

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why is Rishi Sunak acting like he won?

This is a Global Player original podcast.
Westminster's been acting like the next election's a done deal.
The Labour Party's been acting like it's a done deal.
The people of Uxbridge just told all of them that it's not.
Now, no one expected us to win here,
that Steve's victory demonstrates that when confronted
with the actual reality of the Labour Party,
when there's an actual choice on a matter of substance at stake,
people vote Conservative.
That was Rishi Sunak in the rumbling rumble in Uxbridge.
But these results overnight will give him some heartburn
and a bit of indigestion too,
like a good greasy spoon breakfast often does,
because the Tories had a pretty bumpy night.
Now, kudos to him for not reciting what the five pledges were.
That must be the first time he said,
I've got five pledges without listing them.
But otherwise, yes, Uxbridge was interesting,
but the rest of it was bloody awful.
Going into yesterday, Rishi Sunak was trying to ensure
that he didn't become the first Prime Minister since 1968
to lose three by-elections on the same night.
He just about managed to avoid that fake bond.
Today's show, we're going to tell you why it is
that you shouldn't pay too much attention to that,
because the real story of these elections is what we knew before,
that the Conservative Party is in one almighty hole,
and there is no obvious way for Rishi Sunak to dig them out of it.
Welcome to the newsagents.
The newsagents.
It's John.
And it's Lewis.
And we now know how those big three by-elections have gone.
If you haven't heard yet, these are the results.
I'm doing it like an election programme.
Labour had a spectacular win in the North Yorkshire Sea
of Selby and Aynsley.
This had never been a Labour seat since its creation in 2010.
It had a majority of 20,000,
and the now very young MP, Keir Mather, another Keir,
Keir the Younger, won the seat.
And he didn't just win it.
He won it by a majority of over 4,000,
with a 24, yes, a 24 per cent swing.

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Labour have never overturned a Tory majority so big in a by-election.
The Lib Dems continued their spectacular by-election run,
winning their fourth by-election off the Conservatives in this parliament
at the other end of the country in Somerton and Froome in Somerset
with a 29 per cent swing.

That's their sixth biggest in Lib Dem by-election history.

I love this stuff.

Have you noticed, John?

Have you noticed that?

I love this stuff.

I'm worried that I'm going to have to sedate Lewis at some point
because the excitement levels in this studio,
I mean, he's almost bouncing off the walls.

You know what?

It's a cheap hobby.

And the Conservatives, and this was the glint of light for Rishisulak,
the Conservatives unexpectedly held Boris Johnson's old seat
of Uxbridge and South Rhyslip.

There was still a swing to the Labour Party of 6.7 per cent,
but it wasn't quite enough.

And they held on with a majority of 495,
largely as a result of what is a pretty big local issue of deep dislike
over Mayor Sadiq Khan's ultra-low-emission zone policy.

Well, let's come back to that because I think the bigger picture
was worth staying with for the time being
and where it leaves the Tories and where it leaves Labour.

Interestingly, maybe the one helpful thing,
well, you could argue that, that emerged this morning
was Jacob Riesmog on the radio rowing in behind Rishisulak,
which is not something...

Sir Jacob, John, you keep making this mistake.

Sir Jacob Riesmog.

I don't know how that happened.

I don't know why not how.

You're a very rude man.

This is Sir Jacob on BBC Radio 4.

I think the Tory party mustn't panic,
and it may surprise you that I'm going to say this,
but we must support Rishisulak.

This is really important that Tory MPs, including me,
need to row in behind the Prime Minister.

I'm pausing to check that I've heard what you said.

Yeah. This is Jacob Riesmog.

The man who has criticised Rishisulak

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suggested he'd almost got socialist economic policy,
spends too much, borrows too much, taxes too much,
and you're now saying, steady as she goes, back the leader.
That's absolutely right because I want the Conservatives
to win the election rather than to have Kerstama,
who will punish us all with these high green taxes,
and therefore we have to back the leader that we've got.
So, you back the leader that you've got,
according to Sir Jacob Riesmog.
But interesting there, he's talking about
how we have to get behind him,
and that this could be like 1992,
when the Tories came from behind to win a general election
with a very small majority when John Major was Prime Minister.
Look at the results from last night.
The biggest Labour swing since before the 97 general election,
which presaged Tony Blair's landslide.
The Liberal Democrats, for the first time in this parliament,
have won four by-elections.
When was the last time they did that?
Before the 1997 election.
There is so much that is so much more similar
to the lead-up to the 97 election,
that I think that it is Tories whistling to keep their spirits up
to try to make the comparison now with 1992.
Because 1992 was a completely different set of circumstances.
Thatcher had been ousted after a very long period.
John Major comes in with a mandate to get rid of the hated poll tax,
which he does.
The British people come to the 92 election,
feel they've had a general election,
because they've got rid of Thatcher.
And there were question marks over Neil Kinnick, the Labour Party leader.
So, to compare it now to 1992 just seems way off target.
I think this is what quite a lot of the coverage this morning has missed,
which is that inevitably, because of the surprise of the Uxbridge results,
it's got a lot of attention.
Rishi Sunak, fair play to his media guys.
They were out first thing this morning.
They were in the rumbling tum.
Frankly, why wouldn't you be?
First thing, and the pictures were everywhere,
and the headline was, you know, surprise.
Surprise win for Sunak, and he's looking happy.

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And it gives the image on the TV screens
of this unexpected win and an abolient Prime Minister.
He's got nothing to be abolient about.
The fact of the matter is, is that
the only thing Uxbridge really tells us is something we already knew,
which is that there is a great deal of antipathy
in the out of London boroughs about you, Lez.
Were it not for you, Lez?
The Labour Party would almost certainly have won the seat.
Let's see, by the way, which has always been conservative.
It's never been Labour.
It has historically been a solid Conservative seat.
It's trending maybe a bit more demographically towards the Labour Party.
And even in Uxbridge, there was still a near 7% swing,
as I was saying earlier, to the Labour Party.
And that is all 7% that the Labour Party needs
to get become the largest party in a hung Parliament.
So even if you had Uxbridge, which was a pretty meager result
in some ways for the Labour Party,
if that were translated nationally,
then they would still become the largest party.
The true story, like you were saying, John, is the fact that what we are seeing
is, and we've got lots of evidence for this now,
we've got lots of evidence for it in by-elections,
we've got lots of evidence for it at local elections,
the coalescence of the anti-conservative vote in seat after seat
is now got enough evidence to say that it is a profound and significant trend.
That where the Lib Dems have the best chance of defeating the Conservatives,
Labour voters hold their nose and vote for the Lib Dems,
vice versa as well in Labour-facing seats, as we saw indeed with Selby.
And that, as you say, John, is exactly like the mid-1990s.
And let's just get real here for a moment.
I mean, like Selby, a couple of years ago,
if we had said the Labour Party is going to win a by-election
with a 4,000 majority in Selby and Anstey,
a seat which is one of the safest Conservative seats in the country,
we would have been told that we were absolutely off our bloody heads.
This is a seat which is exactly the sort of seat where the Labour Party
has not just been doing badly, but has been catastrophically underperforming in recent years.
It is a seat that is more rural, it's a seat that's quite affluent,
it's a seat with fewer graduates, it's a seat that was heavily leave voting.
I mean, come on, just two years ago,
they couldn't even win the Hartlepool by-election against the government.
The government won that seat, a seat that had been Labour until the mid-1960s.

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The transformation in just two years has been mind-boggling.

Now, you can argue whether that's because of Keir Starmer and a Labour Party resurgence, or just because the Conservatives have completely and utterly imploded, but the transformation is profound.

The transformation is profound, but you've also got, just go back to the 2019 election and Boris Johnson getting an 80 seat majority. So much has changed since then.

For a start, Labour no longer has Jeremy Corbyn as the party leader, who was a deeply polarising figure, easy to rally support against, very difficult to sell on the doorstep in kind of working-class, conservative, small-sea areas, and Labour got punished accordingly.

You also had, among Brexit voters, them saying, look, if we're going to get this bloody thing done, we need to have a Tory government because they're the only ones who are going to achieve it. We're going to back Boris.

That coalition has completely fractured since then.

I do think, though, that one thing that has kind of occurred to me this morning was that Nigel Adams, who had been the MP in North Yorkshire and who resigned in a fit of peak because he couldn't have a peerage, I mean, if he hadn't resigned and this by-election hadn't taken place, and it had just been two by-elections where Tories had held on to Uxbridge but lost in the West Country in the Somerset and Froome, the narrative that Rishi Sunak would have had today would have been completely different.

Rishi Sunak must want to stick pins in Nigel Adams for what he's done over all of this.

But the bigger picture that you describe is absolutely spot-on.

They are in a hole.

It's like when you are caring for a very elderly relative and you know there are no good options of what you can do.

You run out of easy solutions.

Running out of time.

The Tories are in that position it feels like now.

What is the good option?

Change the leader?

Change the policies?

Change direction?

When you hear Jacob Rees-Mogg saying, oh well, steady as she goes, we've got to row in behind Rishi.

That's all they've got.

I mean, look, in terms of where this leaves Sunak personally,

I mean, there is no sense that there's going to be a move against him.

His internal position seems secure.

Even if he'd lost Uxbridge, I think that would have been the case.

I think one of the other things in terms of the change that you're talking about, John,

is though, which would have surprised us again
if we rewound sort of two years or three years,
is that again, Selby, deeply leave voting area,
Summerton and Froome for the Lib Dems, deeply leave voting area,
and the retreat of Brexit as a salient issue,
as an indicator of voting intention is extraordinary.
I mean, if we'd been having this conversation two or three years ago,
we'd have been talking about the great realignments,
this idea that leave voting areas were inexorably moving to the conservatives,
away from parties like the Lib Dems or the Labour Party.
For leave voting areas, at least, that process seems to have been halted in its tracks.
And we should talk about the Lib Dems because it's almost like we're getting used to this now.
The by-election victories that they have achieved now
in seats as disparate as Cheshireman Amisham in Buckinghamshire,
of North Shropshire, Tiverton in Devon, and now Summerton in Froome,
they've achieved them all, huge conservative majorities,
with extraordinary swings.
I think four of the biggest swings they've ever had in by-elections have been in this parliament.
And there's two things to say about that.
One, it shows that they are returning to being a by-election winning machine,
which, of course, historically they were.
They are recovering from the doldrums of the coalition period.
It also shows that they're making a return in the Southwest to their historic heartlands,
which they'll be very pleased about.
And it shows as well that pincer movement of the Labour and Lib Dems,
which is what you need to really defeat the Conservative Party, is coming back.
There is a question, of course, as to whether they can translate by-election success
to the national picture, because they're very good at throwing the whole kitchen sink.
At one by-election, they have fewer resources when it comes to a general election.
But they've got every reason to be extremely pleased.
If you look at two polling questions that I think are interesting,
the first polling question is, is it time that the Tories had a spell in opposition?
Are they done? Are you sick of the Tories?
Overwhelmingly, the British public answers that question in the affirmative.
Huge majority think that the Conservatives need a spell.
Now, out of government, they've been there too long.
They've passed their shelf-life. They are passed their sell-by date.
It is time for them to go.
And of course, that is, you know, time for a change
is one of the most powerful clarion calls in politics.
The other polling question is, would you like to see Labour replace the Tories?
And that is still where there are still a few more questions for Sakya Stammer to answer.
Because I think that there are still some reservations.
It is not Blair in the lead-up to 97, I would argue.

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And the Youles Factor, there are a number of constituencies on the suburbs of London that could also have been good target seats for Labour.
Can the Tories capitalise on that in a general election?
Or are general elections fought on big national issues and you can't do micro-targeting?
Yeah, and look, there are going to be, and I know for a fact
because I've spoken to some of them this morning,
there are pretty irritated figures in the Labour Party at the moment.
They were very close to a clean sweep.
They were very close to, there being no other narrative other than Labour success.
And there are questions about Youles and about the ways that Eek Khan has approached it.
And you could sort of hear that in some of the Labour interviewees this morning.
This was Labour's deputy leader, Angela Rayner, talking about this.
We're trying to do the right thing and keep Londoners safe,
but we've also got to recognise that people need compensation
and need a way to be able to do that that isn't going to impact on them
at a cost of living crisis when people can't afford it.
So there is a concern that we have to make sure
that whatever is implemented is not at the cost of working families.
Funnily enough, Oxbridge, I think, this is a weird by-election
because I think it doesn't tell us very much about the next general election.
But funnily enough, I think it probably tells us more about the direction
of our long-term politics than the election itself.
I mean, it doesn't tell us much about the election because it was already said
Labour were in this weird kind of almost quasi-incumbent position.
Sounds quite uncomfortable, but it was uncomfortable for them
because they obviously had Khan Nair as mayor.
And the Tories very successfully managed to do what politicians always say
they want by elections to be about, but rarely are, which is local issues.
And this really was about local issues.
It doesn't have much import beyond a few other sort of London seats.
And let's be honest, London's already so dominated by Labour.
It won't make much difference when it comes to the general election.
But I do think it tells us something about the future of our politics
because the future of our politics, we know,
if we're to take the Labour Party at their word,
is to say that the next five to ten years are going to be dominated
by the transition to net zero, by more environmental policies.
Policies, which, by the way, are going to have a big impact on people's lives.
And if you think about the fact that government itself,
they run the Labour Party, they're committed to phasing out
the sale of petrol and diesel cars by 2030.
The replacement at some point in the next 15 years
of our sort of gas boiler system replacement with heat pumps.
You can see the politics of net zero honing into view.

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And although politicians often talk about it as if it's unequivocally a good thing.
By the way, I'm saying we need to do this.
It is a good thing.
But you can see the potential for backlash against it
and a sort of populist centre right or right wing backlash against it.
And there are already going to be.
I fear that the net result of this, by the way,
is going to be that the Labour Party is going to be
that little bit more sceptical, that little bit more worried
about environmental net zero policies.
And you already heard it from the right as well today.
Jacob Riesmog in that interview wasn't just saying he backed Rishi Sunak,
but he was imploring Rishi Sunak to back away from net zero policies
to go for the Labour Party on the politics of the environment,
on the politics of net zero and all of these sorts of things.
And we've already seen glimmers of that with just stop oil and all that sort of thing.
So I think that this by-election is a portent of our politics to come,
both in terms of the Conservative government and its politics now
and the Labour Party in the future.
It's so interesting.
The Blair insight into politics.
And he tells this story of someone stopping him and said,
after the 92 election and saying,
oh, Tony, what is wrong with the British people that they didn't vote for us?
And Blair said, no, maybe it's us
and we have to go closer to the British people.
It is very dangerous for politicians
to go so far ahead of public opinion,
even though they might get a lot of likes on Twitter for the positions they're taking,
that on the environmental agenda,
I think Keir Starmer's takeaway from this will not be I've got to be more radical
and I need to be bolder in what I'm offering the British people.
I think his takeaway will be,
yeah, I'm pretty well right to be cautious about what we're saying we will do
because undoubtedly Labour strategist thinks
that this whole ultra low emission zone thing around London
has cost them the Uxbridge seat.
And I think you will see more caution,
not less sticking to his broad ambitions and goals
and not going way ahead of public opinion
on what can be done at a certain speed
because we have seen the backlash when it becomes real,
what those policies will mean
if you're driving an old gas guzzling car with high emissions.

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And we should say, by the way, in terms of ULEZ,
this was actually in some ways a conservative, mandated thing
instructing cities to get air pollution out of control,
but also in terms of what it means for the Labour Party politics,
that process or that dynamic is going to make the tension
which is already there between Keir Starmer's office
or the top of the Labour Party and Ed Miliband,
his shadow energy secretary,
because Ed Miliband has been the one urging Keir Starmer to go further
and faster on net zero and all these sort of things,
people like other people around the Labour leader going,
hold on a minute, let's go a bit more slowly.
It's going to make that tension even more acute.
We're going to go to the break in just a second,
but before we do, no by-election night is complete
without an Ed Davie stunt.
It was pure Hollywood.
It was as though Baz Lerman or James Cameron
had come to Somerset and Froome
and set up one of the most elaborate Hollywood-esque
grand productions ever.
It was Sir Ed Davie with a circus cannon,
and well, it all went fucked.
So here we go.
Let's hope it lights.
Five, four, three, two, one.
Oh!
Did you like that?
Take it like that.
Did you like that?
Not a lot.
We'll be back after the break.
This is The News Agents.
Welcome back.
Now, if you're a political geek,
you obviously love statistics,
and there is a fabulous statistic
out of last night's crop of by-election results.
20% of the Liberal Democrats in Parliament are now Sarah.
Yep.
Who knew?
I don't know.
I don't know.
I don't know.

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I don't know.

I don't know.

Yep.

Who knew?

And we're joined by a Sarah in the studio.

Sarah Olney, Lib Dem for Richmond Park Treasury spokesperson.

Welcome to you.

Thank you very much.

Congratulations.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Yes, it's been another good day to be a Lib Dem.

Yes, and a Lib Dem Sarah.

And another good day to be a Lib Dem Sarah,

and another good day to be a Lib Dem Sarah

who's won a by-election.

There you go.

So there you are.

All the boxes ticked.

What do you think happened?

Yeah, I mean, I was down there three times

over the course of the election and right from the start,

it was extraordinary, you know,

much more so than the other by-elections

we fought over the last few years.

Extraordinary how ready people were

to vote Liberal Democrat.

And we heard time and time again that people

are fed up of the Tories,

and I think particularly in Summerton and Fromm,

where obviously David Warburton hasn't even been present

in any...

That's the former Conservative MP.

The former Conservative MP, yes.

Hasn't been sort of present in any kind of form

for the last year,

and people were particularly upset about that.

And he had to resign in controversial circumstances.

Absolutely, absolutely.

But more broadly than that,

people are just sick to death of the Tories,

and people are concerned,

as they're concerned everywhere,

about the cost of their mortgages,

the cost of living,
the state of the NHS,
but particularly in these rural areas,
and we've seen that in Tiverton and Honiton,
and we've seen it in North Shropshire,
they feel really let down
by the government's trade deal,
particularly over farming.
That was a really, really big theme.
Did Brexit come up at all?
Because we were talking on the show before you arrived
about the fact that Brexit as a salient issue
on the doorstep seems to be fast diminishing.
And in a way that we would have found that extraordinary
even a few years ago,
I mean, Lib Dems at one point were the revoke party,
you're now winning these elections
in heavily lead voting areas,
including North Shropshire you've seen previously,
now again in Somerton and Froome.
Is it coming up at all now?
Not to the people I spoke to.
They were just sick of the Tories,
we need something different,
we want to vote for you.
I spoke to one gentleman,
I was in Temple Coombe yesterday,
and a gentleman called Kelvin.
He's always voted Conservative.
He felt that they always really,
really aligned with his values.
He says he wasn't sure about Lib Dem policy,
he thinks we're a bit soft.
I'm going to vote for you this time.
He says that Sarah, she's been here,
she's knocked on my door,
she works really hard,
you've worked really hard in this campaign.
So that was the sort of, you know,
positive message that I was getting back
from voters in a Somerset accent.
Right.
But what you can do in a by-election
is very different from what you can do

in a general election.
You can't be in 650 constituencies
when it's the general election
and you can't have that intensity
of people swamping the constituency
to kind of get your message across.
Does this mean anything?
Is this just your really bloody good
at by-elections
and doesn't matter at all anywhere else?
Well, I think there's,
it's probably a couple of things.
We are really bloody good at by-elections,
and I don't think there's much doubt about that.
But in terms of the bigger goal,
what I think is really important
about yesterday for us
is that we can show that we are,
we're back in the Southwest,
obviously not just Somerton and Feroon,
but also Tiverton and Honiton last year.
We're back in the Southwest
where we used to hold lots of seats,
and I think people will see that.
They will be looking at the Liberal Democrats now
and they'll be thinking, you know,
these are the people that we want to vote for
at the general election.
But I think also, yeah,
we're not going to be competitive in 650 seats,
and that's not the plan for us.
But there are a number of seats
where we do plan to really work hard
and we've shown that we can beat the Tories.
There's, I think, 92 seats across the UK
where we're in second place,
and in as many of those as we can,
we will be out there making the case
that people should be voting Liberal Democrat
if they don't want the Tories.
Just to follow up on that,
there also seems to be a huge appetite
among the British public
for tactical voting as well.

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That, you know, you look at the result
in North Yorkshire,
you look at the result in Somerset,
Labour were in the strongest position to win there.
People piled in behind Labour,
Somerset and Feroon,
they piled in behind Liberal Democrat.
Is that a significant force in the next general election?
I think, you know, Labour have obviously got a job to do
in terms of persuading perhaps some of their former voters
to come back to them in the seats they lost in 2019.
Some of those seats, I imagine, will be fought fairly hard
and, you know, no way of knowing which way they'll go.
So I think where the Liberal Democrats
can really make a difference
if we don't want a Tory government
after the next general election
is that where we can gain seats,
that's where we can really make an impact.
Finally, Sarah, why do you think it is?
There's no doubt you've had spectacular by-election success
four times now in this parliament
and yet it isn't translating to the national polls.
I mean, you haven't been any higher,
and I was looking earlier, than 13 points,
basically over the last few years.
Why is it that you're able to perform well in these by-elections
and yet there doesn't seem to be nationally
any great enthusiasm for you?
I think it's the same as I was just saying, though,
with second in 92 seats.
So there's a limited number of seats
where people will be looking at the Liberal Democrats
and thinking that that's where they're going to place their vote.
But if you go back not so long ago,
pre-collision days, you were often around the 20-point mark.
I mean, you're just bumping along the bottom.
We're not bumping along the bottom.
Well, 10, 9, 10, 11, 12, it's quite...
13% is not the bottom.
But anyway, my point is more actually,
I don't always think that polls capture our vote share terribly well
and I certainly don't think that they're a good guide
to how many seats we're going to win,

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and the seats is what really, really counts.
I mean, we've won the same number of seats
on 8% as we've won on 12%,
and actually you look at difference between 92 and 97.
It's kind of like the vote share was very similar,
the number of seats was extremely different.
So I don't think, for us, it doesn't particularly matter
what the vote share is in national polls.
I think they're a good guide to relative performance
of Conservative and Labour.
I just don't think they tell a very useful story
about the Liberal Democrats.
And I think, you know, for us,
we're really focused on the number of seats
we can win at the next general election,
and we're hoping for a few more results like last night.
Sarah only, thank you very much for being with us on The News Agents.
Thanks for having me.
And we are joined now in the studio by Emily Thornbury,
the Shadow Attorney General,
and welcome to you.
Thank you for being with us.
Oh, it's a pleasure.
What did we say about last night?
Good imparts or what?
Yeah, I mean, it's kind of...
I mean...
OK, so I think that there are...
the two elections that we were, you know, very active in
have had, obviously, two different results
and for two different reasons.
I think the one in Selby was run on national politics
and what was going on nationally, national messages.
And it reflects what happens in the polls,
which is very good news.
And then Uxbridge, which was run very much on one issue,
the Conservatives said,
vote Tory and we'll stop Eulahs.
So it was kind of very narrow,
and obviously it's very difficult to extrapolate that
to any sort of national result.
Let's ask the obvious question.
Yeah.
Does Eulahs, the ultra-low-emission zone,

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does it need to be rethought?

Well, we're calling on Sadiq to kind of consider the results and to think about Eulahs and about how it's being put in place and so on.

That sounds like a yes.

Well, no, I mean, listen, in politics, if you're a good politician, you need to listen and learn from the public, right? And it was very much a kind of debate going on in Uxbridge. And there is a cost-of-living crisis.

It is very difficult for people on low incomes who rely on their cars, and if their cars are elderly, to be able to just get rid of it and buy a newer one, particularly since there is a scrappage scheme, but it's not as generous as it could be.

And actually, you know, if you look at the other cities like Bradford or Birmingham or Bristol, they've all got scrappage schemes with 40, 50 million pounds from the government, which the London doesn't have.

I just think the government wants, we all want, air quality in London to be much better.

The mayor is under an obligation to improve air quality. Transport is one of the biggest producers of pollution in London, so he's trying to deal with it.

Let me try one more time.

I'm trying to answer your question in a thoughtful and complete way, and the way that you're allowed to in podcasts.

And we're very happy for you to do that.

I just wonder whether you're saying that his policy has cost you the by-election?

I think probably.

I mean, you know, look, it's never been Labour.

I mean, Axbrook has never been Labour and didn't even go Labour in 1997.

Didn't even go.

I mean, we had a by-election in 1997 as well.

Still didn't go Labour.

You know, so it's been a hard nut to crack, and possibly we got a bit over confident and a bit over excited and thought that we were definitely going to get it.

And then there was also the addition of Eulahs.

So, you know, probably Eulahs had a lot to do with it,

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but I wouldn't blame it completely on Eulahs.

Who is we when you say you're calling on Siddique to rethink it?

Labourers.

The Labour leadership.

So Keir's time.

So Keir has today, Angela has,

and collectively I think leadership is of Eulahs.

And so when you say rethink, do you mean

stop the expansion from the inner boroughs to the outer boroughs,

abolish it altogether?

What do you mean?

No, we're not going into any specifics at this stage.

It's the day after the election.

The most important thing is that we consider, you know,

the messages that we were given from Arxbridge

and work out what the appropriate response is.

And I'm not going to tell you at this stage.

Sure.

You're a London MP.

You're a London MP.

You, there's already applies to Islington.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Do you think it's a good idea?

Has it worked in Islington?

There is no such thing as good pollution.

You know, children's lungs in London are too small.

Most of my primary schools are on main roads.

They need to have better air quality.

20% of strokes in London are caused by pollution.

I was diagnosed on Monday with asthma.

I think that's probably to do with the fact that I'm a Londoner.

Of course we have to do something about it.

And Eulahs is a very important way.

What's the other ways?

We're going to stop industry?

Why do you think calling on Sadiq to rethink it?

Well, because I think there are different ways in which you can do it.

You know, so I think that there are ways and ways you can roll it out.

You know, I think it's got to do with the particulars of it.

You know, in what circumstances do people need to change their cars and when?

I think there's a lot of kind of, we could look at that and make it fairer

and reflect the real concerns that people have

a bit better than perhaps the current system does.

Why didn't Kierstar more calling him to rethink it before today then?

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I mean, if it's such a bad idea.

I mean, it sounds like you're hanging Sadiq can't out to dry a little bit to be honest.

I don't think, I don't want to do that.

And I don't, I don't think I do hang him out to dry.

I think saying that, you know, that you should look again at the scheme

that, you know, see if you can't make it better is not hanging him out to dry.

It's just saying, look, we've just had a, we've just had a by-election

and we've got a pretty strong message and you Sadiq, like me, you know,

want to listen to the public and want to make sure that we have the best policies possible

and the way you develop the best possible policies is by listening to the public.

And I'm not saying it's easy because as I say, you have this tension

because I have, you know, large numbers of parents in my constituency

who want cleaner air because they're frightened, they're frightened for their children.

Emily, doesn't this underline a kind of worry, a concern

among a lot of Labour supporters that actually everything is cautioned first

and, oh, crikey, we've just lost Oxbridge, we need to ditch you less policy now

because that's obviously been unpopular with the voters

and that this kind of very cautious incremental approach

don't do anything that scares anyone is taking hold now in Labour.

No, no, who said ditch? You said ditch, I didn't say ditch.

You said rethink.

Yeah, rethink. That's not ditching it.

You said there are better ways of doing it.

There are better ways of doing it, that's not ditching it.

That's like learning from the public.

That's like looking at your policies, looking to see if you can't do it better.

That's not ditching it.

And that's just grown-up politics.

That's not, you know, and you don't, you know, it's always like, ooh, you turn.

No, no, no.

Let's just make sure that we have the best policies, you know, that we can.

And let's bear in mind, as I say, these two huge tensions for London.

Has anyone from the Labour leadership spoken to Sadiq and said, hey, rethink time.

What do you think? Have you spoken to him?

I'm not speaking to Sadiq today.

That's largely because I've been doing medium as the saying.

But, you know, I mean, I get in touch with Sadiq on a regular basis.

We have, you know, debates.

There are many things that I agree with Sadiq on.

I think that he's a brave and bold, you know, man.

I think that he's doing a good job as mayor.

But I do think he probably ought to rethink the new layers,

given the impact it's having on out of London.

It's not like in London.

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You know, many people do need to have cars because public transport's not as extensive.
I know he's doing work on it.
I know it's getting better, but it's not good enough yet.
And so for, you know, poorer working people, it's a real burden.
Has Keir spoken to him today?
I don't know whether Keir has spoken to him today.
I know that Keir has been in Selby.
So, you know, I'm sure these conversations go on and I couldn't tell you.
I'm sure there are mobile phone signals in Selby.
I'm sure there are mobile phone signals in Selby.
But, you know, he's been in Selby. He's been dealing with Selby.
I'm sure there will come a time in the near future where the two guys will speak.
And do you think the danger is, in a way, we're having this discussion about Uxbridge,
you're calling on the mayor to change his policy with regards to you layers.
In a way, that just distracts from your victory in Selby.
You're the ones asking me this question.
Come on, David. You've been touring the TV studios calling on him to change policy.
But, you know, but let's go, okay, let's go back to this.
The point is, this was a by-election that was fought on a narrow issue,
that the Tories fought on a narrow issue,
and then they get the prime minister to turn up and go,
aha, there we are. This is our way to the victory.
And you respond scared going, oh, Mr. Mayor, please change the policy.
No, no. What we say is,
this is a particular result for this particular seat.
You can't extrapolate this to a general election. You just can't.
But, equally, what people were saying to us, they were speaking the truth to us.
And we need to bear it in mind. We need to think about this.
It does sound like the Tory narrative has taken hold, and you're responding to it.
No, the narrative is one that's been given to us by the public
by listening to what the public have to say.
And there is concern amongst the public about the way in which this is being introduced.
Well, 60% of Londoners are in favour of it.
Of course, 60% of Londoners are in favour of it,
but in outer London, working people are finding it very difficult,
and they have a choice. They can get rid of their car and buy a new one,
which costs them too much money,
or they have to pay, you know, daily to use their car to go into the Euler zone,
which again costs them too much money.
And in the meantime, children's lungs are too small,
and people are getting asthma, and people are getting strokes when they don't...
So we have to do something about it.
If you had won Uxbridge with a majority of a few hundred, as opposed to losing it,
would you have been coming into the studio calling for Sadiq to rethink Euler's?

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I think there would be conversations with Sadiq, certainly.
I do think so, because we need to get this right.
We need to get it right for the sake of all of us.
So I'll go back to Lucy's earlier question. Why hasn't this been raised earlier?
Why is it being raised now in response to a by-election defeat
if you thought the policy was wrong or needed recalibrating,
rethinking whatever the phrase is, not ditched?
You've told me you're not ditched.
But whatever the phrase is, why didn't you do it earlier?
Well, I suppose.
I mean, I don't want to kind of encourage people to do this.
But I think having a by-election actually means that you do get...
I mean, we've had thousands of Labour volunteers and politicians,
you know, professional politicians in Uxbridge,
listening to what the people of Uxbridge have to say.
And it's been an important lesson of learning for Labour,
just like there have been thousands of people out in Selby.
You know, you get messages by listening to people
and by people going out of their way and being good enough to give you their time
and say, my biggest concern is this, my biggest concern is that.
And you listen.
And so there has been a focus on Uxbridge,
and as a result, you know, a clear message comes out.
What is your takeout from the by-elections as a whole?
Has Keir Starmer sealed the deal with the British people?
Are you on course for victory next year?
I don't think we can say that we've sealed the deal
because you look at the reality, right?
We need to get a better result than Labour has ever had.
We have to get a turnaround when it comes to seats.
We have to do better than 97.
We have to get so many seats.
We have such a mountain to get over that we absolutely cannot say,
ah, it's fine. It's going to be a walk in the park. It's not.
Anything could happen between now and a general election,
and we need to be careful, cautious.
We need to be focused. We need to be tough.
You know, we've got to take this through.
We're 20% ahead now.
That's reflected in Selby, which was a fantastic result, historic.
But, you know, we cannot be complacent.
We absolutely are not.
And we fight for every seat and we fight for every vote.
We really do.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why is Rishi Sunak acting like he won?

Emily, thank you so much.
I realize it's Lewis, John and Emily in the studio.
Yeah.
We've just got the wrong Emily.
Or the right Emily.
Oh, the right Emily, let's say it.
Sorry, Emily.
Thanks so much for joining us.
He's so rich.
I know he's, he's terrible. Cheeky.
That's one way of putting it.
Thank you so much.
Not at all.
Well, that was quite something, wasn't it?
Emily Thornbury is sharp.
She's intellectually self-confident.
She's a great performer.
And that is a fantastic mix if you're doing political interviews,
because she has the confidence to go where the questions take her
and doesn't pull her punches much, particularly on a podcast.
And by the way, talking about pulling your punches,
I mean, I know she rejected my characterization of it,
but they have completely hung Siddiq Khan out to dry.
He's arid.
He's arid at this point.
He's been baked in the sun.
I mean, they have basically come out the day after a by-election
on Mayor Khan's signature policy,
the thing that he's attached all of his political credibility to,
the thing that he's told Londoners in the year before
a mayoral election where he's trying to stand for a third term.
The Labour Party basically turned around and said,
his judgment on this is wrong.
And that is a big, big problem.
He now stands isolated,
and he's now got a really difficult choice.
Either he plows on, in which case he is setting himself up against
his own national leadership.
He could choose to do that.
There are advantages and disadvantages.
Or he retreats, and in which case, obviously,
he looks weak and he looks like he's caved into pressure
from the Labour Party national leadership.
And it's hard to see what the alternatives are in that scenario.

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When asked, is it his fault?
Probably, that did probably cost us the by-election.
I also thought that there was that question that we have discussed before
on the podcast about Labour bravery
or willingness to say unpopular things or to make an argument.
We've had a by-election.
Crikey, we've got to rethink this.
And, you know, you look at the number of seats there are
around London, Hillingdon, kind of Finchley and Golders,
Green, Chipping, Barnett, et cetera, et cetera.
There are a number of seats that Labour might have thought,
we quite fancy that.
But they are in the kind of you-less zone,
where maybe they think, oh, my God,
these seats become much more difficult with this.
Yeah, and I do think as well that before today,
Keir Starmer's line was, you know,
this is the local decision, I'm not going to get involved.
He often sort of says, oh, I'm the great localist.
Well, he doesn't sound like much of a localist at the moment,
because he's basically, as I say, calling on the Mayor of London
to come into line with what he is saying.
And again, you know, in terms of where it leaves
the National Labour Party leadership,
I think, right, John, I think the other thing about it is this,
I'm not entirely sure this was the wisest thing to do the day after,
because all that we'll have now done is everything,
is now about Uxbridge.
A loss that was actually quite explicable.
You just say, look, there was this local issue,
it's Mehkan Singh, we're a bit ambivalent about it,
but it's his decision and we know why he's doing it.
But you know what, look at Selby, Selby, Selby, Selby, Selby.
But instead, all that this is doing is reigniting the idea
that basically the important result last night,
which is the thing that we've spent this podcast saying it wasn't,
is Uxbridge.
And actually, in terms of the national election trends,
as we've been discussing, it's not.
We'll be back in a moment.
This is The News Agents.
Welcome back.
We had wondered, or it had been rumoured,
that there could be a cabinet reshuffle today.

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At the time of recording, at least, that has not taken place,
and we're told that it will not happen.
I suspect that if they'd lost all three,
it probably would have happened,
but Rishi Sunak is happy for the pictures of the rumbling tum
to go out across the airwaves,
rather than sad-looking ministers emerging from number 10 Downing Street.
There was, though, to keep us entertained,
during the course of election night,
another extraordinary spectacle,
and this was Johnny Mercer,
who is a Conservative, Plymouth MP,
Armed Services Minister, and so on.
And ex-soldier.
An ex-soldier, we should say as well, yeah.
And he was on Sky News' bi-election overnight programme,
and I don't know whether it was, like, just a little bit early,
or a little bit late, about four or five o'clock in the morning,
but he had a quite extraordinary take
on the fact that Britain's newest MP,
or the youngest MP, the new baby of the house, Keir Mayther,
who's a new MP for Salby and Ainsley, the Labour MP,
had just been elected.
This was his analysis.
I think it's always good to get new people in politics.
I mean, I think we mustn't become a sort of repeat of the in-betweeners, right?
So I think you've got to have people who actually...
What do you mean by that?
This synthetic outrage, you know,
identikit Labour politician...
What?
...is the opposite of what people like me came into politics for, right?
I became an MP because I thoroughly disliked that sort of representation
and that kind of fictional, you know, outrage all the time
about the Conservatives.
I think that, you know, this guy...
I mean, he's been at Oxford University more than he's had a job right,
so if you can really apply that to the empathy required
to understand what it's really like in this country at the moment
in terms of the cost of living,
in terms of all these experiences of the people he's trying to represent...
Personally, personally, I don't think that is conducive
to good electoral representation
and I'm more than entitled to have that view.

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So, I mean, this is an extraordinary thing to say, I think.
I mean, by the way, I think Johnny Mercer in fairness to him,
he's an interesting guy, I quite like him,
he's often got something interesting to say,
he's done a good job at the Ministry of Defence and so on.
But I don't know, as I say, whether it was just a bit late in the night.
I mean, that was dripping with condescension.
I'm sorry, let's just rewind a little bit here.
Yeah, we've got this new 25-year-old MP.
Like, actually, I think it would be a bloody good idea
if we had more 25-year-old MPs.
You know what the House of Commons doesn't need?
Like, more like 50 to 60-year-old geezers, right?
No offense, John.
We're pressing companies.
Pressing companies.
Well, I'm 60-plus.
Well, exactly.
But the thing is, is that, like, let's just, like, rewind.
The reason that key MA that is even an MP in the first place
is because the previous Conservative MP, Nigel Adams,
as we've already said, decided to just walk off in a big huff
because Rishi Sunak wouldn't give him the peerage that he'd been promised.
Like, is that the sort of MP that we want?
And you know what?
Maybe it would be a good idea if we have more 20-year-old MPs
because you know what?
He says, mostly says,
oh, they don't understand the cost of living crisis.
There is no one better, bloody placed
to understand the cost of living crisis in a 25-year-old MP
with the rents as they are,
with the cost of living as it is, with the smaller incomes
and the incomes that have not grown over the last 10 years.
And maybe if we had more 25-year MPs,
we would have more houses that people could live in.
There might be better childcare.
Student loans wouldn't be going through the absolute roof.
And it goes on and on and on.
The planning system wouldn't be a complete joke.
And maybe climate change would actually be taken seriously.
So, you know what?
I think more 25-year-old MPs would be a good thing.
And I think Johnny Mercer would be a bit careful about stones

and glass houses and so on.
If you want to go down the
he doesn't understand the cost of living routes,
I'm sorry, your Prime Minister is absolutely loaded
beyond belief.
So, a dangerous road for Mr Mercer to go down.
Yeah, it was silly.
And it was one of those things that you're in the studio,
it's the middle of the night.
I mean, it's just so patronising, as you say.
And also, you want people with a variety of different backgrounds
who've got different experiences to bear.
And if we have the Conservatives saying,
we don't want young, talented people.
I mean, you think of all the people that came into politics
when they were in their 20s.
I mean, I think Pitt the Younger was Prime Minister
when he was 21?
23, yeah.
William Gladstone.
Yeah.
Winston Churchill.
I mean, they did all right.
They didn't have a bit of a career.
I mean, you know, to bring it up to date,
Charlie Kennedy was baby of the house.
I mean, even really right up to date.
I don't remember Mr Mercer or anyone else complaining
when Dana Davidson, when she was 26,
was elected DMP for Bishop Auckland.
There's loads and loads of history of very able MPs
coming into the House of Commons at a young age
and staying there for a long time and doing a good job.
And as Jenny Chapman, the Labour Baroness,
was saying in that clip there, at the end of the day,
it ain't up to him or anyone else.
No, let the voters decide.
The voters have decided that they like this guy
and quite frankly, must be a bit of an improvement
on the guy who decides to go off in a massive bloody huff.
I think Lewis is feeling a lot better than he's got that off his chest now.
Been a long week.
He's been a long week.
Bit of a stag weekend last weekend,

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which obviously took a bit of time to recover from.
Wasn't as good as the by-election.
I won't go into the stories of that weekend.
But maybe one day I will hold that over, Mr Goodall,
and our editor and the producer.
We'll see you next week. Bye-bye.
Bye-bye.
You