

## [Transcript] The News Agents / Why did Rishi Sunak donate \$3m to a private school in California?

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

Today on The News Agents, we're going to hear from her mum. She's got kids at Labour and Primary School in Richmond in North Yorkshire and she's spent a year trying to fundraise to get some new computers for the kids at school.

We did a family fundraise and asked like locals to come along, bouncy castles and things and we've made quite a bit off that. We've done little bits throughout the year like secret Santa's and things for the children at school.

£10,000 she was trying to raise and you heard what it took, a bit of bake sale, a bit of secret Santa, a bouncy castle and a lot of blood, sweat and tears. Wasn't so hard for another school.

This is Claremont McKenna University in California. Also wanted money for computers. Except this time, the MP for Richmond, North Yorkshire, Rishi Sunak and his wife, who had studied there, just simply cut a check for \$3.2 million. That's the way to do fundraising.

Not a bouncy castle.

No bouncy castle.

Not a bake sale.

In sight.

No bake sales anywhere near.

Not even a secret Santa.

None.

Welcome to The News Agents.

It's John.

It's Emily.

And later in the episode, the Ukraine war has been going on now since February last year. But arguably, the most important moment in it arrived today with the long-awaited Ukrainian counter-offensive and the counter-claims being made about the counter-offensive. We'll be analyzing what we think is happening.

We'll be talking to a former head of NATO policy in the Pentagon in a moment. But we're going to start closer to home in Yorkshire because it emerged this weekend that the Prime Minister, when he was just a fairly newish MP, had given \$3 million, more than that, to support his wife's former school in California. And in fact, they've just had a computer lab named after them, a computer lab in which we understand each chair costs north of £600.

So this dearly-in-want Californian school is the happy recipient of a massive one-off grant, philanthropy they call it, in the US. And there are quite a few people in Richmond right now who are learning about this and wondering why their schools, their classes, their kids don't even have a computer to do their lessons on.

And of course, people are free to spend their money however they want to. But when you're a member of parliament and you are the champion of a constituency and you hear about the bake sale and the secret centre and the bouncy castles and the summer fete and all the rest of it, where you're trying to raise a few pence here and a couple of quid there and you've finally got to \$5,000 and you need \$10,000 so that every kid in the class can sit at a computer which has got the same processing speeds as the others and the other kids aren't left behind, it must be slightly jarring to know that this school, Claremont McKenna

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in California, which already has endowments of \$1.2 billion, got an extra \$3.2 million from Rishi Sunak and his wife.

So we're going to be hearing from this mum, Mel Wise, who's been on the fundraising campaign and she actually is very sympathetic to what Rishi Sunak has done in the constituency up to this point. She was homeless at one point and she said he went out of his way as her MP to help her find a home. But I do think this raises big questions that occasionally surface around Rishi Sunak and that word cloud that hangs over his head within which rich is the biggest, most dominant adjective people use about him. And we've discussed it a little bit on the podcast, on the news agents before, whether being rich makes you unassailable, you know, richer than the king means that you are uncorruptible, you can not be bought, or whether it puts you slightly out of touch with the people who think of you as coming to save them, first and foremost, them when you choose to spend your money elsewhere.

Well, let's speak to Mel now. She is the chair of Laeburn's primary parent teacher and friends association and joins us. Welcome to you. Thanks so much for being with us.

I wonder how the fundraising is going and I wonder what you thought when you found out about the donation that had been made to this California University.

My God, for a community where we are, not only the schools, computers, it could do such a benefit to so many different activities and clubs within the area. It was just like, why is that money not come to his own doorstep? Why is that going absolute miles away? And why is it going out of the UK? Why are his own people not first? Why are the government not doing anything to help the schools? They are wanting our children to stay in school for what, the 18 or something? So if that's the case, why should school be doing fundraising? They should be able to go to the government or the MP and just say to them, right, we need 20 grand for computers and that should just be allocated in my eyes. I think because we are so small and rural, people don't necessarily steal as important anyway because we are in the middle of nowhere, which we get with the countryside. And obviously, I work alongside other stuff like the local football club and stuff where all that money he's sent abroad could actually have benefited the top school as well as a football club that's for the children on a 3G pitch. I know it's not computers, but there's so much in this area we're screaming out for. Why is there nobody there to help us?

It's such an interesting one, isn't it? Because, you know, in America, that's what you do.

You are almost strong armed into giving a lot of money to the college where you went.

In Washington, we have friends who sent their kids to this very posh private school and they published in the school magazine a league table of what different parents had given in terms of money. And if you're at the bottom, you are ashamed to think, why did you give so little? And if you're at the top, well, you're a gold star parent. And so it is slightly grotesque the fundraising that takes place in American academic institutions. But when you set it against this little school in Laburn, try to raise a few quid so they can put it towards the computer fund. And yet the local MP has given three million to this academic institution in California. It's quite jarring.

I mean, to be fair, we don't know. We genuinely don't know what Rishi Sunak gives in a much quieter way to, you know, Laburn primary probably won't ever have a plaque, you know, outside

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of its donors. He might, for all we know, give very generously within the constituency. But I guess what it does is sharply throw into focus this idea of the richest ever prime minister, right? For whom three million dollars, even five years ago, would not have seemed like anything more than a drop in the ocean. And I think when you talk about philanthropy, obviously, in the US, it's philanthropy with a twist. It kind of means like, just in case my children ever apply here, just in case I ever need to get a foot in the door, just in case, you know, it's partly in recognition of everything that's happened there, might even be where he met his wife. Was it where he met his wife?

I think they met in California.

They met in California. So I think there is an edge of not just fundraising, but like, you know, sort of papal indulgences, just in case I need this in a sort of future life in brackets, my kids. And I suppose the interesting thing is that we don't have any rules governing what people, what MPs can donate. We always talk about what they can receive, right? That's the big question. We look at the list of members' interests and what they've taken. But if you imagine this in a context of a fight, right? What is to stop Rishi Sunak giving every single school enrichment?

50,000 quid, 100,000 quid before the election.

And the Labour candidate or whoever's standing against him presumably doesn't have a chance. And you're back to Rotten Burroughs then. I mean, you're back to the kind of people buying elections. I suspect there are no rules on that. But I mean, it might be a very bad way to spend money if you feel that the political tide is running against you. It's normally a national tide that runs against you and there's not much you can do to stop it.

I suppose the other thing that interests me is that, you know, Rishi Sunak was three years as an MP, ambitious, upwardly mobile. And yet you would think that that would be the last thing you would do if you're thinking, right, how do I get my foot on the ministerial ladder and rise to the top to become prime minister? You don't give three million to an American academic institution, which already probably has a ton of money already. And yet that is maybe is sort of the attraction of Rishi Sunak is that he's not a conventional grasping, grabbing politician in that way that we've seen other people plotting every step and maneuver. Yeah, I mean, we do spend a lot of time saying we get the wrong politicians because they all come from the same school or the same structure or the same Oxford University course or the same sort of career trajectory, right? Now, Rishi Sunak, I'm not pretending that, you know, he sort of... Come a winch just to Oxford Goldman Sachs.

I know, he wasn't an acrobat in the circus. But I'm just saying there is something vaguely refreshing about having somebody who is so far removed from the grubbiness of politics that actually he's kind of turned around and saying, you know what, actually, I could have been a tech billionaire. I was a Goldman Sachs billionaire. I've got an incredibly rich wife. If I never need to work again in my life, I could spend a lot more time in that heated swimming pool. But I am actually going to go into politics. And I think if we put our money where our mouth is, you know, as a country, and we say we do want people from all different walks of life, like we're always asking people like George Clooney or Marta Zuckerberg, whatever, why don't you go into public life? Why don't you become president? Why don't you stand for this? And so it strikes me that actually we have to extend that curiosity about people

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who are phenomenally rich at the very top, because you also have to sort of say, well, maybe they have something to give to politics just as, you know, we want to encourage people from all walks of life who don't have the same educational benefits and who don't have the same money and who don't have the sort of career trajectory. I guess we do want to properly mix fields.

Yes. And isn't it a relief that, I mean, you know, at the weekend we have in the Sunday times, will Boris Johnson's taxpayer funded lawyers be stopped and scrounging it seems while you're Prime Minister to get money from wherever you can to pay for his complicated private life? You don't have that with Rishi Sunak.

Look, it was 15 years ago that we were itemizing the cat food and the trouser press and the duck pond and the various items that MPs were putting through as expenses on behalf of the taxpayer, right? I'm not sure that we're ever going to have that problem with Rishi Sunak. Is that a reason for saying we only want very rich MPs? Of course it isn't. You know, of course we want to have people from all walks of life and dare I say people who do claim things on expenses when it's legitimate. But I think that there is something that enables you to be completely above the fray, almost incorruptible when nobody can buy it.

Well, let us speak now to Bridget Phillipson. She is Labour's shadow education secretary. Rishi Sunak was free to give money to whoever he wants to give money to, wasn't he, when he was a backbench MP? He is. It's his money. He can spend it how he wishes. But I think it is staggeringly out of touch really, given the pressures that state schools are under right now. And his party and his government have presided over more than a decade of complete failure where it comes to making sure that our children are getting the best possible start in life. And parents, the length and breadth of the country, will know that time and again they are being asked to provide stationery, the headteachers who tell me they can't afford books or even paper, and the primary school in his constituency that is having to fundraise for IT equipment. Yet he is choosing to prioritise giving money to American institutions. We don't know that he isn't handing out donations slightly more quietly without a big brass plaque to many places or hospitals or foundations or charities in North Yorkshire, do we? Well, if he wants to do that, so be it. But I don't think schools should be depending upon handouts. And I don't think they should be having to put out the begging bowl all the time, often asking parents who really don't have very much money themselves to be covering the basics. And that is what I hear time and time again from parents. You know, could they contribute another pound? Could they set up a standing order? They need to provide all of the stationery for their children, the fact that teaching assistants are losing their jobs because schools are having to make cutbacks. All of that has an impact where it comes to the chances our children enjoy in the future. They only get one chance at it at school. It matters so much. And that's why we've set out quite a different direction on how we would raise money to make sure that we're delivering more teachers into our schools. And that's through ending the tax breaks that private schools enjoy.

I suppose the other argument that would be put forward by Rishi Sunak on that is that, look, you know, this is the American system. And they benefited both of them from at some point, American education, where you do put out the begging bowl. And that's how a lot of American schools are funded, not through federal state funding, but by the endowments

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that you get from wealthy alumni.

But you end up with profound issues around inequality. The reality is schools in my part of the world in Sunderland. Parents don't have, they've barely got enough often to provide for their families by the end of the week, never mind being able to provide for extras for schools or other institutions. Of course, if people have got money that they're able to donate, that is for them. And I would welcome charitable giving is of course important. But you cannot base a system on that because you do end up with those profound inequalities that mean that parents, you know, that are less affluent, that don't have as much, just can't contribute. And schools should not be having to ask parents and often its teachers and school staff are putting their own hands in their pockets to provide some of that too. Bridget, if you're actually serious for labour about making this a priority, then presumably you're going to do more than just end a tax break. I mean, when Blair came into power, we knew that mantra, right? It was education, education, education. I mean, why isn't the Labour Party right now saying this is going to be a massive circled percentage of our budget on education? If you actually think it's the most important thing, why aren't you putting your cards on the table and saying this is what we're going to spend on education? This is what's going into education now. Education is a massive priority for me. It is for Keir Starmer too. And he'll be setting up more detail around the mission that we have around breaking down barriers to opportunity a little bit later on.

Yeah, but listen to how long that sentence was. You know, a mission to break down barriers to opportunity. Basically, you've just heard what the teachers or what the primary school fundraisers are doing. They're saying they haven't got computers, right? They haven't got computers for enough kids in one classroom to be on at the same time. It's not about a mission to break down barriers to opportunity. It's like put the money into the schools. Why can't Labour be a step ahead on that one and just say this is what we're going to give schools like Labour and primary? I've got to be upfront about the scale of the challenge that we're facing as an economy and as a country. And we've had 13 years now of Conservative government

where we've had consistent underfunding of our schools. And we won't be able to put that right overnight. And of course, with the way they crashed the economy last year, that's made matters significantly worse. So you won't be saying that though? Well, I want to be clear that when I'm setting out policy, I am absolutely confident I can deliver it. And on the private schools tax breaks, £1.7 billion, that would go into making sure we've got expert teachers in our classrooms that were recruiting more teachers into the profession. Don't remind people what the budget is for education though, because 1.7 doesn't even touch the sides, does it? I think it's a really straightforward way that we could raise money to put that directly into getting more teachers into our classrooms. We're facing a massive recruitment and retention crisis at the moment. I think the government could do that immediately. We were talking about the Chancellor is keen for ideas about how we might do things differently. Well, I tell you, you could do that straight away. He could just get on and do it, raise the money. Why on earth are they not prioritising an easy, straightforward way that we could put all of that into one tax break? That's all you talk about there. The ending of one tax break. And just to add to that, I know there are think tanks that are looking at this 1.6, 1.7 billion figure and say the calculations are sort of 10 years old. They're

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based on all sorts of flawed assumptions that it will be nothing like that much money when it comes to it. And yet that is Labour's big offer on this. Look, the private schools lobby don't like this. I understand that they don't like what we've got to say on this, but they've got options that they could be considering about how they seek to make savings. The fees at private schools have

gone up way beyond inflation over the course of the last decade and they've got choices that they can make too. But my priority is education secretary. Honestly, we've spoken to the heads of private schools about this, exactly about this on the news agents before. And it's not that they particularly have a problem with this. They just don't think that you're going to raise that much money. And you're now saying that yourself. It's one loophole that you're going to close to make maybe roughly between 1.5 and 2 billion. And you know how much the education system in this country knows. And if people are looking to Labour and saying, right, well, Mel Wise won't have to be doing that under Labour, you can't promise that she won't be. It's a lot of money. I think most people recognise what we'll be raising is a lot of money alongside that by ending the non-dom tax status we'd be delivering universal breakfast clubs for every primary school child in England too. So we've got some, I think, really big commitments around the difference that we would make. Of course, Labour governments have always consistently invested in education, invested in our schools. But the state of the economy right now, the damage that the Conservatives have caused, does make it difficult to commit to more. And we need to get our economy growing. If we grow our economy, we'll have more money to invest in our public services. That was the record from Labour last time around. And that's the difference we'll make if we win the next election.

Would you put any cap on what an MP could spend on charitable donations in their own constituency?

I think the priority for those of us who are members of Parliament, but especially for those of us if you're in government, is the decisions that you make as a government minister and the choices that you make and the impact that has on the public. So, of course, as private individuals, people are free to make their own choices. But if you're responsible for a system where parents are struggling, where children aren't getting what they need, then I think that that's rightly a cause for decisions. Can I just ask you, because we know that Richie Sunak is an incredibly wealthy man, right? And we've talked today about the donation that's going to a Californian university and to a primary school that needs money here. Would you feel comfortable, just sort of hypothetically, if he were able to give, I don't know, £50,000, £100,000 to every primary school in his constituency? Would you mind that? Would you say great? He can do what he wants

with his own money. And you don't think that gives him an electoral advantage at the next election? I just think Richie Sunak is staggeringly out of touch with the way the vast majority of people live their lives. And that's the fundamental problem that he has. Flying around in helicopters, giving out money to American institutions, yet here at home, you know, we've got schools that can't afford to provide stationery, paper, IT equipment, they're having to ask for parents to fundraise that money. I just don't think that's an acceptable state of affairs. And the same is true where it comes to food banks. We hear a lot of the time conservatives so keen to praise the work of food banks. The volunteers, they're amazing, of course they are, but we need to get away from people having to depend upon the goodwill and generosity of strangers in order to

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provide

for their families. People should expect that they should have more choice, more freedom over how they live their lives. And for me, that's the rule for government, providing people with freedom, with choice, with opportunity, not about handouts. Which is better, to have a Prime Minister who's borrowing money left, right and centre to fund his lifestyle, or to have one that is so wealthy that he can give three million to an American academic institution? I'm not sure that's the best of choices to have. I think you want people to be seeking to live within their means. Of course, this isn't about Rishi Sunak's private wealth. This is about the choices that he and his party have made over the last 13 years and parents see it for themselves. They know what's going on. They can see the reality of it. And when you've been in government for 13 years, and when we go into that next election, I think a lot of parents and a lot of voters will be saying, are things really better than they were 13, 14 years ago? Has my standard of living improved? Are things moving in the right direction? It doesn't look that way to me.

Bridget Philipson, thank you very much indeed for being with us. Thank you.

Thank you. Thanks.

I did think that was really interesting, actually, that you've got the Shadow Education Secretary who refuses to criticise the Prime Minister's personal wealth and kept on reminding us that Labour is not there to judge people for how they spend their money. And this wasn't just about Rishi Sunak. This is about, I think, her trying to send out a message which had a bit of a ring of new Labour to it, a bit of 1997, which was, you can get rich. We're not the party of the anti-rich. We're not the party that's anti-business. We don't want to stop people from accumulating wealth. We just want those in power to spend it properly. And I did think when she kept on saying this is not about the Prime Minister's personal wealth, it was almost like she had this check in her head saying, do not slag off the rich, because we all know that that is the balance that Stammerer is walking now, not to scare off centreists. We don't want the Labour Party to sound like hard-left socialists. That's not what the floating voters who might have gone for Boris Johnson last time are looking for this time around. Yeah, you said you thought it sounded a bit new Labour. I would say it sounded very much a new Labour of the Mandelson Court. I don't care how rich you are as long as you pay your taxes. And that was the mantra then. The one bit that is different though, and that is on this kind of fundraising, the £1.7 billion that she says they will raise from levying VAT on private schools, that was looked at during the new Labour years and was dismissed because of feeling that it would have a negative effect on middle-class voters who Labour were depending on to get them re-elected. And that is one of the policies that Keir Starmer has kept. And likewise, the ending of non-dom status. Again, where people question whether this will raise as much money as Labour thinks it will and hopes it will, and whether it will have a detrimental effect on keeping investors in private equity funds or what VC capital, whatever it happens to be, from staying in the UK. And so there are bits of it where Labour are being bolder now than new Labour were back in the 1990s. And I think there's

a think tank report coming out on Wednesday, apparently, which is going to question the whole assumption that Labour will raise this £1.7 billion by levying VAT on independent schools. Also, for the whole length of time that you promised to be committing to this policy, you can spend it mentally, verbally, in lots of different places. And £1.7 billion, I don't think,

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is going to touch the sides of what the education system in this country needs right now. Do you remember the great Labour joke with the Liberal Democrats when they were saying, would it raise an extra penny on this? And Tony Blair described it as the longest P in history. And in a moment, we'll be discussing what seems to be a pivotal moment in the dreadful battle in Ukraine and the Russian invasion.

Welcome back. We've heard a lot from Russia and nothing from Ukraine. And I think this is indicative of a narrative that is being played out right now in what might be one of the most seminal points of the Ukraine war. Because Russia is saying that it has thwarted a major Ukrainian assault, which sounds as if that long-awaited counteroffensive by Ukraine has started. And in contrast, Ukraine is saying nothing. And they are actually posting a video of soldiers with their fingers over their lips as a way of saying, we're going to show, but we're not going to tell. Because we know what is going on here. There is the military, physical, horrendous war on the ground. And then there is the propaganda war, the narrative war, the war of telling people often lies and trying to convince one side of something that's happening when it isn't. And look, for the last 15 months, it's been terrible for Russia because they have had the most powerful army in the world. And they've made very little progress. And we have seen the colossal losses that they have suffered, both in terms of men and machinery, and that they have got to a stalemate now. And so we are seeing the extraordinary sight

of what appears to be the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. Now, it may be day one. And so maybe we shouldn't pay too much attention to day one. But it's interesting that it's Moscow that is crowing and Kiev that is quiet. And maybe that is telling or maybe Kiev knows that nothing is going to happen overnight. Hallelujah. By the end of the week, Russia have been expelled from all the Ukrainian territory. That is not going to happen. It's going to take far longer than that. But it does seem that this is shaping up to be the showdown that everyone is expecting. But more important than that, it is the showdown that the West and the NATO nations have invested in spectacularly. And there is colossal pressure on the Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky to deliver on that, to show that all that money has been put to good effect.

I think that's really interesting because every time Zelensky steps out of Ukraine, it is always to ask for military help, to ask for funding, to ask for weaponry. Whenever he turns up at Congress, at Westminster, with Macron, it is always with one message in mind, you need to help Ukraine because that's the way you help the West. And that's always been his message that we are the frontline, but actually Putin will come after you next. And so I suppose what we're seeing now is possibly Zelensky having to respond to the West saying, what are you doing

with our money? What are you doing with our helicopters? What are you doing with the weaponry we're sending? Because Zelensky has to prove that this has not been wasted. This has not gone nowhere.

Even though, in his words, this is for everyone. This is about everyone, not just the country he serves. Well, let's try and figure out what is going on and what has been taking place over the last 24, 48, 72 hours. We can speak now to Jim Townsend. He's a senior fellow at the Center for New American Security and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for European and NATO policy at the Pentagon. And so someone who has been at the center of what it is like to make these



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decisions.

And he's with us now. Jim, thanks so much for being with us. Are we seeing the start of the spring offensive? I think we are. We're seeing the shaping of the battlefield. You know, before an offensive starts, there's a lot of not just logistical work that's done. And you can see that that's been going on for a little while now, stockpiling ammunition and armored vehicles, all the things you need for the offensive. But you begin to kind of shape the front lines as well. And so two things stand out. One is the drone attacks that the Ukraine Air Force has done in Moscow was won. And then this cross-border attacks, you know, which has been so mysterious. Those are attempts to, there's some psychological warfare there, if you will, particularly the drone attacks, very similar to what we did in World War Two against Japan. Early in the war, we sent some bombers over Tokyo that had the psychological effect on them. And the Ukraine is doing that. And then these cross-border attacks by these armed groups, these are attempts to pull some of the Russian forces over to that part of the frontier. You know, they've got a long frontier to defend, the Russians do. And they're beginning to, Ukraine's trying to thin that out a bit. So they're still shaping, still prepping the battlefield, as we say. And eventually you'll start seeing troops beginning to move. Is Ukraine ready for this offensive? Or do you think that they are feeling the pressure of the funding and weaponry that they've received from the West now that wants to see returns? They are feeling a lot of pressure from the West. And that's one of the reasons Zelensky has been making that big tour through Europe and to the various conferences talking about assistance. He never stops. But I think particularly over the past few months, he felt he needed to do that, not just to make sure that there was some long-term assistance past the offensive that can come in from the West. But there have been these rumors going around, some leaks out of Washington and other places where some people were speculating that there was some war weariness and that this offensive had better work or we're going to rethink our whole support for Ukraine. So I think he feels he's got to keep the message going and keep the positive responses from the West so that he doesn't embolden Putin who thinks that he can wait out everyone. That every time he goes to a conference and he gets a big vote of confidence from the West, that's just another reminder to Putin that don't think you can outlast everyone. So I think that there is pressure on Putin in terms of keeping the spirits up. And there's also an understanding too that for better or for worse, there's a lot of expectations in the West on this offensive. And some that's unrealistic, the bar is being set too high. I think a lot of the public remembers last summer, the offensive that was made at that time that took a lot of land back. And so there's expectations with all this new equipment that Ukraine would do the same thing now. What do you think we have seen today when you've seen the Russian military coming out and saying, look, we have repelled them. They've suffered extensive casualties. They've lost all these armored vehicles. Is that Russia telling the truth or Russia trying to shape the narrative? Well, it's both. Well, they're not telling the truth. As we all do, you have to be a little suspicious about anything they say. And also Ukraine too, I have to say, when you're dealing with two opposing militaries like this, you've got to take it up both with a green assault and try to get confirmation. So that's one. And number two, yes, in terms of the narrative, it's a fight over narrative. That's a big fight here. It's not just on the battlefield. It's also in the minds of the West and the minds of Putin and his clique there who's going to control that narrative. I think a successful offensive includes having a narrative that is unimpeachable in terms

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of causing hurt to the Russians, even if you're not taking a huge swath of land, even if you haven't cut the land bridge. If you have now got a narrative going of showing success on the battlefield, the Russians are retreating or large numbers of Russian aircraft have been shown. You know, there's way in which that narrative becomes part of your success. Given all these variables, what does the timeline look like for you? Because presumably Russia just wants to have stalemate and use that as the basis for either a peace settlement or a frozen conflict. Exactly. If the Russians can achieve just keeping their lines intact, even though they would suffer grievously, if they can keep their lines intact, they can then sit back and say, let's watch the West get wobbly now. So it's not even getting to the peace table or even setting the stage for a Russian offensive. It's a matter of trying to get the West to go wobbly by showing the West that despite all of their assistance, that's not helping Ukraine at all. And so, and kind of testing the theory that Putin has, that the West doesn't have the stomach for a long fight. If his narrative is, I've got all the time in the world, the West, so go ahead, you keep sending all your money and equipment to Ukraine, but they're not going anywhere as you've just seen. If that can be the Russian narrative, that's right where they want to be, a frozen conflict, if you will.

Jim Townsend, thank you so much for being with us. Thank you. You're very welcome. Anytime. And it's interesting hearing for somebody who's worked so closely with NATO policy in the Pentagon, because I think one of the big questions, overhanging all this, and we've seen Finland now become part of NATO, Sweden on the cusp of becoming part of NATO, and overhanging all this really is the question of Ukraine itself. And Putin often argues that he was pushed into this invasion, this war, because the West was trying to bring Ukraine on side into NATO. And I was listening to an interview with Henry Kissinger and the Economist last week, and Kissinger, who you will have a stance on Kissinger, and I'm not going to go into the wise and wherefore of this 100-year-old statesman now, but his perspective is that Ukraine is now armed. It is so deadly as a country that it cannot be outside NATO, because the moment you have an armed country on the edge of Europe that is not in NATO and possibly disgruntled with however this war ends is a massive, terrifying threat to everyone else. And so his take is not like, oh, yes, embrace Ukraine into the fold of Europe. It should join the EU, but just be really careful now, because this is a highly weaponized country on the back of everyone else's weaponry. So we know it's pretty good, it's first-class weaponry, and they cannot afford to end this war unhappy. Yes, but how it ends and what happens and whether we are in a situation like Korea where we are still, you know, people forget this, but there is still no peace treaty after the Korean War in the 1950s. It is a frozen conflict, which sometimes flares up with a demilitarized zone, and sometimes it's a bit calmer, but potentially North Korea and South Korea are still at war. And how you avoid Russia and Ukraine becoming that is really hard to see at this stage when neither side is weak enough to lose, nor strong enough to win. We'll be back after the break.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back. So Holly Willoughby was back on air this morning after that break, and said she felt shaken, troubled, and let down. It's the first time she's presented since

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Philippe Schofield left the show after the revelations that he made about that affair with a younger colleague. But the real soundbite of this morning came from its editor, Martin Frizel, who was doorstepped outside his house. Mr Frizel, is there a toxic work environment in this morning? Sorry? Is there a toxic work environment at this morning? I'll tell you what's toxic. I've always found toxic. Is it aubergine? Do you like aubergine? Do you? Is there a toxic work environment at this morning? Do you like aubergine? Because I don't like aubergine. It's just a personal thing. Is there a toxic work environment at this morning? It's a really big day today though. Now look, I'm not saying that was a distraction exercise, but as soon as we saw it, our entire WhatsApp group at The News Agents started discussing aubergine recipes and how wrong

he in fact was. We'll come to the aubergine recipes in a moment because I think it is quite important. I mean, I think it was Gabriel, our young producer, who said, I love aubergine miso. And you know, it all took off from there. But I think we need to just go back a bit because I think Martin Frizel might have done something very dangerous for the future of the doorstep. The shouted question. When Rishi Sunak next comes out of Downing Street after a catastrophe. Have you got blood on your hands, Prime Minister? No, but I've been eating aubergines. I mean, you know, surrealism could take over. I assumed that Martin Frizel had decided ahead of time that he would talk about aubergines or not like aubergine, whatever, to try and get people like us talking about recipes and to try and sort of divert the doorstep into something, as you say, completely surreal. The trouble is that that clip will be played again and again as a sign of how this morning and its editorial team are losing the actual plot.

Yeah, I'm not sure. I mean, the tactic of football managers, and most recently seen by Sam Alalade when he in his brief tenure at Leeds United, when he went in and talked about how he was the greatest manager in British football and was as good as anyone, as good as Pep Guardiola, as good as anyone else you care to mention. He deliberately did that as a distraction technique to take the pressure off his players so that people would be talking about that rather than about the pressure on Leeds United to avoid relegation. And I just wonder whether Frizel was thinking, right, I'm going to do something so batshit crazy that people will talk about that and attack me maybe for being flippant when it's a very serious and earnest issue and we've got to put our earnest voice on. Talking about England football managers, I always loved the people like, not Sven so much, but who was the Italian that came after him?

Fabio Capello.

Capello, who would use bad English as a way of literally answering nothing. And I remember watching him kind of saying, yes, there will be maybe of the two halves and you go, yeah, he's just like, he's literally answered that question, but he's not answering it. And then I watched a whole press conference in Italian of him. So speaking, they were going, what's he actually saying? What's he actually saying? And I was like, no, no, he's managing to be just as boring in his own native language. So it wasn't just a sort of diversion tactic. But I do think that sometimes you're right. That's where the heat is drawn in. What are you looking at?

When the seagulls follow the trawler, I'm going to go all Eric Cantona. If we're going to go for this, we've got to go for it, haven't we? I mean, that was the great, you know, on foreigners speaking the language. And when Eric Cantona, sorry, the seagulls and the trawler.

Say French, say bloody French. And so bloody French in thinking,

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am I in a Truffaut film now? I don't understand what's going on.

When the seagulls

follow the trawler, it's because they think

sardines will be strong into the sea. Thank you, then.

So my husband, Eric Cantona, is his god. And one night my husband got home slightly the worst for wear from an auction with a side photo. With Eric Cantona. I wish, a side photo of Eric Cantona. And I looked at it and I was like, that's wonderful, darling. But where's the actual signature?

And he kind of looked for it and he was like, oh, no, he'll do it later.

I went, so you've got a signed photo of Eric Cantona that wasn't actually signed by him.

Yeah, I'll do it later. Like they were best mates. And Eric Cantona hung in our house without the signature for many, many years until I finally called him out and said, I don't think he's ever going to come back and sign this. It's lovely having you back, mate. I think we've drifted some way from the aubergine and Holly Willoughby. We'll be back tomorrow. See you then. Bye. This has been a global player, original podcast and a Persephoneka production.