

[Transcript] The News Agents / Sunak suffers a Tory backlash - but what will Labour do next?

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

You know how on Twitter, sorry I mean X, that there's always a comment to embarrass you from something you once said, oh the politicians have had such fun over the past 24 hours since Rishi Sunak abandoned HS2.

Rachel Reeves, the Shadow Chancellor, tweeted, how's it going Jeremy?

Jeremy Hunt, the Chancellor, because Jeremy Hunt in 2020 had tweeted, no HS2 equals no ambition for our country, just when the whole world is looking at us.

Now is a time to be, in capitals, ambitious.

Hashtag, great decision.

The Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, we now know, was one of the big drivers behind that decision that Rishi Sunak made finally yesterday to cancel the next leg of HS2.

But don't think that Labour comes out of this completely clean-skinned either.

Rachel Reeves won't be retweeting what Keir Starmer said in 2015.

I oppose HS2.

On cost and on merit, it will not achieve its stated objectives.

We have had plans, amended plans and further amended plans for use.

The only sensible plan is to abandon the project altogether.

I think on the football pools, they call that a score draw.

Welcome to the news agents.

The news agents.

Here's Jon.

It's Emily.

And we've lost Lewis down the back of a couch, but we'll find him.

I think he's in real.

Last seen outside the real Sun Centre.

Brill in real.

If he comes back looking very tanned.

We'll know he spent too long under a sun lounger in real.

Which is not under a sun lounger, under a sun lamp.

Absolutely.

That's what I meant to say.

But that's exactly the sort of thing that Lewis Goodall would do.

Hiding.

Hiding in blend site.

Exactly.

So, a day after the conference, Rishi Sunak probably came back to London thinking, yeah, I did what I wanted to do and the Conservative papers have been obliging and said all the things they needed to.

I was with a number of senior Conservatives this morning, very experienced, not so impressed. They were scathing about the speech, but maybe scathing because they feel their legacy is under attack.

And of course, Boris Johnson has come out and been critical.

Liz Truss has come out and been critical over the smoking policy.

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And David Cameron, who very, very rarely goes in for blue on blue attacks, issued a statement last night condemning the decision to abandon HS2.

Just to give you a flavour of Cameron's intervention, he says, the decision on HS2 is the wrong one.

It will help to fuel the views of those who argue that we can no longer think or act for the long term as a country that we are heading in the wrong direction.

So Cameron saying, Rishi Sunak is leading the country in the wrong direction.

Cameron and Osborne and Boris Johnson.

There is a consensus you haven't seen here really, I think, since Brexit.

I mean, weirdly, what did it take to get all these former PMs and chancellors on the same page?

And I wonder whether this is part of the Rishi Sunak strategy.

I wonder whether there is a voice in his ear essentially saying, move fast and break things.

And if you upset all the prime ministers who've gone before you, then you can legitimately rightfully claim to be breaking with the consensus.

And that was the word he used yesterday that HS2 represents consensus thinking.

And he is making, as it were, the hard decisions.

Now to me and you, maybe kind of pulling out of something to be able to have billions left over to make tax cuts before an election doesn't sound particularly like the hard yards.

But this is how he's trying to frame it.

And I think it's quite interesting that Isaac Levito, the Tory strategist, was telling MPs in Manchester.

Levito worked very closely at one point with Linton Crosby, has been behind many of the last leadership elections, including that of famously of Liz Truss.

But he was telling people in Manchester that the public appetite for change is the biggest obstacle to a Tory victory in 2024.

So when Rishi Sunak comes on the stage saying, we want change, there will be people at home thinking, yes, we bloody do.

And that doesn't involve you remaking what a conservative leadership looks like.

And so that, I think, tries to explain why Rishi Sunak is in some respect something of a kind of a hired gun.

I mean, if the strategists are saying the public are desperate for change, you must talk about change.

He'll go out and talk about change.

And he will break with the past with the Camerons, with the Osborns, with the Johnsons, even if it means doing something that might not actually win him many votes countrywide.

Well, this is exactly what one of the people was saying to me, a very seasoned political campaigner was saying that Rishi Sunak, he travels very light in terms of his own beliefs.

He's not an ideological person.

He is now totally taking orders from the Isaac Levitos of this world.

And we'll maybe talk a bit about Isaac Levito in a moment because it's interesting.

What they're doing is they're saying, right, the only way you can win this is to say it's time for a change.

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But as you point out, Emily, how can you say it's time for a change when there's been 13 years of Tory rule?

The only way you can marshal that argument is to say it's time for a change.

And I am the change, not the Conservative Party, I Rishi Sunak am the change.

And so what you're going to see, if this strategy looks like it's going to bear fruit, is you're going to see Conservative in the smallest letters in the campaign literature for a general election and Rishi Sunak in 126 point bold Helvetica because they want to sell Rishi Sunak.

Now I don't know how easy a sell that is, but that seems to be the strategy at the moment.

And Rishi Sunak, the more he is pissing off David Cameron, the better, the more that Liz Truss says, I don't agree with this fabulous news Boris Johnson, even better Rishi Sunak can try to make this argument that he is going to be the person that's going to be changing everything.

The other thing that was said to me, which I think was smart, actually, is that with all these local projects that have been announced, the kind of tram service here, the news train station there, Rishi Sunak will be on local media as much as he possibly can on the local radio stations, in the local newspapers, talking about the new bobble that they're going to get for their town, for that constituency that will help shore up Tory votes.

And that's not a stupid strategy.

I mean, it is extraordinary, isn't it that I suppose this is what in the US, they've got a name for it.

They call it Port Barrowling, which is each MP here or, you know, Senator, Congress person there comes to the table saying, what are you offering me for my vote?

And I think what Rishi has done here is worked out that probably it's fairly evenly split amongst his MPs of those who wanted HS2 to carry on and those who wanted HS2 to be gone.

But right now, if he's trying to win the red wall and he manages to give each of those MPs, as you say, their own name check of something that will be done, does he actually get them out?

I mean, it's not even talking to your constituents at this point.

It's trying to energize your own MPs, because if his MPs, and we've heard some of the sort of talk at conference, if his MPs are getting too tired to campaign because they think it's a lost cause or a done deal, then Rishi Sunak hasn't got anyone to be the foot soldiers for him.

Just picking up on the role that Isaac Lovito is playing in this.

He is an Australian poster.

I sat next to him at a dinner actually, not that long ago, very, very smart, very shrewd reading of public opinion.

And there's a perception in British politics that what we always do is look to the campaigning techniques of America, that we want to import American campaigning techniques into our politics. It is Australia that we are looking at.

And it's not just Isaac Lovito helping the Tories to help to win the next election.

I spoke to a very senior person in Keir Starmer's office who said, we all love the West Wing. But if you've got problem in US politics, what you do is you drop \$100 million in campaign ads in the key states where you want to shore up the vote.

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We can't do that in British politics.

Much better we look at Australian politics.

And so we're going to be up in Liverpool next week at the Labour Party conference.

They are watching very closely what Anthony Albanese is doing in Australia and how he won the election for Labour after a long period in opposition.

And that's the role model they're going for.

So when we talk about the Americanization of British politics, forget it.

What we're talking about is the Australasianization, Australianization, the Australianization of British politics.

A lot of syllables for a simple brain after a party conference.

It's been a long week.

It's been a long week.

But it's also quite a tricky few days for Labour now.

And they have to answer questions that Rishi Sunak's speech throws up, which is, OK, there you go.

You've had the second leg of HS2 cancelled.

Do you bring it in?

Do you get rid of all these individually named exciting fight passes?

The pork barrel politics.

The pork barrel politics.

For these individual constituencies.

Right.

So I think if you were Keir Starmer's team, you would want to try and rise above it and say, oh, please, is the Prime Minister so short on long-term strategy?

He's literally just setting traps for Labour.

That's your first answer.

But your second answer, if interviewers, as we would, go back for more, is to go, OK, you've made that point.

What do you do?

And I think that what do you do then becomes pretty hard to answer.

It's very easy to say we will support the government in continuing this because it looks like you want to be consensual and collegiate and work towards building a better country.

Once that money has been reallocated or once the project has been pulled, you then have to make the case for a massive spending project for, you know, 60 billion of more spending on HS2.

So at that point, I think you have to say, well, Labour's probably not going to do that.

They are never going to re-energise HS2.

And I think that kind of going back to the camera and Osborne thing, that is the tragedy of this, that some things you can overturn very, very easily, right?

You can overturn a ban and say it's not banned.

You can overturn a policing law and un-make that.

But if you've just cancelled a project and all this infrastructure takes billions not just to make but to cancel as well, I don't think Labour can say that they're going to

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spend it, right?

The Tories in Manchester this week have been trying to lay booby traps for Labour.

That's what they're trying to do.

What are you going to do about that?

What are you going to do about that?

And remember, they want to paint Keir Starmer as this guy who doesn't really believe anything, who flip-flops to just go with the mood.

And yet they are trying to say to him, OK, are you going to follow us or not?

And each way Keir Starmer looked like he's got nothing to offer but to follow the Conservatives and what they've said over HS2 or whatever it happens to be.

So does Keir Starmer go his own way with all the risks that are attendant in that?

Yeah, I was talking to a pretty senior Tory actually on Monday night and I asked him what he felt about where they were in the polls, whether it was quite hard to go into an election like the Conservative one at this point in the political cycle.

And he just looked at me and he said, Emily, they don't like any of us.

And you might say, well, they would say that, wouldn't they?

But I definitely feel that there is a greater dislike, countrywide, of what the Tories are doing at the moment than there is a love for Keir Starmer.

And I think if the Conservatives work that out, that will be their most key attack line for Labour.

They will just go, come on, you want us to save you from them, don't you?

You're looking to us, the Tories, to save you from them.

Because if you look at the kind of favourability ratings, and I don't want to get tied up in polls and all the rest of it and these things shift around, but it's quite stark that Keir Starmer isn't down where Corbyn was for Labour, you know, minus 20, but he definitely isn't where Blair was for Labour, which is plus 20.

He sits around the kind of Kinnock just below the line.

He's not despised, he's not disliked, but he's not seen as a net asset.

And I think the Conservatives, I wouldn't be surprised if you hear a lot being made of that now, which is, here's a leader you don't really want to go for, we can still bring you back and Labour have to make the case to their public, to the wider country that they do.

Well, what's interesting is that, and it's something we've discussed on the podcast before and it was a sort of thought that dawned on me when I was up in Manchester this week.

You talked about, is this 92 when Kinnock fought the new Prime Minister, John Major, and lost and everything seemed to change once Thatcher had been got rid of and John Major took over and Kinnock couldn't quite get there.

Or is it 97 when Tony Blair beats John Major, not just beats him, absolutely hammers him in an absolute landslide?

Actually, it's neither.

I think it's 1993, 1994, when John Smith has become the leader of the Labour Party.

He wasn't a reformer in the way that Blair was, you know, he was much more intellectually disciplined, say the Neil Kinnock, but of course the counterfactual is that John Smith

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died and we never knew how he would have done if it was a general election, because I think that John Smith and Keir Starmer are actually quite similar and that they don't quite set the heather alight, they don't quite excite in the way that maybe Cameron did or maybe Blair did or, you know, Thatcher did or Boris Johnson did and it's kind of therefore not very guaranteed.

Labour have still got a long way to go.

We're joined now by a great friend of the podcast, almost kind of, I don't know, relative, kind of first cousin of the podcast.

Great uncle, great.

Twice removed.

Craig Oliver.

Craig, full disclosure, we were with you at the beginning of the week in Manchester talking about what the conference would be like.

We're now back in London.

What are your reflections on what Rishi Sunak has achieved, what the Tories have achieved after their few days in Manchester?

I think Rishi Sunak gambled everything on the speech and he allowed a number of days to pass where there was a bit of a vacuum and the media was saying, look, surely you can tell us about HS2.

It's pretty obvious what you're going to do, defended, defended, then gave the speech and so his whole strategy was based on the speech and I think the problem with that is that he created a vacuum which allowed the right wing of the party to really rule the roost for a number of days and they created an alternative narrative which is actually now currently competing with what Rishi Sunak wants his narrative to be.

The big thought I have though is that there is polling that I'm sure Rishi Sunak has seen which says that if you ask people, is it time for a change from the Conservative Party, 79% of people say yes.

If you ask people if it's time for a change to Labour, 37% of people say less.

They are thinking in that gap we can play but we can only do that if we suggest that we are the change candidates and that means chucking the last 13 years under the bus.

How easy is that to do?

How easy is it to say it's time for a change, I am the change, forget the idea that I'm a Conservative.

Well, I think that you're at risk of people suggesting or feeling that they're being gas lit by you.

You know, you've had 30 years of political campaigns and a situation where people feel like nothing's ever done and it's short term and it's perfectly legitimate to make that case.

It's very, very hard to make that case if you have been a significant figure in that.

You were literally the Chancellor of the Exchequer during Covid, you've become Prime Minister. You achieved Secretary of the Treasury during the initial dealings on HS2, then Chancellor, then Prime Minister.

Even on that one decision, he's literally got his financial fingerprints all over it,

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right?

He's got his fingerprints all over it and it begs the question, why didn't you say that before?

I think the reason that my former best friend David Cameron is so upset about it is, look, we own this.

I backed it after Gordon Brown said he wanted to do it.

It was taken on by Theresa May, taken on by Boris Johnson, even by Liz Truss in her short time.

We as a party own that and we have made promise after promise after promise to the electorate saying that we're backing this.

Why I think he's so upset about that is, look, the message you're sending is, well, let's just junk all of that.

But also, we're telling the electorate, we can't build a railway, so we must just give up.

Our solution to that is to say, actually, we're going to build loads of other railways and bridges and roads that haven't been built in the past.

You're asking people to believe that you do have a long-term plan for things that have never worked in the past.

Can you end up in this weird kind of security's logic that I think is deeply confusing for people?

Let's talk for a moment about the women in the wings, right?

Because there have been some really big speeches made by Suella Braverman, by Penny Mordent. I mean, there's talk of Kemi Badenok as well, sort of seeing a space that is being created maybe in a, let's say, a post-Russie world.

Is there an argument that by allowing Suella to say whatever she wants and her hurricanes of immigration or the rest of it, that Rishi Sunak actually places himself where he wants, which is, actually, I'm not going to use that language.

I'm going to sound a bit more moderate.

I'm going to sound a bit more grounded than she is.

I think a lot of people believe that Rishi Sunak is allowing her to be an outrider.

And it just is the way that the official leave campaign allowed Nigel Farage to be an outrider.

It said, well, not really my view, but I'm happy that that message is being made.

I don't really buy it.

I think that Rishi Sunak feels very uncomfortable having Suella Braverman as his home secretary.

I think it's perfectly obvious to everybody that she's deliberately positioning herself for if there is a failure.

I think that it's also obvious to a lot of people that what she's doing is dragging the Conservative Party to the right.

So the instinct of people looking forward is to say, look, the Conservative Party would be like most other political parties.

If you've campaigned on Ham and Eggs as somebody once famously said, if you lose, the instinct is to say double Ham and Eggs.

So Suella Braverman is kind of the double Ham and Eggs candidate.

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She is the person that Rishi Sunak worries about and fears and a lot of strategists fear. Would you be surprised if, and it was kind of rumoured to us, and we should put in brackets that sometimes you get late night whispers, which are sort of put out there in their own way to try and shape the narrative, but it was whispered to us that they believe there would be a reshuffle shortly, which would see off Braverman and Leanderson. There are certainly people in the Conservative Party or in and around number 10 who are saying that it's highly likely to be a reshuffle before the King's speech. And one of the key decisions that Rishi Sunak needs to make is he going to fire Suella Braverman or not. And that is a decision that they are clearly thinking about in number 10, about do you want her inside the 10 or outside the 10. Going back to- So he did that without saying pissing. I know. He's very polite though, nicely brought up. Well, I was brought up. We bring an LBJ. Yeah, exactly. You feel able to do that. The broader point I think that is really interesting about the conference is that Rishi Sunak's big analysis is that for the last 30 years it's been short term and all anybody has done is campaign. I don't understand the 30 years. Just take us back. Oh no, I understand the 30th. So in 1993. Thatcher. Thatcher. So it's post thatcher. Of course. Because in the speech he said, you know, this is the party of the Grosers- Post thatcher was 91. Yeah, yeah. But this is the party of the Grosers' daughter and the pharmacist- So you can't slag off Thatcher. That would be one too far for the Conservative Party. But everyone else, you can throw under the bus. The one thing that people in the Conservative Party can agree on is that Margaret Thatcher lover alone, there was a great Prime Minister and actually changed this country. And so he wants to set himself up in that company. And so he's throwing John Major and others under the bus. So yes, it's a loose 30 years, but that's what's really- Couldn't be 40.

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That's what's really going on there.

But I think that his big analysis is what he's asking us to believe is it's been short-termist and campaigning.

And there's this kind of weird post-modern thing where he's saying, and now I'm campaigning against campaigning.

I am campaigning against 30 years of shortism and campaigning.

And what he's condemned the country to, I think, is another year of campaigning because this stuff is not going to be happening.

It's not going to go through Parliament in the next year.

So what we now know is there's going to be another year of this where the country's facing lots of problems.

And he's almost demanding a mandate from the country in another year's time.

So again, it's kind of this weird circular logic.

It's almost post-modern in terms of saying, I'm campaigning against campaigning.

And I think a lot of people are looking at it and going, hang on a minute, this doesn't really add up.

It feels very strange.

I'm not understanding what the logic is here.

And more to the point, he's taken a lot of people who personally, I think, have done some good things for the country, thrown them under the bus and trashed that legacy.

I don't think he thought it through.

I don't think he expected.

Do you think it's Dom Cummings in his ear, as well as Levida?

I have no reason to believe that.

I have spoken to people who say that Rishi Sunak felt in the summer, look, the polls are not moving and I need to do something big.

And they are saying that actually most of this is really coming from Rishi Sunak.

So we always create these kinds of conspiracies about the dark figures like Isaac and Dominic behind the throne, whispering in the ear.

In reality, he is a prime minister who faces losing to the Labour Party and only having been prime minister for a very short period of time.

Psychologically, that is a very, very difficult position to be in.

And your natural instinct is to make big moves.

Where does this leave Starman next week, Liverpool?

We've heard that the second leg of HS2 isn't going to go ahead.

Does Keir Starmer pledge to support it and scrap?

What does he do about all the other promises that Rishi has made this week about, you know, if you hear, you're going to get a tram stop.

And if you're there, you're going to get a new station.

A tram stop.

A tram stop.

Well, you might get a tram line, actually.

You might get a tram.

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Well, on the one hand, of course, he's going to face difficult interviews and he's going to be asked what are you going to do.

And one good thing that I think Rishi Sunak has done in terms of basic prosthetics is force some issues onto the agenda that the Labour Party is going to have to answer to.

But in reality, if you are the Labour Party, you just try and barge through that.

Mock this person who has said, look, the last 30 years of which the Conservative Party has been charged 60% of it, even he is trashing all of that.

Why would you listen to this guy?

So I think it's actually quite an easy gig for the Labour Party.

So you just barge.

So you ignore the question.

You don't accept the basis of the question.

You find ways to push past it and move on and just attack, attack, attack and say, look, we have literally seen a Prime Minister of this country say in the last week that the last 13 years is just going under the bus and I'm changing everything.

The Liberal Democrats already put out a very fast turnaround in a digital picture which was Faraj with a tiny little Rishi Sunak in Faraj's breast pocket.

Well, it seems to be the ultimate tribute to the 2015 campaign is that everybody is doing different versions, different versions of that poster.

But yeah, indeed, they're going to suggest that.

And I was at the conference checking in to my hotel and was surprised to see that the person in the line ahead of me just checking in before me was Nigel Faraj.

And he had with him a guy who had a sort of shaven head and a bomber jacket who I assume was his security.

And I thought, that's interesting.

He's obviously got a pass and presumably he's going to make hay with that.

And he did.

Are you surprised that the Tories gave him a pass?

I am surprised in the sense that knowing that he was turning up and knowing what a great campaigner is, you are basically letting him into this very, very tight small circle where you can wander around.

And I don't know about you when I was there.

I just saw him absolutely everywhere.

He was the Pipe Piper.

He was.

He was a crowd of bigger crowds every time following him down these little corridors.

So if you don't allow him in, and I presume he got in through GB News, then of course he can create havoc with that.

Personally, I think the havoc of him and the images of him dancing with Priti Patel is worse than that.

Yeah.

Oh, God, do you think he'll be at Labour?

I can't see Faraj at the Labour Party Conference.

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It would be interesting to see whether or not GB News is allowed to be in Labour Party because they are a journalistic outlet.

And have they said no to them?

I don't know.

It's really interesting.

I didn't even think that they would be there, but you're right.

Why wouldn't they be there?

We'll tell you on Sunday.

We'll tell you on Sunday.

Craig, thank you very much indeed.

Thank you.

That's coming in.

In a moment, we're going to be talking about a by-election that is happening as we speak.

People are going to the polls in Rutherglen and Hamilton West.

You'll have to stay up till about 1.30 to hear the rest of this podcast.

Or maybe you're listening to it on Friday morning and you already know what the result is.

But anyway, we'll give you a little bit of the background and why we think it could tell us about more than just the one seat.

So we're going to talk about Rutherglen and Hamilton West.

It is an SNP seat, or it has been an SNP seat, until this moment.

And the SNP are fighting hard to retain it.

And Labour think that they are in with a very good chance.

It has sort of flip-flopped between Labour and the SNP in 2017 and 2019.

But this is the first ever recall by-election.

And I think that's quite important because recall basically means that the voters of Rutherglen and Hamilton West could decide themselves whether they wanted to call it.

Because you might remember the case of Margaret Ferrier, who was the MP that breached Covid rules.

She found out she had Covid, she got on a train.

She came down to London, they went back on the train.

And they then referred this to Parliamentary Committee and said to the local voters, the constituency, what do you think?

And they said, no, actually, we'd like to go to the polls.

So obviously that puts the SNP in a terrible position.

The local MP has been forced out in disgrace, which makes it very difficult for the SNP to start with.

The SNP have also been the ruling party in Scotland.

That makes it difficult because you're judging them on their record.

And add to that cocktail the fact that the SNP have had some other little difficulties with leadership, with financial investigations and improprieties, which have cost the SNP dear.

Nicola Sturgeon stood down apparently because she just felt exhausted and ran out of juice.

But then her husband gets arrested and she has subsequently been arrested.

And there is a criminal investigation that is ongoing.

No charges have been brought yet.

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So this is the first electoral test for the new leader, Hamza Yousef.

And I think for the SNP, it would be a major feather in the cap to say this is a post Sturgeon world.

And, you know, a mid police investigation world and we can still win seats electorally.

But of course for Stammer, and he's just going into his possibly last party conference as Labour Party leader.

We know that we're expecting an election sometime in the next year.

But he would love to feel that he starts conference with a little Philip.

Philip, Philip Philip in his step by winning in rather Glenn and Hamilton West,

which would start to make people think that Labour could get back onto Scottish territory that the SNP has dominated.

Well, we're joined now by Ben Jackson.

He is the Professor of Modern History at University College Oxford,

author of *The Case for Scottish Independence*, a history of nationalist political thought in modern Scotland.

And Ben, I suppose the first question has got to be, are you staying up all night to wait for the result?

Well, that is the question as I've been contemplating this.

Unfortunately, I have teaching I have to do tomorrow, so I think probably not.

OK, let me ask you another question, because when it's an interesting by-election, I can never sleep well.

So do you reckon you'll be, you will know the result before seven o'clock in the morning, because you're going to wake up and think, I wonder what happened?

Yeah, I think there is a good chance of that.

Yeah, because it is a fascinating contest.

So, yeah, I think probably, you know, five a.m.

Just talk us through what the campaign has felt like on the ground.

I mean, obviously, we're not going to be talking about the latest polls because everyone's still out, you know, possibly voting.

But in terms of the campaign, what has it felt like?

Has it felt very positive? Has it felt contentious? Yeah.

I mean, I should say, I've been observing it, I guess, like you haven't actually been on the ground knocking on doors,

but my sense of it from the reporting is that, you know, Labour has felt good throughout the campaign.

They thought they were in with a chance, but I've sort of been on the back foot a bit in terms of the arguments

because of the ammunition that the Labour Party in London gave the SNP

when they, you know, refused to commit to doing away with the bedroom tax or rolling back some of the 20 measures.

So that gave the SNP a little bit more ammunition to fire with

and force the Labour candidate to have to differentiate themselves from the UK party line.

And I think it's always a bit acrimonious between Labour and the SNP.

It's always a bit of a grudge match when they're in elections against each other

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because they're competing, they both think of themselves as the progressive left-wing party and they're always very keen to try and catch each other out for not being progressive and left-wing enough.

No, we've just come from Manchester where we've had the Tories saying that, you know, the United Kingdom has never been stronger, that nationalism is in retreat.

I guess if Labour win, it will feed that narrative that something has changed in Scotland.

Will that be an accurate reading?

Some extent is true that the gap between Labour and the SNP is definitely narrowed and it looks like Labour are likely to pick up seats in Scotland at the UK parliamentary election, which is, you know, a big step forward from the position they were in before in 2019.

On the other hand, it is interesting that, I mean, the SNP are still ahead in the voter intention polls, which I think is quite striking given that they have a less popular leader than they did, that their domestic policy records have been criticised so much

and that there was the well-publicised police inquiry into their party finances

and yet they are still ahead in the Hollywood opinion polls and also narrowly for Westminster.

So that does suggest there is a bit of robustness, I think, in the SNP support,

so that there is a core support there for the SNP and they are still likely to hold seats.

I think in the short term, the prospects for Scottish independence don't look that bright

because it does look like the political excitement is going to be focused on the UK election and Labour probably coming into government after that election.

But after that, there will be opportunities for the SNP

because then there's going to be a Labour government that's going to have to defend its records and the SNP are very skilled at positioning themselves against whatever the UK government is offering

and characterising their position as offering a more left-wing Scottish alternative.

And if a Labour government has trouble when it comes into office

and is faced with all this economic firefighting,

I think there are still prospects for the SNP to come back in that environment

and come back at the next Hollywood election, which is going to happen right in the middle of a putative Labour term in office.

So if Labour declare this is a new dawn, is it not? That might be a bit premature.

Yeah, there's demographic tailwinds that favour the SNP because the support for independence skews younger

and as the generations age in the electorate, it seems like younger people are more and more pro-independence.

So they do have that advantage built into the way that politics plays out at the moment.

If you look at the polls, not the voter intention polls, but the polls about do you favour independence or not,

they've actually stayed quite static compared to the voter intention polls.

It's still very finely balanced between yes and no to independence.

And so that maybe suggests that there is an underlying, there's still an underlying support for independence

that might be possible for the SNP to tap in or activate if the UK government and Britain as a bigger

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project is perceived as failing.

Ben, can I just bring you close to home? Because famously in 2015, there was that David Cameron slogan,

chaos with Ed Miliband or strong and stable with the Conservatives.

And it was all predicated on this idea that Labour under Ed Miliband would go into government with an SNP coalition of sorts.

And I think the way Westminster often frames it is, what would Labour do? Would Labour go into government with the SNP?

I mean, do you think there's any appetite within Scotland and within SNP supporters to see the SNP working hand in hand

with the Labour government if it came to that this time round?

Yeah, it's hard to know. I mean, I guess they would want to feel like they had got a meaningful concession from Labour

in order to collaborate in some formal way in government.

So basically I suppose their red line would be another referendum on independence, which I think there's no chance that Labour would grant that.

That are a bit of an impasse, depending on how the numbers work out.

And it seems like from the Labour side, their position is in that circumstance, they would just dare the SNP to vote them down

and wouldn't try and negotiate any formal deal.

I suspect from the SNP side, they might feel there might be advantage to be rung from having some kind of collaboration with Labour,

but only if they can get some kind of movement on what they're really concerned about, which is independence.

And at the end of the day, their political incentives would not be to have a very successful Labour government in London,

because in a way that undermines the kind of central SNP argument, which is that UK politics is intrinsically right-wing

and that the UK state is intrinsically right-wing, and that's why you need to have independence to have sort of more progressive politics.

So I think for that reason they would be cautious about getting too implicated in what Labour was doing.

That's really helpful, Ben. Thank you so much for giving us a little bit of context around that.

And look, I'm sure we'll all be tweeting at 3am. What can I say?

I won't be.

This is The News Agents.

Before we go, it's been not a great week for politicians and dogs.

I mean, Suella Braverman at the Tory party conference stood on one.

A fantastic photo of her standing on the dog's tail.

And the other dog, there's another dog in the shot, guide dog.

It's just looking at the other guide dog.

I promise you I'm not laughing at the dog. I mean, don't get the RSPCA or whatever on to me.

It was just the shot itself.

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You could read the caption from the other dog's mouth saying, what the fuck is she doing?

It was a service dog. It was a guide dog. It probably, it was a veteran.

It probably fought for its country.

And the trouble is that Suella, and this is just really unfortunate and I'm not making fun, but Suella does kind of rhyme with Cruella and you just can't get past the idea of the Dalmatians.

And so when I saw her heel, it was literally a stiletto heel going into the dog's tail.

And the dog, I mean, I don't think it was right in the dog's tail.

I just want to clarify that it's just the way the picture's taken.

It looks like it's going very close to the dog's tail.

And the dog wasn't saying anything until the dog was just lying there kind of taking it all up.

And you're just like, there is no greater image that sort of summed up this sense of sort of just kind of carelessness.

Yeah, but we've got to take you across the Atlantic now because there's another incident involving a dog.

Now, you all know that the president is the Commander-in-Chief.

This concerns Commander because Commander is the Commander-in-Chief's two-year-old German shepherd, Alsatian,

who's been going around biting everyone at the White House and has now been banned.

He's kicked out. They've got rid of him.

It bit a uniformed secret service officer this week.

And I think an agent had been previously bitten so badly he was sent to hospital for treatment.

And I mean, look, we've all been slightly dog-shamed, haven't we?

Has your dog ever done anything shaming?

I think he wants weed on someone's kitchen floor. That's the worst he's done.

It is awful because your natural instinct is to basically support your dog at all times, whatever they've done.

But Commander's gone too far this time.

He's gone too far. I mean, also, you can't bite the person that is literally saving the life of your human.

Exactly.

So when your dog is going around nipping the secret service agents,

and you can imagine the secret service has said,

enough, we don't want any more of our agents in hospital because of your bloody dog, Joe Biden.

But it's been a fantastic comeback from the White House Press Secretary, Karin Jean-Pierre, who has blamed it on the stress in living in the White House.

Now, frankly, there are worse places to live.

Oh, what a shame it hasn't got any garden to run around in an exercise.

Exactly. What a shame there isn't the South lawn.

Oh, there is a South lawn.

What a shame there's nobody around at any time of the day.

Probably everyone goes out and just leaves them all alone.

But Karin Jean-Pierre has said, it is unique and it is stressful for all of us.

So you can imagine what it's like for a family pet or family pets more broadly, she added.

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I'd say what you do not want Commander doing is pulling Joe Biden to a place where he ends up slipping himself.

Well, that's why Joe Biden, he broke his ankle just after he became president, was in a cast.

Because the ball that Joe Biden had thrown for Commander ended up in the bathroom.

Biden gets out of the shower, slips on the ball, breaks his ankle.

So Biden is just...

Again, not funny. Sorry.

This is funny. In a play of the year.

We need to have one of those little asterisks at the top.

I'm not laughing, but...

I'm not laughing, but...

Emily's not laughing at the cruelty to animals in this episode.

And presidents and tennis balls.

We'll see you tomorrow. Bye-bye.

The newsagents with Emily Maitlis, John Sopo and Louis Goodall.

This has been a global player original podcast and a Persephoneka production.