

[Transcript] The News Agents / The misinformation of war

This is a Global Player original podcast.

I was deeply saddened and outraged by the explosion at the hospital in Kasi yesterday. And based on what I've seen, it appears as though it was done by the other team, not you.

Now, leave aside the unfortunate choice of language there, which makes it sound like it's the Boston Red Sox taking on the New York Yankees.

Joe Biden is coming down, seemingly, on the side of Israel over this hideous explosion at a hospital which has potentially claimed hundreds of lives on the eve of Joe Biden's visit, which hasn't got off to the most auspicious start.

But the destruction of this hospital, which has rightly caused outrage and anguish across the world, has posed another question about this war which might still yet be young.

What is the role of misinformation?

Is it the case that particularly with the internet, particularly with Twitter, misinformation is being used as a tool of war?

To put it simply, in this war, who should we believe?

Welcome to the newsagents.

It's John.

It's Lewis.

And it was hard not to feel that we've taken another few steps down into the abyss when you read last night about what had happened at this hospital in Gaza, where potentially 500 people had lost their lives.

And given that Israel had been launching airstrikes in the region and had said prior to this, that hospitals could be a target, not surprising, that the finger was pointed and pointed very, very directly at Israel for responsibility.

And in the cold light of day, the truth has become more complicated with the Israeli Defence Force saying they have strong evidence and a lot of defence analysts have said that there is some credibility to what the Israelis are claiming, that it was actually a failed rocket from the Palestinian side that caused this tragedy.

But who knows?

Yeah, who knows?

And obviously, it's completely easy, John, as you were saying, to understand why everyone assumed that this was Israel because of the context.

I mean, let's not forget, I mean, Israel has quite literally been raining down thousands upon thousands of rockets and shells onto this tiny stripper territory, the Gaza Strip.

We know that thousands of Palestinians have died.

You can question the exact number and whether you query or not what the Palestinian authorities say, but no one can possibly doubt that many, many Palestinians have been wounded, maimed and killed.

And indeed, the Israelis have warned several times that they would bomb hospitals because they believe that the areas beneath those hospitals in the underground networks and so on are bases of operations for Hamas fighters.

So at numerous points, they have warned that this might happen.

So it isn't surprising in that context that people assume this.

But I think one of the really interesting things about this and about this war more

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generally, which this has sort of shone light on, is how this war is reported, how the media, how we, particularly the foreign media in the UK and elsewhere, deal with these sorts of questions.

Because last night, when the news first broke, it was reported by news organisations all over the world, including here in the UK, particularly via push notification that this was down to Israel.

Explain just the push notification.

For people who are not on social media as much as you are, Lewis Goodall.

All of our listeners are very tech-savvy, John, as you know, but yeah, look, this is the thing.

This is a news innovation, obviously, which has become, in many ways, for many people, the main way that people first learn about news these days, right?

It is when something beeps on your phone or flashes on your phone from the BBC or Sky or whoever it is, CNN, and it usually is just says in a couple of lines what the news is.

And often this is totally innocuous, right?

Like, you know, a football result, or Rishi Sunak has said this, or Keir Starmer has said that, or Biden or whatever.

But obviously, in a war like this, which is complex, where there are multiple sources of information, where information is deeply contested, I think there is a real question mark to be had about the utility of push notification.

Never mind tweets and everything like that, which we can talk about, but push notifications as a means of conveying information, apart from anything other than the most uncontested bare bones facts.

Because ultimately, the fact is, let's assume for a moment, and I'm not saying this is the case and we will find out, but let's assume for a moment that the Israelis weren't responsible for that yesterday.

In sending out push notifications saying, Palestinians say, these Israelis are responsible, or Hamas says that Israelis are responsible, that's, for most people, all they're ever going to see.

And that's all they're going to know.

Anyway, that can absolutely happen in reverse as well, and both sides of this war know that.

And it is so dangerous for people to kind of reach instant conclusions.

Because then, what is said almost becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of what is truth.

It becomes your truth, which is something else we've talked about, the idea that everyone can have their own truth.

I suspect, as you say, Lewis, even if compelling evidence is independently scrutinized, which shows beyond doubt that Israel was not responsible for the firing of the projectile that caused this damage at the Gaza hospital, there will still be millions, tens of millions, who believe Israel was responsible because they will have made up their mind and that there is no turning this stuff back.

And so because it's, you're a news organization and you want to be first and you want to get that stuff out there.

You push this stuff out there and it becomes accepted reality that you cannot shift.

And that is so dangerous when, look, you know, as a result of the claim last night that it

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was Israel that did it, Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, King of Jordan, the president of Egypt said, we are not going to meet Joe Biden. Those are serious consequences for the diplomatic push that is going to try to stop this from escalating because presumably if you're Mahmoud Abbas and you're trying to run the West Bank and you've got thousands of people in the streets protesting against Israel, you're going to be overthrown.

And it's made the already simmering tensions across the region even more intense to the point of boiling point now and adding into that sort of combustible mixture in terms of information or misinformation or disinformation, of course, is the role of Twitter or X, which as we saw in the Ukraine war has and in all news events, it has become whether we like it or not one of the primary arenas where politics is done and news is consumed and where the players prosecute their own information war.

We've seen that with Zelensky doing it very, very effectively.

We've seen it in this conflict, you know, Israel, the state of Israel has their own Twitter account.

After the attacks, they were posting pictures of some of the consequences, including, you know, horrific images and so on with dead babies.

We see equivalent on the other side as well.

And it is very, very easy, particularly in a arena like Twitter, where of course you are in your own echo chamber where you follow who you follow to very quickly start to see the development of narratives and streams of information exclusively designed for one side or another.

And I was really struck last night at the response that I got when I tweeted about the hospital, just sort of saying, no one knows for sure who bombed the hospital.

We should be very cautious before attributing it.

What we can say is that it confirms again what should be obvious one way or the other. Civilian horror in a war in Gaza is guaranteed.

Now I would have thought that that would be a pretty innocuous statement for journalists to make because, as you know, John, the most important thing for our job is accuracy.

We want to make sure or admit what we don't or admit what we don't know at the stage that we don't know it.

And I just got, and again, it's totally irrelevant in the grand scheme of things.

I don't care particularly, but it was so striking the absolute torrent barrage of kind of abuse that that what I would have thought was a relatively innocuous statement got.

And, you know, I was called an anti-Semite.

I was called a Netanyahu shill.

I had lots of DMs, eugenicidal scumbag, all of this sort of stuff.

And again, it doesn't matter in terms of me, but what does matter and what is interesting is that as you alluded to earlier, John, there are parallel ecosystems online who want to see what they want to see and they want to hear what they want to hear.

The actual market, at least online, perhaps not in the wider public, but the actual market online for people who want actual news, which is impartial and which doesn't simply re-inform what they already think and what they want to think, I actually think is becoming more and more slender.

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And in terms of Twitter's role as well, this has got worse in terms of how this platform operates and how it is making worse the misinformation that exists under Musk, because Musk has removed

all of the elements that actually made information on the platform more credible.

He's removed verification, which means that now when you see something on there, you can't be sure exactly who it's from unless you recognize the name.

The actual people who are verified are often bots or little Musk acolytes who are actively spreading misinformation, and that's the stuff that you can see first.

And this is the danger with this kind of Hobbesian view, this state-of-nature kind of view that Musk has of the internet and of information, which is that it's a free-for-all, that you can democratize it.

Well, no, because not all information is equal.

Not all tweets are equal.

There's a world of difference from seeing something from CNN or the New York Times or the BBC or whoever it is and seeing it from some little bit of pond life who is just trying to cause as much trouble as possible and actively make some of these tensions worse.

Lewis, I last night did something pretty similar to you.

I hadn't seen your tweet.

I said, you know...

You've not got alerts on my tweets, John.

Yeah, fun enough.

Not always.

Not always.

That's a bit similar.

I mean, I said something very similar, saying, you know, I tweeted a photo, you know, from my timeline on Twitter, I feed just two tweets next to each other, one which says it was Israel, one which says evidence that it wasn't.

I just tweeted it out and said, you know, this is the fog of war, importance of verifying information because at the moment, does anyone know with certainty who is responsible?

And I got a similar response to you of saying, oh, my God, you're just acting on behalf of this or you should be able to do better.

This is clearly Israelis.

It was clearly the Palestinians.

We don't bloody know.

That is not Russia's judgment.

So it's just one other thing that you were saying, which I came across all the time when I was living in America.

And I really worried about the way the broadcast media in that country was going.

In that, I think people tuned in to certain television channels, not to be informed, but to be affirmed, I'll tune in so that the channel will tell me that I'm right to think what I'm already thinking.

And I think that there has to be a space where people can hear reasonable argument that raises questions rather than just telling people what they already think they know.

I think that is right.

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And I think that what has happened is that, particularly with this conflict, people only want to see what they want to see.

And actually, what is striking is, is that, you know, we already know one thing, which is that Israel has, as I said earlier, bombed and bombed and bombed the Gaza Strip over the course of the last week.

Now, leave aside whether they have to do it and the security reasons for it or whatever. That is beyond contestation.

We know for a fact that some of the people who will have died in that hospital would have been the injured from some of that bombing.

We know for a fact that some of those people who have died or been injured in that hospital bombing were sheltering in there because they thought it was safe as opposed to the rest of the Gaza Strip or other areas nearby from Israeli bombing.

You can make an argument just on that basis.

You can say, look, this bombing is wrong because look at the civilian toll that it's having. You don't need to be able to say with absolute certainty that, yes, this was an Israeli bomb. The facts actually speak for themselves in a different way.

And also, even if there's, let's imagine this was an accident on either side, which some people have also posited as a theory, again, it reinforces the point, which is that it is very, very difficult, indeed, probably impossible, well, definitely impossible, to even prosecute a kind of strategic war in the Gaza Strip when you're trying to destabilize and remove Hamas without civilian casualties.

We know that that is to use that terrible phrase, collateral damage.

And that poses enormous questions for Israel and for the government of Israel.

And in a way, for me, that is enough without jumping to conclusions about the provenance of this particular missile and this particular shell, which happened to destroy this hospital. Well, I mean, whatever, it has certainly added more chaos and uncertainty and ratcheted up tensions and probably increased the likelihood of this spreading beyond the borders of Gaza and Israel, which is a very uncertain and deeply worrying prospect and has further complicated Joe Biden's visit, I was going to say, to the region, but it's not to the region, it's to Israel.

This attack, if it turns out that it was Israel that is responsible, I mean, what a calamitous error on the eve of Biden's arrival, you know, Israel had no interest in being responsible for anything like this.

Who knows, accidents happen in war, we will find out what happens.

But it has been a disaster for the process and for the possibility of making progress on this.

In a moment, we'll be speaking to Simon MacDonald.

He was Britain's ambassador to Israel and a former head of the Foreign Office, and he's got a book coming out next month called Beyond Britannia, reshaping UK foreign policy. Simon MacDonald, welcome to you.

Thank you so much for doing this.

As a former ambassador to Israel, you must have a pretty profound sense of what the country is going through right now.

How bad is it?

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As bad as you can imagine.

I have many Israeli friends across the political spectrum, different age groups, different parts of the country, and this is all of their worst nightmares.

The attack by Hamas on the 7th of October was their 9-11 moments.

This was something that they had feared in the back of their mind, and now it has happened.

1,400 people killed on one day, that's the same as 9,000 being killed in the United Kingdom in a very carefully planned, very nastily targeted operation that took out young people at a music and peace festival and old ladies in Kibbutzim.

Does it matter, objectively, who blew up that hospital?

Because aren't people going to believe what they're going to believe?

I mean, where do you stand?

What do you think?

I don't know.

For less than 24 hours there are two totally different accounts.

I think it does matter who did it, and the reason why Israel is producing the evidence so quickly that it wasn't them is because they know that it matters.

If Israel killed hundreds of people in a hospital, that is a terrible thing to have happened.

That is terrible for Israel's case in the international community.

If it was Hamas or PIJ misdirecting a rocket, then that is their fault, and Israel, of course, gains from people knowing that.

Of course it can gain from people knowing that, but it's not going to be accepted in the Arab world.

Even if the military operation were a success and there are huge reasons to believe why this military operation is going to be extremely difficult, you're just going to radicalise a new generation of Gazans.

Hamas might go, but you're still going to have the anger, the fury, the sense of resentment that their plight has been ignored.

Well, this is why the leadership, why Biden's visit are so important.

Looking at the bigger picture, knowing that the only resolution is through negotiation is also part of the picture right now, and reminding people, reminding the national unity government that there is this future, there is this necessity to bring this decade centuries old dispute to a peaceful resolution is also part of the picture.

Sometimes the darkest moments are the place to make the boldest initiative.

Well, I'm interested you say that, Sam, because you were there as our ambassador when Ariel Sharon was in his later years, and here was a guy who had been the hawk, the hard man of Israel, the brutal invasion of Lebanon, all the rest of it, and yet he suddenly becomes a latter day FW de Klerk or Jerry Adams, where he wants to sit down and talk peace.

Is there anyone you see in Israel today who is that person, or is the Yasser Arafat interlocutor on the other side who could deliver?

No, I don't see that person, but sometimes that person emerges unexpectedly.

Before the 24th of February last year, I never imagined that a comedian who'd fallen accidentally into politics would become the greatest war leader of the 21st century, but Zelensky has done that, so somebody might emerge out of this very, very unpromising backdrop to seize this moment.

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But what happens now, given there seems to be a land incursion about to start in Toghaza? There is the controversy over whatever happened to that hospital, which may have killed hundreds of people.

It looks like it's going to be bloody, but without a clear resolution.

I fear both those things are correct.

Israel absolutely has a right to defend itself.

Defending itself means taking on and out Hamas.

They're going to get all the equipment, they're going for the leadership structure.

They want to get rid of this terrorist organization.

But the problem is, this terrorist organization is embedded in the community of Gaza, two million people, more than two million people in a patch of land the size of the Isle of White, and it is not possible surgically to remove Hamas from Gaza.

So there will be collateral damage.

One of our messages, I think, to Israel must be, although we stand with you, although we feel with you, what you are feeling does not justify any response at all.

We also care about Palestinian civilians.

They are innocent victims too.

They must be protected.

They must be born in mind in whatever Israel does.

You know from your time in Israel that that is a very hard message.

Well I would imagine it's a very hard message.

To get over to Israeli leadership, we're given history.

The Israelis say, thanks very much, but we'll take it from here because we are the only people who can look after our own, and we've seen what happens when we depend on others.

The key external player right now is the United States.

I think Secretary Blinken and President Biden are playing a very important and constructive role.

Blinken stood next to Netanyahu in Jerusalem and said, we also care about the Palestinian civilians.

So the United States, I think, is doing its best to broaden Israeli perspectives and make sure that they don't inadvertently make things worse.

How worried are you that this spreads, that this stops just being about Israel-Gaza, Israel-Hamas, that takes in Hezbollah?

It causes an uprising in the West Bank.

Goodness knows what happens with Iran.

Of course that is a worry, but I think most of the diplomacy right now is focused on precisely that, making sure that it does not spread.

I think objectively it is in no one's interest for it to spread.

No doubt Iran is somewhat enjoying this, the discomforture of the West, this shock to Israel, but it has that.

It doesn't need to stir up Hezbollah.

It won't achieve, in my view, anything more from its own point of view by stirring up Hezbollah.

So I think the diplomatic effort is focused on containment.

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But you talk about the diplomatic effort.

Joe Biden is there right now.

He had been due to meet the leader of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, one of the few politicians in the world that makes Joe Biden look youthful.

He was due to meet the president of Egypt and the king of Jordan.

And that's not going to happen.

That is undoubtedly a reverse, but he is in the region.

He is talking to the senior Israelis.

What he's trying to do is commendable and deserves our support.

Of course, the Arab leaders are reacting to the first reports about the destruction of the Ahli hospital.

But already we're not clear about exactly.

What happened yesterday?

Yeah.

So what does success look like for Biden?

Is it the reopening of humanitarian aid, of fuel, of water, of food, of medicines getting into Gaza Strip?

I think Biden will be very careful not to frame his objectives in public.

But I assume that that humanitarian access, protecting the civilian population, will be high on his agenda.

I mean, if you look at the history and you go back to the first countries to recognize the state of Israel and then you look at the Abraham Accords that took place under Trump and apparently the move that Saudi Arabia was going to be doing the same thing.

Is all that in jeopardy?

Could diplomatic relations be called off when we get back to kind of 67?

It could be because it is that big a moment.

But I don't assume that that's the case.

I don't think that's likely.

I think people's consciousness of how much is at stake is a restraint.

I think that Egypt and Jordan and Saudi Arabia do not want this to spiral out of control and so will hesitate to contribute to the spiraling out of control.

But is there an element in which this is out of the control of some of these leaders given?

I mean, I'm presuming that Matt Mbass has calculated it is too big a risk to sit down with Joe Biden given the state of public opinion on the West Bank.

So what can Biden do?

What can Biden possibly achieve with this visit?

The focus is the Israeli side.

It is shaping the Israeli response.

Israel at the moment feels that anything is justified.

Such is the pain.

Such is the horror they have suffered.

But I think other players, like the President of the United States, can be a restraining hand because the key thing is that there is a fundamental difference between terrorists who target women and children and the elderly and government forces that kill civilians

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inadvertently even though they are trying not to kill civilians.

But the anger and the grief that are suffered by the bereaved are exactly the same.

So he will be trying to persuade Israel of the sense of not stoking up that anger and grief and sowing problems for the future.

When you say that in the darkest moments that is when an opportunity can be seized, do you think that the two-state solution can be revived, that there is something left in it?

Because for it to happen, it would require enormous concessions from Israel in terms of, you know, the settlements that have already been built in the West Bank, etc. etc.

This is true, but I believe that two-state separation is the only way to a sustainable peace.

I think many of the actions in the last 80 years have made that more difficult, but it's still, I think, the best chance for peace.

And we're not beyond the point of no return.

I mean, people focus on that the whole time.

People announce that we've gone beyond the point of no return constantly, but I think there is still that opportunity, though there is immense risk to Israel in this.

You are right.

They will have to make very painful concessions, but until they have two states, each sovereign in its own land, I do not think there is a chance for sustainable peace.

Can Netanyahu survive this?

I don't know.

I think it is striking that immediately before the 7th of October, Israel was as divided politically as I can remember.

He was leading a government that was very widely seen as the most right-wing in Israel's history.

It had a very particular agenda focused on the Supreme Court and settlements.

And then this happened, and there is anger in Israel that the government was not focused on security, that there was this intelligence lapse.

And so that is simmering in the background.

But of course, in the short term, people rally around the government because people see there is an existential threat.

Simon MacDonald, stay with us.

We're going to take a break now, but when we come back, we're going to talk about the pretty decisive role you played in British politics, where Britain's former head diplomat waded in to the future of Boris Johnson.

This is The Newsagents.

In Tamworth and Mid-Bedfordshire, they're going to the polls tomorrow, and I'm not going to ask my guest, Simon MacDonald, to talk about the sephological implications of Tamworth and Mid-Bedfordshire.

But the Tamworth by-election has been brought about by Chris Pinter, having been suspended from the House of Commons.

If you remember Chris Pinter, he was the deputy chief whip when Boris Johnson was prime minister. He goes to the Carlton Club in Mayfair, has a few too many to drink, and allegedly gropes some men that are there.

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Boris Johnson said, I knew nothing about his behaviour.

And then on the Today programme, back in July 2022, one Simon MacDonald made a surprise appearance on the radio.

I know that the senior official briefed the prime minister in person because that official told me so at the time.

Where do you think this leaves 10 Downing Street?

What do you need to hear?

What do we all need to hear, do you think?

I think they need to come clean.

I think that the language is ambiguous.

It's sort of telling the truth and crossing your fingers at the same time and hoping that people are not too forensic in their subsequent questioning.

And I think that is not working.

Simon MacDonald, arguably, as well as being a peer of the realm and a master of a Cambridge College and and and and and and, you brought down a prime minister.

It seems that way.

I would say that he brought himself down, although the pincher allegations were the straw that broke the Johnsonian camel's back, the allegations, the problems, the scandals had been mounting through the first half of 2022.

How big a decision was it for you to go public, to write that letter and then agree to appear on the Today programme and, in effect, say the prime minister isn't telling the truth?

It was an agonising decision.

The only person I consulted was my wife.

So we discussed this basically from the Sunday through to the Tuesday morning.

And the trigger on the Sunday was an interview which Therese Coffey gave in which she clearly looked conflicted.

She clearly wasn't happy with the lines she was required to spout.

And I knew why she was conflicted.

I'm sure she didn't know the background, but I did know the background.

So I got in touch with, because I still have contacts in the Cabinet Office, Foreign Office Number 10, and said, you know that the story that is out there is piffle.

You have got to correct this because this is important.

On the Monday there was an attempt, which I thought was ludicrous.

It was a little tweak of language here and there, but it very much made it feel as though this was minor.

There had been no formal complaint.

There was nothing to see here.

Let's all move on.

And I thought that was wrong.

And so I wrote my letter.

Do you regret any of it?

The things that I thought at the time, which I discussed with my wife, have happened.

One is that people think it's personal.

People think that it was a personal animus between me and Mr. Johnson.

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And the justification for that was not just that you did it, but that you had sort of been squeezed out of the Foreign Office when the Foreign and Commonwealth Office became the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

That is true.

But it is also true that I'd done my five years, and so I was disappointed not to get an extension, but I'd done my five years.

There was no skull-duggery in my departure.

So I wanted to do more, didn't do more, but it worked out all right.

The Prime Minister put me in the House of Lords.

So I did not have a personal animus, though it has been repeatedly claimed.

But second, I felt that by intervening the people, and there are quite a lot of people, some very close to the government, that do not trust the civil service, who think the civil service is a problem in the governance of our country, they'd get some evidence in their minds that the civil service is unreliable.

And it would be used as a weapon to attack the civil service.

Which it has been.

Which it has been.

And presumably you regret that, because there is a narrative now that the civil service are running in opposition to the government, and there was something else that was cited, which is you appearing on a documentary where you make clear that you voted remain and then you speak to civil servants afterwards the day later, and it was portrayed in the media that you were this kind of, ugh, the lefty remain establishment trying to thwart the government.

Indeed.

I thought the betrayal was unfair.

Was wrong.

Were you cross?

I was cross, because I made it clear in the interview that the reason why I was telling my staff how I had voted was in order to stress the importance of impartiality at this critically important time.

It did not matter how I had voted.

It did not matter how they had voted, because our duty was clear.

As civil servants, it is our job to implement the policy of the government of the day within the law.

And that was my clear instruction to them that key day, no matter how they felt personally. Eventually one or two commentators twigged that and put that, so that argument has been replayed, but inevitably rather more recessed than the new story from the program.

What did you make of the argument that was marshaled by some, you know, Boris Johnson's closest supporters like Nadine Doris that, look, he's done all the right things on all the big issues, and this stuff that Simon McDonald's drawing attention to really doesn't matter?

That is her view, no doubt.

I would only point out that this was not the only thing going on.

I think party gates, the stories of number 10 exempting itself from the rules, it instructed everybody in the country, everybody else in the country to abide by was much more important.

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So I think it was the accumulation of problems rather than this one problem that was key. I mean, I spent, you know, a good part of my last decade in the US covering US politics and the Trump administration, and the grip of populism is still tight.

Arguably, Britain went back with the fall of Johnson to more normal politics where truth and a way of doing things did matter.

Leaviside is trust and her implosion.

But since then there is, it feels more familiar territory.

Indeed, I think our institutions are strong.

And although 2022 was a very dramatic, disruptive year, we sorted ourselves out.

The House of Commons was able to dispose of two very different prime ministers for very different reasons and choose somebody who is doing the job in a calm way, even if you disagree with the detail of his policies.

He is, as you say, a more traditional, competent, thorough figure.

And what do you make of this review that has emerged in the last 24 hours to abolish the cabinet secretary, break up the treasury?

And this is the review that has been spearheaded by Francis Maud, Lord Maud of Holisham, who was a former cabinet office minister.

I think this is a contribution to the debate.

There's lots of it.

I disagree with, but I understand the motivation.

Clearly, the system is not perfect, but I think that this debate needs to go on.

It also feels to me simply too late in the parliament, too late in the life of this government to try such a radical change.

It might feature in a Conservative Party manifesto, but if it's to happen it feels as though the only correct way for it to happen is on the other side of a general election.

And what do you say finally to the charge that civil servants are that bunch of lefty Ramona remainers who are thwarting the will of the elected government?

Flat wrong.

Civil servants are there to do the bidding of ministers.

This is understood by all 400,000 people who work for the civil service that they advise.

It is their privilege to be close to ministers and advise up close, but only ministers decide.

That is how the British system works.

One of the problems in recent times is that ministers have not been around long enough to get their head around their portfolio to get into the job.

When you have six education secretaries in 12 months, there is a deep problem in the system.

Lord McDonald, thank you very much indeed.

This is The News Agents.

And before we go, if you were listening yesterday, you would have heard that Lewis Goodall was off on his honeymoon and was flying to Tokyo about two hours ago.

Yeah, well, I didn't want to leave you, John, on your own.

We talk about accountability interviews on this podcast.

What happened?

I just woke up this morning and, unfortunately, my flight was cancelled.

So it means that I'm flying tomorrow.

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What time were you due to fly?

About midday.

We checked on the Heathrow website.

There were no flights cancelled to Tokyo today.

But I wasn't flying with Heathrow.

I was flying indirectly because unlike you, John, I have to save my pennies.

So I have to make some of these economisations.

Oh, really?

I kind of just don't think you want to go on a honeymoon.

I think you want to be here and you can't resist being away from me.

I want to be.

That is right.

You're my husband.

You're my work husband.

But the point is, what this does, it completely vindicates, which you were all making fun of me for yesterday when I said that I had only booked the outbound flight, I hadn't booked any hotels, and that is which I never ever do.

I always leave it to the very last minute, and this is complete vindication of the Goodall travel approach.

The Goodall School of Travel.

So just for those listening and wanting to understand the psyche of Mr. Goodall, he had booked an outbound flight and he said, no, I'm going to try and book a hotel now.

And I said, should we go for lunch?

He goes, oh, yeah, let's go for lunch.

And so we went out for lunch and he didn't actually book the hotel.

Well, I wasn't going to do it in front of you.

That would have been very rude.

So where are you going now for your honeymoon?

Well, I dare not say because you're just going to track my movements.

Well, we're going to go to Japan, what we're going to defer, we're going to go next year instead, but we're going somewhere else now.

So don't worry.

But I'm definitely not going to be here tomorrow because even if my flight is cancelled again, I'm not going to risk this second accountability ribbing.

We'll both be back tomorrow.

See you then.

The news agents with Emily Maitlis, John Sopel and Lewis Goodall.

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