

## [Transcript] The News Agents / The rental crisis - no end in sight?

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

On the news agents today, we're going to talk about renting and renters and how impossibly difficult it is becoming, particularly for young people, for young workers, to find somewhere, particularly in London, that they can just afford to live.

Today we're going to be hearing from a number of news agents listeners who got in contact with us to share some of their stories and they're pretty grim.

This is just one of them.

There was a leak from the flat above us and the water kept coming through the light fitting in our bathroom.

We reported this but nothing happened.

Our landlord did not appear to be motivated to get it fixed and eventually the ceiling in the bathroom came down.

We kept complaining but it was down to the local council to get it fixed.

The local council just did nothing.

We were constantly getting mosquitoes in the flat because they were breeding in the horrible dump and we lived with that for over a year.

We've talked about the affordability crisis, how people can no longer get a foot on the housing ladder.

It's all become too expensive but this isn't about buying.

This is about renting and even there, even with stories like that, there is still a crisis of affordability because the cost of rent has gone soaring and the service that many people are receiving has plummeted.

Welcome to the Newsagents.

The Newsagents.

It's John.

It's Emily and we're going to be hearing from more renters during the course of the programme and indeed from a landlord as well and we're going to be asking about the root causes to the problem that we are seeing right now.

Let's just start off with a few figures because they will put into context what is happening in most people's lives that are trying to rent right now because it takes the average person nine years to save enough money for a house deposit.

In London, that becomes 15 years.

If you come to London in your late 20s or 30s, you're probably not even looking at being able to buy a house until you're around 45.

A lot of these stats we should say are from John Byrne Murdoch in the FT from last week.

Rent is up 15% on last year in London and just under 10% in the rest of the UK.

Inflation is running at just over 10% at the moment.

But there are some cases in London where the supply of rental property is so scarce that that 15% is way in excess of that rentals going up by something like 33% in some cases for no apparent reason.

We know that housing costs take up an enormous proportion of income.

It can be around 23% of people's income just spent on rent in a lot of the UK.

In London, that goes up to 35%.

A third of any money you get in is going straight on the rent of something that increasingly

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nowadays is sounding pretty substandard.

What seems to be happening in the bigger picture in all of this is that we know that interest rates have gone up and that has meant that a lot of people who may have thought they were just about to get their first house or first flat have been deterred from that and are thinking, I need to rent a bit longer.

You're seeing a surge in demand for rental properties.

At the same time as landlords, if they keep rents at the same price, they're also paying higher interest rates for the mortgages on the properties that they have as buy-to-let properties.

They need to recoup the costs as well.

It's like a perfect storm is capturing this section of the rental market.

Nothing used to be seen as the cheap option, not anymore.

You heard from Elizabeth, who ended up with a hole in her bathroom ceiling and mosquitoes coming in because of the damp.

We're now going to hear from Tash, who was quite happily paying a rent of £2,900 for a four-bed flat with her friends.

Just listen to what's happened now.

Hi, newsagents.

My name's Tash and I rent a room in a four-bed flat in North London with three other girls.

Last time last year, we were paying £2,900 for the flat.

We've been told by our landlord that if we'd like to renew the contract at the end of June, it's going to go up to £3,900.

We tried to negotiate, but we were told that actually the market value around the area is £4,400, which would have been a 55% increase.

Because we've been good tenants, he's happy to reduce it to £3,900.

That means after bills, I'll be paying over £1,000 a month for my room.

I know rent's going up for a lot of people, but I'm also finding that as a single person, you're having to take over all the increases yourself rather than being able to split it with the person you share a room with.

Just another way that being single is impacted in the cost of living.

I think that's a really important point as well, because we do often hear about families and obviously families can just mean one earner, but when you hear it from Tash, that each of those women that she lives with are now facing that extra huge rise of 33% on their rent, it puts it into perspective just how difficult it is to be single in the capital right now.

Yes.

She's paying £1,000 for her room or a share of the room that she is in.

That's on top of, of course, the extra costs for electricity and gas and everything else that has gone up in price.

One would suspect that her income has not matched that, and so people are finding it very tough indeed to make ends meet.

There is also something in the law that means that if it is a multi-occupancy residence, there is a difference to how you're treated legally compared to if you're a family.

That's a good context for bringing in another clip now, and this is from Beth.

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She talks about section 21 of the law, which means that you could just kick someone out of a high occupancy rental property.

I was evicted recently under section 21 in London.

We are evicted because new HMO licensing to combat slum housing has been brought in by most London boroughs, and the landlord simply decided they didn't want to meet the costs of the licensing and therefore evicted us so they could rent to a family where they would not need the license, despite it being exactly the same house.

It really felt like a perverse outcome of policy making.

There was no recourse for us to wear the landlords or council on accommodations to prevent eviction.

The house would never be described as slum housing.

It was very good quality.

It was a real loss for us, and it also meant that finding a new HMO was not an impossible.

So just the acronym there HMO, that just means Houses in Multiple Occupation.

As we were hearing from people, from newsagents listeners, from renters, tenants, I think it's important to say that we were also contacted by a landlord who considers himself to be a pretty decent landlord.

His name is Steve, and he says, look, we're always cast as the bad guys in this.

The landlords are the ones that are greedy and putting at rents beyond all conception.

I think it is fair to say that some landlords definitely will fit into that category, particularly when they see other properties going up and they realise they can make more.

But Steve tells us his story, and he has a lot of sympathy actually for the tenants, but he's also on his knees in terms of what he's trying to pay for right now himself.

Name is Stephen Williams, and I have rental houses in Bridgend, Swansea and Neath.

Bought our first property in 2007.

At the height, we had 18 properties rented out.

Since the turn of the year, I've sold four, three of them to actually Enon.

Basically, a friend of mine said to me the other day, I used to be enjoying being a landlord.

I don't enjoy it anymore.

I feel very sorry for tenants at the moment.

It's very unfair for them.

We had to give them a rent rise in January.

We really had to think long and hard about that because we realised we were passing pain on to other people.

I put the rents up in January, and I have now three of my properties, which the rent does not cover the mortgage.

A lot of people are going to go, I agree, landlord, blah blah blah, you can handle it, so to speak.

Yeah, we did have it good for 10 or 11 years, but in those 10 or 11 years, we didn't give our tenants a rent rise.

The end of the day, all a landlord wants is a long-term tenant that pays their rent, keeps your house in good order, and if there's a problem, they phone you early enough to rectify the problem before it becomes a major problem.

Politicians need to get real.

You can't put tenants and landlord against each other because we need each other.

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So it's got to be equitable for everybody.

It's got to be fair for everybody.

I don't care if they came to us and said, a section 21 notice is now a year.

I'm happy to live with that.

It's just bring some equity in it and understand that we're not greedy.

Well, that is Steve speaking to us from Bridgend in Wales.

We gave you some numbers at the start of the podcast.

I just thought it would be useful to break this down a tiny bit further.

Essentially, the housing market is like in three segments.

19% of people, so a fifth, are in private rented accommodation.

17% are in public housing, whether it be housing association or council housing.

And 65% are owner occupiers.

But among that 20% or so, they're in private rented accommodation.

78% of them are aged between 25 and 34.

So very much a young people's area for private housing.

And weirdly, this has a knock on effect on what's actually happening to the population.

We're going to explore this in a moment.

But the people that cannot rent, the people that would be at one time,

first time buyers, are moving out of London, not having children in London.

And the number of children in London is going down to the point that primary

schools are now shutting or unable to function because there aren't enough

babies being born in the capital.

That is a phenomenally weird place to be because of high rents.

We're going to bring you the story of Josh now.

We've been following and talking to Josh for some time rather than just getting a snapshot on one day.

We wanted Josh to take us through his nightmare, really, of a diary as a renter or a would-be renter.

And the effort that he and his partner, Amy, have made literally to find somewhere to live.

Hi, my name is Josh.

I'm 30 years old and I'm a graphic designer for an agency based in Shortich, East London.

I live in Newington Green, N1, with my girlfriend, Amy.

And we're currently renting a one and a half bed flat for £1,800 per month.

It took a long time to find the right place.

But already within a year of living here, our landlord is putting our rent up by £600, which means we can't afford to live here anymore.

We've had a few house viewings this week, and sadly, nothing is quite what we're after.

But it's been an insight, to say the least, because estate agents have also been informing us that if we are serious about taking property off the market, we would have to make a decision pretty much on the spot and also send an offer through that day.

We had a house viewing yesterday for a one bed flat round the corner from where we are currently.

As we were walking through our sort of 15-minute slot of viewing, she told us that if we wanted to take it, we would need to tell her pretty much there and then, and that an offer would

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need to be emailed through by the end of the day, which proves how mental the rental market is at the moment.

There's no time to think, you have to act very quickly, and if you don't have the money to outbid, chances are you aren't getting it.

We've also noticed we will get more for our money in terms of size the further out we go, so we've had to start looking more than two miles from where we are currently. There was an email we received today from an estate agent with a listing for a two bed flat, which we really like the look of, but we were 40 minutes too late to reply, so we missed out on any house viewing, so also if you don't respond quick enough, you don't even get a chance to view it.

There are so many layers to this process, and it's all consuming and emotionally draining. It's put a lot of strain on our relationship, both with work and day to day.

Everything is on pause.

We have to invest so much time and energy into each property review, if we're lucky enough to get a viewing.

We have to craft bespoke emails to each open rent landlord, hoping we stand out and get a chance to meet them and view the property.

We dress up nicely to meet them and hope we charm them enough to pick us, knowing there's 20 other people meeting that day.

We find out the landlord's life stories, you share yours, you think they're good people who don't need more money, and then bam, they want £200 more per month because someone else has offered more, and they didn't care about who you were as people at all.

Money seems to be the name of the game, people in their stories doesn't seem to matter anymore. I mean honestly, when you listen to Josh walking us through that, you realise it is like a full time job, right?

I don't know how Josh has the time to actually do anything else.

When you constantly feel that you're trying to put yourself out there, you're trying to charm the landlord, you're actually coming away feeling not just that you haven't got a place to live, but that somehow you've been a failure because somebody hasn't chosen you to live in their whatever bit of accommodation.

I'm struck by the old phrase that the customer is always right, you know, customer service. The customer has absolutely zero power in this situation.

The customer has to beg and grovel and scrape to the estate agent who says, I'm sorry, you were 40 minutes too late, you have missed your opportunity.

So you spent your time, you've got to give me an answer right now.

You spent your ego, you spent your money, and at the end of the day you're going back to what?

To not being able to have somewhere that you can even call a home.

I mean it is disgusting actually, frankly, it is so demoralising and so upsetting for so many people.

And just to give you, I think some of the numbers in this, that we know nearly one in five households in England live in the private rented sector.

That is 4.4 million households living in the private rented sector in England.

So that is a lot of people that are currently going through whatever the whims and changes

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and increases and expenses are to this system which is broken.

I mean I just wonder for those of you listening, how many can relate to Josh's story about what he and Amy are going through right now, trying to find somewhere to live and it's like a desperate scramble just to get a roof over your head.

We've heard the nightmare from Josh's point of view of trying to find a place to rent.

Let's talk to one of the letting agents who's probably showing people like Josh Round.

We can talk now to Rodney McQuillan-Kean.

He is a letting agent in North London and Rodney, just how are things out there?

To be brutally honest with you, it is rather soul destroying because the market's wearing fat very much because of government policy, unfortunately.

We're dealing with probably the lowest amount of stock across London ever.

So in some cases, I'm receiving emails from people saying, desperate to see this property, I will offer a above asking price before they've even viewed a property and it must be soul destroying to turn up outside something and have people arriving into the 10 minute intervals and you're one of them thinking, oh my God, I've got an offer on this.

Where is my next property coming from?

And obviously one of the knock-ons immediately of that is the sorts of supply and demand and basic economics.

If you've got too many people chasing too few goods, prices go up.

Yes, inevitably, yes, and to some extent, it's always the price pyramid.

And at the top of that pyramid, you've got the fewest affidants and you've got the fewest properties.

But what tends to happen if they can't find something in the top of that tier, they will move down to the tier below but bring their budgets with them.

But they're not an inexhaustible supply of tenants.

But the reality is even tenants on the lower tiers are bringing their budgets up just to get that available stock in the middle.

It is.

It's horrible as an agent involved in the industry because obviously, we're people too.

And it is about affordability.

You want people who can afford to rent the properties that are out.

It's unusual that it is happening and probably with every single, you've got 20 people.

Just on the first day of advertising, you know there are going to be many people disappointed.

Just paint that picture for us then.

A property comes onto the market.

What happens?

What's the speed at which things then happen right now?

Within an hour or two, we'll have 10 to 20 applications.

Generally, anything that's reasonably priced and that's generally more expensive than it was let the preceding year, we'll get about 20 inquiries.

And how often are you finding it the case that people are coming in and saying, I'm going to pay it over the odds or I'm going to pay a year's rent upfront?

A year's rent, probably not too many, actually, but we've had people saying, yeah, I can pay six months in advance.

Probably every listing, there will be somebody who will say, I will offer above asking price.



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To be brutally honest with you, I usually counter the actually, look, have a look at the property first.

So I'm a little bit surprised, but it's the manifestation of the desperation that people are instantly saying, look, I will go over asking price.

I will pay six months upfront.

Is there any cause for optimism?

Is there any parting of the clouds that you can see or is it pretty grim?

Unfortunately, the government, they're either being very disingenuous or they're just in complete denial.

And the fact is, if they're denying the fact, this isn't going to change.

Now the reality is, someone said in Parliament a couple of weeks ago, that there are more households being created.

Which is disingenuous because with the way HMO houses and multiple occupancy licensing laws have been used, there are more sharers within properties.

So if you've got five people sharing a house, they're five separate households.

But in truth, we're seeing between 30% and 40% of our owners selling up.

The vast majority of a certain age, arguably, anyone who's bought stock in the last five years, they're going to have quite high mortgages.

So if you've got multi-investment landlords who've got a lot of property, they've been increasing their stock over five years, their mortgages are quite high.

Investors are not buying property because interest rates are too high.

They can't afford to be landlords.

So it's not going to get better.

It's going to get worse in reality.

Thank you very much for taking the time to speak to us.

No problem.

It's a pleasure.

I suppose it's like AA meetings, isn't it, where they say until you've recognised that there is a problem, you can't possibly begin to do something about it.

And it's quite sobering to hear Rodney there, who's he's an old hand at this.

He's worked in the industry as a letting's agent for 20 years, and he's saying, please accept and admit that something is going wrong.

Otherwise, nothing's going to change.

Well, we're going to be hearing from Vicki Spratt in a moment.

She's a housing correspondent for The Eye newspaper about the political ineptitude that seems currently to surround this problem.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back.

And kind of to digest some of what we've just been talking about, we're joined in the studio by Vicki Spratt, who is the housing correspondent for The Eye newspaper and has been doing some amazing reporting on some of the stuff that is going on out there at the moment.

And an astonishing story today about someone who had a property, they give it back and they are not getting their deposit.

Not only are they not getting their deposit, they're being whacked with a huge fine for

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mould that is in the place because presumably a bad ventilation.

I've been talking about the housing crisis for nearly 10 years now, and I keep thinking that I'm unshockable.

And then a story like this comes along and I am shocked.

This couple repeatedly complained about mould and damp in their rented flat.

And then when they moved out, they were billed £2,300 for damage from mould and damp.

And it is the landlord's responsibility, sorry, it's funny, it's the landlord's responsibility to make sure that a property is not plagued with mould and damp, which can make you sick.

And as we found out at the end of last year with the case of the two-year-old who died in Rochdale, it can even be fatal, it's the landlord's responsibility to make sure that doesn't happen.

Well, there's a loophole in a piece of legislation called the Tenant Fees Act, which came in in 2017 and banned letting fees.

I don't know if you remember those, but basically the fees for pretty much anything that letting agents would charge you when you moved in or moved out of a property.

So that regulated those, but there's a loophole in the act that says even though deposits were capped at five weeks rent, landlords can charge for damage on top of that in exceptional circumstances.

So what I'm hearing is that they're using this loophole to charge people for mould and damp so they can fix up their properties.

So what recourse to the couple that you've been hearing from have, have they got a legal right on this one?

Yes, they do.

They can potentially take a claim against the landlord under another piece of legislation.

This is the problem with private renting, it's law on top of law and they're not joined up at all.

So you really have to know your way around housing law to even make a complaint, which let's face it, not many people do.

They could make a claim under the Homes Act, Brackets, Fitness for Human Habitation, which only came in in 2018.

So it's quite new.

Can we zoom out a bit and just take a bigger picture of this?

Because it'd be easy to paint a picture which says, oh look, greedy, avaricious landlords are screwing everybody else, but landlords are struggling to make money because of new regulations and all the rest of it, interest rates going up, fixed rate mortgages coming to an end.

At the same time, you've got more people coming into the market and not enough property to meet that demand.

It just seems to me a recipe for real unhappiness.

Well let's zoom out even further.

Why do we have so many people relying on private landlords, who as you rightly point out, John, are mostly private individuals with one or two properties and they are being hit by interest rate rises.

So they're putting their rent up because what else are they going to do to pay their mortgages?



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But why are we in that situation where housing providers are at the mercy of global financial markets?

Because we now have more people living in privately rented homes than we do living in social housing.

The private rented sector is growing and it has expanded rapidly in the last 20 years and there aren't enough properties, not nationally, but in places where people want to live. I think that's the crucial thing.

It really depends where you are in the country.

But the big problem is that we've got lots of low income renters living in privately rented homes as opposed to in social housing and every year for the last few years, potentially even longer than that, we have sold off more social homes than we've built.

So you've got a sort of double whammy in the private rented sector.

We've got low income renters who can't get social housing being pushed by local authorities into the private rented sector and then you've got slightly wealthier renters who maybe could have got a mortgage when lending conditions were more favourable but now even if they could get a mortgage, are paying so much in rent that they can't save up a deposit.

So they're selling.

We need more landlords, right?

Quite simply, we need more landlords because there are more people.

Or we need more social housing.

Well, yeah, it depends how you look at it.

Right now, we need both because you'll never, even if there was the political will to build social housing at scale, huge numbers, 300,000 a year, we still wouldn't get rid of the social housing waiting list.

It's over a million in husband for the last few years and that's households, by the way, individuals.

So let's talk about solutions, even if it's the short term or the immediate term solutions.

When Ed Miliband was the Labour leader, he talked about putting caps on for renters, right?

And I think there was disprage and obviously he didn't win and that was sort of thrown out.

I mean, are you hearing from either main party that suggestion that they will start capping rents or what is the solution here?

Rent caps.

Well, the Conservatives really don't like the phrase rent caps.

Back when Theresa May was Prime Minister, if anyone can still remember that far back with everything else that's happened since, she was quite warm to the idea of rent regulation, which is basically rent caps in all but name.

But as I understand it, Michael Gover's not pro rent regulation or rent cap.

Scotland obviously have introduced a rent freeze to combat the cost of living.

And the number of properties available for renters declined?

Well, I would question that and I understand why people think that the two could be related. But I think there's a bigger picture as to why the number of rented properties is not increasing.

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People aren't moving.

So the private rented market, like any market, it's just made up of people in their behaviour, right?

Rents are so high, they've hit historic highs.

People are not moving because they know they're going to have to pay more, even if they need to move because, let's say, their family is expanding.

So I think that could also be why.

And what about the drive to create more social housing?

I remember kind of that you're winning the election and the mantra of virtually immediately afterwards was the right to buy.

People were buying their own council houses and, you know, it was a property owning democracy was the phrase.

And that is still very much the goal that people want to own their own homes.

But yet for many people, that's an impossible dream.

And so you need social housing.

I think social housing is the solution.

And right to buy in and of itself, should a council tenant not be able to access home ownership?

I'm not going to sit here and say that they should be locked out of it.

Right to buy could work if you replace the homes that were being sold off.

And actually, most people don't know this, but it was originally a Labour Party policy.

And the Tories took it.

And the version that they introduced was sort of on steroids.

The discounts were way bigger.

And it was available to more tenants.

I think the Labour policy had smaller discounts and was maybe available to only key workers in a smaller group of tenants.

So right to buy in and of itself would have been OK if we'd replaced the homes and something else that happened under Thatcher.

Another piece of legislation, the 1988 Housing Act, got rid of rent control and renters rights.

So at the same time that we sold off social housing, didn't replace it, we took away tenants rights in the private rented sector.

And then in the 90s, you have the boom of buy-to-let mortgages with landlords flooding in.

And it's a perfect storm for the crisis that we're in now.

I mean, to be fair, Michael Gove would say that the reason rent controls don't work is because it just means that landlords stop then looking after their property and at least declining standards and a lack of investment.

That if they're not able to charge more to do the works that they need to do, then the whole place falls into disrepair.

You don't buy that.

I don't think he's wrong.

Right.

But seeing now with interest rates kind of proves that point.

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You could cap rents and perhaps you need to because we did some polling recently at the eye paper and over 60% of renters have had an above inflation rent increase in the last year.

I mean, the wider, the really, you know, zoomed out place is we're not building because of all of us saying, please don't build next to where I live, right?

And it probably doesn't come down to one party or another party.

If you have a house and somebody's threatening to build social housing right on your back doorstep in your yard, in your garden, those are all the people saying, please don't do it here.

Do it down the road.

Yeah.

Right?

Yeah.

So what do you do?

At some point, something's going to have to give.

And I think it's probably a bit of everything, right?

Build more social housing, tell people it's got to go in their community if they don't want it.

It's got to go somewhere.

Do something about regulating the private rented sector.

I'm not sure that rent control would work right now with mortgage rates going up.

So that is a problem.

And the demographics of this, Vicky, are really weird because we were just looking at the piece John Boehmirdoch was doing in the FT, and I'm sure you've covered this as well, that primary schools are shutting, right, in parts of London, one in five in Hackney, because there aren't enough children being born in London because nobody can afford to have children in London.

I mean, that's, that's a really weird place to be going into, isn't it?

What happens next?

And by the way, it's not just London, it's places where there are lots of holiday homes too.

I was in the Lake District in the autumn meeting young adults, my kind of age, like mid-30s, who have moved miles and miles away from their jobs and their families, from the communities they grew up in, schools they went to have shut down because they can't afford to stay there.

So we might end up with pockets of the country where there are no future generations.

Yeah.

And in those tourist areas, you can't get local people to run the hotels or the restaurants because they can't afford to live there.

Yeah.

So...

Well, you're enjoying your morning coffee and the person who made it was busting on a two-hour coach.

Yeah.

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Do you see any signs that it would be different if Labour won the election?

Are they making commitments to any of this?

Is it, have they got a clear strategy?

They're talking about building social housing.

Would they build it at the scale that we need to?

Let's see.

There is no talk of rent control or doing something about rent hikes, whether that's full rent control or capping, how much rents can be increased by.

So TBC.

Vicky.

TBC.

TBC.

We'll have you back.

That's our note.

Yeah, exactly, exactly.

Time will tell.

Thank you very much indeed.

Thank you for coming in.

Thank you very much.

Thanks so much.

Thanks.

This is The News Agents.

And Lewis is here.

Put your phone down.

And you too.

Oh, these millenials.

No, it's because you don't know how to work yours.

Exactly, exactly.

Well, I put my finger in a dial.

I mean, isn't that a word for this, man?

PMQs, Rishi Sunak, Kirstama, the economic argument that presumably is going to rumble on now every Wednesday between now and the next general election whenever it is.

Yeah, I think that if you watch today's PMQs and you didn't like it and you didn't like the arguments and you found them a bit tired and a bit stale already, then I just suggest that you don't watch any of the rest of the PMQs right up to and including the general election.

Because what we got today was the perfect distillation of the two parties' main arguments against each other, being a dummy rumble at the moment for the local elections, which are now just over a week's time, and it will basically be the same.

You've got Rishi Sunak trying to do it in 1992, trying to say again and again that this is the same old labour, that it's tax and spend, they're going to tax you more, don't listen to them.

Even if they've not made any extra spending commitments, doesn't matter, they're going to tax you more.

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And you've got Starmer basically saying that this guy is so out of touch, he's so elite, he's not even British elite, he basically doesn't have a clue about what life is like for anybody outside of Pasadena and people who live in the richest parts of California. And you're going to rinse and repeat, rinse and repeat, if I can even say it, right up to the next general election.

Here is a little bit of that exchange where they're basically the same thing with each other for all six questions, but this was probably the best bit.

Mr Speaker, here's the difference.

I'd scrap his pension giveaway, whether it affected me or not.

He refuses to scrap the non-dom status that benefits him and his family.

I can see why he's attracted to this non-dom thing.

This Prime Minister is so removed from the country that he boasted that he didn't know a single working-class person, so insulated from reality that he proudly told a Tory garden party how he'd moved money from poorer areas and handed it to rich ones. So out of touch that he looks at a petrol pump and a debit card like they've just arrived from Mars.

Is it any wonder that he smiles his way through the cost of living crisis while putting other people's taxes up?

Is it any wonder he doesn't have a clue how food prices are hammering families across the country?

And is it any wonder that under him people are paying more and more and getting less and less?

We'll just look at what's happened just in this week, where the Labour Party have put themselves.

On Monday, in the other place, they decided to side with extremist protesters.

Yesterday they sided with polluters, Mr Speaker, and tonight we will see them siding with the people smugglers.

I'll tell you this, while we're in the business of sending back the 1,000th illegal migrant from Albania, we're delivering cost of living payments to millions of households just yesterday and today we've announced we put 20,000 more police officers on the street.

We're siding with the British people, Mr Speaker.

That's what the Conservative government does.

Can you actually imagine a party that said, yeah, actually we're the party of polluters and people smugglers.

Yeah, they're our base.

Funny enough, I think that Rishi Sunak has taken a leaf out of Starmer's adverts book and said, right, if he's going to accuse me of being friendly to pedophiles, I'm going to accuse him of being friends with people smugglers.

It's the verbal equivalent of, I think, what Keir Starmer has probably done on the adverts and it just sounds quite fantastical, doesn't it?

Well, both parties at the moment are obsessed with, and we saw it last night as well with a bit of boring to go into the details, but a bit of parliamentary chicanery.

It's never stopped you.

No, it's never stopped me before.

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That's true.

That's why we get our phones on.

And doubtless, and doubtless will do it again, but both sides are trying to orchestrate votes in parliament ahead of the local elections, which can basically say, even though it's not really true, the other side voted to stop this or the other side didn't vote to stop sewage being dumped into the water.

The other side didn't vote or voted to side with people's traffickers or not to deport a thousand people.

And it's all about this new type of campaigning, really, which is about these kind of as Emily says.

Well, it's reductionist.

You get it down to three words based on a vote, which never actually asked you that question in the first place.

And a vote that probably I would have had no impact whatsoever.

They're just kind of parliamentary motions that call on the government to do this or call on the government to do that.

But actually, there is no impact on them at all.

It's all about this little Twitter picture that you can then just put out and say, the other side didn't do this or voted to stop this or didn't vote to stop that.

And that is all so much of modern campaigning.

I mean, how much breakthrough does that get, though?

It's not at all.

So it's good for Twitter wars.

Good for repetition.

But I mean, Labour at the last election in 2019, they thought they were winning Twitter and then kind of massively losing election.

It's more about, I mean, Twitter is already for the highly news engaged, right?

It's more about Facebook, really.

And there are, I mean, if you talk to...

Which just put that into age terms means 60 to 80, right?

Yeah, a bit younger as well, maybe even being a bit unkind to some of the Facebook users.

But yeah, definitely older than the most.

And the point is, I mean, some of this stuff does filter through.

So if you talk to parties at the moment, they will say that if you take the sewage thing for example, it can be very specific in terms of where it works as well.

Actually, much of the country, people haven't noticed that much.

Coastal areas where there's a huge clutch of marginal seats.

Actually, it does really cut through.

There's another thing I think happened in PMQ today as well, which is a little taste of the politics to come.

And it does sit awkwardly for Soonak in some ways.

But there were two questions which really illustrated how important some of these culture war questions

are going to be up to the next general election.



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The first question was from Conservative MP Tim Lawton.

First question of the session, and he did the whole, essentially will the Prime Minister confirm that he knows what a woman is because the leader of the opposition doesn't?

Now, just in parenthesis on this, I mean, I personally, if I don't know what you two think, I personally find this a deeply, deeply tedious debate or a deeply tedious set of questions, just in the sense that, of course, there are very legitimate questions and legitimate debate to be had around the question of trans rights and women's rights and how they clash and so on. But this deeply disingenuous question, which is becoming more and more ubiquitous, where both journalists and also politicians ask each other, what is a woman?

Well, the truth is, is that we know, in nearly all cases we know, but the truth is basically this question has become a little bit more complicated than it once was. I would just say that it was just Tim Lawton.

If he was the first question, I am sure that he would have had conversations, I'm guessing, with the Whips office, with number 10.

So the Conservative Party obviously think this is a good area.

They absolutely do.

They think this is fertile soil.

It's not just one-backed venture.

I mean, if you look back to the question that Blair was asked about this, and Tony Blair just found a really simple way around it of, you know, if you take this back to our heartlands, people will think you're mad if you carry on talking about this without finding an answer.

I sort of think there's probably a bit of impatience actually from Labour as well, certainly from the people of the Blair era who just kind of think, don't let it be a problem, just sort it out, just make it go away, because they're only asking Keir about it repeatedly because they sense the Labour unease with how they answered it.

Although it's a bit dispiriting that, and again, I think the media, we have to take out a bit of responsibility for this as well, in a sense that this is a very blunt question as part of a very blunt culture war, basically being asked repeatedly for political ends, when we actually know at the very least, sometimes we're dealing with very vulnerable people who are involved and actually get deeply impacted by basically being used as a political tool in that way.

There was another, but John, you're absolutely right, in a sense that the Conservatives absolutely sense vulnerability, and we are going to be hearing it again and again, which is, I'll say, I find a bit depressing.

There was a second sort of culture war type question, and I think Sunak's answer to it illustrates why I think this is a sort of a poor fit for him in some ways, these sort of political issues are anyway. It was a question from Bell Ribeiro Addie, the Labour MP for Streatham, and she asked a question about whether or not the Prime Minister should apologise for the historic British state's role in slavery.

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Listen to this.

This month marks 23 years since the passing of the late Great Bernie Grant, a former member of this House,

and the founder of the UK reparations movement in the UK.

In his last Prime Minister's questions before his death,

he asked for an apology to the people of African descent, living and dead, for our country's role in slavery and colonialism.

But since then, Prime Ministers and heads of state have only ever expressed sorrow or deep regret.

These are not sentiments that are befitting one of the greatest atrocities in human history, and there has been no acknowledgement of the wealth that has been amassed,

or the fact that our country took out the largest loan it ever has to pay off the slave owners and not the enslaved.

So I want to ask the Prime Minister today, if he will do,

what Bernie Grant asked all those years ago,

what I have asked and what countless others have asked since,

and offer a full and meaningful apology for our country's role in slavery and colonialism and commit to reparatory justice?

No, Mr Speaker.

That what I think our focus should now be on doing

is, of course, understanding our history in all its parts,

not running away from it,

but right now making sure that we have a society

which is inclusive and tolerant of people from all backgrounds.

That's something that we on this side of the House are committed to doing,

and will continue to deliver.

But trying to unpick our history is not the right way forward,

and it's not something that we will focus our energies on.

Again, my heart sinks a bit with this stuff, right?

Again, this is a complicated question and is being used.

That sort of answer that deeply, I would just say,

facile answer about unpicking history.

This isn't about unpicking history.

What does it mean, unpicking history?

Because actually what we're talking about here, potentially,

is in recognising and coming to terms with Britain's role,

or it doesn't even have to be Britain,

any particular country's role in any particular historical fact

or set of facts,

by coming to terms with it,

it is actually a deeper,

and yields a deeper and richer understanding of your own history.

It's not like I'm picking it.

Quite the contrary, and it is an established principle

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that states often apologise for acts committed by people,  
or undertaken by people,  
who were at the time in charge of those states,  
who were long since dead.

And you can see with Sunak,  
you know, Sunak's an intelligent guy,  
and to see him just sort of repeating these,  
what I'd say, pretty facile arguments,  
I find pretty depressing.

But come on.

I mean, we are expecting a higher level of debate  
in Prime Minister's questions,  
about a question that is so complicated,  
about restorative justice, and all the rest of it.

I mean, those are huge questions  
that don't lend themselves to PMQs.

Yeah, but it's not just in PMQs.

We're seeing it, we see it when Oliver Dowden,  
you know, as Culture Secretary, for example,  
you know, a close ally of the PM.

It's this line I find objectionable about unpicking history.

It isn't unpicking history.

Was it unpicking history,  
when the Welsh Government this week  
apologised for the forced adoption scandal,  
which happened 50 years ago?

Was it unpicking history,  
when the British Government apologised  
for certain actions in relation to the troubles,  
with regards to the Good Friday Agreement,  
which Rishi Sunak was celebrating only last week?

No.

Actually, sometimes by apologising,  
or at least recognising our actions in these things,  
it allows you to move on.

And I suppose the thing is,  
the reason I sort of mentioned it,  
is because it feels like with this,  
we're going backwards.

You know, Tony Blair apologised  
for the Britain's role in the slave trade.

In 2006.

And maybe it was a bit controversial then.

But the debate has become so much more polarised

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and so much less, I would say,  
intelligent since that time.  
I don't know about you two.  
I'm still stuck on the idea of being a polluter,  
without getting too religious.  
Who amongst us is not a polluter?  
Yes, that's true.  
And maybe in that sense, I suppose,  
the Labour Party would be good to argue for all of us.  
All of us who are polluted.  
It's actually quite a big part of the electorate.  
We are all polluters now.  
Are we not?  
We'll be back tomorrow.  
And Emily will be putting her plastic bottle  
into a recycling.  
I will put my tin can into a recycling  
and we will come back even better human beings tomorrow.  
And John's confiscating my phone.  
Exactly.  
See you then.  
Bye-bye.  
Bye-bye.