

No one should be pushed out of the workforce for tax reasons, so today I will increase the pension's annual tax-free allowance by 50% from 40,000 to 60,000. Some have also asked me to increase the lifetime allowance from its £1 million limit. But I've decided not to do that. Instead, I will go further and abolish the lifetime allowance altogether. When you start talking about pension savings and lifetime allowances, it sounds so tedious. But make no mistake, this is every bit as significant as when Quasi Quateng in the ill-fated budget dropped the top rate of tax from 45 pence to 40. Because people, the well-off, the well-to-do with big pension pots have been handed a massive tax cut as a result of this measure. Yes, to keep doctors in work, but others will benefit hugely too. And that bombshell takes me back to the George Osborne Conservative Conference of 2007, where he promised to raise the threshold of inheritance tax to £1 million. And it was such a big move, it was credited, actually, with making Gordon Brown drop all his plans for an election. It never happened. But this, curiously, is a massive, massive boon for people who want to pass on their money to their children.

The government don't want the headlines, the rich are getting richer. But I think that out of this budget, that is the standout measure, on that I think is where the political dogfight is going to centre. Welcome to the newsagents.

The newsagents. It's John. It's Emily. And it's Lewis. And we'll be talking also today about this extraordinary story that's emerged and been very little covered about the BBC again and will bring you what we know, the insider's understanding of what was going on in newsrooms during the last few years there. It's a story from The Guardian that you might have missed. But first, the budget. And it was a long one. It was over an hour and there was plenty to get through. Childcare, a change to disability allowances. We'll be talking about the Great British Nuclear Project. We'll be talking about living standards as well. Lewis had the birds eye view today.

Lucky me. Lucky me for all, I had an entire hour of it. I have to say, as budget statements go, it was not the highest charge. There were lots of good service for LPs, looking at their watches, looking at their phones. Hunt is not the most telegenic performer. Let's put it that way. But in some ways, that's kind of what they want. They wanted to reestablish that sense that they'd reestablished order. But the biggest cheer, as we've already heard, was for the changes, the pension changes, basically reversing changes that George Osborne had introduced some years ago. And Hunt's argument is that this will help. It's part of his measures for getting people back into the workforce, incentivising people who have dropped away from the workforce to say, no, you should stay in the workforce for longer because you will be able to put more into your pension pot. And when you retire, you'll be able to have a bigger pension. What happens after these budget events is that instantly in the room to the back of the press gallery of the House of Commons, there is what is called the huddle. This is where journalists, lobby journalists, Westminster lobby journalists get to quiz. In this case, some of the Chancellor's advisers, but Prime Minister's advisers, government spokespeople and so on, about what has just happened. Almost instantly, all of the political attention turned to the pension measures. And almost instantly, all of it was being seen through the prism of this being a big tax boon for not just the rich, but for the wealthy. What was the government saying in response to that? Their argument is, is that this will help, particularly NHS senior doctors, stay in the NHS for longer. You turn

to the back of the document, which is in front of me right now, the actual government budget book, the red book, as it's called, it's going to cost over £800 million in a few years time a year, all for the sake of £800 million to get 15,000 workers in overall economy back into the workforce. What percentage of that will be NHS doctors? And by the way, right now, you know what's happening this week? A junior doctor strike. The argument could be, well, if you want to make sure there are more doctors in the NHS, you could stop by paying the junior doctors more rather than the very wealthy, already pretty well positioned senior ones with huge pension pots.

I mean, this was all part of a big Jeremy Hunt theme, what he called the fouries, which sounds slightly more exciting, perhaps a little bit more ministerial than he intended. But he's talking about enterprise, education, I can't remember the other ones, but everywhere. Everywhere, because they ran out of ease. They used to be able to say, you're...

Ease and whiz. They were looking for levelling up, they were looking for a way of talking about levelling up, and they came to everywhere. But essentially, to go back to the main point, he wanted people to be back in work. Why does he want people back in work? Because quite frankly, we now have underemployment. We have too many jobs that we can't fill since we left the EU. And we desperately need to get people back into the workforce. And it is both an appeal to, I think, young parents, or parents of young, I should say, who they want to encourage back to work, and to pensioners or people who might be thinking of leaving their jobs that they desperately want to retain in skilled work.

Yeah. So let me try and have a feeble stab at trying to explain what the difference is that the government has introduced, and why it is so significant. Look, it does mean that if you're a well-paid doctor, you're a consultant or whatever it happens to be, a professor or something or other, you're on a decent salary. At the moment, you can only put in what's deemed to be a value of 40,000 into your pension pot each year. And if more than that goes in, because you've got an employer contribution as well, then you, at the end of the year, face a tax bill. And so people were getting a tax bill for money they would take out at some future date, and it became a massive disincentive to stay and work. So they've raised that allowance from 40,000 to 60,000. And doctors have contacted me on Twitter saying, look, this will make a difference. This will have an effect. But they've also done this thing where they have said there is no limit on the LTA, the lifetime allowance of what you can have in a pension pot. It was a million quid. Now, that sounds a huge amount of money. But if that is going to fund your retirement from, say, 55 and you live till 90, it's decent money, but it's not fortunes. Now you can have an unlimited amount in your pension pot. A lot of wealthy people who had pension pots in way in excess of a million pounds, and were going to be paying a marginal tax rate of well in excess of the top rate of tax of 55% when they drew money out because they had more than the lifetime allowance are celebrating. And a wealthy friend of mine who sold his company a few years back, messaged me today and said, I mean, half joking, but only half joking, I'm ringing up my wine merchant and ordering champagne.

So all of Britain's under 40s, John, they're all just so pleased for you all after saying I mean, it does.

It's extraordinary.

But that's also where the politics is. That's where the politics of this is difficult, right?

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Is that we're already dealing with people here who, as John says, actually a million pound pension pot is a huge amount of money. But if it sustains you through your retirement, it can be less than it seems.

But we are talking about people who have enormous pension pots already, particularly by comparison to much of the rest of the workforce. And ultimately, like this whole problem to some extent is as a result of the wider generational problems in our economy in the sense that why are so many of these people not in the workforce or have left the workforce? Well, frankly, they already got the golden goose. They were part of a generation with massive asset wealth, with great defined salary pension schemes, they already won. That's one of the reasons they're looking at their income and thinking, you know what, I don't need to afford to work right now.

Yeah.

And they are the people that are going to be benefited by this scheme. You can make an argument about the effect it will have, but it is pretty marginal. And the question has to be, is it really worth when you've got people who are much younger, who will never enjoy pension pots like that, never enjoy assets like that, never enjoy income like that? Really? Are those the people who want to spend 800 million pounds on? Let me just add one other footnote to this, because the people who have really accumulated these vast pension pots and have it in what's called a self-invested personal pension, that stands outside inheritance tax. So when they die, if there is now an unlimited amount you can have in your pension pot, 4 million, 5 million, I don't know, however much you've sold companies for or you've managed to accrue, that will all get passed on to your kids without any inheritance tax. Whereas ordinary people who might have much lesser assets but don't have these pension pots will be subject to inheritance tax.

Well, that's great news.

So again, we're talking about the less than, less than, less than 1% here.

Yeah, absolutely.

So that's the headline that we've played at the beginning of today's news agents. But here's the one that Rishi Sunak might like us to take away.

Today, the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that because of changing international factors and the measures I take, the UK will not now enter a technical recession this year.

Jeremy Hunt, they're telling us that we will not be entering a technical recession, which, you know, you could say is a yay moment, but really this is how Keir Starmer phrased it.

After 13 years of his government, our economy needed major surgery. But like millions across our country, this budget leaves us stuck in the waiting room with only a sticking plaster to hand. A country set on a path of managed decline, falling behind our competitors, the sick man of Europe once again. This was a day for ambition, for bringing us together with purpose and intent, for unlocking the pride that is in every community, matching their belief in the possibilities of the future. But, Madam Deputy Speaker, after today, we know the Tory cupboard is as bare as the salad aisle in our supermarket. The lettuces may be out, but the turnips are in.

And having talked about how the super-rich will come out of this budget, we should say that UK real household disposable incomes will be falling at their fastest pace since the 1950s. According to the OBR, the Office for Budget Responsibility, which measures,

if you like, the living standards, they are expected to fall by 5.7 per cent. That's nearly 6 per cent over two years. That is the largest fall since the Second World War. So once again, you're playing to the sense of most people, the generational divide, what this actually means. Yes, we're not going to enter a technical recession. Does it make you feel great? Not if your living standards are going to fall that dramatically. Well, also, because although we're not entering a technical recession, the OBR is still saying that the economy will shrink by 0.2 per cent this year. So all the technical recession means is two consecutive quarters of negative growth. We're not going to have that, but we're stagnant at best. And as you say, when you're actually talking about the generational thing, Britain has had a long-standing problem with too many people having too much wealth at the same time as what we've seen in this budget is yet more, and this is a horrible boring sounding thing, but it's actually really important, fiscal drag, i.e. people being dragged into higher tax thresholds, which aren't being uprated with inflation. So we've basically got a budget where working people are ending up paying more tax than they might have expected at the time when effectively taxes on wealth are being reduced.

Hang on. This takes just to be absolutely clear about this. This kicks in next month. There'll be tax increases next month for basic rate taxpayers who've just entered that rate and for higher rate taxpayers as well. So you're going to be £500 a year worse off if you're a basic rate taxpayer from next month and £1,000 if you're a higher rate taxpayer because of the freezing of thresholds. Jeremy Hunt is super aware of this. He is one of the government's kind of real survivors, actually, and he knows how to play the political game, which is why a lot of this budget was related to beer, war mail, potholes, leisure centres and particularly childcare. He knows he's got to get people on side that might be thinking they've had enough after 13 years. That's all coming up.

This is the news agents. Welcome back. Just as Jeremy Hunt had his four E's, which we have discussed, we're now going to go into our three P's. Pubs, Potholes and Pools. If only there was a word for childcare with a P in it because we want to talk about childcare. Pennerceries.

Preschools.

Yeah, preschool.

Ah, good.

Very good.

So this is quite a big deal because it's 30 hours of free childcare a week. I should say this is childcare in England. The devolved governments will be doing very similar things and it's a £4 to £5 billion giveaway. What it means is that from nine months old, one and two-year-olds will be getting extra help or rather their parents will be getting extra help with the childcare.

They need it to be fair. One and two-year-olds.

But here's the problem. You see, the implementation doesn't come in until September 2025. So I was thinking of my friend Jess who's just had a baby and I was like, what a brilliantly timed baby you've had. But no, because actually, if you've just had a baby, that baby will almost be out of it by the time this actually kicks in. And I think there's also a question and we're going to hear from Christine Farkison from the Institute of Fiscal Studies about the unforeseen consequences that this might have.

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While this might sound like good news for parents all around, there are risks here too, most notably around how the entitlement is going to be funded. After this reform, but before anybody changes their behaviour, the government will directly control the price of around 80% of preschool childcare hours delivered in England. That ramps up the pressure for getting the funding right, set it too low and providers might choose not to offer the new entitlement or even to leave the childcare market altogether. That would make it even more difficult for parents to find childcare and so the stakes for Mr Hunt and for families in England really can't be higher.

So a lot of control would rest in the government on what it chooses. Let me just talk about one other bit of childcare, which I think is really important and that's Families on Universal Credit, who will now be receiving or shortly be receiving their support up front instead of claiming it later. And why that is so important is when Universal Credit was first introduced, there was this terrible lag for families and it was partly to do with a technology system that didn't work, but it meant that people who were actually the most vulnerable, who needed it most, ended up going into debt just in order to pay household bills because the Universal Credit hadn't come through. I think pre-empting this is very important and that monthly limit will go up from £646 to nearly £1,951 for one child more, obviously, if it's two. And I think that is a sort of clever bit of politics which won't really cost the government any more in terms of the timing, but it will massively help ease that.

Look, the restriction.

There was a lot in this budget that will get headlines. It may not get that much discussion in the financial times, but let's face it, the government really isn't after discussion in the financial times for a lot of this. It wants to reassure voters that the government is sort of on their side and helping them with some of their concerns. And so to talk about help for leisure centres and swimming pools, Tom, our deputy editor will say, aren't leisure centres a bit 1990s? I think they're still relevant to an awful lot of people that they've got their swimming pools.

Well, they probably are for people of mine and Tom's age because that's when we were last in leisure centres as children. So that's the last time that we can remember actually being there.

I think that for an awful lot of people, if you've got young kids now to be able to take the kids on a rainy afternoon to the leisure centre might be a good outlet for them. It's a cheap way of doing something because you can't do an awful lot. If you're repairing the roof in your local swimming pool, which hasn't had its roof checked for 50 years, that is going to be a massive help on a rainy Saturday afternoon, which won't cost that much.

But on the childcare stuff, I think there's just a problem both politically and economically. The reason they're doing this, we've talked on this show before about childcare and the importance that it could have in terms of actually generating growth because we had just have a completely broken childcare system by comparison to other European countries. So it is really important. The focus is absolutely right.

Problem is 15 hours by April 2024 for two-year-olds of working parents only. So what about those parents who aren't working? But 15 hours by April 2024, that ain't going to do very

much economically any time soon. And also politically, what are we expecting between April and September, October 2024, a general election? And to take your point Emily on, I mean, in a way, the slight danger politically is that you end up basically irritating quite a lot of parents who hear this and they think, fantastic, I've got a one-year-old. I've got a two-year-old.

Can't wait.

I can't wait. And then you think, oh, actually, it's not going to work. This is basically a policy for the unborn and possibly not even conceived, which could be brilliant when it actually comes to fruition. But politically, it ain't great.

It's a policy to steal an idea that Labour had. I mean, literally on the news agency talking to Bridget Philipsson a month or so ago, they have laid out pretty much their plans for making childcare a priority. And it's a pretty easy win for Jeremy Hunt to come in and go, oh, that sounded quite good. That went down well.

We'll dig that.

I think we'll have that.

Yeah, exactly.

It might not come in for a while. Won't cost us anything until after an election. But we'll do that.

If it doesn't materialise, then you just run the risk of de-resisting.

The other thing that we've seen the government under pressure on over not just the past few weeks, but since Brexit happened, is, well, what on earth has Brexit done for us? And there was a rather odd reference in the budget, which I must say caught me by surprise, where the Brexit advantage was laid out in all its glory.

Today, I will do something that was not possible when we were in the EU and significantly increase the generosity of draft relief so that from the 1st of August, the duty on draft products in pubs will be up to 11 pence lower than the duty in supermarkets. It's a differential a Conservative government will maintain as part of a new Brexit pubs guarantee.

The Brexit pubs guarantee.

It is interesting. I mean, I was speaking a couple of months ago to a cabinet minister about where he saw Brexit advantages, and he ended up taking me down this very odd road extolling the virtues of our trade with Vietnam in dragon fruit. And I ended up going, wow, that is quite niche. And I think it does speak a little bit to the fact that we don't have a Brexit advantages minister or a Brexit opportunities festival or whatever it's called, but they have to keep reminding the electorate and particularly parts of the electorate that were Brexit voting and Tory voting and might not be next time that this is working, that it was all worth it. And now you can have, as he would say, war mail at frozen prices. It's all part of sort of, I think joining up a narrative that it wasn't about a massive mistake.

Although, I mean, the problem is, is that if you end up talking about things that seem pretty twee, you're talking about a Brexit pub guarantee you're talking about. I mean, previously, we talked about having the Queen or then the King's head on pint glasses again. You know, it all starts to seem a bit pounds and ounces. And, you know, the effort to reverse decimalization, you know, it all starts to have that slight air of being a project. Nostalgia.

Deep in nostalgic rather than a genuinely different geopolitical approach and economic model, it's problematic. I think the interesting thing though about this budget as well is what wasn't in it. The big political projects and problems that Sunak himself has identified, whether it's on industrial action or whether it's on NHS waiting lists, which are still going to be an enormous, enormous political problem by the time of the next election. They are coming down a bit faster than they were, but they're still huge. There was nothing about NHS spending. There was nothing really about departmental spending, apart from typical source of increases. The public realm is still going to be in a pretty tattered state to put it mildly by the time of the next election. And the Chancellor didn't have much to say about that.

I think it is relevant to this question of industrial action. And don't forget, we're talking on a day where there are tube strikes in London, there are teacher striking, there are parts of the BBC striking, and there are most importantly junior doctors on a three-day strike at the moment. And yet, we heard a freeze on fuel duty. Now, that would have cost, what, six billion a year? That is money that could have been spent helping nurses and doctors and teachers and people that are right now telling the government that they're not early enough to stay in their jobs.

We've got a bit used to it, haven't we, in the industrial election?

Well, we've got a bit used to the fuel duty phase as well.

Well, yeah, totally. Well, exactly. I mean, you know, this is one of the great jokes. I mean, it's not very funny jokes. It's not like a proper gag, but it's one of the sort of jokes of the sort of budget that we all wear.

But as good as we thought we'd hear.

Well, you know, I would say a bit better. But it's, you know, it's basically the idea is that every year since 2012, the fuel duty is due to go up at the next budget. And every year, partly because of a campaign by the Sun, the Conservative Chancellor says that he won't raise it. So it's basically just a complete sham.

But on the industrial action, I think, journalistically, it's quite a difficult story to keep covering because nothing really changes. It's the same thing sort of week after week after week.

And in a way, we've started to factor it in. But just politically in terms of people's everyday experience, actually, these strikes can be a deeply radicalising experience. We can't forget that when you can't get to work, when you see the junior doctors, when you see the nurses, every time, you know, if you phone 999 and you don't get the treatment you think that you ought to get, there's a really radicalising experience for ordinary people in their ordinary lives every single day. And yet, again, there was really nothing in the budget to address it or talk about it. Beyond the fact of saying that inflation is due to come down to 2.9%. But we should remember that that doesn't mean prices have come down. It just means the rate at which the prices are going up has slowed. So people, including people in the public sector who are striking, continue to be much worse off. That is now baked in. But the Chancellor did talk about potholes, great British potholes. The great British potholes and the relief that will be felt by everyone. I mean, I don't think it's a good...

I think potholes are massive. I think there is no...

They are. That's the bloody problem.

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That's the problem. There is nothing that affects more people's lives on a more frequent daily basis than potholes. Radicalising.

Potholes are radicalising now. Every time you go over one, you think bloody hell, I hate it. They actually are. And actually, we started looking up. It cost £63 to mend a pothole. I mean, I don't think there must be one uniform...

You're doing a whip round.

I feel like sort of going out and doing...

It's at John's Mansion Pothole.

I'm going to get the kids doing that in the summer. I mean, they've got these long summer holidays. Why not? But the point is, I think potholes speaks really directly to people who just don't want their tyres ruined. What's wrong with that?

But they are again mentioned in every budget again. It's budget bingo. There's always something about potholes. Yeah.

And yet they keep coming.

Yeah. My favourite tweet so far is from a Tory MP who said that we, at last, are able to deal with the plight of potholes. And I think he meant blight.

Blight.

Poor, poor potholes.

Poor, poor potholes.

Yeah, God, they get such a bad rap.

They're homeless.

They just come along and you fill them in.

Like the homeless.

The elderly I care about.

Gosh.

The plight of potholes.

Yeah.

Just before we move on to talk about Hunt, I think we should talk about this borrowed phrase. And it wasn't about fuel duty. It was the opposite. It was about making nuclear, recognising nuclear as a sustainable, environmental, friendly fuel source. And they called it the Great British Nuclear. Right? Is that right? The Great British?

Everything is Great British now.

Yeah. Everything is Great British.

I blame the Great British Bake Off.

Yeah.

Well, I think that started telling the politicians.

Bloody Mary Berry.

I think the politicians have got a lot to answer for, for introducing the Great British.

You know, because it's now on everything.

Today I can announce two further commitments to deliver our nuclear ambitions. Firstly, following representations from our energetic energy security secretary, I am announcing the launch of Great British Nuclear, which will bring down costs and provide opportunities across the nuclear supply chain to help provide one quarter of our electricity by 2050. And secondly, I am, I'm, it's so good to hear Labour in favour of nuclear energy.

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Don't forget Keir Starmer at his conference calling the phrase Great British Energy. So they're both at it. And I wonder whether it says none of you nasty French nuclear, none of you nasty Chinese nuclear.

Well, the irony being that it probably will be owned by EDF, the French energy giant. So it'll be Great British, Francais nuclear. I mean, what is next?

Like Great British lunches?

The Great British.

Great British agents.

Great British news air, Great British astrologers.

The Great British news agents.

Oh, we are.

It goes un-said.

So we should talk about Jeremy Hunt's performance because Lewis, you called him un-televsual on charismatic...

Telegenic.

Telegenic.

I think that's wrong.

Well, I thought, I think he is, as I've said, the ultimate survivor. He's been culture secretary, health secretary, foreign secretary. He's tried twice for the leadership without it hurting him. And now he's chancellor. And he's basically Rishi's right-hand man at a time when they just want to appear quite boring. And I thought he was doing OK at that until he started talking about trying to attract and retain older people in the workforce. And he turned round and insulted his colleague, Eleanor Lang, the deputy speaker, who, I mean, looks great. I don't think she's that old, but said, isn't it great to have older people still doing their jobs? And everyone sounded horrified.

If we matched the rate of Sweden, we would add more than a million people to our national labour force. Madam deputy speaker, I say this not to flatter you, but older people are the most skilled and experienced people we have.

She's only nine years older than he is. I can feel my toes curling inside my shoes right now at that because it was actually, I think that Jeremy Hunt did pretty well in... He wanted to be boring. Jeremy Hunt is good looking in a bland sort of way, kind of like an American senator. And there aren't many of those in British politics. And I think that he was doing well in being kind of normal, reassuring, slightly dull. We've had enough of fireworks. Rishi Sunak wants dull technocratic. And he was doing well with that until I think that gag at Eleanor Lang's expense.

Because it sort of stood out because there were no gags. I mean, actually normally in a budget speech, there's a few kind of little bit of light ribaldry. There's a few, you know, Osborne was quite good at it. There'd always be a few, you know, gag sort of laced through, particularly the opposition's expense, because he was playing such a straight bat. It really stood out that the only gag you have is basically calling the deputy speaker, one of your own MPs, old, brave move.

I think he looked quite embarrassed, actually, from how he looked afterwards.

I think it...

I think it...

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Yeah, I think it's sort of just...

At that moment where your body, you feel the temperature rising inside you.

We've all done it.

He looks slightly flushed.

Oh, yeah.

We've all done it. We've done that thing where, in your head, it sounds great. And then you sit out there and you're like, oh, I just want to die.

We'll be back in a moment and we'll be talking about what we've been talking about a little bit over the past few days, the BBC and some astonishing leaked emails and WhatsApps that have appeared in The Guardian.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back. The BBC has been in the news a lot and not for good reasons. And it seems to be back again, this time with a Guardian story of leaked emails and WhatsApp messages sent by a senior editor to the political staff at Westminster.

And these messages, which take us back a couple of years now, there was a leaked message showing the BBC shying away from a story that could have been pretty damaging to the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson. And it was the phrasing that was used in this. It was the way that somebody pretty senior in the newsroom or in a Westminster newsroom congratulated their correspondence for, if you like, staying away from the subject of Jennifer R. Corey. She was the American tech entrepreneur who was meant to be, let's say, giving Boris Johnson tech lessons. And the question surrounded not actually a sexual liaison or their affair, but whether he had used his position as London Mayor to secure favourable treatment, including funding for her. And the leaked message basically said, wonderful job last night, keeping us away from the story. I'd like to continue this distance. It's not a story we should be doing at this stage. Now, I should say, as somebody who's worked in a newsroom, there are lots of reasons that you don't touch a story. You might not touch a story if you didn't really believe the sources. You might not touch a story if you believed it was not in the public interest, or it was tittle-tattle, or it was salacious as opposed to being genuinely revelatory or credible. But I think what is important about this is she was being interviewed a lot at the time by main newspapers. And there was very little pickup in the BBC. And it's curious to realise if this leaked message is verbatim, that people were getting congratulated for not doing a story, because the implication is it would have been damaging.

Well, I was a political correspondent for 10 years. And, you know, I've never seen an email like this one. And this was Downing Street complaining about, you're not holding the Labour Party enough to account. And this was over COVID policy. And so an editor writes to the political staff, Downing Street is complaining that we're not reflecting Labour's mess. And then full stop, can we turn up the scepticism a bit on this? Now, if you've got the story wrong, of course, correct it. And it may be that there are valid reasons for think that actually, we haven't been sceptical enough about Labour in certain ways. But this looks a direct response to Downing Street complaining. That to me is astonishing. And I've got to say that John Simpson, the World Affairs editor, a big supporter of the BBC, he's still employed at the BBC. He's a defender of impartiality to the nth degree, has expressed serious alarm on Twitter about this as well.

I have to say, John, actually, that turned these messages into surprise me at all, in

a sense of having been around at that time, not working at Melbourne, but working doing political stories at that time at Newsnight. I think that it was very clear that there was a, in that period, particularly in 2020, where the government, Boris Johnson's government felt so titanic, so hegemonic, that there was a very consistent stream of communications between number 10 and the Melbourne Cooperation at that time. That's not to say, of course, you would expect that to some extent, but sometimes it felt like that influence was just a little bit too strong.

One of the interesting things, though, I think from the last few days, and I think something that will endure, is Labour's reaction to these stories. I think 12 months ago, you would have seen maybe some huffing and puffing, some crowing, but the Labour reaction basically being like, we want to make sure the BBC is on a fully impartial footing, we're going to take all of the political machinations out of it, we'll make it fully independent, et cetera, et cetera. That hasn't been what they've been saying over the last few days. What they've been saying is heaping pressure very directly on BBC managers, BBC leaders, to basically say, we're watching you, and we saw that in Prime Minister's questions. Literally five questions.

To Rishi Sunak, who might have actually been the wrong target in all of this, Rishi Sunak, I think, has a very different relationship with the BBC to the one that Boris Johnson had with the BBC. But it was very, very noticeable that Keir Starmer was coming out and saying, this isn't impartiality, and very noticeable that he decided to spend five questions on the day of the budget talking about the proximity of the BBC to the Conservative government. I was talking to Labour sources about this just today, and I think they are concerned that as we get closer to a general election, they think that history could repeat itself in terms of this proximity, this closeness. And look, they're sending, I think, a very clear signal. I mean, look, Prime Minister's questions, no one ever cares about Prime Minister's questions on the day of the budget. It's like the Amoose Boosh, it's like the kind of starter that no one cares about.

I've never heard you speak French.

Oh, we don't.

I've seen that.

He's an Amoose Boosh sort of guy, isn't he?

No, I am. I bring the Amoose and the Boosh. But on a day like today, what are they thinking? They're thinking, actually, most of the public will never notice that, but the BBC will notice it. And you could argue that's part of the problem. You're going to get one government, potentially swap one government for another, that that government is going to put them under pressure. But it is interesting.

Every government puts the BBC under pressure. It's what governments do. The difference is in whether the BBC accepts that pressure and responds to it.

Completely. I was there during Blair, Alistair Campbell, did he put the BBC under pressure? You bet he did. But the editors, the senior managers, were meant to be the shock absorbers that you didn't get it passed on to the political correspondents.

You should never have known. We should never know.

We should be doing the journalism that we think is right. And so when Tim Davie gave his interview saying, we've not been bullied, we're not doing anything because the Tory

government have said so, I'm afraid these text messages and WhatsApps and emails paint a different story. And a senior editor contacted me today and said, I would have rather walked out the building than send emails like that. And this is why that resonates. We debated what to call the episode on Monday. And we said, they think it's all over. It isn't.

Because it isn't.

Because it isn't.

We will be back tomorrow with the Chancellor. There's a lot for him. Please tell us if there are things that you'd like us to get to him. We'll be recording early tomorrow morning.

Before we go, we leave you with a reminder of just how contentious it was only 15 years ago to hold a budget on the day of the Cheltenham races.

As political editor of the spectator, I have reported on numerous controversies at Westminster, but never won quite as divisive as the Chancellor's decision to announce the budget during Cheltenham

week. The move has been greeted with horror by MPs in the House.

It's an absolute national disgrace. And there was a chance for the Exchequer after the war, Stafford Cripps, who had to resign because he gave away some budgetary secrets. This goes far beyond that. This is such an insult to all the thousands of people who will be at Cheltenham, all the devotees of racing and our four-legged friends. This is a resignation matter, in my view.

But seriously, scandalous miscalculation. It shows how the Treasury, who decided this don't live in the real world, where the ordinary man lives, and I'm afraid that Gordon's got his priorities wrong.

He doesn't give a tinker's cuss about the very great institutions of this country. The Manchin House speech, which Chancellors have turned up to for generations in white tie. The man turns up deliberately in a lounge suit, disrespecting all concerned, and he's doing the same with the festival. You know, there are lots of proper people who actually want to be there, and some of them are going to have to be in the budget in the House of Commons. I think it's probably deliberate, or he certainly doesn't care.

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