

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why Boris is the least of Rishi's problems

Hi folks, Boris Johnson here. I am thrilled to be asked to contribute a column to the Daily Mail. It is going to be completely unexplagated stuff. I may even have to cover politics, but I'll obviously try to do that as little as possible, unless I absolutely have to.

I'm much looking forward to making my first contribution to those illustrious pages on Saturday. Join me in the Daily Mail on Saturday.

As sure as night follows day, as we said on Thursday's show, Boris Johnson has miraculously ended up with a column in the Daily Mail where he will doubtless lob political hang grenade on a weekly basis as far into the bunker of Rishi Sunak's number 10 as possible. Week after week of late, Boris Johnson and what we charitably call a psycho-drama has exerted an inescapable gravitational pull on our politics on the Conservative Party. There will be yet more to come on Monday as the Commons considers what to do about the privilege's report. Britain seems destined, aided by his media allies, to exist in a Boris Johnson orbit for some time yet.

Like Trump, the story is just too good for too many, including, let's be honest, sometimes ourselves to resist. But sometimes we should resist, and today we are, because there is a cost to Johnson mania, to Johnson obsession. It is to ignore all of the things which are sucked in and crushed in his wake, it is to think that Sunak's main problems are Johnson related, and they're not.

So on today's show, the big forces which are really, but quietly, driving our politics, the things you may have missed, and why Boris Johnson is in fact the least of Rishi Sunak's problems. It's Lewis here, welcome to the newsagents.

Those are Sunak's much-vaunted five priorities. This is what you'll remember, he says, at every opportunity, sometimes a little bit too often.

The idea, of course, is to give a sense of, at last, some purpose, of some order, to an electorate with low expectations of pretty much anything, to provide a sense of sturdy managerialism. The problem is they're proving much trickier than most, including almost certainly those in number 10, thought they would, to meet. And though Sunak wants to project stability, something he's failing to do as a result of the 15th or so rerun of the Boris show, his bigger problem is that on so many fronts, he is failing to create it. In fact, the Boris show is obscuring, occluding, distracting from those bigger problems that, beneath the surface, Britain's structural problems on the economy, on health, on security, are in fact, in many ways worsening. And though the media's collective eyes may be on the blonde mop, the public's arms. For my money, it is underpriced right now, just how close we're getting to something approaching an economic crisis, which could hit this year, or before the next general election. Inflation, though falling, is proving stubbornly high. Interest rates, which only a month or so ago, analysts assume would peak at around their current levels and now forecast to go higher still. There is now frequent chaos on the mortgage markets, with products being repeatedly withdrawn. Forecasts this week suggest that mortgage stress, i.e. the impact on family finances, to service a mortgage, will hit levels not seen since the 1980s. Higher borrowing and debt costs have led to news just today that company liquidations have jumped by 40% compared to a year ago. 40%. Brexit continues to prove a drag on the UK economy, and then the even longer view, again missed this week in the Johnson-Imbrolio, data from the ONS showing that, adjusted for inflation, real wages are no higher in the UK today than they were in 2005. Take that in, nearly 20 years of stagnation of living standards. Had we enjoyed the sort of growth we had before then, we might have had a cost of living crisis now, but at least there'd be something for people to fall back on. As it is, households are getting poorer and poorer, and my word are they noticing

we've not experienced anything like this since the Napoleonic Wars. Forget Johnson, this is the main act, arguably nearly all of what politics is about right now and has been in recent years, explaining much, and making soon next job of political recovery, perhaps now, in what could be the Tories' fantasy eclat, impossible. Paul Johnson is director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies. The Prime Minister of the government has very little in the way of tools for managing inflation. It's the Bank of England whose job it is to do that, and when he made that pledge, what he was really saying was that the Bank of England is forecasting that inflation will significantly more than half by the end of the year, so it's a pretty easy and cheap pledge to make. Inflation has in fact fallen quite a lot less quickly than expected over the first half of the year. I think we will still get to a position where it's half at the end, so about 5% rather than somewhat over 10% by the end of the year, but that's more at risk than it looked in January. I think that pledge will still be fulfilled, but as I say, it wasn't really Rishi Sunak's pledge to make. I really don't think you can blame what the government's done over the last few months for the fact that inflation hasn't gone down as fast as expected. I mean, these have been external factors, including increases in the price of food and the impact of faster than expected wage growth in the private sector. Now, you could arguably say that some of the things that government did during the pandemic, for example, pushed inflation up here more than in other countries. We spent more than other countries, and indeed the Bank of England printed more money than happened in other countries. Why have mortgage rates and so on gone up again this week? Well, it's essentially because the wage number, the wage increases that we found out about this week are higher than expected, and that means that people are expecting the Bank of England to increase interest rates even further than was expected a few weeks ago. People have taken, we've all taken a wage hit already over this period. Earnings are still, if anything, a little bit below where they were pre-pandemic. Taxes, of course, aren't going up, and that's making people worse off. And if you've got a mortgage, my goodness, you're not going to feel any better off, certainly at the point at which you've come off your fix because the increase in mortgage rates is going to hit people's disposable income. There'll be a lot of people whose disposable income goes down by something like 10% as a result of the mortgage increases, and that's a big hit to people's living standards. Part of the problem is that we're spending an enormous amount on debt interest more than we have for many decades, so that's taking a big chunk of the money available, and we're not growing very fast. So put that together, and actually there isn't, I'm afraid, certainly in the numbers that the Office of Budget Responsibility, the Treasury published in March, there isn't very much money at all to grow public services. The answer is we're not going to be in a good place there unless something remarkable turns up. So this is going to be a very difficult election for both sides when it comes to making promises. Since the pandemic, respiratory services have been flat out, and there's no end in sight. Flu cases have peaked, but every bed in every bay is still taken. They're still at 100% capacity. The winter pressures don't simply go away. At least we hear, though, about the economy now and again. We hear relatively so little about the NHS right now. It's extraordinary. That's despite the fact that save for the cost of living, it consistently tops the list of what the public is concerned about, and as well they might be. It feels as if, just because it's not winter, just because the service isn't at the historically bad lows we saw in January, the interest has dried up. Rishi Sunak claims the government is cutting waiting lists. The truth is that yes, some specific NHS waiting lists, such as a list

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why Boris is the least of Rishi's problems

of patients waiting more than 18 months for treatment, 18 months, have fallen. But the overall number of cases where someone is waiting for consultant-led elective treatment in England remains at a record high. The disputes with many NHS staff still show no sign of reaching resolution, making the problems worse still. And millions and millions of people, many of them older, many of them Tory voters, waiting with their lives damaged or even ruined as they wait for a service they should be able to expect promptly. Helena Vesti is health correspondent for the Manchester Evening News. It's important to stress that across the NHS you're looking at just waves and waves of pressure. And that goes back to before the pandemic, specifically on waiting lists. You were looking at high levels of waiting for treatment. Prior to the pandemic around February 2020, that was already about 4.43 million people who were on a waiting list for care. It'll come as no surprise that over the course of the pandemic that got progressively worse. But after the pandemic, despite a lot of efforts to rebuild and recover and cut those waiting lists, we're now at record levels of around 7.42 million people waiting for treatment. And those are according to the figures for April 2023, so really the most recent ones. About 3 million people of that 7 million total are waiting over 18 weeks. And around 371,000 of those patients have been waiting over a year.

And that's just short of 300 times as many as March 2019. So with those figures, you can get a rough idea that things have really, really gone downhill quite rapidly over the course of a couple of years. And that comes, like I said, despite the attempts to recover that backlog from the pandemic.

Those promises from the government have been profoundly hamstrung by NHS strikes. One goes in hand with the other at the moment, really. We've seen at least half a million postponements already from the last sort of five or so months of strikes. Junior doctors have just gone and strike again this week and vowed to do so every month until 2024 if they can re-ballot and get a new mandate to extend. Another one that I think of, another issue that I think of often, is the crisis of staffing and social care. A lot of the problems that are happening within the NHS, so people waiting on wards who are medically well enough to be released. And that causes queues within A&E because there's no beds available because you have these

people who are physically fine enough to be discharged. But then they've got nowhere in social care to go. There's no staffing within care homes, so look after them. There's no social care staff within the community to do home visits twice a week. And there's a major issue there which is causing a huge knock-on effect within the NHS. And I think if we're to solve this kind of crisis within the NHS, you have to take all of the kind of sectors which feed into it, so for example, social care, and tackle those issues as well. Then there is housing.

A very good morning to you. The top stories from Sky News live here in the city of London. House price growth slips back in May as new research suggests arranging a mortgage is becoming harder for many people. On every front, the housing crisis is lacerating Tory fortunes. Rents continue to skyrocket. Higher mortgage rates are crushing many families in an already dire cost of living crisis. In many cases, again, Tory voters. Data from two weeks ago showed mortgage lending at a record low. And in the last few months, a little reported story,

new private house building plummeted by 51% compared to a year ago, and a 39% below the three months to March. Analysts are warning the housing industry, the building industry, is suffering a protracted depression. There looks to be no danger whatsoever of the government coming anywhere near its manifesto commitment to build 300,000 homes a year. And then, just a couple of weeks ago, again, obscured by Johnson, the news that new house building approvals have plummeted to a 15-year low after conservative changes to planning laws. So losing older voters through losing control of interest rates and mortgage payments, losing younger ones with no hope of getting on the housing ladder, another electoral vice. Vicki Spratt is housing correspondent for the Iron Newspaper. Something that I think was perhaps missed amongst all of the political tumult of the last few weeks is the latest housing figures in terms of completions and new starts, which were way down on where they ought to have been. Absolutely. 15-year low. I think it's really, really worrying. The Conservative Party seems to constantly be in some sort of turmoil or distracted by bad behavior of one of its members. And honestly, the housing crisis goes from bad to worse, and they seem to do very, very little about it. And the fact that we are not building enough homes, particularly not building enough truly affordable social homes, is about to become a really big problem. Why is that? Because I'm sure everybody listening has noticed that interest rates are rising. Mortgage rates are expected to go past 6%, which is going to cause a lot of pain. We don't have enough affordable homes for people to live in. We have more low-income renters living in the private rented sector than we have living in social housing. And landlords are going to be hit with these rising rates and pass them on to their tenants. It is a disaster. And in terms of that 15-year low, and what sort of numbers are we talking about? And why is it so bad? Because all we ever hear about from the government is different policies that they say they're bringing through to try and kickstart housing. Yeah, after 13 years, we're at a 15-year low. Well, I think what's really important to remember is that we have, until recently, had housing targets. This is the Conservative Party manifesto commitment to build 300,000 new homes a year. Now, not all of those homes will be affordable. And that's a really key point here. This isn't just about building homes for the sake of building homes. They have to be affordable. And we have not been hitting that target since the Conservatives have been in power. Last year, Liz Truss, remember her, shortest-serving Prime Minister we've ever had, she said that she thought housebuilding targets were Stalinist and about to get rid of them. New Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has not brought them back. Now, there's a lot of conversation going on in the Conservative Party about whether we actually need housebuilding targets and whether we should really be empowering local councils to build. I do think that there is merit in the idea of giving local authorities more ability to build and more money. But of course, you've actually got to give them the money to do that. And without targets, I'm just not sure what the impetus is to really be building homes, let alone truly affordable ones. We have something called the Affordable Homes Program, which is supposed to fund social housing. But that has not been increased for years. And I think another really important point here is that because of inflation, and partly also because of Brexit, the cost of building has gone up. So if we don't increase the funding available to build social housing, it's going to be very, very difficult for local authorities or housing associations to do that. And I am not someone who often has a lot of sympathy for housebuilders. But I do think that it is becoming more expensive to build homes and finding people to work in construction has become increasingly hard in recent years. And actually, they are up against it.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why Boris is the least of Rishi's problems

One of the other bits of chaos in the housing market at the moment, which is not making anything better, you alluded to it when away already around interest rates. But the chaos in the mortgage markets, which doesn't seem to be stabilizing each week, it seems to be getting worse. Yeah, I think it's starting to get a little bit worrying. An expert economist that I spoke to yesterday said it was scary before and now it's very scary. I think it's really important to make a distinction here, which is the conditions of the rate hikes that we're seeing at the moment are not the same as the chaos caused by Liz Truss and Quasi-Quartank with the mini budget. They are different. But that figure of 6% rate, which everybody said, if mortgages go to 6%, we're in trouble, they are now going to go to 6%, I think probably 6.25% by the end of the year, early next year. That is a problem. Why? Because homes are more expensive and less affordable than they have ever been in the history of housing. People's wages have not gone up in line with house prices. So that's where the affordability part comes in. This means buyers today take out bigger and longer mortgages. So if rates go up, the debt that they go up on is greater. So a 6% rise today is equivalent to a double digit rise in the 80s. That's according to an expert housing market analyst called Neil Hudson, who does brilliant, brilliant work with data week in week out on this. So I think we are entering a real, real crunch point for the mortgage market. And we're talking about millions of people here who have mortgages. I don't know if what's coming down the track will be as bad as the 80s or the rate hikes of the 90s because the truth is that fewer people have mortgages now. We have a lot of people who have their own homes without mortgages.

But it's still going to be very painful for those people who do have mortgages. And more than that, for private renters who are at the mercy of their landlords, if their rates go up, passing that on to them. And we are not building enough new homes. I think the figure was around 38,000 completed and just under that started. We need hundreds of thousands of new, truly affordable homes a year to fix this crisis. And we are nowhere near delivering that. And now the housing market, which I would describe as sort of a house of cards that really depended on low interest rates to keep it moving, is really going to be blown over by rising rates. And briefly, do you think potentially a crash, a price crash? Well, it's semantics, isn't it? People like to talk about crashes. Others like to talk about downturn. Correction. I've been hearing people calling it a re-pricing recently. Put it this way, Lewis, right? Whatever you want to call it, we're looking at house price falls, depending on who you talk to, anywhere between 10 and 20%, perhaps even 30% in real terms from the peak. Let's remember

historic house price high after the start of the pandemic from that peak between a 20% and 30% fall in real terms. So call it a crash, call it a downturn, call it a re-pricing, house prices are coming down. And then for an issue which causes SUNAC, both parliamentary problems, but also deep political ones as well, this time in particular with the so-called red wall section of his inherited coalition, stopping those boats. Problem is, if you set your store by something, which like quite a few of these problems is driven by global difficult to control forces, it is by definition a political hostage to fortune. It is clear he had to try and do something. Little animates the conservative press quite like this issue, say for Johnson himself. And a few weeks ago, to not inconsiderable fanfare, SUNAC claimed he'd had some success. In the five months since I launched the plan, crossings are now down 20% compared to last year. That's right, crossings are down 20%. And yet once again, the latest figures

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why Boris is the least of Rishi's problems

from just this week come back to bite him. Lizzie Deardon is the Home Affairs editor of The Independent. So Lizzie, can we just start by just getting a numbers check, a sense check of where we are in terms of the channel crisis so-called. I mean, Rishi SUNAC a few weeks ago was making some play around the fact that numbers had come down by 20% compared to the previous period last year. But it seems we have had something of a resurgence since then, right? Yeah, exactly. So the government got quite optimistic earlier in the year when there was a period where there appeared to be a year on year fall in channel crossings. So in the early part of this year compared to the early part of last year, at one point there was, as the Prime Minister said, a 20% fall. What happened at that point was that the government potentially took a bit too much credit on itself. And the Prime Minister said that the numbers were an indication that his policy was working. There were a couple of problems with that. One was that border force sources and other people involved in the response to this phenomenon tell me that this year in the late spring, early summer, the seas were unusually rough in the channel for several weeks and it was very windy. And that meant that dinghies could not cross. So there's an element with channel crossings where whatever the government's doing, really historically, a lot of it has been down to the weather. The second that wind calmed, the weather got nice, we've had the heat wave that we've all been enjoying, suddenly numbers got very, very high. And now that reduction is slipping away very quickly. In terms of the Rwanda policy, which obviously is the signature policy to try and deal with this, is there any prospect you think of it working, being enforced and being enforced to the extent that it could have a significant effect on numbers, either in terms of deportations or deterrence by the time of the general election. So let's say, for argument's sake, in 12 to 15 months. In 12 to 15 months, it would be difficult to see how it will have had any meaningful impact in and of itself, just because at the moment, we are still in the midst of a big legal battle over the scheme. So it's at the Court of Appeal. We haven't yet got a hearing date for when the court will rule on that. And after that, it's likely to go to the Supreme Court, which could take many, many, many more months. And it won't be until it's finished, it's very final stages at the Supreme Court that the government will know if it's legal. And if it does win, it's likely that there's actually a kind of middle ground where the court rules that it is legal, but only can be used for certain people in certain circumstances. So the reality is that if Rwanda goes ahead, it will likely be for a very small number of people who have to go through very lengthy and extensive kind of examination before they can be selected for that program. And so whether that will have enough of an impact on a much wider pool of people and the huge numbers that we have seen coming to this country remains to be seen. And finally, there is obviously, given that the deterrent strategy isn't really working, and we are still having significant numbers of people arrive irregularly, it means, of course, the government has to have somewhere to put them, whilst their application for asylum is processed. And we know that that takes a very long time, because there is a very big backlog right now. And that, of course, causes all sorts of political controversy, either because of BNB hotels, or indeed this latest innovation, this idea of using barges to put people on. I know you've got a story about exactly that. What is the latest on the barge situation? Well, what I finally uncovered after a long time where the government was refusing to answer questions on costs was the contract that has been given to

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why Boris is the least of Rishi's problems

the private firm that will be operating the new asylum barges as well as other accommodation. The contract has an estimated value of £1.6 billion over two years, which appears like a very significant amount of money. And we know that that's also separate to additional costs that the government will have to be paying to local councils, local police forces, the NHS, a whole host of people. So at the moment, there is only one barge confirmed and procured. The government says there will be more. And it's also in a whole host of other legal battles against councils who are resisting the imposition of military bases and other large sites like a former prison, where the government hopes to house thousands of people. So there are layers of difficulty the government's facing, and it's basically fighting fires on all fronts.

So as the Johnson Roadshow returns next week, as everything is pushed to the wings by this old jaded performer, remember the vices in which Sunak and his party find themselves. Remember what it is voters confront every day. And remember that on so many of these fronts, the answers are eluding Sunak. In this sense, Johnson is a problem, but he's also in a way a convenience bit of cover. Okay, now yesterday, I said that Emily against all of the odds was at a tech conference. This is a woman who still gets her tech advice from the Microsoft paper clip. Still, she did something other than try and work out how to turn off caps and has been speaking to one of this country's most successful entrepreneurs who just so happens to be related to one of the country's more successful prime ministers will be back right after this.

This is the news agents. Welcome back. So yes, Emily was at something called the Founders Forum yesterday. It's a conference for tech startup bros and presumably sisters. And she was speaking as part of a live event to you and Blair, son of Tony, of course, founder of apprenticeships company multiverse. And she had a conversation with him about apprenticeships about universities, education, of course, a bit of politics. We thought we'd bring you a flavor of that conversation. And here it is.

Well, I think we're kicking off. We have got you and Blair founder and CEO of multiverse. And we're going to discuss the merits or otherwise of university, what a good education looks like, and what the emphasis on degrees has possibly done to social cohesion. You're on a mission. You want people essentially not to go to university. She said provocatively.

It's somewhat more nuanced than that. What I think is a danger is if there is an assumption that university is the only way to be successful represents the very best and the only show in town when it comes to high quality education. And certainly when you look at access to the best jobs, because the fact of the matter is plenty of evidence that shows there's no correlation between academic performance and job performance. We need a host of new skills in the workforce for people to be successful. And relying on university to do that for us is detrimental and probably pretty short-sighted. You didn't shirk university. I mean, you went to Bristol, they went to Yale. I mean, was it that bad? So I'll try and unpick that. First, there weren't apprenticeship options for me to pursue. And it's something I've talked about before. I would have actually liked that. I didn't love being in a classroom. But what I did enjoy about it was getting to meet people and some of the other experiences that you have on university. It's striking to me that when I began my current investment banking at Morgan Stanley, my degree in ancient history and my masters in international relations were in no way useful to me for this job I was supposed to know how to do. And yet they were for some reason deemed a prerequisite. I mean, I learned everything about corporate debt derivatives on the job. And yet I was hired because I had these arts degrees. Universities have almost ended up having this

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why Boris is the least of Rishi's problems

monopoly on access to the best jobs. And whenever that happens, it creates very imperfect conditions

for the consumer. Because you've got essentially a sense that universities believed they were the only show in town. People had to go there to access the best jobs. So therefore, they didn't need to modernize certain things. They didn't need to focus on skills employers really needed. And we're not anti-university. There is absolutely a place for academic exploration. There should be. There is a challenge, though, if you look at the US, 75% of those who leave high school will apply to college in America. Half of them, six years on, will still not have completed a degree and the majority of those people will have dropped out having accumulated huge amounts of debt. And actually 10 years out, by the way, the majority will not have any income premium versus a high school diploma. One of those who believed it was the only show in town was Tony Blair, your dad, who suggested in what, 1999, that 50% of school leavers should aim for university places. Was he wrong? The challenge you have is that it was assumed the more people that went to university, the more opportunity would be distributed across the country and in different communities because it was seen at the time as a sort of silver bullet for social mobility. The reality is, due to issues around diversity and access, the fact that an academic-only education is always going to be inadequate, and yet it's what we do from the ages of four to 18, and the fact that the labor market is shifting rapidly and a whole host of new skills are needed, universities often tell me they think in centuries and decades, which is great, but when you're looking at a labor market that is changing on a quarterly basis, on some case even a monthly basis, that's a major problem. So I think the idea was correct, which is how do you distribute opportunity more evenly? The fact is, it has transparently not worked. And is that a conversation you have around the dinner table? He's massively supportive of apprenticeships. Actually, one of the great things about apprenticeships is they're quite a unifying force politically. You'd find in the US, it's one of the few things that Republicans and Democrats both agree on, they're both pro-apprenticeships, they want more of them. In the UK, likewise, you speak to anyone in the opposition or anyone in government, they're all supportive of apprenticeships. So I think we have moved on from where we were 20 years ago. Well, when you say moved on, you've said manifestly it didn't do the job it wanted to do. Did it do the opposite? Did it widen the social divide?

I think it probably did. And you see that if you look at the correlation between higher education and voting preferences, and then you start to look at things like Brexit and support for Trump and various other social issues, what it basically did was... Wait, just unpack that a bit, because you've got a lot one sentence. So basically, the Trump vote was very much skewed towards non-college educated, and we think the same of the Brexit vote. So if you did not go to university, you are more likely to vote at Brexit or Trump. So that is true. Now, part of the reason for that is basically, as you had a cluster of these great, well-paying jobs and particularly jobs in tech and professional services that were accruing to a very small proportion or subsection of society, you had a lot of people who felt left behind. We were seeing all the benefits that technology could bring, and particularly the kind of deindustrialization of Britain and explosion in tech and professional services in driving our economy. And yet the biggest gains of those through the most kind of obvious means we have of giving someone economic opportunity, which is their job, because it's not just your paycheck, but it's often your status in society, what you can choose to do for your family. With all of those going to a narrow part of the population

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why Boris is the least of Rishi's problems

that we university educate, it was always going to create bigger social problems. And so the challenge

is really what happens when you have a one size fits all model and basically throw everything into that, as opposed to saying instead, how do we create a system where there are multiple routes that can suit different people who learn differently and from a wide range of backgrounds into the very best careers. Britain, America, other countries around the world haven't yet been sufficiently thoughtful around that, but it is changing. It's just you can't have all of one. You can't just say, we are basically going to prioritize the academic above everything else and everything else is secondary, because we have a major productivity challenge in the UK. We have a major productivity challenge in the US and this is being fueled by a lack of emphasis on training within the workplace. About half of the British workforce has received no formal training over the last five years. And when you think of the extent to which jobs are changing rapidly, the skills need to be successful are changing rapidly. That is a major issue.

You grew up in Downing Street and we get these glimpses periodically, the snapshot of the wallpaper

that was paid for by the donor or the new kitchen that somebody's put in. But I wonder, was it an interesting, was it a sort of doable environment to be a kid in?

It was actually really normal, because the thing is once you go through the door into the flat that we lived in within Downing Street, it's a normal family life, a normal family existence. And one of the things I give massive credit to my parents for is they really focused on that. They made it very normal. What was that? Was it strict rules? Was it everyone home for dinner? What was the sort of family meals? Family meals, really important, part of it. And also, effectively, Dad's office was also kind of his home, so we got to see him a lot.

State educated all the way through, which I think was important to meet people from different backgrounds. Because it is a very weird upbringing in many ways and it's very kind of, you'll have moments where you meet all sorts of incredible people from around the world and then you've just got another normal day at school. But the thing, when I reflect on it, I often think that was most beneficial to me, I took from it. When your dad's the Prime Minister, it's so easy to believe that anything is possible, because he's just this normal guy, he's your dad, and he's doing maybe the most important job in Britain. And so that sense of possibility and that you could go and do something profounder, the public service matter and everything

else, that was all quite present and sort of accessible. And the thing that you realise as you meet more and more people is it's absolutely not uniform and it's a major problem. And it's why it's important that we have role models reflecting every part of society. It's why it's important that we can very transparently outline routes into the best careers that are non-traditional or we just have to avoid this one size fits all model.

So what is, I mean you've said that it's kind of ecumenical what you do, whatever side the political divide. What is the one policy change that you really want to see of whichever government that would make us more productive and get young school leavers better jobs?

The most important thing is really embedding applied learning within our education system. It is having a really robust apprenticeship offering. You can never rely on government or policymakers to sort of drive this success on their own but they can convene, they can get businesses together to talk openly about the skills challenges, about the skills gap, about how you

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why Boris is the least of Rishi's problems

distribute opportunity more evenly and then it's incumbent on businesses on in some cases charities and not-for-profits and various other people to figure out how you turn that into something that is both highly effective and equitable. You and Blair, thank you very much. Thank you.

This is The News Agents.

Right there was one other story again squeezed out this week we wanted to bring you, it's a tragic one I'm afraid, a new tragedy on the Mediterranean. At least 78 people at the time of recording have died more than 100 have been rescued after their fishing boat sank off southern Greece but survivors have suggested as many as 750 people migrants trying to cross may have been packed onto the boats with reports of 100 children in the hold. The Greek government has said that it's one of its biggest ever migrant tragedies and has declared three days of mourning. There is an horrendous picture taken before the boat capsized of hundreds and hundreds of people packed onto this boat, many of whom will now almost certainly have perished. An old colleague and friend of mine, Sikonda Kamani, now Foreign Affairs Correspondent at Channel 4 News, is in Kalamata, Greece, covering the story and we can talk to him now. So Sek, just bring us up to date really because of everything that's been going on in Britain, this is a story which has got less attention than it should. What's happened and why is it so much worse perhaps than some of the things

we've seen before? This appears to be one of the deadliest tragedies that we've seen across the very dangerous route across the Mediterranean into Europe, reports suggesting that around 700, 750

people were on board a ship that set off from Libya heading towards Italy but that sank in circumstances that are still a little bit unclear off the coast of Greece. 104 people have survived, they were rescued, 78 bodies have been recovered but hundreds of others are missing and the ship came down, it sank in one of the deepest parts of the Mediterranean so it seems that you know whilst the search and rescue operation is still ongoing for another few hours, it doesn't seem like there's any real hope of finding survivors or bodies or even retrieving the shipwreck. I'm here in Calamata, a coastal town which is the kind of centre of the rescue effort and where many families of those who are missing have been arriving from different parts of Europe searching for news about their loved ones. We met Egyptians, Pakistanis, Syrians, I mean the scale of

this disaster really is pretty huge. I mean we heard from one man who was saying that around 70 people from his area, his neighbourhood in Egypt were on board that ship. I've been speaking to contacts in the Pakistani-administered Kashmir where around a dozen, possibly two dozen people were

on board the boat from one small village in its surrounding areas so real, real tragedies with effects kind of rippling right across the globe. And there have been reports right that there may have been children in the hold and it's unconfirmed I think but children in the hold potentially who have certainly not been accounted for if they were there. Yeah that's right I mean there was this horrifying picture really of taken by the Greek coast guard of the boat hours before it sank that showed it kind of teeming with people hardly anyone if anyone at all wearing a life jacket but below deck according to survivors we understand that women some reports suggesting up to around

100 women and children were below deck they would have had you know no chance of surviving when the

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why Boris is the least of Rishi's problems

ship sank. It's still unclear exactly what happened I mean the Greek coast guard laid out a timeline saying that they had made contact with the ship and offered help but they didn't want any because they said they're going to Italy then later that night it ended up sinking but a migrant charity said that it was in touch with some of those who were on board and throughout the day they were making frantic calls saying they were in distress that their their boat had stopped moving so very unclear exactly what happened here but amongst relatives for example real real anger as well as grief. And I'm looking at the picture of it right now I mean it is it's horrifying looking at it because you know what's going to happen you know this relatively small boat full of people most of them presumably have perished. It's a reminder isn't it that obviously we have a lot of attention in Britain on the channel and the channel situation but it's a reminder that this is a European problem and indeed the countries of southern Europe everyone thinks back to the migrant crisis of the middle part of the last decade but to some extent this has never gone away and the countries of southern Europe have a particular problem which has not disappeared. Yeah absolutely I mean I'm looking at figures now of the number of people who've crossed what's called the central Mediterranean loop so that's from Libya where this boat came from Tunisia out of Egypt as well going towards Italy that 50 000 people have made that crossing between January to May this year that's a hundred and more than a hundred and fifty percent increase

compared to last year. Actually the numbers of those coming to Greece had actually decreased because the government that has been in charge here for the past four years and looks set to be re-elected fairly soon they had trumpeted a tough approach to migration and that had proved pretty popular with boaters and it seems as if it had helped bring down the number of people arriving but you speak to activists and they say well actually it pushed migrants to taking even riskier routes across the Mediterranean and there's a lot of anger you know amongst migrant charities migrant activists here in Greece about the kind of attitude and the approach the government

has taken they've been accused by human rights groups in the past of pushing back boats for example as they're coming to the sea so a very very hard line approach but yeah it spells out exactly as you say that the kind of debates that we see taking place in in the UK are very much taking place elsewhere in Europe on an even bigger scale. And finally just on that I mean there is just no sense of any government whether it's the EU or the UK government there is no real sense of any

government having any kind of handle on what to do about it even after all of these years and so you just see these tragedies this is a particularly severe one but these tragedies continue to happen. Yeah I mean you perhaps know more about it than I do though but the EU is kind of working on this new deal that's meant to change the way that allocations of migrants are worked out and so that the the numbers of migrants for arriving are spread out more evenly in those countries that don't want them whole and hungry and meant to make kind of financial contributions for example and

that part of the deal also is meant to involve making it easier to deport some migrants back to countries that they've passed through. But you know is any of that really going to change the demand amongst people who want to get to Europe in the first place? I'll speak to one contact in Pakistani administers Kishmir they've been in touch with a family whose young son is missing presumed dead they said it was the fourth time that he was trying to make this journey into Europe

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and that four times previously he had managed and either been deported or failed now on this occasion

it seems he lost his life. Seth take care of yourself thanks so much. Thank you. Well thanks to Secunder there and we'll keep an eye on that story of course perhaps try and bring you an update next week when and if we learn more. That is it from all of us for this week John is back on the red eye with his nine irons for a round of pitch and putt with a certain former world lead and while Emily she's still trying to learn how to turn her computer on I wonder whether we'll get her back in time on Monday remember you can catch up on all our shows from this week on Global Player and send us story tips and feedback to newsagents at global.com thanks to our production team on the newsagents Laura Fitzpatrick Gabriel Radis Ellie Clifford Georgia Foxwell Will Gibson Smith Alex Barnett and Roy Simon our editor is Tom Hughes and our executive producer is Dino Sophos is presented by Emily Maitlis John Sobel and me Lewis Goodall we'll see you on Monday have a

lovely weekend. This has been a Global Player original podcast and a Persephoneka production.