

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

Today on The News Agents, we have an exclusive. We're going to talk to the woman who became the youngest elected member of parliament in 300 years, Marie Black for the SNP, who got in in 2015 and today she tells us she's had enough.

Westminster, I think, is one of the most unhealthy workplaces that you could ever be in. It's a toxic environment.

What is it about the culture of Westminster, its toxicity that is making so many MPs want to quit? Welcome to The News Agents.

The News Agents.

This is a dangerous government making bad decisions on top of a global pandemic. But mind you, we shouldn't be surprised given the fact that they seem to have been half the time at parties in number 10. So, as I said, there is an element of truth in that the war in Ukraine, for instance, has also...

She just said to the Honourable Lady, she really must not use language like that. Please don't. I hope you will apologise for...

They're inebriated, intoxicated, they were paralytic at parties in number 10. Is that all right?

Be quite careful. Mari Black, continue.

That was the SNP's Deputy Leader in Westminster, Mari Black, in the Commons last month. She's getting told off for swearing. And Mari got in touch with us with The News Agents last week. She wanted to come in for a chat. I'm assuming, Mari, because we are swear-friendly on air. Perhaps it is the only place that you could find that will not asterisk your speeches. Tell us why you wanted to chat.

Yes, so grateful for you giving me the time to. I suppose I wanted to be able to have a kind of human conversation about why I've made the decision not to stand in the next general election. So, yeah, I thought, no better person to have the conversation with than yourself. You're not going to stand for the SNP?

No. I'm stepping down at the next election.

Why?

Honestly, because I don't... I'm tired, as a big part of it. And the thing that makes me tired is Westminster, I think, is one of the most unhealthy workplaces that you could ever be in. It's a toxic environment. It is just the entire design of the place and how it functions is just the opposite of everything that I find comfortable.

Toxic is a strong word. It means poisonous.

Yep, absolutely. It's definitely a poisonous place, whether that's because of, you know, what folk can get away with in it or what the number of sort of personal motivations and, you know, folk having ulterior motives for things. And it's just not a nice place to be in.

You call it toxic, Maury. In terms of specific examples, are you talking about people? Are you talking about culture? Are you talking about your own experiences there? I mean, what are the...

Yes.

What?

All of the above. So, I mean, like, the toxic instances you see, you know, there's a lot

of folk being physically dragged into lobbies. I've passed folk crying, shouting arguments. There's been a fair few fistfights and stuff.

Have you been manhandled?

I've never been... Oh, no. No, my mother brought me to go for the back of the knees, if anybody tries to manhandle you. But I have seen it happen to other folk. But even, I suppose, culture-wise as well. Like, I remember there was one time where, for whatever reason, because you know how you have to go in the lobby when you're voting and you've got eight minutes and then they shut the doors and they open up a set of doors at 45 degrees so they can go through one by one. And so what they do is, if the lobby isn't clear, they go into the speaker and the speaker gets up and goes, Sergeant of Arms, clear the lobbies. So the Sergeant of Arms comes in and that's the one with the sword and everything. And for whatever reason, this night, we were deliberately holding things up or trying to make it as awkward as possible. Next thing the Sergeant of Arms comes in, we're a sword marching down, you know. So it's stuff like that where you think, what is my workplace? Like, chased around with a sword.

With a sword, yes. But that's just tradition, isn't it? I mean, it doesn't mean that democracy doesn't get done. It means that people, just like Barrister, still wear wigs in...

I'll give you an example, right? Absolutely, tradition has its place completely. But when tradition starts to get in the way of functionality, that's when I've got a problem with it. And if I remember rightly, I think it was during the Brexit votes that this happened. Because there was one night in particular where we were voting for, I think it was roughly about four hours, just literally just going round and round those corridors. And up in the Scottish Parliament, they had the same amount of votes and they were done in four minutes. And you just think, if you want to talk about quality time for Parliament, this is meant to be where we are discussing folks' lives, the major things that are having an impact on people, and apparently we can afford to spend four hours fanning about in corridors. That's where I have a problem with tradition, is I think that you're actually getting in the way of the work that we are supposed to be doing. This is a workplace. It's not a walking museum. And that's where I think Westminster often struggles to figure out whether it is a museum or whether it's a functioning place of work. You can never really switch off when you're in Westminster. And also given the, I suppose, unsociable hours that Westminster works as well, it feels like you're spending a lot of your life there. And in the run-up to the next election, I've realised that will be almost 10 years that I'll have been elected.

So a third of my life I've spent in Westminster, which gives me the ick.

You are too young to be tired this early. I mean, to remind our listeners, you were 20 when you won your seat. You were the youngest person to be elected, I think since the actor Parliament, 300 years. Do you think that is part of the problem? I mean, it just presumably it ate up your childhood, your adolescence, you weren't allowed to go and get, as you would say, pissed. Oh no, I still managed to fit that. I think it's more, I don't regret spending any of the time doing what I've done. I'm fighting for what I believe in and doing so in a way that I've had the encouragement of others to push me forward and do it. But I actually think the fact that I'm younger is partly why I suppose I see everything that's wrong so starkly. I can understand why people get absorbed into the world of Westminster, how folk can spend 40 years working there because it's a world unto itself. It's

get its own culture, its own sort of history and everything, which is just still alien to me. You talked about the design of Westminster. What do you mean? I mean, ranging from things like the travel, see even just being a Scottish MP, the distance that we have to travel, and I'm not even one of the worst. Some of my colleagues have a much more hellish journey than I do, but travelling up and down every single week does start to take its human toll on you. But also in terms of how the place functions in that it doesn't a lot of the time. It's even when you think about the voting system, it's 600 folk crammed into corridors literally doing laps all night. When we had a button like during the pandemic, they introduced electronic voting and it worked a dream and yet they just took it away again because Westminster is too old and established for that, which is just a nonsense. So it's how the place is run. It's how the processes are designed and I suppose how it's made up as well. Very rarely do you get a vote in Westminster that you don't already know the outcome to, such as the nature of party politics, if you know what I mean. Everybody pretends that they're walking through the law because they've finally made up their minds. Everybody knows what they're voting long before. The only time I've ever seen votes actually being unpredictable was during Brexit.

So you're actually describing a sense of exhaustion with the British democratic system, aren't you?

Yeah.

I mean it's that profound.

For me personally, there's also a deeper layer to it and I got into this job because I wanted to help people like radically change folks lives and stick up for people who wouldn't have somebody sticking up for them otherwise. Again, just on a human level, it's so demoralising to realise within this system just how powerless you are to an extent.

You don't think you've got anything done?

My vote hasn't changed anything. It's even Scotland. If all 59 Scottish MPs vote one way, all it takes is the city of London, which has 73 MPs and we're out voted. So add in another 300 MPs from the Conservative government. To an extent, it's for sure.

How much was it about your encounters, like the one we just played, people telling you off via language or people saying that's not how we behave? How much was it actual encounters that just rubbed you up the wrong way or you rubbed them up the wrong way?

Yeah, there's definitely a touch of both, I think. But I suppose it's more examples like that. The swearing one's a bit tongue-in-cheek, but how the place functions is an insight into the sort of mentality, the establishment mentality and that this is how we do things and it will never change because we are the mother of all parliaments. Without ever stopping to think, well, are we actually the best parliament? We talk about being the mother of it, but is it not about how we can make democracy better?

But you change things from inside, not by walking away.

But how? That's nearly 10 years and Scotland has voted continually for change. It hasn't voted Conservative since 1955 and yet we're still, I'm still having constituents coming in with their lives being ripped apart by a Tory government they didn't vote for. And I vote against the policies that are damaging their lives, so do all my colleagues, but it doesn't make a difference.

I'm imagining we've got a lot of listeners who are hearing you call Westminster toxic

and say, oh, bloody hell, like if there's one place that's toxic right now, it's Hollywood, it's the SNP, it's the implosion of having an actual police investigation going on into missing campaign finances and a husband and wife team at the top of the party. It's your party.

Yeah, obviously it's not a great position to be in, but as I say, I mean, I made this decision long before any of that stuff came out.

This wasn't sparked off by, let's just say, what happened to the SNP?

Oh, no, no, no.

The resignation of Nicola Sturgeon.

Truthfully, I made this decision in 2019 on election night and I went home and I remember saying it to my wife, you know, I said, this will be my last run at it. And she said, you have got SNAP elections coming out your ears, so just hang in and wait and see what happens. But now that it looks as though I'm going to see this full term out, I think it's appropriate, especially now that the party has a timetable to work to and they have to get a candidate in place and stuff. It seems like a timely moment to share that I'm not standing.

You've just shared this decision for the first time on the news agents. What are you feeling now having said it?

I suppose a bit of relief, to be honest, because I'm not good at hiding things, essentially. It feels good to be able to be open about it and even just, I suppose, get across to people as well that there's the human element to things as well. And if we want politics to be representative and invite, you know, ordinary people into politics, then we have to look at whether it's a system that works. And even not just myself, but when I look at the damage that Westminster does to folks' mental health, even their physical health, it's undeniable. And it's foolish to ignore that fact. And if we continue ignoring that fact, then we're just going to keep getting the same certain type of politician that we've always had.

The SNP will be gutted to lose you. I know they describe you as their rock star. You're already in a leadership position, not even 30. You were 14 when the SNP came to power in Scotland. They must have seemed invincible. When you saw what happened in February, when Nicola Sturgeon stepped down and when everything started unraveling, were you shocked?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, totally shocked. I mean, to be honest, it's one of the things that I think the party could have got better. And I think Hums is getting better. And it should be a big tent. You know, we're all a team. And the one thing that attracted me to the SNP is because I believe in independence, and I still do wholeheartedly. And I truly believe that the SNP is the best electoral vehicle to get us there.

Do you think that they may have been in power for too long, quite frankly, because something's happened. The wheels have come off the motor van, as it were.

I can emphasise with that point of view, but what would fill the gap if we weren't in power? And when you look at all the good things that the SNP have brought, like in my opinion, the SNP and the Scottish government have shown how we could do things differently. We've been able to take a different path and been able to give concrete things that actually improve lives, free prescriptions, free personal care, you know, the Scottish child payment, all of these things. But I also just continually remind myself, the SNP and the independence movement isn't just a fleeting electoral thing. It spans generations because it's bigger

than any one person. And I think that I was reminded of that in February when everything broke, you know, because Higgy told me that we would lose Nicola Sturgeon to a police cell, you know, that would have seemed like the worst thing under the sun. But it's not, we're still here. We're still carrying on with the job.

Well, Hamza's had a baptism of fire, quite frankly.

Absolutely. He was the continuity candidate.

Even that, I don't buy. I understand why folk call him the continuity candidate, but I really don't. He's his own person. And certainly as long as I've known him and as long as he was a minister, he was always his own person.

So why do you think he hasn't suspended Nicola Sturgeon then, as she did with Alex Salmon?

I mean, why doesn't he put that space between?

If anything, that kind of shows that he is doing things differently, you know, because I think it's fair to say.

I'm not sure about your logic there.

No, because like, I think it's not beyond the realms of possibility to think that had Nicola still been in charge, she would have suspended herself. But to see him taking a different approach and going, wait, there's been no charges. There's been nothing proven. Let's just hang fire, wait till the investigation is complete, and then we'll take it from there. Which, I mean, you can disagree with his point of view, but I think fair play to him for having it and sticking to it.

So what is the road to independence now then? I mean, if the SNP doesn't get its electoral force back and there are signs, as you know, that Labour think that they're going to make good ground there, is there a route for independence without the SNP? Is there another pathway? I can't picture one without the SNP because ultimately, when independence is won, it's got to be won democratically. And that's where certainly the gold standard is a referendum. But we're in a situation where, despite winning umpteen elections with a manifesto commitment to having another referendum, we're in a situation where a conservative government can just say no, and that's it, then the only vehicle that's left is to support the SNP to exercise that democratic mandate. And whoever's in charge then is going to put that into effect. And what that looks like to a large extent is actually up to Westminster because the balls in their court in many regards, all I know is that they cannot keep ignoring what's happening in Scotland.

And if it is a Labour government that says no to a referendum?

Well, two things. I think, first of all, that would bite Labour in the backside very quickly and very hard up in Scotland. But second of all, it would be no different to the position that would be in if the Conservatives were in and saying, no, it's still a Westminster establishment trying to dictate what Scotland can and can't do. And the fundamental premise that they are running scared from is they cannot answer the question, if this is a voluntary union, how do you leave then?

If I said to you that the first country to leave the union is given the current circumstances more likely to be Northern Ireland than Scotland, what would you say to that?

Maybe. I genuinely don't see the United Kingdom as a political entity surviving. Now, I don't know whether that's...

Surviving what? Five years? Ten years?

Well, I don't know whether that's five years or 50 years. I just know that the time is running out on it because it's a dysfunctional system that we've got. It's an outdated system. And if we want to move, as we have been towards a more democratic society over the last hundred or so years, then to continue that path is to become equal nations. And right now we know that within the setup of the United Kingdom, we are not equal nations. It's England that holds all the cards and everyone else just gets to chip in every now and then.

And if I take you back to where we started, which is your own resignation, you're not leaving now, but you won't stand again at the next election, you've got another year. If people are looking at you, Maureen, saying, I'm a young woman, I want to do amazing things, I want to enter politics, I mean, do they think now you're saying don't do it?

No, not at all. I'm saying the opposite. I'm saying it's your turn now to an extent.

You're not exactly hobbling around on a walking stick with a grey beard.

No, no, not at all. But being honest with myself, I don't think my body or my mind could take another...

You don't want young women going in there, then?

No, but if you want to change things, then go for it. But I'm not going to, you know, pretend that it's all going to be sunshine and roses. It is a horrible place to be, but the only way we're going to change it is by folk like myself going in and pointing out all these things. And also, to an extent, having the courage as well to go, I don't think I'm the best person anymore. I don't think I'll be able to give you everything that I have done over the last 10 years because, you know, I'm embarking on married life, my parents are getting older and, you know, I see it in their faces when they come round to visit and they see the panic alarms and the bomb bags that are left and they see the threats that I get sent and stuff. It's a pretty stark reminder that their daughter's not in a normal job, so to speak. So, of course, I'm telling people how toxic the place is so that it can be changed. And I just, I suppose I've done, I feel like I've done my shift for now.

Are you expecting others to follow you out the door? Not because of you, but do you think that there are other people?

I've no idea. I mean, I know a couple of my colleagues have already announced that they're not standing for a variety of reasons.

Presumably because you will realise you probably won't win your seats this time around.

No, I would dispute that. I would absolutely dispute that. I think we've still got a year or so to go, it's all to play for. But I, like, I was thinking back to 2015 when we first arrived and the thing that struck me most about our group then was it was the majority of it was folk with normal jobs, like, in all different backgrounds. It wasn't folk who've been living and breathing politics for years. With that in the back of my mind, I can understand why folk are going, like, I've got young kids now or I've, I'm going to be 70th by the time the next election, you know, it's, folk need to take their own personal circumstances into account. But know that definitely this isn't a political decision, it's a personal one, you know, it's coming from me as being a human being as opposed to the politician. And it's a relief?

Yeah, now. Because I've been thinking about it for a long, long time. It's a relief to be able to tell folk now. Because, you know, like, I'm still absolutely still going to

be campaigning, still absolutely determined to see Scottish independence. It's, I suppose, to quote Tony Bennett again, it's leaving politics to do more politics to an extent, you know, in the less time that I have to spend in London the more time I have to, you know, talk to folk in pavements and stuff, which is much more mac-up-a-tea than hanging about with lords and baronesses and such like.

Murray Black, thank you.

Thank you.

And in just a moment, John and Lewis will be here and we'll be analysing the state of Westminster, a year out, we think, from an election and why so many MPs are deciding to turn their back on what this democracy has to offer in Parliament.

So that was Murray Black, soon to be an ex-SNP MP. This is Emily.

And this belatedly is John. And this is Lewis. And welcome to News Agents HQ. So really interesting what she had to say because obviously the big story out of it will be that she's standing down. But this is a woman who is still in her twenties and deciding she's had enough of it. And I was struck listening to it that I thought this is a young woman coming face to face and having had enough of an old man's institution because so much of the ways of the Houses of Parliament and the House of Commons is that it's an institution that was essentially for years a gentleman's club with a handful of women MPs. But whose working practices still seem somewhat arcane. There's still so much drinking that goes on. It's a kind of slightly toxic environment, as she says.

I remember when Murray Black was elected. I remember back in 2015, she was part of the great SNP landslide. They won 56 of 59 seats, painted virtually the whole of Scotland, SNP Yellow. And there was all this speculation because she made this extraordinary maiden speech in the Commons. And there was all this speculation that she was going to be a sort of parliamentary star, that she was going to sort of dominate the SNP. And in a sense, she has been and she's been an interesting sort of force. But from very early doors, talking to her and seeing her when she was talking about Parliament, you could tell this was a woman who was deeply, deeply frustrated with an institution, that she didn't gel with it as an institution. And John, I think what you were just saying is right. I think anyone who has spent time in Parliament knows what a deeply flawed place it is. I mean, you know, when I was a kid, when I used to revere the idea of the place, right? When I first got my lobby pass as a journalist, it was this sort of like, it's like a golden ticket, right? It's a really wonka style. It was just this moment for me of like complete awe. And then the thing is, the funny thing is, is that the more time that I sort of spent working there, and the more time I sort of saw it up close, the less and less enchanted I became with it. And the more I realized, it took me a while before I remember just being in Parliament one day and being told once again by one of the sergeant arms that, no, you couldn't go there or no, you couldn't stand there. Or they were telling off another case. I wish I should have been, I probably should have been or more, not so much for me, but like, you know, you would see people's constituents come and, you know, they were told that they couldn't be there or they couldn't stand in a particular place. And it took me a while to realize, of course, there's a reason it's called MP, member of Parliament. That's what it is. It's still running so many ways, like a private members club. And having spent a little bit of time in Congress, much is huge, obviously, but a little bit of time when I took this internship there, when I was a student,

the contrast with how it operates, you know, for all of the flaws of American democracy, there is just this sense when you go to Congress, this is your place, right? Constituents are treated, you can go up to your senator's office, you can go up to your MP, your representative office, you can go and get the flag, you can go and get the tour, you can go and knock on the door and ask to see them. There is this sense of openness and it is this people's Congress.

That is just not there with Parliament.

I think it comes through every bit of the way the American system works, which is for journalists as well. If you want to discover stories in America, you go to the public records office, you get out the files and the facts and the data, and you cross check here, you take somebody from the Cabinet for lunch, you know, discreetly, and that is how stories are shared. And I do think that immediately puts you in a very different place in terms of how we are perceived, whether it is the journalists in the lobby or whether it is the MPs in terms of their relationship to the rest of the country.

But Lewis, you talk about getting your lobby pass, I remember getting my lobby pass as well and thinking, oh my God, that one Gladstone was his first term, right? End of Thatcher actually. But you kind of, the Commons didn't start sitting every day until half past two prayers, then questions and Prime Minister's questions will be on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 3.15 to 3.30. Why didn't it start work until 2.30 in the afternoon? Because so many of the MPs were lawyers, were barristers, and they were in court in the morning and they were doing their other jobs in the morning. And then so the House of Commons were set up to convenience as the lifestyle. And there's still a lot of that in terms of the late night sitting.

So you didn't just say, my right honourable friend, you would say, my right honourable and learned friend. And that was the signifier that you were a barrister.

Well, let's just hear from Sajid Javed, because arguably the point that John's making has come full circle, because he now is making the point for more expertise needed in the House of Commons.

You get what you pay for, right? You get what you pay for. You know, if you want, if people want to see GPs or senior nurses or headteachers or an accountant, you know, give up their job to want to come into Parliament, they have to take a massive fall in their lifestyle to do it. And a lot of people are not willing to do that. So, you know, you either get, you attend there to get in Parliament, therefore, either really rich people that don't need money, and therefore, they don't care if their salary is \$88,000 or \$28,000, or you will get people that were earning sort of \$30,000, \$80,000 is a big jump, but they might not come with the skills the Parliament needs. So, if I had my way, I would halve the number of MPs and double the salaries, right? It wouldn't cost a taxpayer a penny, and you'd get a much higher quality of Parliament and ministers.

So obviously, we should say that Sajid Javed himself is standing down, having first been elected in 2010. He's got a safe seat in Bromsgrove, and he's very wealthy.

And this is the thing, it is not just Murray Black. And we should say as well, I suppose you could argue with Murray Black, there is a question maybe about her own seat and in Renfrewshire that maybe Labour could take that back in the next election. And like a lot of MPs, they will be looking at their seats right now, and they're thinking about they need to basically decide at the moment, are they going to stand at the end, they need to tell their local associations or the constituency Labour parties or whatever. And Javed is one

of many who is making the decision that they've had enough. And there is a whole array of people of all different ages in the House of Commons at the moment who are making that decision. I think in terms of what Javed is saying, I think, look, I think it's true to say that there are some who say that you should pay MPs more because you might be able to attract better people into the Commons or more people into the Commons. I think there's just two things I would say to that. One, I mean, Javed says there, oh, well, you need perhaps to pay more to get the sort of expertise you need. Well, actually, I mean, arguably, what we want in the House of Commons is more people who work in call centres, more people who work in social care, more people who nurses, for example, also from business, but they are all paid considerably less than the 90,000 that Javed is talking about. I actually don't think money is the big problem in terms of attracting people of quality, or it's not one of the main problems in terms of the Commons. I think one of the problems we've already talked about is the way the Commons works. The way that it works in so many ways compared to many other parliaments is still anti-diluvian, it's still archaic.

I mean, it's the one bit of our lives where you are trying to slow things down as opposed to speed things up and make them more efficient. I mean, it's crazy. I was talking about this. It is crazy that we still have a situation where MPs in order to vote have to spend 15 minutes on each division, traipsing through the lobbies. Running back from restaurants at the division bell sounding. And doing it again and again and again, having to wait in the Commons for hours and hours and hours to catch the speaker's eye. And you talk to MPs sometimes and they say, look, I've got to the end of the day. I've had quite a full day. It's been sort of quite busy in a way, but I don't know if I've achieved anything. And that often weighs heavily on MPs. So much about MPs career is about luck and being in the right place at the right time. There was a third thing as well in terms of the quality. I think we've got a problem and Lord Hague has written about this and I think he's completely right. We've got a problem at the moment in terms of having an obsession about localism in our politics. It's part of the problem of having a constituency based system. We've got to a point in politics now where we'd rather it would seem have a kind of village idiot as long as our village idiot than having someone of real ability who comes into a selection meeting and said, yeah, not from this constituency, but you know what? I'm absolutely fantastic. We've increasingly had in both parties an obsession and selection of MPs, particularly for safe seats, the idea that they must be from this place. And you know what? Britain just isn't big enough to really warrant that sort of thing. If it's the US, fine. But you know what? You can move to some constituency and not be from there. And let me just talk about the US example because you raised it earlier. The House of Representatives, which covers the whole of the United States. So quite a big landmass has 425 members. The House of Commons representing the UK, which is considerably smaller, has 650. So arguably, do we need that many MPs? We're roughly speaking every 100,000 people you have an MP. It's a completely different calculation in the US. You don't have as many lawmakers. And also, is it right that you want your MPs to be spending so much time worrying about whether in someone's council flat they've got a leak or they've got, you know, there's a row over the playing field or whatever it happens to be, which is a lot of sort of local care work, if you like, rather than legislating what should be the future of the nation.

I think you can be local and not a village idiot. I don't think those two are mutually exclusive. I think in every constituency, there is almost certainly the right person for the job. It's just that the selection process is so skewed towards the way that the party, the sort of grassroots parties push forward candidates. So you have to sort of appease the chairpeople in your local party constituency with whatever that takes, as opposed to thinking about the person who might, in a mayoral way, in a bigger role, might represent more of the people, more of the time.

We don't have a primary system, right? So you're right. One of the problems is, is that the system for selection is often so opaque, and you have to square off all of your local... A primary system can be just as ludicrous in the U.S.

I don't think that's a solution either.

No, but although it's harder to just come in, it doesn't always happen, or we necessarily often happen, and you still have to square off different power interests, but it is harder to just come in. There is no way for a Labour Party selection meeting, for example, you can just come in, make an amazing speech, get selected.

But I like the idea, personally, that your MP is the person that you go to. If you continually have problems with your building, or the substance, or flooding, or rats, or whatever it is, and you go, this is a structural problem, why aren't you sorting it out? I think because if it's you, it's probably a whole load of other people, and they then know what the problems are in the community. I don't have a problem with that at all.

Sure. I guess the argument against that is you have a whole tier of local government, and you've got local councillors who are elected to do that sort of work as well. And is it necessary for the Member of Parliament, who is at Westminster, to feel that so much of their time is devoted?

This is where I want to bring in the clip of In the Loop, where Tom Hollanda, who we had on last week, plays the MP, who thinks he has to make an important decision about whether or not the country goes to war, and ends up fighting with Steve Coogan over his garage wall.

Paul, why don't you just outline the whole issue?

Right, OK, I'll tell you again. Your constituency sidewall is falling down. Your wall is falling into my mother's garden. She tried to call the office, but she was fobbed off, fobbed off by your people. She's not Lord Snooty in a posh car, or Madonna on a horse.

Well, that's fine. I find that sort of incredible irritation myself.

It's a patch from London. It's Karen Clark. Urgent.

Hello. Sorry. Paul, I have to take this.

Have you fobbed off? Absolutely not.

What's the difference between being fobbed off and what's just happened then, please?

Can you all be able to forget me, Simon?

What's going on there, Simon?

It's deep, unmental business. It's about a wall.

Wow. Gaza.

Javier raises the prospect of cutting the number of the House of Commons. And John, you alluded to that as well. And that's, you could do that.

The problem with the British system, of course, is that the House of Commons right now, for

England anyway, is the only body, democratic body, above council level, arguably you've got the mayors as well. But unlike the United States, where you've got state legislatures and you've got governors and you've got Congress and so on, there's basically no intermediate level for much of England. In Wales and Scotland, it's different, but not in England. So if you were to cut the number of democratically elected representatives without making wider reforms, I think that's just a problem.

And particularly when you've got the House of Lords, which is currently larger than the democratically elected House of Commons.

I think the other thing that's just happening with MPs as well, is that the longevity, the shelf life of MPs and their political careers is coming right down.

I mean, you know, we're talking about Javid there. He was only elected in 2010.

In decades gone by, when you talk about your lobby pastoral, they're still just getting going. They might have just got on the ministerial ladder.

These days, the political shelf life, the half life of politicians has been accelerated.

So much like dog years now.

Rishi Sunak is a good example of that, right?

He was only elected in 2015.

He's Prime Minister a few years later.

It seems unimaginable, almost unthinkable now that you would get sort of Ken Clark, someone who was elected in 1970, still in the House of Commons in 2019, or Dennis Healy, who's still knocking around the House of Commons years after he stopped being deputy leader, or Tony Ben.

That is very unusual.

I think part of that is not just because people have got less, less endurance perhaps than they did, but I think how tough politics is as a career has got harder.

The intensity is 24 hours.

It's 24 hours.

And also the way people react to you, the constant feedback, social media, it's become a harder job than it was a few decades ago.

And a few decades ago, what happened in parliamentary debates mattered.

Every newspaper when I joined the lobby had a parliamentary correspondent, i.e. they weren't there in the lobby chatting to the politicians.

They were there reporting for their newspapers on a daily basis on the second reading debate on whatever it happened to be.

The BBC still does yesterday in Parliament.

But where else would you read the parliamentary reports?

And so MPs had importance because of their contribution to those sorts of debates.

No one gives a damn about what's in Hansard now.

And where it's much more important for them to have a good...

Presumably accepted, I love yesterday in Parliament.

OK, you're a weirdo, Lewis, weirdo still, me, absolutely normal.

Put that on the strut line.

But those MPs got their importance from that.

Today's generation, it's a good TikTok, it's a good tweet.

It's a clip on the local radio station.

Or it's a sketch, parliamentary sketch.

Yeah, and that's what they hope for.

And it's very different.

We'll be back in just a moment.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back.

There was a tweet five days ago from one Nigel Farage that caught my attention, where he claimed there was an establishment plot against him.

Oh, really? Yeah, I know.

Because his bank account had been shut and there was no explanation for it.

Except Simon Jack, the BBC's business editor,

is reporting that the story is a bit different to that.

He's obviously spoken to someone at Coots who has told him that what's happened is that Nigel Farage's account was stopped because he didn't have enough money in it to have one of these elite private bank accounts.

And so he was offered a Nat West account instead.

So not much of a conspiracy.

Yeah, what Simon is tweeting is that Nigel Farage fell below the financial threshold required to hold an account at Coots.

In brackets, he was too poor to bank at Coots,

which probably doesn't sit well with the Nigel Farage version of events.

Farage has hit back, we should say, in a video in front of a swimming pool, obviously, obviously, where he says, actually, Simon's wrong because nine banks tried to stop him because he's a politically whatever important person and that actually why would Coots have done this because of money reasons when all the others did it as well?

So it is rather murky.

Yes, the bank that closed me up was Coots.

Now they say they've offered me a Nat West account.

That wasn't until late on Thursday night after I've blown the story out there, which said that then seven other banks had refused me.

That is now nine other banks that have refused me.

They're telling the press I don't meet their wealth threshold.

Well, they've never mentioned that before in the previous 10 years.

The worst of a story is they denied to me on the phone on Friday that I was a pep, a politically exposed person.

That's the reason nobody else will have me and Coots are, frankly, being very, very dishonest.

It obviously spent all the cash on the pool, obviously, gone down and made a pretty big withdrawal.

But this whole thing of a politically exposed person is interesting.

I think that what it's all about is sort of the regulations around money laundering and foreign investments and accounts that may be held overseas

and that therefore that you want to make sure that nothing is happening that can be untoward.

No one imagined that could potentially affect people on the left and on the right. I think that's what he wants us to think.

He wants us to think that there is something that is all about his politics.

You know, he loves playing the outsider.

He loves playing the person who's fighting the establishment in brackets.

He went to Dulwich Public Schools.

Coots account. He had a Coots account.

He was a foreign exchange trader in the city.

Yeah, he's very, very anti-establishment.

But actually, the Coots line, and I'm going back to Simon here, is that last year, Farage had what he described as large, significant, positive cash balances going through his business account.

Coots do not offer business banking services to customers who are not private customers.

So it seems as if Coots is just from what we read, playing by the rules of how you can bank with their bank.

And if you can't bank with their bank, they offer you an alternative, which he didn't like because it doesn't quite have the status.

That's very disappointing.

You're saying about that, Wes.

That's very disappointing.

You're saying it's not a conspiracy by the establishment against it.

We'd all love it to be a conspiracy, because obviously...

We'd probably be involved that way, of course, which would be you.

Yeah, we'd be the new conspiracy elite or something.

I mean, we could start a bank.

Yeah, he could be our first customer.

Let's call it blob, blob, the blob, blob, blob banking.

Anyway, with mate list, good ol' and soap on.

Anyway, enough of Nigel Farage.

Just a word about news agents USA, because we're going to be talking about the Supreme Court and Joe Biden's view

that it's no longer a normal court after a series of rulings which have rolled back a number of progressive measures and the suggestion that it's just all got to political.

A lot of you have been asking us about the recent decisions from the Supreme Court were a year on from the overturning of Roe v Wade, which basically put a wrecking ball through the whole image of the Supreme Court and what it could do in America.

And we're going to be talking on this evening's episode about affirmative action, positive discrimination and the student loans question that Joe Biden is very keen

to get across the line in the face of the Supreme Court.
And that's news agents USA available on Global Player, first of all.
And then wherever you get your podcasts, we'll be back tomorrow.
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