

[Transcript] The News Agents / What is Starmer doing in The Hague?

I think the Labour leader is Beach Ken. Beach Ken stands for nothing on shifting sands in his flip-flops staring out to sea, doing nothing constructive to stop small boats all grow the economy. And when we examine his record on union demands, on border control, on protecting the public and stocking small boats, we discover that like Beach Ken, he has zero balls. That was Penny Mordent, comparing the leader of the opposition to Barbie's fellow Ken. I'm not sure how insulting she thinks it's going to be for Keir to find out he's been compared to Ryan Gosling. But Ryan Gosling is obviously currently visiting The Hague with Evette Cooper, Shadow Home Secretary. Is he? Yeah, more of that to come. Yeah, Ryan Gosling or Keir Starmer is in The Hague as part of a series of international trips he's doing over the course of the next week and he has announced a policy which has been pretty unusual for the Labour leader as to how to deal with the small boats crisis which has gripped our politics and it's already generated an almighty backlash. It's Emily. It's Lewis. And a little later we'll be talking about Mitt Romney, the Utah Senator who at the age of 76 has decided that he will be stepping down, he'll be retiring. He was the one Republican thorn in the side during both impeachments of Donald Trump. Sounds a funny thing to say but yes, there were two who voted in favour of impeaching the president not once but twice. We'll be looking at his contribution to Republican or American party politics and seeing how far things have moved from when he first became Senator. Well, we should talk about Ryan first, shouldn't we? We should. Because he's just been photographed outside The Hague. Not the International Criminal Court, we should say. Well, the same sort of area. But he has gone to try and find a way of dealing with Europe in terms of solving the people smuggling question. And I think it's a very interesting moment this because he's gone to The Hague to talk about proximity to Europe, not in terms of the EU, not in terms of sort of rejoining or any of the big questions that have surrounded Labour's position on Brexit for so long, but on this one very specific question of people smugglers and whether in his words, you should start treating people smugglers like terrorists. And he's saying that if he wins, if Labour wins the next election, he wants to freeze their assets, he wants to place restrictions on their movement, he wants to smash the gangs by expanding use of civil orders used to target serious criminals and terrorists and drug traffickers. And just this kind of language, I think, gives you a real insight into how he's trying to move onto Tory turf. He doesn't want to be seen as the man who is pacifying or making immigration, illegal immigration easier. He wants to be seen as the prosecutor he once was of what he now calls one of the most serious international crimes in the world. Yeah, so he's gone over to The Hague to talk with Europol, the European-wide police organisation, with a vet cooper, the shallow home secretary, had talks with Europol's director, Catherine de Boll. And it's worth noting, of course, that this matters partly because the UK gave up its seat on Europol after Brexit. That ended our access to shared intelligence databases under the Schengen information system. So we have a far less cooperation with our European neighbours than we did before. And this is an interesting thing, I think, on a couple of fronts. One, I think it speaks to the confidence of Stammer increasingly. I don't think you'd have got Stammer doing this 12 months ago. The fact that he is not only going to The Hague, but is doing this sort of mini international tour of which we can perhaps return and talk about a bit later. But also the fact that he's doing something which he hasn't done on all sorts of different areas. He's setting out a policy. He's showing some leg,

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showing some ankle as to what the Labour Party is going to do about one of the most contentious political issues, indeed, perhaps the most contentious political issue. And he's doing it in a way that exposes him a little bit. He is saying that a Labour government would draw up a returns agreement with the European Union or attempt to get a returns agreement with the EU, i.e. that we would agree with the EU that we could send back a certain proportion of eligible asylum seekers, illegal migrants, whatever you want to call them, who arrive in the UK every year. And in return for that, because you can say, well, why would the EU want to do that? So far they have

refused to do it. In return for that, he's willing to have a conversation with the EU about a quota system or burden sharing of overall numbers who arrive on the continent of Europe. This has been a real political hot potato, a real sort of third rail of British politics and European politics more widely. And you've already seen the visceral reaction against that across the right-wing newspapers,

the Sun, the Daily Mail and the Conservative Party more generally, slamming him saying that Keir's answer in trying to stop illegal migration is to make it legal. And so you've already seen the backlash start on that. Lewis, I don't want to stop him on log, which has gone on beautifully for about 15 minutes now, but it might be time to hear from Keir Starmer.

There is no return to freedom of movement. We have left the EU. There's no case for going back to the

EU, no case for going into the single market or the customs union and no freedom of movement. I've been really clear that that's the parameter. I do not accept that that prevents us working with other police units here, with prosecutors here, to smash the gangs in this vile trade. But to be clear, no return to freedom of movement and no going back into the EU. But it would be foolish to say therefore we won't work with other police forces to smash these criminal gangs. And I think everybody watching would say, look, for heaven's sake, if you can take these gangs out before they put people in the water, that has got to be a good thing. So that was Keir Starmer with Susanna Reid on Good Morning Britain this morning, again reinforcing this very violent language when

he's talking about sort of smashing the rings. And I think inevitably it has brought the response from conservatives who, I don't know, maybe slightly unnerved by what he's doing, particularly this very sort of strong image of him standing outside the Hague on, as Lewis says, the front foot. But they have come out and said Keir Starmer would turn the UK into, there would, a dumping ground

for migrants, handling control of immigration to the EU bloc. And they're talking about numbers of 100,000. Now, we should say that, first of all, that the returns agreement, we are not part of the EU. So whatever the number is for EU members, I guess Keir Starmer would argue that he's trying to secure a very bespoke deal. And it's a word that the conservatives have used. And we should say also that about a month or so ago, Rishi Sunak was the one seeking exactly this kind of bespoke deal, a returns agreement of sorts, right? The EU said no to him. And now they've sort of flipped it onto the back foot and said, oh, you see what Keir Starmer's doing. He's prepared to just make us the dumping ground. Maybe that is all they can do at the moment. The returns agreement

sounds as if each member state would take a minimum annual quota of 30,000. So we don't know where this 100,000 figure is that the conservatives are using at the moment. Clearly,

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it does mean that we have to play our part in solving the immigration crisis. And Keir Starmer, I think, is making it clear that he is prepared for us to do that. So yes, he is making himself vulnerable. But also, he's kind of saying it's a problem we've got to solve without sending people to Rwanda. And he has definitively now ruled out Rwanda as a solution to this.

Yeah, because he said it's a waste of money. And given the fact that it's, you know, been mooted for so long and is still not operational, you can say that that's a pretty credible idea. I think that in a way, although in some ways you could say Tories might be a bit unnerved that he's going on to their turf quote unquote, I think in another sense, look, I think they're happy. They think that he's opened a flank that they can exploit again and again. And it is interesting that, and again, we sometimes talk about the comparisons with the 1990s and the run up to the 97 election compared to now. One of the interesting things you can see here is the press are still the sort of male, the son, the telegraph, they're still very much not in the position they were in say 1996 with Blair, you know, they're not rowing in behind him. They think he's made a mistake here. And they are amplifying the conservative message very, very strongly. I'm going to disagree with that because he wrote this piece for The Times. The sun's headline, obviously, same stable as The Times, sounded quite supportive. I think he's found himself a space here

where those papers know that or think they know that people's big worry is immigration, is a legal immigration, and he is trying to offer an alternative to the one that clearly hasn't worked for the Tories since Brexit. And he's also said he'd end the use of hotels for asylum seekers within 12 months of coming to power. I mean, that is a stone around his neck. That is a millstone if he doesn't then make that right. But I think, going back to your point as well, it is all part of this statesman-like appearance now. He's at the Hague. Next week, he's in Montreal. We think he's meant to be meeting Justin Trudeau, the Canadian president. He's going to see Macron as well next week, the French president. He's still trying to get this Oval Office meeting with Biden. I was speaking to people close to him this morning. He was saying it's definitely on the cards. The problem is that they've had three UK prime ministers and protocol always insists that each of the prime ministers have got to meet Biden before the opposition. But they are hoping to see that picture

in the White House. And I think for the first time, this week has felt like Labour is setting the agenda now, not just responding, but sort of setting it. Well, I completely agree. And what I was going to say is that although the conservatives clearly feel they've finally got something on which to capitalise, in a way there is so little for them to do at the moment that you can understand that, the truth is, is that what this reveals, as I say, is how confident Starmer is and Labour is, even on an issue which is as difficult as this, the truth is, even on immigration and legal immigration, which is something that the Tories normally, you know, romp home on in terms of polling, even their Sunak and the conservatives are behind. And so the fact that Sunak and the Tories have been seen to fail so comprehensively on this issue, an issue that Sunak himself put up in light, one that he said he was going to deal with, stop the boat, stop the boats, not subtle, not nuanced, stop the boat, three words. And the fact it hasn't happened gives Starmer a lot of political space. And that is what he's exploiting here and feels able to do. And the fact that he's able to propose something, which actually is going to be contentious, is itself revealing. And I think the other thing is this, why are they doing it?

Part of it is you, say Emily, I mean, you know, this is part of the kind of statesman-like tour,

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he's, they're starting to absolutely dominate, there's this kind of sense that, you know, increasingly they're making, they're running on issue after issue. Part of it is I think there is an awareness in Labour circles, and I'm absolutely right about this, is that this issue around the border, if they think, or we think that it's been a problem for Sunak, you just wait till Starmer gets in there. I mean, it's been a big problem for Sunak in terms of the press. You wait two, three months in, and these boats are still going, it is going to become an absolute toxic issue for his government. And he knows that. And unlike Sunak and so on, who are the people, and unlike, say Blair in the late 90s or early 2000s, you've now got TV channels that will be absolutely dedicated to it, be excoriating in a way, amplified by comparison, even to the way they've dealt with Sunak on the issue. So, you know, they know that they've got to try and come up with something that at least dense this. And you know what, fair play to Starmer in the sense that, you know, we've talked about this before, that on the border issue around asylum seekers, and so on, there has been a lack of honesty and straightforwardness to say, this is a continental wide problem. You think we've got it bad? Look what Italy's had over the last few years. Look at what Greece has had. Look at what Turkey has had. And this is a continental wide problem that is going to require a continental wide solution. That's been obvious since the migrant crisis of 2015-2016. And Starmer, to some extent, is grappling with that. Yeah. And I think every time up till now, Starmer, the Labour Party has voted down a government bill or voted down a stop the boats measure. It has always been thrown back in Labour's face. Oh, you say that you're, you know, keen to see this, but actually you won't vote with us. This is their response to that. And I think it's interesting that Starmer has now, as it were, lent in to the comments that both Johnson and Sunak have made about his lawyerliness. You know, we always heard this stuff like, oh, do you really trust these lawyers, the sort of lefty lawyers, all that sort of stuff. And now he's gone, actually, not only was I a lawyer, I was a barrister, the chief prosecutor. I know how the law works. And when he's talking about changing the law to be used against people traffickers, when he's talking about crime prevention orders, when he's talking about restricting movements and freezing assets, this is the kind of stuff that somebody who understands the law from within, who is actually applying what he knows about international organized crime to people traffickers. And I think that's important as well, that the emphasis you'll hear from Labour will not be on, quote unquote, illegal migrants, right? They're not blaming the migrants. They are blaming the gangs that traffic them. And I think that is how they can then turn and say, the Rwanda policy is inhumane. The conservative approach is inhumane. We want to stop the problem, but we don't want to punish the wrong people for this. We're going to treat the people, the perpetrators, as the criminals here. Yeah, and the Home Office will say that the counter argument is, is that you have quotas, you distribute around Europe and you make Europe even more accessible and even easier for people to come. And of course, that is part of the calculation. But they're coming anyway. They're coming anyway. It's been happening for years and years and years. And when you have got the push factors, whether the pull factor, we see what's happening in the Sahel, literally every country across it, subject to some coup or political instability, that generates problems, famine in East Africa, that generates problems. There is just an, there is, we do have to just face the fact that there will be a certain number of people who arrive across Europe. And if we want the EU's

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cooperation in terms of sending people back, now we're not in the club, we are going to have got to them something. This is the news agents. We're going to talk about the senator for Utah now, Mitt Romney, who's just announced he is resigning. And he famously went up against Barack Obama as the Republican presidential candidate in 2012. He lost clearly. Perhaps even more famously, he remains the only Republican to have spoken out in both impeachments of Donald Trump and voted

to have DJT impeached. Here's what he said earlier. I just don't think that we need another person in their 80s. I'm a little long of tooth already. We don't need more like me. But I do think that that the times we're living in really demand the next generation to step up and express their point of view and to make the decisions that will shape American politics over the coming century.

And just having a bunch of guys that were around the baby boomers who around in the post-war era, we're not the right ones to be making the decisions for tomorrow. So obviously that's interesting in one sense, in that it's a broadside against the gerontocracy, which now basically runs American both parties, you know, Biden, McConnell, Trump himself. But obviously this is interesting for another reason, right? Which is, as you were saying, Emily, I mean, I suppose Romney has been in so many ways, he's the kind of arguably he's the last of a kind. I mean, the 2012 presidential election, you can argue with the last normal election that America 2016 definitely wasn't 2020 wasn't 2024 won't be. It was the last time when you had a kind of pretty normal Democrat candidate going up against a pretty normal Republican candidate.

And the interesting thing about Romney, I mean, he lost that election, the campaign wasn't particularly

effective. Obama and the Democrats very effectively sort of caricatured him as this really out of touch elite guy. I mean, interesting, Obama kind of using the sort of glimmers of some of the Trumpian

arguments, right, that he was to deploy against Clinton later. But what's interesting, obviously, is about what happens to Romney because obviously then he loses, he goes into the Senate having been

governor of Massachusetts. And the reason he becomes interesting is because it's not so much that Romney changes. It's that American politics changes around him. So the reason he stands out in the Republican Party is that he's such an avowed institutionalist. He's someone who's willing to go along with and prizes the constitutional processes, as we saw in the impeachment process.

And like that wouldn't once have been unusual. But it is unusual now. And the fact that I mean, look, he had the political space to speak out against Trump because his party in Utah was pretty against Trump or was pretty skeptical about Trump. And so he had a sort of solid political base on which to critique Trump and criticize him and be that conscience of the Republican Party and be so isolated. But nonetheless, it is telling in the sense that there will be no more Romneys. There's no one really quite like that in the Senate now. It's not so much that he was so special or insightful or whatever. It's just that the Republican Party changed so much around him. I covered the 2012 presidential election between Romney and Obama. And there are very few people who have come out. You know, I'd say Liz Cheney has come out. Adam Kinzinger have come out as people who will stand up to the Trump lie. But at the time he was very much portrayed

and seen as this slightly out of touch elitist. He was very wealthy. He was the multimillionaire. He was memorably Mormon from Utah. He had horses in the Olympics. You know, he was sort of

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seen

as somebody who was too rich to govern, if you like. I mean, you know, ridiculous, given what happened afterwards. And he came out with this very odd line, which really did for him at the time where he talked about 47% of people. And that 47% became a sort of millstone around his neck. Just listen. There are 47% of people who have bought for the president no matter what. All right, there are 47% who are with him, who are dependent on government, who believe that they are victims,

who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they're entitled to healthcare, to food, to housing, to you name it. But that's an entitlement and the government should give it to them. And they will vote for this president no matter what.

Now, what we should explain is that that was actually a secret recording that was leaked out. And he was talking about all these people who actually, in his words, have got away without paying tax. And the point being made afterwards was clearly these are people who don't pay tax because they're too poor. So he was seen as out of touch with a huge swathe of impoverished America.

Maybe you can say that laid the groundwork for somebody like Trump because the difference was Mitt Romney was a classic Republican. And Donald Trump was never a Republican. He was never in anything. He just sort of hitched himself to the Republican wagon because that was what allowed him to gain power. And I suppose the combination of Obama and Romney who really were not that dissimilar compared to, as you've said, what came after 2016, 2020, the fact that they looked as if there was very little difference between the parties was maybe what allowed that space for Trump to enter. And then Mitt Romney reinvents himself as the person who has integrity, quite simply dignity, who will stand up to the lies that have been thrown. But don't forget, he's also a big internationalist. And in his resignation speech, what's interesting is not that he slams Trump and says, you know, he's an idiot and he's untrustworthy. He basically talks about both Biden and Trump not confronting authoritarians, you know, Russia and China, not doing enough for global warming, not becoming part of the international solutions. And I suppose

that's the way he wants to be remembered, not actually as the man who just fought Trump, but as the man who kind of upheld what the Republican Party used to be.

He was the last time that the Republican Party establishment controlled and put in place the candidate. You know, I mean, this was a guy who was steeped in the Republican Party's father, was a governor of Michigan, George Romney, who was very active in the 60s and 70s. And so, yeah, you can basically say the transition that took place between 2012 and 2016 was the slow process of Republican elites, of whom Romney was the kind of quintessence losing control. There's been an amazing article in the Atlantic magazine about Romney and profile of him. And it's interesting in all sorts of ways. And again, he comes out quite admirably in some respects, you know, particularly, again, talking about the impeachment process and how seriously he took the idea of being a juror on both occasions surrounding himself with all the documents and went back and forth, particularly on the first occasion, the first impeachment, as to which way he was going to go against Trump and was shocked that so many of his Senate colleagues weren't doing that. They just instantly thought of their own political reasons. But there are also some amazing little tidbits about it, including his life in Washington, how isolated he became so quickly in the Republican Party because he was such an outlier.

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This is an amazing passage, talking about what he would do when he went home in Washington, because his wife wanted to stay in Utah most of the time. And it says, in the dining room, a 98 inch TV went up on the wall and a leather recliner landed in front of it. Romney, who didn't have many real friends in Washington, ate dinner alone there most nights, watching Ted Lasso or Better Call Saul as he leafed through his briefing materials. On the day of my first visit, he showed me his freezer, which was full of salmon fillets that had been given to him by Lisa Mikowski, the senator from Alaska. He didn't especially like the salmon, but found that if he put it on a hamburger bun and smothered it in ketchup, it made for a serviceable meal. What an image. The guy who would have been president sat there in front of his big telly, putting loads of ketchup on his salmon fillets. And I think there's always a tendency to sort of put the gloss on 2020 hindsight and all the rest of it. But we did also get this fascinating fact from the biography, which is that he sent Mitch McConnell, a text, Senate Majority Leader McConnell, warning him four days before January the 6th, that social media traffic was warning of something amiss, that guns are being smuggled into DC to storm the Capitol. He literally says that he warned a senior Republican in leadership that this was going to happen, and Mitch McConnell doesn't respond. And so you do get that sense not just of his isolation at home in front of the TV, but his political isolation, that there are people in his own party who could be listening, who could be aware of the problems that are brewing and just choose to ignore it. Well, joining us now is Jim Merrill. He was a director of the Mitt Romney for president campaign in 2012, also worked on the George W. Bush campaign. Jim, thanks so much for joining us on the news agents. Was it a surprise to you, this resignation? It did not come as a surprise. I think that Senator Romney, I think, has sent some signals to indicate that he might not run for reelection. So certainly it's bittersweet. I hate to see him leave public service, but I completely understand it does not come as a complete surprise. Jim, do you think that part of this is about his own disillusionment with the Senate and the way politics in Washington works these days? I do, absolutely. Mitt Romney is a doer. He's someone that looks at public service as really as an honor and an obligation. And so I think he went into the Senate really enthusiastic about meaty policy opportunities and weighing in on a number of issues and making a difference. And I think the Senate is somewhat calcified. And I think it's difficult to have those kind of thoughtful debates on policy at times, which I think frustrated him. And so I certainly think that, I don't think it was only that, but I think it certainly contributed, yes. The kind of stories that we are now learning from his autobiography, Jim, suggest that he was the voice that spoke out. Many others in his party felt the same way, but didn't dare. I mean, what is your message to those Republicans, to people in your party who just watched Mitt Romney do it and thought, yeah, we're too scared? My message is we need more Mitt Romneys. We need more people who are willing to put aside partisanship and be truthful. I think one of the most simple but poignant things that Mitt Romney said in and around January 6th was the best thing that we can do as elected officials is tell the voters the truth. The election wasn't stolen. And things of that nature where I think too many politicians, frankly on both sides of the aisle, but we're talking about Republicans here, speak for political convenience and to score points in the moment and not think about the long-term obligations they have as an elected official to the institutions that we serve. And I think Mitt Romney did that extraordinarily well. And I hope that somewhere out there,

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some people have taken a lesson from that and maybe we'll emulate them looking forward. There was a time, wasn't there, where Mitt Romney seemed to think, we all seem to think, that he was prepared to work with Donald Trump, that there's a famous photo of them having dinner and it looked as if he was asking to enter a Trump cabinet. I mean, when you look back at that time, do you think that was a big mistake? I don't. And again, I think it's actually consistent with the Mitt Romney I know, which is this, Donald Trump was elected in 2016. So he was the incoming president. And so if you're someone like Mitt Romney, you say to yourself, look, whether I agreed with the selection or not, he is the selection. He is the president incoming. If I have an opportunity to serve that administration and to make sure that it comports itself in a way that is beneficial for the country, then I want to do that. And so I think that's what Mitt Romney did. And I think that's the way in which that should be seen. Jim, will you paint a picture of us for the man that you knew that you worked so closely with? Because his biographer has drawn up this image of a man who was terrified of death, who took sort of premonition very seriously, who often kind of sat alone in Washington, spent an evening with Ted Lasso and the TV because his family wasn't around him, eating sort of frozen burgers he didn't really enjoy. I mean, that's not the picture that we have of this sort of slightly debonair dashing, multi-millionaire with his sort of horses in the Olympics and all the rest of it. I wonder if you could sort of tell us how you see him. Far and away, one of the very best people I've ever known. And I mean, what I mean by that is someone who is just inherently thoughtful and decent and good and moral and thinking that the greater good beyond self. And so that picture that's drawn I think is someone who didn't fit in with the way, you know, the game is played in Washington, you know, isn't a social butterfly, so to speak, and just deeply, you know, loves his family and has close circle of friends. But, you know, isn't someone that was rushing out to the TV hits in the Capitol Rotunda every five minutes or hobnobbing with lobbyists and donors. And Mitt Romney obviously is in a position to not have been reliant on donors and so didn't have to engage in those activities. And so I, you know, look, he's truly one of the most decent people I've known. I think we have benefited from him being in public service for so many years. And I'll say this, just because Mitt Romney is retiring from the Senate, I don't for a moment believe he's going to retire from the public discussion. I think he'll find a way to remain engaged. He cares too much about issues that are too significant for our country. But yeah, I think it's just going to take a different form now. Jim, in a way, we always talk about 2016 as the turning point in modern American politics and modern American history, don't we? I mean, here's an argument to say that it was 2012, that it was Romney's loss in 2012. And that if Romney had won, do you think the Republican Party would be in a very different place now? Sure. I think that's a great point. And I agree with you. I do think that when we ended in 2012, I think that the debate shifted. Mitt Romney was treated very badly by the media in 2012. Time and again, you know, arguments were slanted against him and he was cast in a way that seemed weird because he was so normal and so square. And so I think, you know, when he lost, I think Republicans said to themselves, look, here's a guy who's a, you know, down the line conservative who is thoughtful, who's decent, who's earned his money the hard way, who's had success in the private sector, he couldn't get a fair shake fighting a fair fight. And so I think that kind of led into years of discontent in 2013 and 2014 and 2015, which led us to 2016 and Donald Trump. So I think 2012 and his loss helped pave the way for an environment in which the Republican base just felt like we need to shake things up. And Donald

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Trump certainly did that. And so I think that you're right, 2012 was kind of an inflection point that shifted the debate and the dynamic. Jim Merrill, fantastic to speak to you. Thank you so much for giving us your time today on The News Agents. Thanks, Jim. It's my pleasure. Take care now.

This is The News Agents.

You've probably heard by now that Kevin McCarthy, the House Speaker in the US, has launched an impeachment inquiry into Joe Biden. If you want to understand a little bit more about the issues surrounding that and the question of whether or not there is actual evidence to support this inquiry, you can go to News Agents USA and listen to our episode last week, which lays out all the arguments in favour and against that inquiry. And we'll be back tomorrow. Some of us will. Some of us, half of us will. Bye-bye. Bye. The News Agents with Emily

Maiklis, John Sopel and Lewis Goodall. This has been a global player, original podcast and a Persephoneka production.