

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why is pressure mounting on Keir Starmer to call for a ceasefire?

This is collective punishment of the Palestinian people in Gaza for crimes they did not commit. How many more innocent Palestinians must die before this Prime Minister calls for humanitarian ceasefire?

That was Yasmin Qureshi, the Labour MP for Bolton, South East, in the Commons today. But Prime Minister's questions. But don't be gulled. That question wasn't really aimed at Rishi Sunak. It was aimed at Sakir Starmer and the stance that he's taking over Israel and Gaza.

Today we are detecting a growing unease, certainly amongst Labour MPs with large Muslim constituencies,

but also quite possibly on Kirstarmer's own front bench. People who'd like to hear their leader now calling for a ceasefire on Gaza. Welcome to the Newsagents.

It's John.

It's Emily. And we must start saying we are in Newsagents HQ because people everywhere, including our daily listener in Romania, is wondering where we are and we are in...

They think we're in Timishwara in Romania.

They may just think that. But we should probably set out where this all started, which is a clip in a studio not very far from here with our colleague Nick Ferrari on LBC, where Kirstarmer was being interviewed just after that rather successful upbeat Labour conference. It came down with a bit of a bang because he was asked by Nick if Israel had the right to cut off water and energy to Gaza. And Kirstarmer says now that he sort of misanswered that question. He was referring to something that came earlier, but essentially in that interview he says yes. He's trying to say that Israel has the right to defend itself and he has stuck very closely to this line that Israel has suffered the most unimaginable, horrendous, horrific attack, the details of which are getting clearer and frankly harder to listen to every single day. And Kirstarmer's position has been clear that Israel has to defend itself. The problem is now when you hear how close humanitarians are to saying they can no longer work in Gaza because they simply can't get fuel. They simply can't get aid through. They simply are watching people who will be starved to death or have their water cut off or will not make it if they're hit because the hospitals are now unable to offer any kind of support to those injured. Then you understand that this is becoming a really big issue for the people of Gaza and for anyone here who has a constituency where those questions are being raised and taken to them every single day.

Now remember when Kirstarmer spoke at the Labour Party conference, it was only days after the terrorist attack, the full horror of which had not become clear. But it was the easiest thing in the world for politicians to say Israel has a right to defend itself. Now what I know really frustrates Israeli politicians and diplomats is that when Western leaders say that, what they're really saying is in theory, I think you've got the right to defend yourself but when it starts happening in practice, it's a very big problem and that is what's happened for Kirstarmer. It has become a very big problem as the Israeli Air Force and artillery have targeted positions in Gaza but which have led to large numbers of civilian casualties. The other thing that's happened of course is this sort of blockade on the border crossings. It means that no fuel and very little water, very little medicine is getting in and that has led to heightened emotion.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why is pressure mounting on Keir Starmer to call for a ceasefire?

If you just look at just basic numbers, statistics of the number of Jews in this country and the number of Muslims in this country, there are something like 250,000 Jews in the UK. That's 0.5% of the population. In England and Wales alone, according to the last Office of National Statistics, it is just close to four million. So 13 times as many Muslims in this country as there are Jews. QED, you're much more concerned about Muslim public opinion if you are standing for election than you are about Jewish public opinion and therefore that that is why this is a voice that a lot of Labour MPs cannot ignore.

I think it's both things. I mean, I was speaking to somebody on the Labour front bench who said actually, if you look at all our voters, you will find a much higher percentage of both Jews and Muslims in Labour constituencies than you probably will in Conservative constituencies. So if you are a Conservative voter, this is the point they made to me, you are more likely to be seeing this as an international affair, a question of foreign affairs. It's at one move. It's distant. Do you believe in what Rishi Sunak is saying in terms of his support for Israel? You are more likely to see that as a policy decision at arms length. If you are a Labour voter, it may be that you are just closer one way or another to finding this a very personal issue because you are more likely to be ethnically of one of those parties that I guess feels that first hand. But I also think that even if you move back from this, I mean, it's almost impossible not to look at this through humanitarian lens, but even if you say strategically, there will be a point at which even Israel's greatest fans and even those who have been her staunchest defenders will see that actually the killing of more civilians is not helping at all. Not least when you still have 200 hostages who are being sort of drip, dripped out to freedom very, very slowly, we presume, by Hamas for exactly this reason, and you have the thousands of stories emerging of the very young being killed in hideous ways as we have all heard has happened to the Israeli civilians as well. So I guess Keir Starmer is now facing this what moment where it could be a ground invasion, and he has to hold on to that thought that his protection is with Israel's right, but what does that actually mean? And why would you carry on endlessly sending in rockets that are just going to be killing people on the ground?

One of the best definitions I've heard of British foreign policy, it's find out what the Americans are doing and do a bit less. And it's kind of unerringly accurate to describe how we approach the world. On that basis, I think the Americans have been trying to strategically act as a break on what Israel does in terms of a ground invasion because of hostages, because of the humanitarian situation, because they don't believe Israel has got a clear enough plan over what an invasion would look like and how it would unfold. And so they are playing for time. And so you've suddenly started hearing Anthony Blinken, the US Secretary of State, talking about maybe a pause. And I wonder whether a pause is what we're going to hear Keir Starmer talk about in future, because that might give him a bit of room, because what we're reading, I mean, there's an ITV political correspondent who has said he has heard from a number of labor MPs that two shadow cabinet members are considering their position because of Keir Starmer's stance over Israel. So I wonder whether his way off this particular hook at the moment is to suddenly fall in behind the US and say, yeah, I support a pause as well. We know that at the moment, just after PMQ's Prime Minister's questions, he went into a meeting with his Muslim MPs, who have been voicing very direct concerns. And we've heard calls for a ceasefire from

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why is pressure mounting on Keir Starmer to call for a ceasefire?

some of the labor front benches. And I am now getting the feeling that there are many more who would like to be saying that directly to their leader, call it a significant pause or specific pause or a humanitarian pause. I mean, you know, so much is sort of couched in this language

of diplomacy, isn't it? But they don't feel that he is saying the words and they're putting pressure on him now to say that. And I think the pressure grows. It doesn't diminish. It's not like we've reached a crescendo. I think that what you're hearing is that there were the mildest rumblings at the Labour Party conference where there was a determination that what should be on show was unity and a single minded purpose about winning the next election. It's got a little bit louder as Israel's air campaign over parts of Gaza has been unleashed. And you can be sure that when that ground invasion starts, we're going to hear a lot more. I've, you know, from one of the left wing Labour MPs who's been in touch and said, look, I'm not going to say anything publicly now. But if Israel goes ahead with a land invasion, and Kirstama doesn't say anything, then I'm going to break cover and make clear my views. So it's sort of building the pressure on him. I mean, we can talk about whether it would really be that controversial to say the word ceasefire given everything that's going on now. But certainly the fact he hasn't said it has already actually had an impact. He's lost 23 councillors. In Oxford, nine of them means that Labour no longer hold the council majority there. So that's actually had an impact. He visited a South Wales mosque Muslim community centre. And there was a sense there that he had,

I think the word they use was gaslit that he hadn't, he'd come for one thing and they'd understood another. And was he just doing it for a photo op? So I mean, these are only maybe small moments, but together they add to a picture, which is actually putting pressure on the Labour leader to slightly move away from the Israel can do nothing wrong. And we know why he's had the Israel can do nothing wrong stance in his head right from the beginning. I'm sure, you know, on a personal level, what he heard coming out of Israel on that Saturday made it a very simple thing for him to say. But also he is still fighting constantly the charge that Labour could slip back into the anti-Semitic party that it was perceived to be under Corbyn.

Exactly. So to your question, which is kind of the essay question, isn't it?

Why can't Keir Starmer just come out and say, it's time for a ceasefire and I want it now?

I guess the answer is, if you are at the same time saying that Israel is right to want to rid itself of Hamas, how can you do that? If you're saying, well, let's all stop being nasty to one another and stop this because Hamas will stay there. Hamas will stay in position. There have not been free and fair elections in Gaza since 2006 when Hamas came to power. Arguably, the position of ordinary Palestinians, their lives have got worse with Hamas and the way that they have governed and that way they have militarized so much and all the investment has gone into arming up for this fight against Israel. So if Israel is going to prosecute this campaign to say, we cannot leave Hamas in place after they have butchered 1,400 of our people, well, how do you reconcile that with saying there needs to be a ceasefire? Look, I'm going to say there's two levels here. On a humanitarian

level, is it controversial to ask for a ceasefire? Really, it isn't actually at this point. We understand that the more bombing that takes place, the uglier and the harder it gets for everyone. But actually, on a political level, it is almost impossible for him to say that because he starts

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why is pressure mounting on Keir Starmer to call for a ceasefire?

to open up the water between Labour and the Conservatives again. And as soon as he has uttered those words and Rishi Sunak hasn't, even if there is pressure from Rishi Sunak's own party to say the same thing, then it becomes a very easy kind of meme for the Tories to say, you see what you've got? Same old, same old. This is Labour slipping back into their own ways. They don't really care about Israel. They don't care about British Jews. You know, there is another way of measuring discontent or delight over government policy or opposition policy. And yet we've just listed the councillors who said, enough, I've got to resign from the Labour Party. Just listen to the sound that comes out of the House of Commons. When Rishi Sunak stands up and said, Israel has a right to defend itself, Hamas has done terrible things, there are huge echoing cheers on the Conservative benches. When Keir Starmer stands up and says those things, it's an awful lot more muted on the Labour benches. And that tells you everything you need to know about the precarious and increasingly precarious position that Keir Starmer is now holding.

In a moment, we're going to be speaking to one of those Muslim Labour MPs who was in the meeting just now with Keir Starmer, Khaled Mahmoud. He's the MP for Perry Bar and Birmingham. And we're

going to be asking him what his assessment is of what the leaders should do right now.

We said we'd be speaking to Khaled Mahmoud. I just want to sort of tell you what's going on.

We recorded that about an hour ago, an hour and a bit ago, because we had hoped to speak to Khaled Mahmoud at half past one. It is now three o'clock in the afternoon. And I think the reason for this is that Keir Starmer's meeting with Muslim MPs has been going on for far longer than had originally been scheduled. So I think in private euphemism terms, you would say there has been a full and frank exchange of views taking place at this meeting. But we are hearing bits and pieces from senior Labour MPs. Yeah. I mean, I've been speaking to some of those on the front bench. And the sense I was getting from one person in particular was that a majority of them now do want him to call for a ceasefire, do want him to make the case for whatever this humanitarian pause is. And they told me that it's been a mess. The whole thing has been handled poorly, that Labour didn't gauge the strength of feeling within the Muslim communities, within constituents. And because of the by-elections and all the excitement and all the preparation and all the sort of victory parade that had been missed, it's only just been picked up now that constituents feel really, really upset. And of course, we saw the resignation of the Labour councillors.

And this person just said, look, at what point do we say, no, this is not okay.

If you see a ground invasion, if you see IDF, Israeli military forces actually shooting people on the TV screens, is it okay to say, yeah, this can carry on because we've always said, we're going to back Israel. It comes back to your point, which is, if you support Israel, how far do you support them and what does it mean? But this person also said, look, we're acting like it's an earthquake right now. When you hear people say, let's send in aid or let's send in water or let's send in fuel, it's not like there isn't fuel and water available.

If only the bombing would stop, it's not an earthquake zone. It is somewhere that we have that is possible to have control over if you just call for the bombing to stop. But they just said it's been really emotional, really painful in the Labour Party for the last two weeks, which is not something I don't think that we've heard very much in recent months. And they thought it had all started from the LBC interview, which a number of them then said directly to Kirstama, you've got to walk that back. Let's just play that clip again, where Nick Ferrari, our colleague

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why is pressure mounting on Keir Starmer to call for a ceasefire?

at LBC, is interviewing Kirstama. And this was the question. I'm very clear Israel must have that does have that right to defend herself. And Hamas bears responsibility. I think that Israel does have that right. It is an ongoing situation. Obviously, everything should be done within international law. But I don't want to step away from the core principles that Israel has a right to defend herself and Hamas bears responsibility for these terrorist attacks. And I would call on all responsible states, particularly Middle East responsible states, to call this out for what it is and to stand with the world in condemning utterly condemning these actions by Hamas. And although Kirstama says, well, I was actually answering a previous question. It doesn't really sound like that. It sounds like he was answering that question is now trying to say, Oh, I didn't mean what I said, which is fine up to a point. But you know, maybe what I think a lot of Labour MPs are after is a bit more clarification and public clarification of where Kirstama stands on this. I imagine that will come because the point they're making is that no one thinks they shouldn't be supporting Israel. No one actually within the Labour Party right now is sounding unreasonable. But when the sensible Labour voices are missing, you leave a vacuum and you leave people then shouting jihad on the street. I think there's another interesting point there. And this is about the sort of temperament of Kirstama. And you said, Emily, that there had not been the show of emotion or the concern or the empathy that there should be. You know, Kirstama is this rather technocratic lawyer who kind of understands and reads the papers. And I don't think he does emoting particular. I mean, I was listening to Theresa May the other day. She felt, you know, she, she hated anyone saying to her. So how do you feel? And Kirstama, I think has a similar sort of problem in, you know, I don't know. Look, Joe Biden is the ultimate consolar in chief, right? He is so good at families and grief and that direct one-on-one communication. I think the point with Kirstama is more actually about the timing that this happened just as they were going into the Labour conference. He knew what he had to do to get the message across that they were on the side of the hostages and on the side of the civilians who had been killed in Israel. And then we went into this kind of frenzy of the by-election. And actually, I think they just missed the beat. They didn't read the ruins in the constituency. And I think that is now catching up with them and making life potentially quite difficult unless we hear something vocal now. So it's clear the sort of language that Labour MPs want to hear, which doesn't sound on the face of it that much, just saying, you know, there needs to be a ceasefire while humanitarian aid gets in. The language last night from the United Nations and from the UN Secretary General was pretty extraordinary and absolutely infuriated the Israelis when he said, you know what, what Hamas did didn't happen in a vacuum. Almost as though he was legitimising what Hamas did as a sort of response to the way dozens have been treated over many, many years, which is, you know, are you saying that it's okay to go and kill concert goers and to kill women and children and Holocaust survivors and then take 200 people prisoner and as hostages keeping them in tunnels underground. Yeah. And Israel has heard that and responded very, very strongly indeed. This is the words of the Israeli ambassador to the UN calling out Antonio Guterres and those words. This morning, when he started at speech, his speech at the Security Council by saying that Hamas attacks did not happen in a vacuum, this is really something that every decent person, it should be unfathomable for each and every one of us.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why is pressure mounting on Keir Starmer to call for a ceasefire?

Mr. Secretary General, the UN was established to prevent atrocities, to prevent such atrocities like the barbaric atrocities that Hamas committed, but the UN is failing. The UN is failing and you, Mr. Secretary General, have lost all morality and impartiality because when you say those terrible words that these heinous attacks did not happen in a vacuum, you are tolerating terrorism and by tolerating terrorism, you are justifying terrorism. And Israel has now said it's going to deny UN officials visas. It's actually going to deny them visas to come into Israel and it's not the first time they've done that. We'll refuse to issue visas to UN representatives. This is Gilan Erdan who's the Israeli ambassador to the UN talking on army radio and he's already refused a visa for the Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, Martin Griffiths. The time has come, he said, to teach them a lesson. So, I mean, even the UN, who in our minds are the neutral peacekeeping force in this, has become politicized so quickly. Well, I mean, the UNRA, the United Nations Relief Agency in Gaza, have never been seen as neutral by the Israelis. They've always been seen as highly politicized, willing to make very political interventions over what Israel does. And I think that this latest intervention marks another deterioration in that relationship so much so when you get the Israeli ambassador saying that the UN Secretary General should resign, you have got a real collapse of the relationship between the UN and one of its members. And again, the question always in this situation, where does America stand on that? Yeah, and I guess the wider read across is, let's say in a perfect world, in a good world, there are discussions now, there are peace talks, there is the attempt to bring both sides to an understanding of what a two-state solution would look like or the rest of it. At the back of your mind, you're still left with the sense that what terrorism has provoked that then terrorism has kind of worked, right? And that if Hamas, who probably didn't actually ever want a two-state solution, if Hamas then becomes the catalyst to this, what message is that sending out to further terrorists, to further acts of terror? I think that's where Israel would say we can't be seen to be moving towards the perpetrators of these atrocities. You cannot have in democracies a situation where people say the terrorists have won. And that's the danger that Israel has now seized with the position that the UN is taking. Well, unfortunately, Khaled Mahmood still hasn't joined us. We need to stop this recording pretty soon because we need to publish it so you can have this podcast on your journey home or on your walk

or cooking in the supper, whatever it happens to be. If he turns up a bit later on, we'll bring you that interview tomorrow. We'll be back in just a moment.

This is The News Agents.

By the time you'll be listening to this, there is a very, very strong likelihood that Peter Bone MP, the conservative MP for Wellingborough, will have been suspended from the House of Commons for a lengthy period, lengthy enough to make a recall petition possible. And we all know what happens then. If enough people sign it, you precipitate a by-election. And that is a by-election that Labour are pushing very hard to see take place, the seat of Wellingborough, not a million miles from mid-beds where they've just had one of their most historic by-election triumphs ever a week ago. Today we heard from the young man who made the complaint about Peter Bone. And I think it's important just to give you a sense of the context of all this, that he made that complaint in 2017. That was six years ago. Peter Bone was elected Deputy Leader

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why is pressure mounting on Keir Starmer to call for a ceasefire?

of the House of Commons in July of 2022, just a year ago. So how could you have been in this place where a complaint was first made in 2017 and he's still being promoted in those dying days of the Johnson government before Johnson finally quit? Yeah, there was an investigation by Parliament's Behaviour Watchdog, the independent expert panel, and it found that Peter Bone had broken sexual misconduct rules by indecently exposing himself to the staffer during an overseas trip. So it's not just that he shouted. It's not just that he had a volcanic temper. It's not just that his mood swung like a pendulum from one thing to the other. The committee found that he had exposed himself,

locked him in a hotel bedroom. So it was all pretty seedy, unpleasant stuff that the committee has found that Peter Bone did. So imagine that if MPs vote in the way we're expecting, they would approve

a six-week suspension. And that means anything more than 10 days triggers a recall where you actually go to the constituents and you ask them if they would like to have that by-election, Labour will be putting a lot of pressure, I'm imagining, on the good people of Wellingbrook to say, yes, we would. And imagine going into Christmas facing yet another by-election over a sleaze story. It feels like we've heard it time and again. And what's the bet? Peter Bone may not be the last. Yeah, exactly. And every time that Rishi Sunak wants to shift the narrative, wants to make something a clean break so that he can say, I am this new person. I am the future. I am here for the long term. I am the change candidate. You're just reminded of all that was rotten. And there is so much rotten. You look at the last two by-elections that have been fought. Nadine Dorris, who was very close to Boris Johnson, although there was no scandal about her, she hadn't been in the constituency very much as an MP. And then you had Chris Pinscher, both those by-election seats lost. Yeah, we should just say that today, in Prime Minister's questions, we saw both those new Labour MPs, the MP for Tamworth and the MP for Mid-Beds. And the MP for Mid-Beds got a special welcome from Rishi Sunak, the Prime Minister, possibly the funniest gag he's made in the Commons ever.

But, Mr Speaker, can I, in fact, join him in welcoming the new members to their places? After all, I suspect the new member for Mid-Beds may actually support me a little bit more than the last one. A little dig there from Rishi Sunak at Nadine Dorris, a notable thorn in the Prime Minister's side. I'm doubting somehow that she's going to be on his resignation honours list and find herself in the hold. Oh no, she has blown that. And that's why she left. She said, I'm not getting a peerage and I'm in a huff and I'm off. And so Nadine Dorris was now the butt of a joke in the Commons and it was a good joke and kudos to Mr Sunak. But making good jokes in the Commons doesn't always, I mean, William Hague did the best jokes ever when he was opposition leader and then went crashing to the 2001 election defeat. There's a whole circuit out there that you can make a lot of money from. After dinner circuit, great. Necessarily winning the next election, not so much. We'll see you tomorrow. Bye-bye. Bye.