

[Transcript] The News Agents / The US Ambassador on Biden, Harry and Meghan & Sunak vs Truss

It's Thursday, two days out from the coronation, and the first lady of the United States arrives tonight. Jill Biden is rocking up at the ambassadorial residence, but without her husband, the president, Joe Biden. And there's one person who thinks that's a really bad idea. He should be here as our representative of our country. I was surprised when I heard that he wasn't coming. He would think he would be here. He'll be in Delaware where he spends a lot of time. He spent a lot of time there during the election in the bunker. So I don't know, but I was very surprised to see. I think it's very disrespectful for him not to be. Disrespectful says the former president, Donald Trump, in an interview with who else, Nigel Farage. We'll be putting that to the current US ambassador to London. We'll also be talking to her about Northern Ireland. We'll be talking to her about the possibility of a trade deal about Ukraine and the best swear word she's picked up since she moved to the UK. Welcome to the newsagents. The newsagents. It's John. It's Emily, and we're a newsagents HQ. And we are delighted to be joined by her Excellency Jane Hartley, the US ambassador to London to the court of St James. And welcome. Thanks so much for being with us. We're two days out from the coronation. And I get the impression that America is going madder for more about the coronation than we are. And you booted us out. And then we tried to burn down the White House. Why the obsession with our whole family? I think you are right. I have more friends from home calling me from all over our country saying, so tell me about it. Tell me what's happening. How does it feel? I said this when I first came and there is a special relationship here. We know the special relationship is government to government. We know what we do on military. We know what to do in intelligence. But the people to people is still very important. And I felt it. I came around the end of May, and I was here in time for Jubilee. And the number of Americans that came over to pay tribute to the Queen then, I mean, people from all over the States. And I was talking to one person, I think from Ohio or something who said, you know, she's our Queen too. I mean, there is a connection that is not just what we do together economically, what we do together in terms of Ukraine, which is a lot, but there is a people to people connection. Why do you think that is, though? I mean, why do you think this obsession with the monarchy? Is it about history? Is it about pageantry? Is there a sort of regret that America, you know, is about almost Disney fairy tale in some ways? I think it is, listen, between the two countries, you know, we have a common language. We have common feeling about democracy, which we're seeing, particularly now in terms of Ukraine, common values. And there is some, I think, in terms of the pageantry. Yes, I think Americans, you know, our pageantry, I guess, is probably the White House. And probably it would be our president. But it's not the same. And I do think Americans love to look here. And I once again, back to the Queen, I, and I think many Americans and certainly our president, we respect the sense of duty, the sense of commitment to a country. And our best of ourselves, we want that. We want that. We believe in service, we believe in commitment, we believe in public service. And no one exemplified that more than the Queen. We've lent you a couple of our royals, the Hollywood Royals, Harry and Meghan. So you've got your own branch now. I wonder how much support you feel they have in the US. Do you think they are seen as a new generation or disaster? I haven't been back there. I've been here. So I don't know if I have the total sentiment. But listen, and I've said this

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before, every family has their issues. Every family has their issues. I mean, we should come to our Thanksgiving dinner sometime with my extended family. Everybody has an opinion. Everybody speaks

it clearly and loudly. And, you know, I just hope that for this coronation, there's support for the King. That's what I would want. From them? From them. Yeah, support for the King. And do you worry

that they're a kind of lightning conductor that takes them in a different place, that takes away support? Well, Meghan and Harry and that all that they've done takes support away from the King. You know, I don't know. I mean, I don't know how many people, I don't sense. I mean, if you look at our media, look at our New York Times, look at our Washington Post, whatever. I mean, they're not getting that much coverage, to be very honest with you. The coverage right now is really about the coronation. The coverage right now is about what the UK is doing with us in terms of Ukraine.

The coverage right now is the alliance that President Biden has put together. So, you're not seeing them in mainstream media, if you want to know the truth, in my view. But once again, I'm here. I'm not there. And here, we're expecting, you're expecting the First Lady for the coronation. Tonight, Joe Biden, President Biden, isn't here. I wonder what was behind that decision, if that was sort of discussed with you. I know that Donald Trump, for what it's worth, told Nigel Farage, it was disrespectful for him not to come. I know. And I could not disagree more. I mean, I think what was behind it was truly just scheduling on logistics.

The President's been here four times. And the President has committed in a great phone call with the King, which I don't want to talk about, but to come again to the UK before the end of the year, when he and the King will have some much more private time together. So, I think that whole thing is ridiculous, if you want to know the truth. I mean, I have ambassadors- Is there a state visit coming? Well, I don't know if it's a state visit, if I'd call it a state visit. But the President, in his phone call with the King, committed to come this year because he wanted to spend time with him after he was officially King. And was there concern that you felt, or the White House felt, that when he came over for the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, it was kind of dubbed here the Blink and You Miss It tour, because he spent so little time in the British Isles, in the UK, and an awful lot more time in the Republic of Ireland.

He did. He had that vacation planned for a long time with his family, but I was actually with him in Belfast, and it was quite impressive. And I've talked to people since then, both in the Prime Minister's office and both leadership of all the parties up in Belfast, and they thought his visit went unbelievably well. He was trying to say, and I think said quite well, was that we cared deeply about Northern Ireland. 25th anniversary was about peace. We want the next 25 years to be about prosperity and urging all parties to take a few brave steps and to go back into government.

But there was a sense from some, particularly the Unionists, particularly the DUP, that he had slightly trashed Britain, that he'd played up one side more than another in this very fragile ecosystem. You know, I don't know. I've met recently with the head of the DUP,

and I asked him how he thought the visit went, and he said he thought it went very well, and he thought that the President was quite sensitive, and you know, and his President and his remarks made sure not to play a heavy hand, but to say how important we thought it was, because we care about Northern Ireland, and we do see the potential of investment there, especially when you can trade

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both ways. And the President even brought up some of his English roots in his speech at Ulster. Latterly. Peter, I think a story, I think we had to do with something he and Peter West, my God, had done a long ago, but yes. But I did talk to the leadership of the DUP, and... Because you were worried. I mean, because you thought that he'd overplayed the Irish hand. No, I met with them at Winfield, and I brought it up. It wasn't because I was worried. It was more on where we were in terms of the Windsor framework.

Just very quickly on that. You've said that you think there could be great economic progress if there is political progress, and there is a kind of you return to power sharing.

Yes. Following your talks, do you get a sense that we are closer to that?

I actually don't know. I don't know. I mean, I do think everybody up there that I've talked to understand, you go to Belfast, and it feels vibrant. But obviously, there's more that can be done, and there's more in terms of, I don't want to use the word leveling up, but bringing all communities up. And I think as you see investment coming in, and we already have a lot of big American companies. There are city groups there, all states there, spirit, we have a lot. But what I've said, and I've said it kind of continually, is I think it's a wonderful place to invest. And I think America wants to help. But the problem is, if you talk to CEOs, they don't like instability. So in having people invest where there is instability, where there's new government, is harder. I've said the same thing to the DUP. This is not something, and so I think there is huge opportunity, huge, but they do have to get their government formed. Let's take that opportunity, and you use the word leveling up. One of the big promises of Brexit was this free trade deal with the US. Can you tell us that we are any closer to a free trade deal with the United States, with Joe Biden? Listen, I don't want to get ahead of anything. There's going to be a meeting, which you probably know about. There's going to be a meeting in June at the White House with the prime minister and the president. And I think some of the things that are going to be talked about, there are a lot of the things. I mean, obviously, the key Ukraine will be discussed, China will be discussed, but also economic security issues will be discussed. And as part of that, trade will be on the agenda. But not a trade deal.

Once again, I don't want to get ahead of anybody, but I do know, and I've talked to, I just talked to Catherine Tai the other day, many positives in terms of the meetings they've had, particularly in terms of small business and other things. And the alignment between our two countries, whether it's on environment or whether it's on digital, there's a lot of, or some of the small business service type things. But the more you talk about other stuff, the more we're hearing, okay, that's really hard to say there's a free trade deal coming, right? There isn't. But the thing I would ask, I would ask the prime minister what he wants. I would ask that instead of just putting it back on the US, I'd ask the prime minister what he wants, because I think one of the things that is very important now is trying to figure out where we are in critical minerals in terms of our IRA legislation, and then looking to see if they're building blocks as part of trade. So I don't know what's going to happen in the June meeting, but I'm feeling very, very positive about it.

Okay. And is this prime minister, how can I put this, easier to deal with than the previous two? Liz Truss and Boris Johnson?

Well, let's see. So I arrived here at the end of May.

You've seen a lot of political upheaval in this country.

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An instance then, a country that supposedly has a very stable political environment unlike ours at times. I've seen three prime ministers, two monarchs, many chancellors. Listen, I don't want to compare the current prime minister to the past, but I do want to say we really enjoy working with the number 10 and with the prime minister.

Liz Prime Minister?

Yes, yes. It's a great working relationship.

Does it feel more stable than it was?

Well, how long was Liz Truss in office? So I think he's beaten that record already.

And the ambassador is staying with us. And when we come back, we'll be talking to her about Joe Biden's age, Ukraine, and whether a Republican president would maintain support for the country. And also, Harry Dunn, the motorcyclist who was killed by an American diplomat.

What should have been done differently?

This is the news agents.

Welcome back. Ambassador Hartley, Jane Hartley, is still here.

You spoke at the start of the interview about the special relationship and what it counts for.

And I remember kind of, you know, I was in the States then when Biden announces we're pulling out of Afghanistan. And that was without any regard to the view of the British or the French or other people who are nations there. Isn't it a rather one-sided special relationship?

I actually don't think so at all. And, you know, and I heard, everybody in the States has always heard a lot about their special relationship. And obviously, when I was going through my confirmation hearings with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, there was a lot of discussion about that. But, you know, since I've been here, and especially once again, Ukraine, I mean, the sharing of intelligence, and by the way, the sharing of intelligence ahead of Ukraine, which we did with the Brits. With the declassification before the invasion.

With the declassification where the Brits, where everybody here was so helpful and maybe even out in front on us, but always with coordination. And, you know, I see the number of people that come over constantly. Our Director of National Intelligence was here. Bill Burns was here.

Our Deputy Attorney General. The flow of people, I think, shows the relationship. I mean, we work together unbelievably closely. Does that commitment to Ukraine hold? Because there are Republican hopefuls who are much more skeptical about what happens next.

I mean, Donald Trump, sorry to quote twice. He said he'd end the war in a day if he was president. We don't know what end means, but there is. And Rhonda Santis as well. And Rhonda Santis,

there is a sense that they don't want to have anything more to do with Ukraine. Listen, I'm supposed to be apolitical on this job because that's what ambassador is. Everybody knows my political party and knows where I came from. I'm a Democrat. But, you know, I don't see it.

First of all, President Biden, who's obviously still in office, very much still in office, it's a hard core and very emotional and very personal commitment. And if you look at the leadership of the Republican Party, maybe ask Mitch McConnell about it or ask any of the key senators on armed service or foreign relations. So I don't know where Donald Trump is because I don't deal with him or his people. I do know Rhonda Santis initially came out and then seemed to have to pull it back. So I think the commitment on Ukraine is strong.

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You're confident whoever is in power after 2024?

Well, I can't speak in terms of the Republicans. I can speak in terms of the current Republican leadership like people like Mitch McConnell. I don't have any connection with the Trump campaign, so I can't speak in terms of him. You talked about the strength of the rival democracy's instability. What does it say about American democracy, a country of 350 million people, that the choice in 2024 could be between Joe Biden, who would be 82 starting his second term,

and Donald Trump, who would be 78? Listen, I mean, I'm aware of the age, but look at how much President Biden has accomplished. And by the way, in terms of President Biden, it's the same thing I said when he ran not quite four years ago, and I was obviously an early supporter of his. I remember having many meetings in New York and Washington and saying President Biden was the only candidate, the only one who could put a coalition together of people to win the election. And his coalition is broad and deep. And you don't see that in terms of other candidates. And now I think you continue to have that coalition of people, whether it's women, whether it's minorities, whether it's suburban voters, whether it's labor, whether it's independence. He still has that coalition, and now he also has a record to run on, a positive record. But don't you worry that someone who is 82, you know, look, there are times when he does look tired, and there are times when he does look that this is taking its toll, that it's just being the leader of the free world, the most preeminent democracy in the world.

I am sure the pressures are intense. I mean, I've worked with three presidents, so I see what the White House does. But I got to tell you, I was just in a meeting with the president, a small meeting, and with a group of policy people, and he led the way. He led the way on everything. And what we can't forget is maybe there is age, but also with age comes wisdom and knowledge and history. And especially when you're talking about foreign policy, he knows more than anybody, frankly.

Ambassador, you talk about the special relationship, and I know a lot of our listeners will probably be reflecting on the awful tragedy of Harry Dunn, the young man on a motorbike who was killed by an American diplomat. And that seemed to show us what a minor player the UK is in this relationship. And I wonder whether, on reflection, you think that was badly handled by America. His mother said the real enemy was not Ansoculis, it was the US government. It was heavy-handed, and it tried to cover for her rather than seek justice.

Yeah. I mean, listen, I want to give my condolences to the family. That was a tragic, tragic accident. But it happened before I was here, so I really just don't know enough about it. But I don't. But you do. You know the facts of it, and you know how long it took, and you know that the family had to campaign really vigorously for three years just to get America to understand the position it had put this family in by taking her away, by sending her home.

Don't you think that was badly handled?

Once again, I wasn't here. I know from the people I've talked to who were here, I mean, there was a lot of sorrow. People felt terrible, and felt terrible for the family.

But once again, in terms of what agreements we have with the British government, what agreements they have with us for their diplomats in the United States, those are long-term agreements that protect on both sides. And once again, I don't want to go further because I wasn't here, and I don't know what happened legally, and I don't know the whole

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concept of what was happening during that period. I do know that there was a huge amount of sorrow and condolences for the family. But these are agreements, and they protect us, and they protect the UK too, frankly. Because you have a lot of diplomats.

This is a terrible what if. But if something like that had happened while you were on, this was on your watch, would you have done things differently?

You know, I am sensitive to these things. I don't come from the military. I feel things should be handled well in terms of also with the public because I never want to do anything that damages our relationship. But once again, I was not here. So, you know, if there's something going forward, let's talk about it, okay? Do you feel that the young people of Britain warm to America right now, what is your sense of the relationship between our two countries genuinely?

Listen, I think it's extremely positive. And, you know, one of the things I've done is tried to get out in the country a little bit and see people. And the reception I've had sort of representing America has been so positive. It's a joke, but I keep saying to my husband who's in New York, the States, half the time, how nice everybody is. And it sounds like sort of a cliché, but it really is true. Perhaps it's to be due to saying that because you're from New York.

Can I just ask you, is a town in North Wales, Wrexham, getting disproportionate coverage in the United States compared to everywhere else in the UK?

Well, I will comment on that. For me, no, but I am going to go to Wrexham. I'm going to Cardiff first. I think I'm going to Cardiff next week. And I was just down in Bath in Somerset, and I've been to Scotland often. And are you learning Welsh?

What, am I learning Welsh? No, but I did have something at the residence for St David's Day, where I did try to sing with the Welsh choir, not very well, because one, I have a terrible voice, and two, I don't know Welsh. But the Wrexham thing I do, my daughter who lives in New York, is a huge fan of Wrexham, and probably like nine months ago.

Had never heard of them.

Well, she started going on and on to me about Wrexham, and I'm like, why does Wrexham work?

I'm going to lose you in a second. So we're just going to ask you very quickly, your sense of not Britain, but British people, British traits. What is the most confusing British trait, do you think, the personality trait that took your while to get used to?

Well, once again, what I said about nice, and I know it's sort of cliché, but it really is true.

People are lovely here. People are patient. People are kind. I have a wonderful staff at Winfield House, and I was talking to my husband because I'm, even though I consider myself a New

Yorker, lived in Washington, obviously I work for three presidents, but most of my life is New York, but I wasn't born in New York. I was born in New England. So the UK reminds me a little of the positive of New England. I don't know how many people you've traveled around, but decent, stiff upper lip, kind, polite, and, you know, I could go to Maine. You've said decent and kind.

Any favorite British swear words? Well, I have to be very careful on some expressions because wait, you can't ask the ambassador to swear on it. We're very proud of our British swear words. I've used expressions in the wrong way, not publicly, but privately, so I've stayed away from them. What is it, taking the piss or something like that? I think I'm still getting it wrong, so I have to be very careful because I get it wrong. Is that good? I've done

it incorrectly in the past, so I tend to stay away. Okay. Is there any food stuff that we offer up that you just think, I can't possibly go in? Incomprehensible food. I mean, for me, you know, I was in the US for eight years, grits and marshmallow and sweet potato is one dish. I mean, that just seemed to me incomprehensible. I want to know what we offer up. Well, most of it, I think, is quite good. I love pubs. I love especially the small little pubs. I've just done a bath in Somerset and we went to a really wonderful, better lamb, frankly. That's why I'm going to Welles. I'm going to go to a farm up there, better lamb than we have in the US, better salmon. Just some of the stuff is just better. Terrible? But I haven't gotten a taste for haggis yet. I tried. And the more you know about what goes into a haggis, I think the less you would want to eat it, frankly. But you know, my father, my father's passed away long ago, and I don't even know haggis and blood pudding and things like that. He loved.

Now, that may be also why, because I remember as a child going, I don't know, I don't think so. But they will convince you on your first trip to Scotland. Well, I've been to Scotland a few times and I did try it and my father did love it. So I'm going to keep trying. Ambassador Hartley, great to speak to you. This is the news agents.

Welcome back. American diplomats know that when they are speaking to a British broadcaster, you have to say special relationship out front. Otherwise, you're going to get a question. Well, don't you think the relationship is special? And she wanted to avoid that. So she wanted to get it out there on the table. And it was in the first sentence. I bet that when she's speaking to French broadcasters, she has relations special. No, no, no. It's the oldest. The oldest relationship. Is that right? Mexico, Canada, the closest relationship. So they have a form of words. So different adjective for each country. That makes them feel special.

It's very funny because I've just started watching the diplomat. The premise is exactly that, that a new US ambassador arrives in Winfield House in London, except the one in the fictional version is meant to be in Kabul and she's kind of a tomboy and she's a bit scrappy and she has to evoke shoot and she doesn't really like wearing high heels or fancy clothes. And she keeps saying really inappropriate things. So obviously, soaps and I were hoping that we would get full inappropriate.

Yeah, full on inappropriate. Apart from a little taking the piss, she was pretty rigorously sticking to lines there. I mean, I thought she answered the question well about what's it like dealing with Rishi Sunak compared to trust. She laughed. And she laughed and said, let's just put it like this. We enjoy working with Downing Street very much. And we both said, this one, you mean? And yes, I think was the answer. I think America is preferring the stability. I also thought there was a very subtle push towards Harry and Meghan when she said, we'd expect them to respect the king. And I wonder whether that is a sense now that actually they had a little bit too much airtime, a little bit too many column inches in the US media, I don't know. And that this is her way of saying, now is not the time. If the interview had gone on for an hour, there was something else I'd really love to have spoken to her about. And it kind of relates to what we were talking about on the podcast yesterday about civil servants, whether they've become politicized in the UK and all the rest of it. She said repeatedly, I am a Democrat. I'm not going to speak about the Republicans because I am appointed by a Democrat president and I am a Democrat. You have much more politicization, open politicization of the civil service and top jobs in Washington compared to the UK. Yeah. I mean, we should explain how she

sort of came into that role, which is first she was a campaigner for Obama and she raised hundreds of thousands of pounds. Well, millions. You don't get the ambassadorship in London without raising millions. Right. And she would have done that. And that's your reward. And it's the same in Paris and it's the same in Tokyo. Political appointees to do some of the plump. So you don't call it cronyism at that point because you say it's all, it's all open. And whereas we have a system where someone will wash up in the House of Lords and you think, well, have they really got that on merit and public service? Or have they got that because of their relationship with whoever the prime minister happened to be at the time? And of course, that question, all the more pertinent now, because it does seem that so many people are getting a little bauble, a gong, a peerage, just because they may have slipped some money towards the Conservative Party or towards whoever the prime minister was at the time or whoever was in power. And that is a such an opaque system.

I kind of prefer in America, I've raised you millions, give me an ambassadorship.

I was once speaking to the information campaigner, Heather Brooke, who was the one who brought into the open the whole question of the MP's expenses. And she said, the differences, even in journalism, in America, journalists go to the public records office. They look at data and they see it all written down there. And here, journalists tend to whine and dine, we lunch, we gossip, we send WhatsApps. That's a kind of more covert way of getting our information.

It's a very, very different system, whether it is the politics itself or the way journalists cover politics. Yeah. And the American system is so completely different. We've got a good family friend. And she would describe herself at election time as a bundler. And a bundler is somebody who hosts the dinner for whoever it happens to be and raises the money and gets the big ticket. Exactly what Jen Hartley was. Yeah. And you are bundling up the money to help the campaign. And you know that at the end of that process, you are going to be offered something in return. You will be on the board of the Kennedy Center in Washington. You will be on the board of something else. You will get an ambassadorship. You will get something else. And that is the way it works. It's clear, transparent in its own way. Yet we don't have that.

It is polling day today. You've got until 10pm tonight to get your vote. Don't forget your voter ID. You will need that for the first time and bring along your registration card as well. This is for people in many parts of England and not in London. So don't panic if you're listening to this in London or indeed in Scotland. Lewis will be back. I think he's up all night actually. We hope he's up all night bringing you things as they happen on LBC and he'll be in the hot seat tomorrow. And good luck to all of you who are standing. Whatever party. It's great that people want to represent your local area. So the very best of luck. Bring your dog to a polling station. Bye.