you haven't done your homework,  
then you're kind of, you're stumped, right?  
They have to be the ones, I think,  
that confirm what they're trying to do.  
And in a way that comes back to what I was saying earlier,  
you have to let them talk.  
You have to let them set out their case

before anything else can happen.  
And sometimes you'll spun a line,  
and you can almost feel that they are trying to practice  
this line in front of the mirror to deliver it to you.  
And you just have to be the person  
that kind of raises an eyebrow,  
or even starts to laugh a bit,  
because actually, sometimes it's about disarming.  
Sometimes it's just saying, look at me, come on.  
You know, face to face, you don't really believe that, do you?  
Because it's surprising how few people do that.  
We, as interviewers, we sort of swallow lines,  
or we try and argue lines without stress testing,  
whether there is any actual core belief  
from the person who's parroting it.  
And if they've been sent out with a line,  
as you know, quite often happens,  
if the leader of the party,  
or if a sort of megalomaniac like Trump tells his acolytes,  
this is what you have to say, they will go and parrot it.  
And all you have to do is start pressing hard.  
Just press, press on that tender spot a bit more  
to work out if they really think that.  
And that can yield some of the most interesting  
and sort of complex answers of a whole interview,  
rather than just shouting somebody down.  
Do they ever keep you up at night, old interviews?  
Yeah. Yeah. I mean, they do.  
You can replay all your mistakes as well as your golden holdings.  
I do that. I mean, every time that you've done  
particularly sort of controversial or high-profile interview,  
I remember you saying to me once, don't worry about it,  
you just go over and over and over and over.  
Over and over again.  
But there's nothing you can do.  
No, well, you can. You learn from them.  
Well, you learn, I suppose. That's true.  
And you learn where you walked into a trap,  
or where you made yourself vulnerable.  
I mean, I remember years and years ago,  
like probably 20 years ago, talking to Peter Mandelson once  
and saying, but everybody knows that Tony Blair  
wants to be the EU president.  
And he turned on me and he said, oh, do they?



Oh, really, Emily?

Because I didn't realise that you were very close friends with Tony Blair.

When exactly did he confide that to you?

And that's what I realised at the time was like, yeah, don't make assumptions.

Get somebody else to tell you what the fact is, and then you can interrogate the fact.

But the moment you start walking into, well, everyone knows or, but I thought this, you're kind of making yourself vulnerable to somebody just slapping you down.

And how different do you find doing it via podcasting?

Because it is different, isn't it?

I mean, without, first of all, it's not live, so it doesn't have that kind of immediacy and that risk. That jeopardy, yeah.

And I know we talked quite a lot, you, me and John, in the early days about this.

It's harder to find a register which is the kind of high accountability, right?

Because it's supposed to be conversational.

And then sometimes you get people messaging you going, why won't you tougher on that person or tougher on them?

But in some ways, it does feel slightly against the grain in the studio to do that.

You kind of have to make yourself sometimes.

But because the rest of the register is more conversational and the whole idea is it for it to be more conversational, it can be more difficult.

Have you found the difference or transition?

Maybe you don't think there is too much of one now.

Actually, the big difference for me has been sort of as it were sharing interviews.

Right, yeah.

Because normally I would go into an interview with a kind of arc.

And the way we do things now, it is much more conversational.

And, you know, if you're doing a sort of two presenters to one interviewee, then the interview could go in a completely different direction.

So you actually have to be much more nimble about it.

You have to go, oh, okay, Lewis is going up there

or John's going down there or, oh, wait a sec,  
have I lost my point here?  
So actually you have to,  
in a way, you have to think on your feet more  
because you don't control it.  
And then it does become a more genuine conversation.  
And sometimes that yields more.  
Sometimes it's sort of slightly messier.  
But it's a different beast.  
Whereas if you're doing something on your own, as you know,  
you kind of start where you want.  
And you pretty much finish where you want.  
And you've got a trajectory to it.  
Whereas I think we do something now,  
which is much more freewheeling.  
Something else has changed as well.  
Yes, there's social media and politicians  
being able to control their own narrative,  
as Emily was saying.  
But there's also traditional media  
being used in different ways.  
There's a whole new set of right-wing TV channels  
in Britain now.  
And not only are they overtly political,  
in a way, traditional broadcast media is not  
or at least strives not to be,  
they even have active political players  
interviewing other active political players  
or even their friends.  
Is it like being at home with the kids?  
Are they seeing more of Dad?  
They are, yes.  
And it's fantastic because, you know,  
I've got a very full day.  
I'm doing lots of writing and...  
Yeah, I wasn't implying that you were at home all the time.  
But I want you to be clear about that.  
Unless I specifically tell you otherwise,  
I'm doing stuff for my...  
For Arch's Bridge and doing a lot of political work.  
But, yeah, it means I can do reading,  
I can do...  
To them, building things is great.  
Building what?

I'm building a garage for the quad bike.  
I mean, not a big quad...  
It was a miniature quad bike.  
Yeah.  
Fantastic.  
That's useful.  
Or if not a player, then an overt partisan,  
a channel predicated on the idea  
that somehow one set of political views  
who just so happens to match the interviewees  
is being ignored.  
Welcome back to Lee.  
Of course, GB News was last here with you  
during the leadership campaign nearly a year ago.  
Since then, so much has changed.  
This is your first major UK TV appearance  
since being forced out as Prime Minister.  
And we'll be talking about a range of important subjects tonight.  
But obviously, as a news channel,  
we must start with the breaking news.  
And I need your reaction to this decision  
by the political committee today  
to suspend Boris Johnson for 90 days.  
That's no way to treat a former Prime Minister,  
is it, Liz?  
Well, let's all remember we're here in Lee today.  
And Lee, for the first time in its entire history  
as a constituency, voted for Boris Johnson in 2019.  
And I'm a believer in democracy.  
I know that Boris got a huge mandate.  
And he got a mandate to get Brexit done  
and to change Britain.  
And people voted for him because he was optimistic  
about our country's future.  
He had a vision.  
So in the first place, what I think was wrong  
was Conservative MPs removing an elected Prime Minister  
that so many people had voted for.  
Absolutely.  
And I think that...  
And maybe the decline has been in other more subtle ways  
for a long time.  
For decades now, politics and entertainment television have fused.  
There's bigger reach to be had on non-political interviews

## [Transcript] The News Agents / Sunak, Starmer, and the death of the political interview

with a die-hard, probably already politically decided audience.  
Not that that's without risk.  
This was David Cameron being interviewed by Jonathan Ross  
on his Friday night show  
as a fresh-faced leader of the opposition back in 2006.  
Someone who changes their mind or is already a suiting opinion.  
They voted for someone who said,  
look, this is important.  
We've got to be a party that addresses climate change  
and the environment,  
that recognises that for lots of family,  
childcare is the biggest issue in their lives.  
They've voted for these things.  
But did you or did you not ever have a wank thinking of that?  
You see, I'm like, Paxman.  
You see the way I did that?  
He didn't quite go that far.  
It was a bit of a bad one.  
I apologise. That was very low.  
I tried, but it was a challenge even for me.  
And also, if the serious stuff has declined,  
perhaps the inventiveness,  
the characters in traditional broadcast news,  
the margin to be a bit offensive or playful,  
has declined as well.  
The cost of politicians' anger,  
the potential for social media backlash,  
too great for broadcasters to stomach.  
Hard to imagine Paxman doing that to Chloe Smith now  
for fear of the backlash of bullying  
or allegations of misogyny,  
and perhaps that's not a bad thing.  
Or maybe this sort of playfulness  
would get a backlash from politicians  
who would threaten never to come back.  
When you go back to those old-fashioned values,  
how are they consonant with your party  
taking money from a pornographer?  
You know, these funding stories, they come, they go.  
These are people who own, they express newspapers.  
Yes.  
Right, well, in that case, in my view,  
it's perfectly acceptable for us to take a donation from them.  
They also own horny housewives, mega boobs, posh wives,

skinny and wriggly.

Do you know what these magazines are like?

No, I don't.

But I do know that if someone is able and fit and proper to own one of the major newspaper groups in the country, then there's no reason why we shouldn't accept donations from them.

Or would the BBC now have the guts

to air something like this exchange

with Eddie Mayer and Boris Johnson?

Let me ask you about some of the things

that came up in the documentary.

Right. Well, I haven't seen it.

But this happened in your life, so you know about this.

The times let you go after you made up a quote.

Why did you make up a quote?

Well, again, these are big terms for what happened.

Well, I can tell you the whole thing.

Are you sure our viewers wouldn't want to hear more

about Hanzi if you don't want to talk about the line-up quote.

It was a long and lamentable story.

OK. But you made a quote.

Well, what happened was that I ascribed events that were supposed to have taken place before the death of Piers Gaviston to events that actually took place after the death of Piers Gaviston.

Let me ask you about another little...

I mean, I mildly sandpapered something somebody said.

Let me ask you about a bare-faced lie.

Yes, it was very embarrassing and I'm very sorry about it.

Let me ask you about a bare-faced lie

when you were in Michael Howard's team.

You denied to him you were having an affair.

It turned out you were. And he sacked you for that.

Why did you lie to your partner?

Well, I mean, again, I mean, great respect.

On that, I never had any conversation with Michael Howard about that matter.

And, you know, I don't propose...

You did lie to him.

Well, you know, I don't propose to go into all that again.

I don't blame you.

No, well, why should I?

I mean, I've been through, you know, that question a lot with the film.

Watch the documentary.

OK. Why don't we talk about something else?

The programme also includes...

Well, this is about your integrity.

Micking up quotes, lying to your party leader,  
wanting to be part of someone being physically assaulted.

You're a nasty piece of work, aren't you?

Well, you know, Eddie, I think...

Are all three things...

There's no time anymore.

Not many long-form interview shows.

Politicians are so much more brittle,  
so much more willing to call bias and try and intimidate  
and media executives caving rather than facing up to them.

We like to think we're plugging some of that gap here  
on a news agent, so it's not all bad.

But it does matter, because politics remains about arguments.

And if there is nowhere for those arguments to be tested,  
to be tried, for politicians' metal to be gauged,  
then democracy just doesn't work properly.

Or worse, you end up with American-style broadcast news,  
which is all just so chummy,

so much pointless drivel about baseball

and who's playing whom this weekend.

Because when the political interview works  
in that traditional British style, it really works.

It reveals it says something about a politician,  
their policy, or both.

Prime Minister, you've come here today to the BBC  
instead of doing the interview at the site where you just were.

Why is that?

Well, what I want to talk about today  
is what the government is making available  
to the victims of this absolutely horrendous tragedy.

I think we were all, when we saw the horrific scenes  
of what had happened at Grenfell Tower,  
we all were deeply affected by that.

We will ensure that people are rehoused,  
but we need to make sure that that actually happens.

This was preventable, wasn't it?

In 2013, a coroner had safety recommendations  
which included putting sprinklers in all these buildings  
and it was never done.

There were two types of material  
that could have been used in the cladding.

One was flammable and one was fireproof  
and the fireproof one cost £2 more.  
Was that not £2 worth spending?  
Well, we have yet to find out what the cause of the fire was.  
The fire service are doing that.  
You could have stopped it spreading  
by spending £2 more on the cladding.  
The fire service are looking at what the cause of the fire was  
and it's important that we get to the bottom of this,  
that we find out exactly what happened.  
But you were recommended this in 2013.  
You were in government there and a coroner said,  
you can stop this with a sprinkler system in every block.  
And the government has taken action  
on the recommendations of the coroner's report.  
Someone who has really thought about this  
is actually one of my old bosses, Rob Burley,  
who was once deputy editor of Newsnight,  
former editor of The Mars Show on the BBC  
and who has written a book entirely  
about the importance of the political interview  
and its decline and why we should all care.  
Why is this lying bastard lying to me?  
So, Rob, could we just start with the sort of premise  
of today's show in a way, which is,  
do you think that the political interview is changing?  
And if so, I mean, is it actually dying  
or becoming sort of more and more rarer  
to actually see it in the form  
that perhaps we might have known once?  
As you know, intermittently people say it's dying.  
Every few years, there's an op-ed in some broadsheet  
saying that the political interview is dying.  
I actually think that this time around,  
it feels quite serious because the problem is,  
apart from anything else, there aren't very many outlets  
offering the political interview in the form  
we kind of remember and know it as.  
I mean, they're obviously a podcast,  
and you guys make podcasts to fantastic work,  
but it's a different atmosphere in a podcast,  
a different purpose.  
So I don't think it's...  
I mean, you would do accountability interviews,

but I don't know how long they take to do it,  
but what we used to have was long-form political interviews  
on television, on the main channels,  
and there was a commitment that that was a big  
and important part of public service broadcasting,  
not just for the BBC who've entirely left the field there,  
but also for ITV.

So it feels a bit depressing when you're, as I am.

That's like, you know, aficionado of the former  
and a believer that it is the most effective way  
of testing and holding people to account.

Why do you think that is?

Why do you think that the big broadcasters  
have retreated from it so much?

I mean, I suppose, you know, there is still  
the sort of Laura Koonsberg show on the BBC,  
which is the successor show to the show you edited,  
the Mars show, and so on.

So it's still there, but perhaps not to the same extent  
that it was.

It may be that it's to do with ratings  
and a kind of, you know, a retreat from seriousness, really.

But also, I mean, there is a reality,  
which is that it's a two-way street,  
and the political class are less willing  
to submit themselves to long-form interviews.

And so there you end up in a situation  
where people feel that there's no point  
offering the program because you just won't  
get the people to do it.

I think maybe people don't,  
particularly maybe younger people,  
don't appreciate in a way the change that's been right  
because you go back and you watch those old news nights  
or you watch those old election programs  
or whatever it happens to be.

And, you know, the level and quality of the person  
that they would have on, on a regular basis,  
you know, not unusual to go back, you know,  
even to the sort of early 2000s or mid-2000s,  
and on news night have, you know,  
the Home Secretary or the Foreign Secretary  
or the Chancellor or whatever, Prime Minister indeed.  
And that's just being part of the course.



And they didn't do it because they enjoyed it, I'm sure.

They did it for two reasons.

One, that, like you say, they have a political project and they have to represent themselves.

And two, on some level, sometimes, they thought that they should.

And I've interviewed older politicians about this.

There was just a sense that this is part of what we do and have to do.

It is a norm in our democratic process.

And I remember, and you were obviously intimately involved in this,

but during that period of the 2019 general election, when Johnson refused to,

what sort of trick people involved basically ended up refusing to do the interview with Andrew Neal after every other major political leader had done so.

And I remember there was just so much kind of sort of too clever by half kind of chin stroking on Twitter and elsewhere, people going, well, why would he do it?

It's such a clever move by him.

No, we should never have treated it like that.

It was outrageous.

He should have wanted to do it,

not because he enjoyed it,

but because he ought to have done it as a democratic norm.

You nailed it because you didn't apply the democratic norms.

I mean, I say explicitly in the book,

it was the end of the norms that moment.

He said, I don't, I don't see why I should do this because it doesn't do me good.

And so that was his attitude.

This trust carried that forward.

The norms will disappear quickly.

I mean, I think what we discovered in the last 10 years in world politics is that norms of different kinds can disintegrate fairly fast.

So yeah, it wasn't a genius move.

I mean, I think the person in charge of that time with Dominic Cummings was Lee Cain, who I think kind of gave interviews subsequently

down the road that sort of implied  
some great thinking and genius that was behind this.  
It was just cowardice really.  
And also went alongside stringing people along  
and telling them untruths about the fact  
that we're going to do it.  
We just need to find a date.  
But waiting, in fact, for Jeremy Corbyn to do it first  
so that he would be submitted to that  
particularly difficult interview  
and you didn't go very well for Jeremy Corbyn,  
which I think is kind of cheating, really.  
It's pretending you're going to do it,  
wait for your opposition to do it,  
and then saying you're not going to do it.  
And if people don't care about that,  
I mean, I can't make them care.  
I mean, could you believe that?  
Were you shocked by it, the way they acted?  
In a way, I wasn't shocked  
because it was consistent with the way he operates.  
But I suppose, in the end, they come through and do it  
because there is a feeling that we better do it.  
It's probably not the best thing to do,  
but let's just survive it.  
I mean, remember the last time he'd done the programme  
with Andrew Neal was in the Tory leadership election  
when he came massively unstuck  
when he was caught out on the minutiae of the GAT treated?  
You talk about article 5b in GAT 24.  
Article 24, get the detail right, Andrew.  
It's article 24, paragraph 5b.  
And how would you handle paragraph 5c?  
I would confide entirely in paragraph 5b because that is...  
How would you get round what's in 5c?  
I would confide entirely in paragraph 5b,  
which is enough for our purposes.  
No.  
I thought you were a man of detail.  
Well, you didn't know whether it was an article or a paragraph.  
So he was very much humiliated in that moment.  
I think from then on, really, the truth was that his people  
were never going to let him do it.  
I have heard from people who spoke to him

that he at times said he did want to do it.  
I think it suggests is that Carrie, his wife,  
saw he should do it.  
But in the end, Dominic and Lee decided that, no, sorry, mate.  
No chance.  
Is it partly our fault, Rob?  
Like, in a sense, you and I, you know, we both know that,  
you know, we go into these interviews  
and we're always thinking, you know, what's the line we can get?  
What can we do?  
You know, and this is, I suppose,  
what people talk about when they think of gotcha.  
Now, I don't really like that term,  
but we both know that if we come out of an interview  
and we think, oh, it wasn't really a line there,  
we often feel like we failed.  
And we might not have failed.  
It may have just been an interesting conversation.  
I mean, to some extent, how much is the blame  
is on us in terms of the way we conduct ourselves  
that politicians then just distrust us?  
There is that tendency to get a newswire.  
There is that desire to get a gaffe, a mistake,  
and that isn't healthy.  
Of course, it is massively worsened by the fact  
that all the interviews, most of the interviews we see now,  
last for about seven minutes, and they are designed to,  
people try and be a mini Andrew Neal  
or a mini Jeremy Paxman in seven minutes  
and say something that will provoke a reaction.  
And that isn't healthy.  
What I'm into is a long-form interview  
where you actually get a chance  
to get into the serious and important stuff of policy.  
And that could be really revealing,  
and it doesn't have to be a gaffe,  
and it doesn't have to be a newswire.  
It just has to be something that illuminates.  
That's what it offers, and that should be a good thing.  
It's a two-way street.  
Of course, you can't set those interviews up  
and then actually just annihilate them  
and try and bang them around the head.  
But I can tell you, as Brian Walden,

who was one of the masters, said,  
he believed that it was better than Parliament  
holding people to account.  
Because if you're a well-briefed journalist  
who can ask questions of a powerful person,  
you can get somewhere in that conversation  
and reveal something, and that should be what we aspire to.  
But I'm not optimistic about that, to be honest,  
but I'm not going to give up the fight.  
Just before we go, Rob, we can geek out you and I a little bit.  
What's your favourite political interview?  
It doesn't have to be one you've been involved in.  
What's your favourite?  
My favourite is the Kirsty Walk one with Thatcher in 1990.  
Thatcher's gone up to Scotland,  
and Thatcher had tried to get out of it just before  
because she didn't want to be interviewed by a woman.  
Right.  
Yeah, and BBC Scotland, to their credit,  
said while it's Kirsty or nothing.  
And just before, apparently Malcolm Rifkin,  
who was then her Scotland secretary,  
said, Margaret, you keep talking about you in Scotland.  
You in Scotland.  
Don't say that.  
You're the Prime Minister of Scotland.  
You don't need to say you in Scotland.  
She said, oh, absolutely.  
Great idea, Malcolm.  
In this interview, this amazing interview with Kirsty,  
when Kirsty is so well-briefed in it,  
and she completely knocks Thatcher out the part,  
but it's this weird, weird moment  
where Thatcher then starts talking about economic growth  
that we in Scotland have enjoyed has not been quite as good as we.  
And she kept saying it.  
It's just absolute.  
And it's really revealing of that very late Thatcher state of mind  
where she'd started to just slightly lose her grip.  
We in Scotland hadn't quite had the full benefit  
of the increasing number of jobs that there were.  
It seemed more difficult for to get it for us here.  
And it's an amazing interview.  
I've never seen that.

I'll send you the link.

I'd love to.

Please do.

I'll send you the link.

But actually, the one that comes to mind for me is an obvious one, but it's linked directly to the one you mentioned, which is Thatcher again.

But it's Thatcher and Brian Northern in 1989.

It takes up almost two chapters of this book that I wrote because it's just an extraordinary encounter.

In 1989, when Nigel Lawson resigned, Margaret Thatcher, you can imagine why you might want to hide away, but she actually didn't try and get out of an interview.

She had planned with Brian Walden on the following weekend, a few literally two days later,

in which she sat down for 46 minutes to be questioned by Brian Walden.

And he submitted her to a forensic sort of police style interview about what Lawson has said about the reasons for his resignation and why she accepted the resignation, et cetera, et cetera.

And it was the first time I remember watching it live and thinking, for the first time, as a chink in the armor.

And she wasn't able to effectively deal with her usual panache and her usual sort of powerful persona.

Is that the one where she says, if anyone's being domineering, Brian, it's you.

Because if they're not put to me in number 10, and we don't argue them out,

they'll be put to me in the House of Commons.

And I'm able to face them in the House of Commons because we've thrashed them all out in number 10.

So what you're saying again is nonsense, and you know it from having talked with me over the years.

All right.

Now, I'll come back to that, because I think there's a very vital point involved there, which I really want to put to you.

But let me sum you up so far.

You do not accept, Brian, for the resignation of the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

You don't know why he resigned.

He is to tell me himself.

You can offer no guidance on that.

And you don't accept that the other resignations from your government or the other sackings from your government have arisen because you can't handle strong men.

## [Transcript] The News Agents / Sunak, Starmer, and the death of the political interview

Because you like strong men, and you like argument.  
Let me put this to you, Prime Minister.  
It's a point that's always interested me,  
and I think it's now politically relevant.  
It may be the case that even private,  
you will have a lusty argument,  
and you will listen to other people's opinions,  
and that you're only too happy to accept the suggestion if it's correct.  
But you never come over in public like that, ever.  
You come over as being someone who,  
one of your backbenchers said, is slightly off her trolley,  
authoritarian, domineering, refusing to listen to anybody else.  
Why? Why can't you publicly project  
what you have just told me as your private character?  
Brian, if anyone's coming over as domineering in this interview, it's you.  
The amazing backstory to that is the fact  
that these two people were very close friends,  
and they were ideological bedfellows.  
Even though he'd been a Labour MP, of course.  
Yeah, he was a Labour MP, but really, he was a meritocrat.  
And so, in a way, he saw a lot of himself,  
because he was capable of a very poor background,  
and Margaret Thatcher's approach to all this,  
and a lot of the media anticipation of that interview  
was that he would go soft on her because he was too close to her.  
And instead, he absolutely...  
It's devastating, it's worth watching,  
and the whole thing is detailed in the book,  
and they never spoke again.  
That was the end of their relationship.  
Rob, so fascinating.  
Thanks so much.  
Thank you very much. Cheers, Lewis. Take care.  
This is The News Agents.  
Well, that is all from us for today.  
I'm going to Richmond now to pay John and Emily's bail.  
I will be back, though, tomorrow.  
Who knows? Maybe with a political interview.  
See you then. To quote Rishi Sunak, bye-bye.