

[Transcript] The News Agents / Will Sunak lose the election over HS2? Analysing Rishi's speech

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We will be bold.

We will be radical.

We will face resistance and we will meet it.

We will give the country what it so sorely needs and yet too often has been denied.

A government prepared to make long-term decisions so that we can build a brighter future for everyone.

We in no doubt it is time for a change and we are it.

Thank you.

There is no more potent, time-honoured slogan in politics than it is time for a change.

The problem is it would be fine if Rishi Sunak had just won the general election and this was his first party conference with the Tories in power after 13 years of labour but it isn't.

It is proper mirror world stuff.

We are being asked to believe that Rishi Sunak is the brand new novelty candidate for this insurgent, conservative party.

It's as if he's been taken aside, given a bit of hard advice.

If you want to win this, you have to differentiate yourself, even piss off the people who came before you and make yourself sound different.

That was what just happened in the hall.

So he thinks welcome to the news agents.

The news agents.

It is John.

It's Emily.

It's Lewis.

And we are in the press area about 20 feet away from a huddle that is taking place.

We're Downing Street are trying to explain what Rishi Sunak has announced and there's one topic, one topic only, that people are asking questions about and that is the decision to scrap phase two of HS2, taking the high speed line from Birmingham to Manchester and the myriad other projects, infrastructure projects that have been kind of spirited out of the air that are going to take its place for this new network north that we've been introduced to today.

And right now the sums aren't exactly adding up or at least they're not clear because we've been told in the speech that this will save £36 billion that will be spent on brand new northern infrastructure projects.

And the huddle is currently asking where that comes from.

And the two Downing Street CCHQ spokespeople are doing a valiant job of trying to find the new bits of money like an extra 12 billion from the Liverpool to Manchester line, trying to explain that the Euston leg will be a bit cheaper, trying to explain that some new money is coming in and they're going to shuffle things around and do things with more private money.

But it isn't quite adding up.

And I think this is not the end of HS2.

It's the beginning of many, many more headache questions about just where the money is coming.

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I think all week I've been trying to think the same question and I was thinking the same question first thing this morning.

When we knew that this was coming, how does a Prime Minister thread the eye of the needle?

Where he is trying to set himself up as the change, but also trying to set himself up as the guy who takes long term decisions for a brighter future, whilst at the same time making the centrepiece of his speech the cancellation of a infrastructure project, which is by definition

as long term as it gets running into the 22nd century.

I think Sunak did a valiant job in trying to thread the needle, but still couldn't possibly manage to do it.

He tried to do so by announcing this new network north, reinvesting every single penny into Northern and Midlands transport projects.

There's two things about that.

First of all, there is the potential as Emily has alluded to, if you want to do that more quickly, because HS2 by definition is a very long term thing, it wouldn't be finished for another couple of decades, it could end up costing you more money if you were actually going to do it in a shorter time period.

The second thing is, which is a bigger problem, which is maybe people will believe you're that guy if they believe that you are actually going to spend the money and make these transport infrastructure projects in the first place.

The question is, and I've just been asking Cabinet Ministers exactly this question, I'm sure they'll be asked by many other people as well, given you haven't delivered HS2 in 13 years, why should any voter believe that you're going to do the same with all these other projects?

One thing politically it might do though, and you can see why this has appealed to them, is that of course it does put Labour in a bit of a bind, because what Labour will now have to do is decide whether they are committed themselves through HS2 and the second leg, and if they are, then are they going to be committed to these other projects that theoretically the Conservatives are now committed to, that the Prime Minister listed in that speech, and if so obviously they too will have to find the money to finance them.

Well look, let's just listen to Rishi Sunak trying to make the case why this was about the long term future.

I am ending this long running saga.

I am cancelling the rest of the HS2 project, and in its place, and in its place we will reinvest every single penny, £36 billion in hundreds of new transport projects in the north and the midlands across the country.

This means £36 billion of investment in the projects that will make a real difference across our nation.

I know for our producers this is their first party conference, rather tragically I've been coming for about 35 years to- Palmerston was your first wasn't it?

Exactly, 35 years to party conferences, and I've been used to these huddles where a Prime Minister's staff gives a briefing at the end and there are press releases and there are papers and it's all very clear and it all rolls out smoothly.

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This all feels slightly back of a fag packet, although they're not going to be available very soon after the announcement as well in the speech, but it all seems kind of like it's been cobbled together.

Well indeed, and I was talking to Conservative MP, close to leadership today, who was saying you know what, sometimes I keep getting asked, because I always asked him that question that I just asked.

I said how are you going to bind these themes together, because this conference slogan was obviously chosen some time ago and it doesn't seem to match what is the central premise of this conference.

He's like, Lewis, honestly, journalists always make this mistake.

You always think there's some grand plan and that it's all strategic and it's all been thought about for months.

The truth is, this has all been highly contingent.

Although it's true, Sunak had been thinking about HS2 and thinking about cancelling it for some time.

This whole chain of events had been set in motion by that photograph that was taken outside of Downing Street showing that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor had an agenda and they were discussing HS2 and as soon as that was out and the genie was out of the bottle, everything had to be accelerated and when they hadn't made a decision, it became clear this conference was going to be defined by it and so in a way they've retrofitted at least some of this speech and at least some of these themes around this cancellation.

So it's not part of some grand plan.

It's been retrofitted in the last sort of days and weeks.

And I think what they've been trying to do is find the narrative to explain why this has happened.

And to Dave Rishi-Sunak, try to land on this by saying HS2 is the ultimate example of old consensus.

In other words, oh, you see what all those other guys did, the idiots who couldn't think more interestingly, who weren't creative enough about...

Brackets Theresa May, Boris Johnson, David Cameron.

And I say to those who backed the project in the first place, the facts have changed and the right thing to do when the facts have changed is have the courage to change direction.

Now the flaw in this argument is that in the one hand, he's accusing Keir Starmer of flip-flopping.

So when Keir Starmer changes his mind because cost of living increases have made certain expenditures difficult, then he's considered somebody that you don't trust.

But when Rishi-Sunak changes his mind, it's all to do with being the moderniser and the person who leaves consensus behind.

And it has, if you like, the ring of, shall we say, a sort of Dominic Cummings type figure, maybe shadowy, in the background, saying you have to go out there and be different.

And if you piss off former prime ministers, if you've got David Cameron and if you've got Theresa May and if you've got Boris Johnson, all writing editorials and jumping up and down saying what are you doing to our plans and our legacy, you're not doing too badly.

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We don't know that, but it has a certain ring of Rishi-asking advice to somebody who knows how to blow things up a bit.

And well, I think that's absolutely true.

And there was a report today suggesting Sunak has indeed turned to Cummings.

And when I was listening to this speech, like you and me, I thought there are bits of this have Cummings written all over it.

But never mind former prime ministers, there is, of course, potentially discontent from a more immediate source, which is Andy Street, the mayor of the West Midlands, and he's giving a conference this afternoon.

And he is a very, very unhappy man.

And when we spoke to him yesterday on the news agents, that unhappiness was absolutely clear.

He was demanding certain things.

And we've just been speaking to the people that are briefing in the huddle behind us about whether he'd spoken to Andy Street.

The suggestion was that there had been conversations in recent days.

Did you see what happened?

When I asked the question, have conversations with Andy Street taken place before the decision was made, she had to get out her phone and check the form of words on the text.

To use.

Yes.

And I say, if anyone asks you about the Andy Street conversation, because we are assuming or we are understanding from that, that Andy Street, who sounded kind of positive that he could still turn things around if Rishi Sunak was willing to listen yesterday, did not know about this, finally, until the decision was made this morning.

I mean, he knew about it, but he didn't know about it from the prime minister.

And similarly, that is the impression that we're getting from Andy Burnham.

Now, of course, Andy Burnham is Labour, not Conservative, but he is the mayor of Greater Manchester.

He's Manchester.

He's Manchester.

And his office apparently knew nothing until Rishi Sunak stood up and made the announcement.

So there was no pre-warning or pre-bringing on side.

I thought it was interesting that Sunak went out of his way to say, oh, there, there, Andy, you've done such a lovely job.

Don't resign.

Please don't resign.

It was, you know, you're a great guy, Andy, we can work together on this.

I know we disagree.

It was a plea.

Please don't pull the plug on me.

Yeah.

And look, you know, taking a step back, the net result of this, unless, of course, Labour

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is going to get into office and choose to do something else, but the net result of this is going to be that we spent tens and tens of billions of pounds that was predicated on the idea that we were going to transform our economic geography by linking the three major urban conurbations of England, and that is no longer going to happen.

And all of that pain, political pain that the Tories endured in the south of England, building the first phase of the line, the most expensive bit of the line is gone.

And as a result, England, Britain will be a country that only has high speed rail, a technology that was perfected in the 1960s, going from Kent to Birmingham and no further.

And the ignominy of train lines, which have HS2 on the side of them, being really fast to Birmingham and then trundling along at a 20th century pace thereafter.

That will be a legacy.

This conference speech, you sometimes don't matter.

This one does matter.

And it's going to have long-term effects.

And I think we talk sometimes about the microcosm of what you hear in the hall versus what you hear elsewhere.

If the Prime Minister was just listening to the hall, he would have heard the slightly orgasmic gasps of pleasure from the people in the rows behind us, who every time he mentioned a motorway, a road, a bypass...

I did worry about some of the people who were sitting behind us, because they did seem pretty close to that state, as you described.

Why?

I had a yell at when he said the Blythe Relief Road, there's a gentleman next to me, he just... Absolutely.

I'm holding on tight here.

Yeah, I'm rightly so.

It was a bit...

I mean, it was a bit otherworldly, I'm just going to say.

A bit Harry Metzali, a bit otherworldly, because they were gasping at every single mention of stations, towns, bypasses.

Either they were paid up members of the sort of, you know, the cheering brigade, or else Rishi Sunak would have left thinking, you know what, I've really levelled up, I've really levelled up the north.

I mean, he was speaking to people in that room who were gagging to hear about road improvements east to west in the Pennines.

And I'm sure there are a lot of them around the country.

Of course, but there have been so many of these road projects and railway projects and electrification where people have said, oh, this is going to happen, and we're going to do this in the next 10 years, and nothing has happened.

And you think of all these infrastructure projects that have been spoken about, ad nauseam, ad infinitum, for decades, and nothing has happened, Rishi Sunak has pulled the plug on the biggest infrastructure project in the UK.

How do you have confidence that these other ones are going to happen in 15, 20 years time?

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It is a really big sell to say, this is the jam tomorrow, and that's why you've got a vote conservative next year.

But to me, I don't think...

I mean, ministers have been touring around the studio this morning saying that the reason that they're not going to do this second leg is because of the economic cases change.

Because of the pandemic, the fewer people are taking the trains, it's actually not true.

More people are, and the reason they're not taking so many on West Coast lines is because, frankly, it's so bad.

But actually, I don't think it's anything to do with the economics, and not least because, when you consider this is a long-term thing, how on earth do we know?

I mean, I don't think anyone in the 2100 is going to be taking fewer trains because of the pandemic, right?

But I don't think it's about economics.

I think it's about politics.

And again, this is why I think Cummings, the sort of center of Cummings is around.

Because it's Oda Cummings.

Oda Cummings.

Oda Cummings, God.

Well, that would be Rudin Barnard Castle, of course.

No, I think the reason is, is because the politics has changed, because when HS2 was first thought about, the conservatives had a agenda and was looking to appeal to the cities more.

This was in the early period of Cameron.

The center of gravity of the conservative party has moved firmly towards towns, has moved firmly towards urban peripheries, outside of urban sensors.

And this is, as you could see throughout this whole speech to me, it was Sunag choosing to try to reassemble the pillars of the 2019 win, anti-Corbin, Brexit, and indeed a relentless focus on older voters in English towns, and that is the Cummings agenda.

And that belies this whole slogan that they have never stopped talking about, and we have tried to reference this long-term decision making for the future.

And I guess that is where we keep on being stuck in this mirror world, this unreality.

It should be a cross-party thing, whether it's building infrastructure for your country that you profess to love, you know, the Tories call themselves patriots a lot of the time, whether it's sorting out social care, I mean, not a mention in the speech, not a mention of social care, which Andy Burnham, when he was health secretary in sort of like 1874, you know, was talking about finding a cross-party solution to, and I think that's the trouble. There wasn't anything.

I mean, let's talk about what there was in the speech.

There wasn't anything about housing, right?

There wasn't anything about the environment, except for clever me, I've managed to get rid of our green targets so you can all rest easy for another couple of years.

The big infrastructure is being canceled, nothing on social care except sort of one platitude to treating the elderly well at the end, no policy.

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Where is the vision in that?

Where is the long-term vision in that at all?

There were two areas that they would point to, I guess, was the announcement on smoking, which I still don't quite understand, and Lewis, help me with this, right?

Yeah, we can't do the maths on this, but if you can...

This is raising the age...

14-year-olds...

You're going to be fine, John, don't worry.

14-year-olds won't be able to buy a packet of cigarettes, and it's going to go up every year.

So, first of all, it's based on the New Zealand model, right, and it's going to be a free vote, so he actually said that it's not something the government is necessarily going to do, but he's going to put it before Parliament.

Essentially, once you introduce the ban, it means that every single year, the age at which you can buy cigarettes goes up.

So, 15 years' time, you have to go into a tobacconist and prove that you're over 30.

Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

I love that.

I've been ridiculous.

You will always...

Well, it's something New Zealanders have done, and there has been, I mean, Labour have looked at it as well, and it just basically banned the smoking for young people.

Because famously, news agents always ask you if you're idea...

I mean, yeah, we're going to be against it.

We're going to be at work quite soon, obviously, in the news agency.

We're not going to be able to sell facts to people, so we can firmly come out against that.

But, yeah, I mean, obviously, I also loved how it got a massive applause from the Conservative Party Conference, possibly the biggest assembly of social smokers that you will ever have seen in your entire life, the sort of assemble hacks, politicians and political spads.

But they all wheezing from three days.

I mean, I think you can be generous about this as a policy, and I kind of am, really.

I'm brave.

I find this at all, and I love the fact that my children, or, you know, maybe their children would grow up finding it really hard to ever start smoking.

But I think you then have to ask questions about the nanny state, right?

If you like the nanny state, and you go, yay, no more cigarettes, no more vaping, then why aren't you also saying, well, should we be taxing other things like trans fat?

Should we be removing sugar?

Meat?

Well, yeah.

The famous meat test?

The famous meat test.

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You've opened the door, then, to saying, yeah, actually, the state is going to intervene, right?

So why not?

I mean, if you're looking at the huge bill that the National Health Service is facing, and this is a structural argument to deal with sort of preventative medicine, then why aren't you dealing with diabetes and the scourge of obesity that is causing such enormous bills for the National Health Service, and saying to people, you've got to change the way you eat?

Well, the Tories don't want to do that, because then that's...

They don't want to tell you how to eat.

Yeah, because it's nanny state.

I think...

And so it's kind of, where are they on this?

Here's a fat pill.

Yeah.

It speaks to...

There wasn't really a thread to the speech, right?

It was difficult to kind of discern, you know, a Prime Minister doesn't have to have an ism, most don't.

But if you're trying to discern Sunakism, it's hard to kind of see what it is, beyond the kind of what he's saying, which is, I've got a kind of approach where I'm willing to take these kind of brave choices that people don't want me to make.

As we've already said, though, this is quite an interesting one.

It doesn't fit necessarily into that very easily.

But when actually most people in your party, or a lot of people in your party, something among the rest groups want you to do this stuff, i.e. on net zero or on HS2, it's hard to see how that tall is with the idea of just being brave and being the guy who makes the decisions that no one else wanted to.

In fact, it was his predecessors, May Cameron Johnson, who were doing the things on net zero and on HS2 that his party didn't want them to do.

The one other thing I suppose we've got to talk about is this help for teachers that they're going to bring more teachers in.

And certain key teachers in certain key subjects are going to get some kind of tax break for the first five years.

Well that and actually nothing less than the entire abolition and recreation of the English education system, which within a government with about 12 months to go before the election is ambitious.

We will introduce the new, rigorous, knowledge-rich, advanced British standard, which will bring together A-levels and T-levels into a new, single qualification for our school leavers.

First, this will finally deliver on the promise of parity of esteem between academic and technical education because all students will sit the advanced British standard.

Second, we will raise the floor, ensuring that our children, leaf school, literate and numerate because with the advanced British standard, all students will study some form

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of maths and English to 18 with extra help for those who struggle most.
In our country, no child should be left behind.
So that's the advanced British standard.
It's no longer A-levels.
I don't know what happened to the British baccalaureate, but that seems to have...
Bit French.
Bit French.
Too far and too far.
But, I mean, weirdly, I did get those sort of early 1997 Tony Blair vibes when he said I'm all about education, right?
When he said it's the best economic policy, the best moral policy, it's our silver bullet.
I think if he'd started the whole speech there, it would have been a totally different vision.
It would have been a man who does think long term because there is arguably nothing more long term than putting children's education first.
That is the short start.
That is the early years.
That is the way to get to a place where the whole economy is flourishing.
But he saved that right up for the end for his final little riff.
And we didn't hear any sums of money about what was actually going into education.
Look, let's be clear.
This is not going to happen before the election.
Like, there is just no way in a million years, they've only got one year.
Well, that's a relief.
I've got kids on the phone saying, bloody hell, do I have to do, like, 16-year-olds?
Well, exactly.
But it will, no doubt, cause a bit of discontent and worry within the education community because I don't know what's going to happen.
But look, this is something that if the Conservatives are returned to office, they will do.
But there simply is not time.
They will have to consult.
They will have to put out a green paper, you know, in a year before the general election.
There's just no way it gets through Parliament.
That is obviously their direction of travel to, they've only just introduced T-levels, but they're now going to combine them with A-levels to create this new standard and end what they say is the two-tier system between technical and academic education.
You are left with the central dilemma of what this conference is all about.
Is it really about the long-term future, the 10, the 20, the 30 years time, or is it about the next 12 months to get the Conservative Party into a position where it's got some new dividing lines, where it can take on Labour, and where it can pretend, we're a new government and that we haven't been in power for 13 years.
The who?
The Conservatives.
Put that out for me.

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Yeah, exactly.

No, we've never heard of them.

No.

We'll be back after the break.

This is The News Agents.

We started by going straight into the Rishi Sunak speech and all the stuff on HS2, but I think it's worth a couple of moments talking about the Warmer Pact, and it was one penny mordant, not dressed as a Green Goddess, wielding a sword, but nevertheless looking, actually I'd say quite fit and quite like a potential leader in fighting.

I thought she'd, I don't know if I'm allowed to say this, she looked very trim, very sort of sporty, black tailored suit, and I thought-

Welcome to Vogue.

Do you know what?

I'll tell you what it reminded me of.

It reminded me of Mike Pompeo in the US losing a lot of weight just before we all started thinking that he was going to stand as a candidate.

I did not expect you to say that.

I don't mean she looked like Mike Pompeo.

Pompeo from Pompey?

Yeah.

I just think it's what happens when people are thinking, ah, could that be me in 12 months' time?

Maybe I'm jumping the gun here.

Well, she wouldn't have been alone at this conference in doing that, would she?

She would have joined quite a range of her colleagues.

At least half a dozen.

Yeah.

But she was wielding a sword, actually.

She was taking a sword to Kirstama and to Labour and absolutely ripping in with slashing waves of that knife.

Yeah.

What she said was, you've been subject to bullies.

Let's play this clip.

Whether you're a new member, and this is your first conference, or you have been a stalwart of the party for decades, you have all had to stand up to bullies.

You've had your offices graffitied, you've been trolled online, you've been called scum, you've had physical threats, some of you have had death threats, and I know that some of you in this hall today have faced sanctions and threats from hostile states.

No matter what the attack, we don't back down.

Thirty-nine years ago, this conference met in the aftermath of the Brighton Bomb.

Standing up to bullies is what we do.

I mean, talking about the people in the room, or the Conservatives as a party, being victims, and again, it's that whole thing.

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We're not the party of government for 13 years, we're the underdog.

We want to fight this like the underdog, like the victim, and we've got to believe in ourselves and, dare I say, fight like hell.

I don't think those are that as well.

But we've seen from Mordent there, but also from Sunak, and then from Greg Hans and other cabinet ministers this week, how they're going to deal with Starmore, or how they're going to portray Starmore over the next 12 months up to the election.

It's basically going to be a kind of rerun of John Kerry versus Bush in 2004.

It's going to try and make him into this flip-flopper, this guy who vacillates, this guy who is unable to make a decision, despite the fact that, actually, this is a conference which has been characterised by new turns and flip-flopping in all sorts of directions.

That is going to be the frame through which everything you hear from the Conservatives is about Starmore.

I would say, though, it's worth contrasting Penny Mordent with another potential future leader in waiting, Suella Braverman.

Penny Mordent didn't need the cultural stuff.

She was actually pretty upbeat, it was pretty positive, it was quite funny.

Suella played to these kind of imagined dark forces.

It's always this idea of the culture war, of people with luxury beliefs.

Luxury beliefs.

Luxury beliefs.

I'd love some luxury beliefs.

Do you know what?

OK, I'm going to disagree with you.

I think the luxury beliefs has a resonance.

I think the idea that the people who are kind of well-to-do, living in prosperous areas in wealthy cities, are not affected by some of the same issues of petty lawlessness or drugs that happen on estates.

I think it was a well-made argument, actually.

But it's not about prosperity, it's about beliefs.

I think the cultural stuff is horrible, but we're going to see a lot more of it.

I suspect between now and the next general election.

But some of the fact that the wealthiest people are not hit by minor crime or their jobs are not under threat.

Why did she say welfare and prosperity?

She didn't.

She said beliefs.

I think I would make the argument that beliefs in things like compassion or fairness or rule of law or being part of a UN convention is not a luxury.

It's something that absolutely every single citizen in this country could buy into and share.

Also, John, I thought watching, and I agree with you, there's an argument you can make about that and about people who are sort of insulating from certain types of politics.

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And that's fair enough.

The reason, obviously, she doesn't use wealth is because then, well, who would be brought into that?

Everyone is.

Yeah, I wonder who.

I think this, which is I was watching that and it occurred to me at one point, we have just got so used to senior politicians in this country dividing, dividing endlessly, always trying to set different groups of people up against one another, always constantly trying to say that these fake people over here versus these real people over there, it is a politics of aggression.

And whatever the value or merit in some of the kind of principles of what she's saying, she's the home secretary and it would be nice sometimes just to come to these conferences and just have a sense of wanting to bring people together to say, oh, and Suneck didn't do that.

Suneck didn't do it.

Particularly, there was a few things on cultural war stuff, but bringing people together and uniting rather than just constantly creating dividing lines.

But this is Suella Braverman, who has got an eye on the next Tory leadership election.

Yeah, sure, fine.

But it's not.

And she's not here to unify.

She's here to set out her stall for the right of the Conservative Party.

We might have a reshuffle next month and who knows, in the next few weeks, she could be out of the job.

And then Rishi Suneck's got a big calculation to make about whether she's worse on having her out on the back benches or better to have her within the government.

And so Suella Braverman is playing the game of her own, what's best for her own long term speech.

And that's why I would say is that the biggest difference between Suneck's speech and virtually all the other speeches we've heard all week is that was the only speech that had any element whatsoever of talking to the country as opposed to talking to the party.

But I think the point is that every time that Suella is talking about the dark forces trying to stymie what she's doing and the luxury beliefs and all the rest of it, she's not talking about knife crime.

She's not talking about child on child murders.

She's not talking about domestic abuse.

She's not talking about security.

She's actually not talking about any of the things that it is currently her job as Home Secretary to be solving.

She's not doing any of that.

She's talking about the small boats, which is something that she hasn't managed to sort out.

She hasn't managed to sort out illegal migration.

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And so either talk about things positively because you've actually got a handle on it.

And I think most people, to be fair, most people think that high levels of migration on an island are unsustainable in the future.

That's not a hard position to take, but you don't need to demonise people in trouble and the people trying to find compassionate solutions to it.

But also, it's more than just in terms of compassion or not.

It's also not cynical about it is that it's creating an excuse because what she's doing is trying to suggest that it's institutional friction or institutional resistance from within the British state, which is the explanation for her and their failure.

So I agree with you.

Obviously she's got an eye on the not this next election, but the election after that either Tory leadership election, but at the same time, she is the Home Secretary and as I say, it would be nice to occasionally hear something which isn't about division.

So if we're going to mark this Tory party conference, it's not going to end in the bloodbath that it did last year with a Prime Minister being felled in record short time.

Rishi Sunak is going to be there, but did it achieve what the Tories were hoping it would achieve at the outset when they had high ambitions for this being a major reset given this parlous state in opinion polls?

I mean, just, I don't think it was disastrous, but did they knock it out of the park this week?

No.

The danger for him is, is that he wants to cast a message around this guy who is the change who makes tough decisions and all anyone hears is that they've cancelled this railway line and that's all they take in and they can't quite understand why.

I was talking to somebody last night, a journalist has to be said, who said last year's Conservative party conference was the best conference she'd ever been at.

Her eyes got sort of glossy and lit up because it was, if you were sort of, you know, reporting on it, it was just extraordinary and it got better because even after we left here, there was kind of more news still coming out.

I guess the question is, will we leave HS2 alone now?

Because that's really what he wants.

Will we leave HS2 alone and say, OK, back to where we were, we'll leave the boffins to sort out the actual funding and the lines and the timings and all the rest of it or will this be something that we carry on talking about as a potential marker of success or failure for the next 12 months?

This is The News Agents.

Before we go, there was a wonderful bit of Americanisation of British politics when Mrs Sunak, Akshawna Murthy, came up and did a speech saying, you know what, my husband is a really nice guy, he's great, he's my best friend, we're so proud of him, he loves a rom-com.

The attempt to humanise was really interesting and she said, this is spontaneous, he didn't know I was going to do this.

Rishi Sunak gets up to speak and there are these giant TV screens with the autocue, the

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teleprompter and I was reading it and it said, all the lines about thanking his wife for the speech and what she had just said was all on autocue.

The idea that that was spontaneous, my arse.

And I guess the fact that she was there calling him her best friend, name checking their daughters, talking about his film likes and all the rest of it, I wondered whether that said he wasn't comfortable doing that.

He doesn't want to quite go down the key route of, you know, I'm a son of a toolmaker, which we've heard quite a lot from Keir Starmer and probably will hear again next week.

You ain't seen nothing yet.

Or whether it's because every time he does anything, this big word cloud comes up behind him and says, rich, rich, rich, rich, rich.

And he's always asked about, you know, how does it feel to have this word cloud saying rich behind you?

I mean, what can you say?

Does she stop bringing this word cloud out around him?

Put it away, put it away.

But I guess it allowed her to say, he's a pharmacist son.

Did you know that?

He used to get the prescriptions for his mum, he's a pharmacist son in a way that if he'd done it would have looked slightly false.

You know what made me think more than anything else, particularly when she said he's my best friend, it actually reaffirmed something to me that I thought all week, which is how lonely a figure Sunak feels at this conference, that he hasn't got many allies, that he hasn't got in the speeches of a lot of the cabinet ministers, they have been these auditions for the post-leadership, they don't talk about him that much.

There is disconnect between his speech and theirs and that this has all felt a little bit like a placeholder.

I heard last night that there are people, I mean, let's imagine this reshuffle comes before the end of October.

I think there are people who he is very close to who are not currently in cabinet, who have served in previous cabinets, who we will see back in and I think that is the Rishi Reset. Some of the people he kind of picked up like Suella and didn't really want and I think this reset, this reshuffle will be him getting his property.

But let's never forget as well some of these speeches which frankly have sounded a bit unhinged at times, full of cultural stuff and the fake stuff, the lies of the things that they have been rallying against, the imagined enemies, they have all been okay by number 10.

These are not things that have just been freestyling, it is part of the Sunak Premiership. We have talked about the Americanization of politics, we have also talked about the loneliness at the top of politics and no one must feel more lonely today than Kevin McCarthy who was the ousted speaker of the House of Representatives, the third most powerful figure in American politics and for the first time in US history, the speaker of the House has been ousted and we covered that on News Agency USA.

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Tell them properly, we were in a bar listening to Top Loader when the news broke and we were literally watching them live, dancing in the moonlight when suddenly the news came up that Kevin McCarthy had been ousted, vacated from his job and we legged it back with our brilliant producers who flung us on air, sort of on air and pulled together the whole show as it was happening.

Yeah, except Laura said I had to cut out one of your slurs from the Red White.

That's what Top Loader does to you.

Exactly.

We'll be back tomorrow.

We'll be back tomorrow.

Bye.

Bye bye.

The news agents with Emily Maitlis, John Sopel and Lewis Goodall.

This has been a global player, original podcast and a Persephoneka production.