

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why can't politicians just say sorry?

This is a global player original podcast.

I just feel like I can speak more freely at a more human level than almost any other person in politics.

I'm not intending to get very far into this, but I'm not going to say anything more because I don't, here I certainly don't want to give the oxygen of publicity.

I'm not going there.

I'm just not going there.

Don't worry, Matt isn't back in the studio.

In case you missed it, there were a few highlights of all the times we pushed Matt Hancock yesterday

to accept responsibility for some of his more choice decisions in government when he joined us at newsagents HQ.

He said, as you heard, that he just didn't want to go there.

At the time when all of the controversy around Hancock broke, he did apologise for his actions.

He went into the jungle for redemption, but he's not wanting to go back with us to still be held accountable, got us thinking that these days, Matt Hancock really isn't alone.

Politicians, people in public life are so reluctant to, as Hancock put it, go over old coals.

Often they just don't want to take responsibility.

Often they will not apologise.

If you look back at Matt Hancock's leaked WhatsApps when the news of his affair broke, he and his advisers spoke so much about whether he should even accept he broke the rules, would apologise for it strategically, whether it was worth doing politically, if not morally, that doing so would be a big thing.

So today on the newsagents, something a bit different.

We take a look, the long view, on why it is that in politics, sorry seems to be the hardest word.

The newsagents.

Christine Keeler was a model and party girl who'd had an affair with Profumo two years earlier.

And Eugene Ivanov was a KGB spy at the Soviet Embassy in London, who'd also been seeing Keeler.

We've come a long way from John Profumo to Donald Trump.

Not only in time, but in mental space.

Famously after the Profumo affair of the 1950s and 60s, when Profumo, a secretary of war, lied to the House of Commons, he left public life, spent the next 30 years in the East

End of London doing good public works, and was rarely heard from again.

He can't know for sure because he never spoke about it, but we can safely assume that he felt shame he needed to atone.

Fast forward to last week.

Mr. President, do you feel that you owe him an apology?

No, because he did something wrong.

He should have put the votes back to the state legislatures, and I think we would have had a different outcome.

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There was Donald Trump, a former president of the United States, refusing to apologize to his own former vice presidents on CNN for orchestrating an insurrection which had the potential to kill him.

Trump is more than a bit player in this story.

There can be little doubt that he has coarsened international politics outside of his own country.

He has shown how successful you can be, how far you can go if you are impossible to shame.

Others have learned from his example, but he's hardly alone, even in the United States.

Do you feel like you owe her an apology?

I do not, I have never talked to her, but I did say publicly on more than one occasion that I was sorry.

Or in the United Kingdom.

Take this, just from this week, the former chancellor, Kwazi Kwaten, asked on Channel 4 about his role in the economic turmoil of last autumn.

Well, I wouldn't say we ripped the doors off, but it was a very, very high, intense time period.

He sounds like a mayor, Cooper.

It sounds like you've had...

I've said that, I've said that.

I'm not going to apologize.

If you're trying to get me to apologize publicly, I've said very clearly what was done was done, but I don't believe in politicians endlessly apologizing for everything that's gone in the past.

I'm looking forward, and I think we could have done things differently, absolutely.

But a lot of people are looking forward to much higher mortgage rates, cripplingly high mortgage rates.

Hundreds of thousands of people can't pay their mortgage bills because of what you and Liz did.

No, that's not true.

Really?

The interest rates have gone up anyway.

And institutions do it, or don't do it as well.

Business, for example.

Or what about the royal family's own motto?

Never complain, never explain, as if that's a good thing.

And in a way, the non-apology tells us a lot about politics now.

It is a natural corollary of a more populist age.

One of the core components of populism is always to say, it's someone else's fault.

The elites, the institutions, the press, the civil service, the blob.

What better embodiment of that than Dominic Cummings refusing, in the full media glare, to give in to pressure over his ill-fated Barnard Castle trip?

No, I don't regret what I did.

As I said, I think reasonable people may well disagree about how I thought about what to do in these circumstances.

But I think that what I did was actually reasonable in these circumstances.

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Perhaps, too, politics just attracts weirdos and misfits, people who not only cannot see or will not see their wrongs, but sometimes rather enjoy the controversy of not recognising them.

But there's a cost to that.

Such is the evasiveness of Westminster, such is the suffocation of our political media culture, that there is such reluctance to accept responsibility for anything at any time that there comes a natural inclination, a reflex, to dissemble, to deny, to not give an inch.

And that can lead to disaster.

Note, it was Boris Johnson's misleading statements to the House of Commons about Partygate, which destroyed him, as much as the events themselves.

It's now been 48 hours, will the Prime Minister apologise to care workers?

I'm grateful to the right hon. Gentleman.

The last thing I want to do is to blame care workers for what has happened, or for any of them to think that I was blaming them, because they've worked incredibly hard throughout this crisis, looking after some of the most vulnerable people in our country and doing an outstanding job.

As he knows, tragically, 257 of them have lost their lives.

And when it comes to taking blame, I take full responsibility for what has happened.

But the one thing that nobody knew early on during this pandemic was that the virus was being passed asymptotically from person to person in the way that it is.

And that's why the guidance and the procedures changed, and it's thanks to the hard work of care workers that we've now got incidents down in our care homes, outbreaks down in our care homes to the lowest level since the crisis began.

That's thanks to our care workers, and I pay tribute to them.

Mr Speaker, that's not an apology, and it just won't wash.

And maybe it's also about us, about how in fact we in the public and the media don't really credit politicians when they do yield, and there is no better control, no better case study for that than this.

Nick Clegg, when he was deputy prime minister, thought he could try and draw a line by confronting his tuition fee problem.

He did, but at a cost, he was ridiculed.

And then maybe there is something a bit newer to throw into the mix, something about the wider cultural moment we're in.

A moment where so much of contemporary discourse is about the maintenance and preservation of the self, an era where we talk of a truth being yours, of conquering your inner demons, of one's own mental health, being more important than anything else, perhaps more so even than one's obligation to others.

For good or ill, that's a way of thinking that would have been different and perceived very differently in times gone by.

Take this from the Hancock interview.

Despite being at the centre of the biggest health crisis in a century, what is preoccupying Hancock most now, what he wanted to talk about most now, his reflex in that interview, is about how it affected him, how to some extent he has been a victim of all of the controversy

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around him.

And there's no doubt what he has experienced must have been deeply traumatic.

It's just very contemporary, very 2020s that he would speak about it and see it that way.

There is so much to explore here and we're going to do so with two of Westminster's finest right after this.

Well, we're going to make no apologies on today's show for the quality of the guests that we have.

Don't speak too soon.

Well, that's true.

Well, they couldn't actually make it.

So we actually got Sean Kemp, who used to advise Nick Clegg, when he was deputy supervisor of the staff, and some are sure he used to advise Sadie Javid, when he was home secretary and business secretary and loads of stuff, the handyman of British politics.

I think that's fair to say.

Yes.

Yeah.

Anyway, so you two have been on the inside when there's a media clamour for your politician, your principal, as they say in the game, to apologise for something or other.

Why is it that politicians so rarely do it?

There's an obvious answer to that, which is if you apologise, it's an admission of wrongdoing, and it exposes you to your political opponents, and they'll never let you forget it.

And that one moment where you've shown weakness, which is what I think in politics, apologies are seen as, whereas out there in the wider world, it's a moment to reflect, move on, acknowledge something that's gone wrong and move forward.

But why doesn't it apply to politics as well?

Politics is ultimately about judgement, and if you're apologising for actions that you have undertaken, it means that your judgement was wrong, and you cannot afford to open up that flank in that ability for your opponents to attack you.

And I think that's why apologising is so hard.

But is it also about the media culture?

I wonder whether it's that both politicians and the media, we're all just sort of slightly immature about it.

We demand instantly, not only the most comprehensive apologies about everything, but then we will demand off the back of that scalps, or twist the apology in some way, and put it in a headline which isn't even really reflective of what it was about in the first place.

I think a little bit, but I don't think that's the overwhelming issue.

I mean, I think you can get sort of harried and say, are you going to apologise, are you going to apologise.

But a lot of times, actually, if a politician apologises, sometimes actually you can just apologise and people go, well, we've got our sort of sliver of flesh.

There is just a received wisdom in politics that if you say, I'm sorry, I got that wrong, then you're doing one of two things.

You're either saying, my judgement is so bad, my judgement is bad, I am no good at my job and I'm telling the country I'm not very good at my job and I shouldn't really be running

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the country because I can't do it.

And the other one, if it's more about a personal issue, then the immediate follow-up question is, so you admitted you did wrong, are you going to resign?

So you find yourself slightly boxed in.

But why not just say no to that?

Say I've apologised and I'm not going to resign.

Aren't people grown up?

Because it's not in a vacuum, right?

And so never mind your sort of official political opponents, you know, imagine you're a cabinet secretary and somebody has been eyeing your job for ages and you sort of allow that weakness to show, it's not just about the fact that you apologise and then people will move on or you're straightforward with people.

There will be briefings, back briefings, you know, people like me sat here commentating on whether that apology was going to be enough and whether they should now go because it's impossible for them to do their job.

So you know, you don't exist in a vacuum with that apology.

People will react to it and will try and go for a certain outcome.

I think the cultural thing that's weird is not so much just the media.

It's the whole little Westminster microclimate, if you like, which is quite brutal, which is quite gossipy, which is a bunch of people all looking for weaknesses in each other.

Like it is quite a hostile environment still in that sense.

And I think- So to show weakness in that environment is lethal?

I wouldn't say lethal, but it can be.

Yeah, it can affect you.

And if you're, the easy way to understand politics is 650 people who want to keep their jobs and get someone else to lose their jobs so they can nick theirs.

And so in that sort of world, like there's always someone who's looking to take your place.

Look, you were around with perhaps the most famous apology in British politics.

You mean infamous, but yeah, carry on.

Infamous, yeah, all right, all right, you said it.

The most infamous apology in recent years was, of course, Nick Clegg.

Yeah.

And you've said all that that you've just said.

You were around when you were discussing this.

So knowing all of that and knowing what a complete bear pit Westminster is and all of the things that you've just described, why did you do it?

There was a few reasons for thinking on this.

I think the main one that is probably worth bringing up, because I think it's relevant to some other issues as well around this, is that it wasn't so much a case of if Nick says sorry about the tuition fees decision, everyone's going to go, oh, that's all right, then, and we'll all move on and when we forgive you.

That was clearly like no one was that naive.

By that point, and you're talking about sort of two and a half years into coalition, I think, when you did it, pretty much every interview,

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every appearance Nick did was just taken up with, are you going to apologize for tuition fees?

What are you going to say to people who voted for you because of tuition fees?

Are you going to say sorry?

It was he couldn't do an interview about it being 70% that.

So thinking really was, unless at some point, Nick just says sorry, we shouldn't have made the decisions that we made that led to us doing this.

And it's quite convoluted or easy because he wasn't actually saying,

I'm sorry about the tuition fees decision in coalition.

He was saying, I'm sorry about the way we campaigned before, you know, and all the rest of it.

But unless you at some point, try and just get it on the record and say,

I am sorry.

So the next time son actually goes, look, I've addressed that.

You've all seen the video that I did.

Can we please move on?

It was never going to, it was never going to go away at all, but it was just going to dominate everything he did.

So thinking was, let's just say sorry and then have something you can refer back to say, I've addressed that rather than basically every interview he did would be people haranguing him to say sorry.

When he would go, yeah, of course I regret it.

However, they go, hey, we forced him to apologize.

So it was happening all the time.

A strategic apology.

Yeah, in a sense, it was a strategic apology.

Yeah, he did.

He genuinely, he, I think people, I don't want to revisit the whole coalition world, go borrow one to tears, but I think there's a perception around Nick and the Lib Dems that they're also happy to get into power and they were really chuffed to just like fling away promises.

They really weren't.

And he did feel genuine regret about what happened on tuition fees.

He did.

And he did genuinely mean, I'm sorry.

But this is the thing about category of a fence, you know, that requires apology.

Because in no world when Nick Clegg made that statement around tuition fees, did he think that this is something that is not going to be one of my red lines when I, you know, if I get into coalition government, which was a possibility even, you know, before the polls came in, you know, is that really his fault?

Because he had to deal with the real politic of the economic crisis at the time.

Or is that, was that just good judgment on his part?

So looking back on it after all this time, you know, was that, was that justifiable that actually people went for him in that way?

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Obviously, we know what happened next, the music video and everything like that.
I mean, what was your assessment at the time about all of that and how effective it had been?
I mean, did he regret saying it?
So I remember when the music video came out, I remember us all actually sitting in his office, I remember us all watching and laughing at that video.
I think at the time he told herself, oh, this is quite good.
It means more people will see it.
Like, you know, you're in that kind of zone.
It's like, is there a way we can just say this is OK?
In a weird way, it did work for the point I said people kind of stopped asking.
You could say that it worked for that perspective.
It didn't work in the sense that people went, oh, that's OK.
We we forget about tuition fees.
Our voters didn't go OK.
We no longer angry about it.
But that wasn't the expectation.
What I'd say is that wasn't the expectation that people would say suddenly we forgive it and we get it.
And do we think that that has coloured things since then as in politicians have become less likely to apologise precisely because of the infamy of that particular example in British politics in that video?
I don't think it does go back to that video.
I think the inability to apologise is a longstanding sort of factor.
But maybe it's got worse in one sense, which is what that video epitomises is that social media has made this more intense, right?
In that, like the possibility of apology, then it becomes even easier to pillar it.
It becomes even easier to satirise it.
Do you feel enough?
I don't think it is that.
I think it is because actually politicians have become, generally speaking, a lot more brazen.
And I think if you think about Liz Truss and Boris Johnson, the lack of accountability, quasi this week at all.
I mean, yeah, the interview with quasi, that inability to sort of accept or acknowledge that any decision that you've made has had any impact.
I think that probably makes people feel that, well, I don't have to apologise.
I think that's I think it compounds.
I think it compounds what has already been a tradition in Westminster, which is move away from it.
Let's not drive politicians become more shameless.
Yeah, well, I think two points I made to what you said about, you know, was Nick's apology some sort of marker for people not interested.
It was already the case that people weren't apologising.
Politicians weren't often doing like big moments.

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They say, I'm sorry before.

That's why when Nick did it, everyone was like, that's unusual.

It doesn't really happen. So it was already the case.

I think what's true is if you look at, you know, 10 years later, if you look at politics now and you have a politician who has perceived or broken their promise or whatever or lied, now, increasingly, politicians seem to be able to go, yeah, well, I did it.

Suck it up when we'll all move on and seem to get away with it sometimes.

Trump has obviously been the obvious example.

You don't want to translate America onto the UK too much.

But I do think now there's an increasing sense of people think, well, maybe you just actually people don't want to hear you say sorry.

They just want you to sort of almost brazen it out.

So I think there's also that social media as much.

But it's also partly the case that sometimes this lack of willingness to give like even the tiniest inch can itself create problems.

And it leads to a culture of evasiveness and slipperiness.

I mean, if you look at Partygate, right, I mean, there is an argument to say that if number 10 had been much more straightforward, more quickly about what happened and when,

that they may have been able to tough it out, that the problem was the lying.

The problem was the misleading.

And it is this culture of total defensiveness, never give an inch, never say anything that is part of the problem or creates problems for politicians as much as anything else.

It certainly does because I mean, it's something that Sean just said, is that you do live sometimes when you're inside the bubble and this like delusion and you do kind of create explanations for things that sort of justify what you did and the way that you did it.

And I think quite often I hate using the phrase that bunker mentality, but I think that that exists.

And then you feel like you don't need to offer an apology because if you did that, does that expose you further?

Rather than sort of taking a step back from it and giving yourself a bit of perspective.

But it's not necessarily about the apology itself.

I think it's about explaining.

It's about explaining the context.

And I think the point that you made earlier about the media is relevant here because where does one get that space to explain things as well?

So apologies, therefore, sort of fall flat because they feel disingenuous in a lot of cases because everything is so much more nuanced than just that one word.

And going back to the idea of categories of apology,

there's personal failings that politicians are responsible for in terms of apologizing for themselves, referencing your Matt Hancock chat yesterday.

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There are policy errors that are about judgment that have got more than just one person responsible for that apology. And then there's historic apologies, people requesting apologies for slavery and big cultural issues that one person and one politician isn't responsible for. So I think we have to understand the categories of apology, who should be making them and actually are we really ready to receive them because of the way that politicians have behaved in recent years, but also are we giving them enough space and enough time to sort of say, OK, we accept that explanation. Can I make a wildly cynical point here based on what you said about Partygate as well? People often say this is like, well, it just been better if they'd just been up front about it and said everything that happened and just told everyone the facts. And then you always get these people say, oh, it's always the cover up that's worse than the original scene. Like, that's not true because it ignores all the successful cover ups where no one actually finds out what happened. So sometimes just coming out, we're going to say everything that happened and we're going to say, we're sorry for it. Well, why? Actually, you don't know how it's going to end yet. You don't know where it's going to end up. And actually quite a lot of the time, you don't have to do it and no one notices. But you you mentioned Hancock, the thing that I don't understand, I can see that if you're in government, if you're a minister and you're thinking about your political career and you're thinking about the next week or the next month or whatever, I can kind of see what you're all saying. What I find harder is when you're talking about people whose political careers are either definitely over, almost very likely to be over. So we've seen, you know, trust, quasi-quarteng this week, Hancock yesterday. These people are either definitely on the way out or almost certainly on the way out. And yet even then, they can't quite bring themselves to just say the words. Because I mean, Hancock being a great example of, look, he's someone who is definitely out on the way out of politics and obviously wants to be a bit more of a celebrity. Celebrities do apologise for stuff. In order to be redeemed, you have to accept the sin. And yet it still isn't there. Yeah, but celebrity in politics is very different. I know people sort of it's close and people sort of mix it up, but it is different. Celebrities often have to apologise because they've said or done something and they need to move on from it for a commercial perspective or a brown perspective. And people will accept that, right?

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Politics is different because you are taking decisions on behalf of other people. And it's not just about your own behaviour in most cases. I mean, certainly was about one person's behaviour in Hancock's case. But it is different, the sort of the commercial understanding and the commercial sort of balance is different. So I don't think you can move on from it in the same way. Going back to that point that it then questions your judgment and everything that you do going forward from that. I think there's a couple of things to say. I think partly for ex-politicians, it can actually just be quite hard not to be in that politician's zone. When you do media things, thinking, well, I need to move off the... Like a muscle member, right? Yeah, I need to move off the difficult thing and bridge on to what we need to do is look at what's going on. For sure, twofold. It's people like you. Yeah, it's scary. No, sorry, I was always honest as the best policy. I'm not as cynical as Sean. Rigorously well-trained in the media. So I think it's partly that. I think also if you're, Hancock, for example, I don't want to sort of speak into what he's thinking, so I don't know. But he's also having to deal with the fact, like, how do I make sure that every time I go on the TV or radio or whatever, that I don't spend the entire time people going, well, now you've admitted that you shouldn't have done it and you said you're sorry and you regret it. And so what I think he's trying to do is say, look, that's the past. Can we please talk about other things? Which I get. And he doesn't waste the Nick Clegg thing. And he doesn't want it to be completely being asked about the same thing over and over again. I think he hasn't quite done the Nick thing. And it sounds absurd to say people should copy what Nick did. But you go back to the thinking with Nick Clegg's apology was you've got to at least say it once to go, well, I've addressed that. I think he's trying to move on without people feeling that he's actually addressed it fully. And until it happens, you'll probably keep on having slightly awkward interviews. Finally, is it is it something else though as well, which is that many politicians are just weird, right? I mean, how long has it taken you to work on them?

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But it's slow on the uptake, of course.

But I mean, in the sense that I suppose almost every question about politics ultimately comes about this, but particularly when you're dealing with big stuff.

So like now I'm thinking more like Blair, Cameron, Truss, Quarteng, when they've done really big stuff, not really about their personal behaviour so much, but maybe stuff that maybe they or maybe they're actually a bit human, the sense that they can't quite bring themselves to look at it.

They can't quite bring themselves to necessarily accept the consequences of what they've done. Because day after day, they have to live with it and they have to live with the consequences of their actions.

And an apology would be, I mean, I always think this with Blair, right, in Iraq, an apology would be to fully accept the consequences of what you yourself have done.

So in a way, it's just more human than that.

So yes, I think that's true.

I think the difficulty here is that no one person ever makes a decision.

It's the sort of culmination of lots of different people.

But from the way that we see it from the outside is that that one person is in control and does have power.

And I don't think that's the way that it's seen on the inside, because there's always that blame culture.

I mean, do you remember that election campaign with Gordon Brown when he obviously messed up with Gillian Duffy and then he was blaming someone called Sue? Sue, I think.

Whose idea was that? Sue.

So, you know, it looks like it's one person making the decisions, but actually there are teams of advisers and there are all these discussions that are happening. So I understand the politicians sort of resistance to sort of take it all, you know, on themselves.

But ultimately, they are accountable.

There is only one person that really in any of those set ups in the department.

And they take the glory when it happens.

So they do have to take the rough with the smooth.

Oh, so I think I mean, Tony Blair did admit in his autobiography,

he did say there are certain things he regretted,

but there's things like Freedom of Information Act and so on.

He said I think it was his greatest political regrets.

They usually find ones that I think psychologically it's very hard for a politician if you're taking, I mean, literal life and death decisions where all of the options are bad.

I mean, I think that's one thing you have to remember about a lot of those high level political decisions.

There's not an easy option.

It's not an obvious, oh, that would be good.

That would be terrible.

They're all got pluses and minuses and you've got to make a decision in good faith.

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It's quite hard when you've done that and gone through endless rationalizations and discussions about it, then just go, oh, yeah, it turns out I've got that completely wrong. You're like undermining the years.

I mean, that obviously just went so wrong.

And the danger surely is, is that the electorate just perceived he was completely arrogant.

It is an arrogant thing to do, right?

To not apologize or at least say, I'm sorry, I meant it entirely for good reasons, but the consequences were bad and I'm sorry.

But in anybody's life, in order to say sorry, you need to have perspective and you need to have some kind of distance.

And maybe actually the bigger issue here is the fact that the micro climate of Westminster, the toxicity of it in a lot of cases, the sort of dog eat dog nature of it, takes that perspective away from you completely.

And, you know, at some point you do become completely subsumed by what happens in this like small area and geography.

It becomes its own reality and that you have to keep yourself honest and keep yourself attached to the people that are electing you.

Anything you'd both like to apologize for before we finish up?

So much.

We don't have enough time.

I'd like to apologize to the entire Liberal Democrat party for every season

I helped you pass off the dip between 2010 and 2015.

That's not going to get a debut, OK.

Well, there we have it.

Let's make that into a video as soon as possible.

Sean, Salma, thank you on that bombshell.

Thank you. Thanks.

Thank you. Right, we will be back just after this.

This is The News Agents.

Right, that is all from us for this week.

John and Emily Wood themselves actually like to apologize for not being here on a day together to the South Coast.

They were pulled over in a high speed chase with a lone photographer from the Brighton and Hove Argus.

So I've had to have the day off and I wouldn't mind, but they were the ones chasing the photographer.

Remember, you can catch up on all of our shows from this week on Global Player and send us story tips and feedback to newsagents at global.com.

You can also listen again to our full interview with Matt Hancock from Thursday or our special coverage from NatCon earlier in the week as well.

Thanks to our production team on The News Agents, Gabriel Radis, Laura Fitzpatrick, Ellie Clifford, Georgia Foxwell, Will Gibson-Smith, Alex Barnett and Rory Simon.

Our editor is Tom Hughes and our executive producer is Dino Sophos.

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And a special thank you to Matt Hancock,
who basically provided us with content for 40% of our shows for this week.
It's presented by Emily Maitlis, John Sopel 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.