

[Transcript] The News Agents / Will the real Keir Starmer please stand up

This is a global player original podcast.

If you look at opinion polls, you will see there is a lot of cynicism about politicians that they promise things and then don't deliver.

So when is a pledge not a pledge?

This is Keir Starmer when he was running to be Labour leader.

Tuition fees then.

Will you remain committed to scrapping them?

Is that all?

They're all pledges, Andrew.

And the answer to these questions is yes.

So university tuition fees being scrapped will be in a Starmer manifesto?

Yes.

And this is what he said this morning to our colleagues on the Today programme.

I think we are going to set out a fairer solution and just in so...

But it won't be the abandoning of tuition fees, will it?

Well we are likely to move on from that commitment because we do find ourselves in a different financial situation.

But I don't want that to be read as us accepting for a moment that the current system is fair.

Moving on obviously is very, very different to changing your mind or rowing back or doing a U-turn.

Moving on suggests that you've thought about that, you've transcended it to something better.

And this is Keir Starmer, two days before England goes to the polls, a lot of England goes to the polls in the local elections, saying that thing I promised about tuition fees, well maybe not.

So moving on, welcome to the news agents.

The news agents.

It's John.

It's Emily.

And it's Lewis.

And a little bit later on we're going to be talking about whether this weekend we're going to be sitting in front of our TVs on Saturday morning pledging our allegiance to the new king.

Will he be swearing with the king or as the king?

As the king.

Well I think we know what the answer is for the two of you.

That explicit rating gets rolled out far too often for my mother's liking.

Wait and see Mr Goodall.

So are you going to tell us a little bit about tuition fees and what on earth is going on in the Labour leader or the Labour Party's collective mind?

Yeah, so I think the first thing to think about and to reacquaint ourselves with is what the tuition fee system isn't.

Because obviously this has been around for a long time now, the Blair government basically introduced, but they were then known as top-up fees back in 2004.

It punctuates our politics on a quite regular basis.

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We remember all the different controversies that have been with Nick Clegg and the Lib Dems.

Ned Miliband had a policy and Corbyn promised to abolish them.

So it's had a long history, a checkered history, particularly on the progressive side of politics. But the truth is, is that in no real way can this system any longer be described as a tuition fee system.

What we have is a de facto graduate tax and is a bad graduate tax.

What do I mean by that?

Because if you have a tuition fee system, the chances are, and we've talked about this on this show before, if you've got a tuition fee system worth the name, then you should be able to pay that money back.

That's basically what happened when I went to university.

That was the first tranche of the post-Blair reforms when I went in 2007.

You leave with about 20 grand or so of debt.

The interest rate levied on it wasn't especially high.

There was a student maintenance grant component which reduced the amount of money if you were from a poorer household, you needed to pay back.

So the chances are, within 10 to 15 years, if you were earning a decent graduate salary, you'd be able to pay it back.

The changes that were brought in by the coalition government in the early part of the last decade transformed that.

They increased the total amount of money that you had to borrow from 3,000 to 9,000.

Over time, they also increased the interest rate on which you would pay the money.

And thirdly, they replaced the old maintenance grant component which was given on a means test to poor a household with a loan.

Now the net result of all of that has been to hugely increase the amount of money that each individual student borrows and to make it extremely difficult to repay the money.

That's the interest rate component of it.

And so now you'll find, if anyone is listening to this who has got a tuition fee loan and has taken out a loan in recent years, the chances are, unless they're earning mega-money, they will log on to their student loan account each year and find that even though they've been paying money off, the actual stock of debt has likely increased and increased and increased.

So now it is not uncommon to find graduates with stock of loan in 50, 60, 70,000 pounds or more.

You'll find the individual graduates are paying an effective income tax rate of 30, 35, 40%.

That has been the change that has taken place.

I do think the interest rate change is the game changer in all this because one thing was the set amount and Lewis is right.

When we were first talking years, decades ago, about tuition fees, it was 3,000 pounds.

Now, obviously, that was a long time ago.

But the sum is one thing.

When you've got a really inflationary pressure on an interest rate on top of the debt, then actually, you're never going to get even close to paying it off.

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And you can't even keep a sense of what you're paying on a regular monthly basis because it's all in the hands of the interest rates.

And as we know, right now, we're looking at 10%, the student cap, I think, is at just under 7%.

That's huge still.

It's huge on top of the debt.

It's interesting.

I mean, my son decided to study abroad.

Actually, one of the reasons was like, didn't actually particularly want to clock up a massive student debt?

Totally get that.

And then I sort of said, well, what are your friends saying today?

Will this be a game changer in terms of what you think about labor or how you vote?

And he said, actually, most of them don't think they'll ever pay back this debt.

So what is it for?

I mean, who is paying for it primarily?

And is it helping students?

Is it actually?

The idea was to help more students originally get on the kind of education ladder, the undergraduate

ladder, rather than just make it for a few at the very top.

We've been here before.

I mean, you know, you gave that introduction.

Of course, the coalition trebled what you could pay in student tuition fees.

One part of that coalition, the Liberal Democrats, had gone into the 2010 election with that most categorical of pledges that they were going to abolish tuition fees.

And so surely this is about politics.

It's not about whether students are going to find it easier or not.

I mean, let's see what Labour come up with.

It was the worst mistake that Nick Clegg ever made.

You could argue that was what finished off the Lib Dems and put them out of reach of seats for another decade or more, right?

Well, I think there is no doubt this is partly about politics.

Stammer does not want to go into the next general election precisely because of the Clegg folk memory.

Rather than make it a folk memory, let's bring up the moment of his apology when he rode back.

Oh, God, man.

Oh, God, man.

Set it to music just to top things off.

Genius.

Musical genius.

The Lenin and McCartney.

You're not sure.

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Of 2010.

And look, he never recovered from that.

And that folk memory, that song ringing in the ears of all Labour people.

We should say again, Stammer made the pledge.

It wasn't just that he was saddled with it.

He inherited it.

He made it during the leadership campaign.

But they've been preparing the ground for this basically since January.

And it is the latest pledge from which he's resiled.

There is a genuine policy problem in the sense that the reason they were introduced in the first place and have been expanded is that higher education numbers have gone up significantly.

That is a good thing.

Higher education in Britain is one of our world leading industries and universities need to be placed on a stronger financial footing.

By the way, in parentheses, universities are currently unhappy about the current system as well because they actually think they need more money than the 9,000 or 9,250 or whatever it is now isn't enough.

But I think from a Labour point of view, however you package this up, it is a problem for an incoming progressive government.

Why?

I said at the start that this is a bad graduate tax.

It's like a graduate tax without any of the positives of having a graduate tax.

What I mean by that is referring to the third bit of what I said the Osborne Clegriforms were.

By abolishing the maintenance grants, you basically create a situation where richer students can end up leaving university without this extra burden because richer students, richer parents, they can either take out no loan at all or less of a loan and support their children through.

Poor students are not in a position to do that.

Poor parents are not in a position to do that.

The state used to give them a grant.

Now you will find poorer students taking out bigger loans to cover their living costs, something that richer students don't have to do.

So it's the opposite of progressive, basically.

Exactly.

So you will have the unbelievable and invidious situation where higher education, which is supposed to be a root and means to ease social mobility and address inequality, can be in the situation in the current setup of embedding intra-generational inequality because students from poorer households end up effectively paying a higher rate of tax on their income than richer ones.

For a progressive incoming administration, that has to be absolute meltdown and there has to be some sort of policy response to address that.

So the question that sticks in my mind, having heard Keir Starmer on the radio this morning when he says we're going to look forward, do you think Labour does have?

OK, we're not going to abolish tuition fees.

Do you think it does have a plan to address that?

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And we've just got to wait until nearer the general election, you know, next October or whenever it is, before we hear it?

Or do you think, oh, we haven't actually gotten a clue, but all we're trying to do is get rid of one of the negatives, which might lead the Tories to say, well, how are you going to pay for that when we haven't got the money?

So I think they will have formulated a credible-ish plan by the time anyone's actually asking them to pay it now.

No, I don't.

But I think what this is about is not being Jeremy Corbyn, right?

I mean, it's not anti-Semitism.

But actually, if you look at what Keir Starmer is permanently, perpetually trying to do, it's move away, even from the Keir Starmer that was taking over from Jeremy Corbyn.

And I think we often talk about political cross-dressing on this podcast.

And the Labour leader you expect is the one that says, free money and free tuition will raise taxes of the rich.

And the Keir Starmer, certainly that you heard this morning, is the one that said, actually, we've got to be fiscally responsible.

I just want to come back on that because I can totally get the need and the drive for Keir Starmer to define himself in his own way and not being Jeremy Corbyn.

But if Keir Starmer is defining himself by not being Keir Starmer, then that becomes really problematic politically because who is the real Keir Starmer?

Will he please stand up and show himself to the British electorate?

And the danger is that if you resile from everything you stood for and you were in the shadow cabinet of Jeremy Corbyn and you said he was a good leader and you were prepared to serve with him and now you abandon all the policies as well, then what is Keir Starmer?

We can definitely expect one of the key attacks from the Tories up to the next general election being this idea of him vacillating the entire time, of him constantly going back on what he said.

We'll see and hear more of those videos that we started with comparing Keir Starmer in 2019 and 2020 to the one in 2023 and 2024.

Then there's a wider issue as well, separate from the tuition fee thing.

The most interesting element of what he was talking about this morning was when he was being asked about tax.

And he essentially said that he wasn't going to honour some of his other commitments on increasing income tax rate on the richest because he said that basically the high tax spending model or the high tax economy model, which he says the Tories have perpetuated, doesn't work.

Now this is pretty novel stuff in some ways from a Labour leader and it does speak to what Emily was saying about him wanting to try and be counter-intuitive.

I think the problem though is that fundamentally if the Labour Party doesn't believe in restoring the public realm, which is basically in their hearts what they want to do, they think the public realm is on its knees, I'll add 1997, then what does it believe in?

What is an incoming Labour government going to do?

Okay.

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And the thing is that ultimately for the last 13 years, the essay question for Labour leaders has been in the post-2008 world, how do you do social democracy in a world where tax revenues aren't just pouring into the Treasury and you can't just redistribute from the top to the bottom?

And the truth is Ed Miliband didn't really have an answer to that.

Corbyn's answer was to say actually there will be loads of money because we can tax more and Keir Starmer's answer is well he's not even addressing the question and to me he's got to try and find a way to address that question in the next 12 months otherwise an incoming Labour government will just be basically arguing about the finer points of technocracy and who is the better manager which I don't think against Rishi Sunak will be very successful.

I think he was undone actually by parts of Jeremy Hunt's budget and in particular by the raising of the corporation tax which was one of those pledges that Keir Starmer had made, we will raise corporation tax and then we can pay for the abolition of tuition fees. Once the Conservative Chancellor has already done that, once the Conservative Chancellor has already made inroads into childcare, you as the Labour leader are being forced kind of off your middle ground again, right?

Jeremy Hunt came in and told us, you know, he'd been listening to Bridget Phillips and on the news agents talking about childcare as one of the ways that he worked out his sort of rebuttal or his own position for the budget and he clearly did the same on corporation tax.

He takes Labour's idea and Keir then has less money to spend on the policies that he's already announced.

Although I would argue, Lewis, that if you go back to 97, Labour's big ideas were similarly not about, you know, I mean, one of the key pledges from Gordon Brown was not to raise the top rate of tax and to live within the budgetary constraints of the Conservatives but it was being tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime, reducing class sizes, you know, speeding up law and order.

But tough on crime, you see, that is not a natural Labour position.

It was Tony Blair cross-dressing.

But the point I'm making is that Labour was able to define itself as being different from the Conservative Party.

It introduced the minimum wage, which, you know, a lot of people said was going to lead to mass unemployment.

It did not.

Labour was able to introduce some quite modest measures but that still differentiated it from John Major's Conservative Party and the differentiation seems to be quite difficult at the moment.

I think that's right.

And I think that, you know, people forget now that the restoration of the public rounds that I talked about didn't really happen in the new Labour years until 2003 when Brown was the Labour Party.

Yeah, absolutely.

So that is true.

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And they stuck to controversial at the time, they stuck to Tory spending limits for two years and so on.

But I think the difference is, and I think the danger for Stamford is this, I think, you know, Labour wins very seldom, you know, we know that since the 45, they've only really basically won three times in an incoming government, they've overturned the government of the day.

And I think if you look back to all three of those times, 45, 64 and 97, each time the Labour leader at the time had two things.

They had credibility, which Stamford has been trying to achieve over the last three years and perhaps has gone a long way to doing so.

And they had a sense, and this is perhaps a bit abstract, but I think you can see it in all of those occasions, they had a sense of modernity.

They had the zeitgeist.

They had either charisma, like someone like Blair or Wilson, or they had a sort of ideological sense that the incoming ideology of the day was on their side, i.e. at the in 45.

I think the danger, you think about 97, which you talked about again, you know, the zeitgeist, that sense of modernity and charisma was so profound, the danger for Stamford is that there is none of that.

You know, Corbyn had the modernity, but didn't have the credibility.

Stamford could end up having the credibility, but not having the modernity, and I think that is a problem that you need to try and at least create some zest around the idea of his leadership and excitement for an incoming Labour government.

And I think the Labour people, I speak to say, well, you don't go back to comparing it to 97.

Blair was a unique figure.

If an advertising agency was trying to define who the role model should be for a Labour campaign, they'd have come up with Tony Blair.

But does Stammer compare himself not to that, but to Anthony Albanese, the Australian Prime Minister, who's pretty dull, or Olaf Scholz in Germany, again, a social Democrat, not the most exciting man ever.

And maybe they think that there is this new era of someone who is a bit more technocratic and not that exciting.

Joe Biden.

I mean, to be honest.

Nobody's saying Joe Biden's the most fascinating man.

But what did Biden and Albanese have?

They had a populist leader against whom they could run and they could represent stability.

And if Johnson was still there, or Truss, there's no doubt that, in a way, the idea of stability is there and you can cut yourself against it.

He's now got Sunak, and it still seems to me that Labour haven't quite recalibrated to their new opponent.

Yeah.

Fascinating.

Well, after the break, we're going to be coming back to talk about something that will

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be there after the next general election, and probably the general election after that, and the one after that, the royal family.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back.

The fact that the three of us are in the studio suggests we are not three royal superfans because obviously then we would be on the Mall, where some people have already set up their sleeping bags and tents and their primer stoves so that they can make a cup of tea and keep warm while they await the coronation this weekend.

But it has been fascinating, even if you are not a super royalist, to watch some of the kind of unfolding narratives that have emerged as they try, they being the royal family, and to some extent the Church of England, try to prepare us for what might be in store. And there was something quite surprising that came out at the weekend, which was the invitation to all of us this Saturday to pledge our allegiance to the King.

To be fair, we start every podcast like that with a little pledge to Emily, of course, who and I jump before she walks in the room.

You don't stand anymore.

I liked it when you used to stand.

It's become a bit more informal.

I thought it was good when you said we don't need to bow.

But what did we think of it?

I mean, in PR terms.

Well, I tell you what, listen to James Cleverley, our Foreign Secretary, how he frames it when he was speaking to Cape Early on Sky.

There's an invitation, a very generous invitation, to expand what has traditionally been quite an exclusive function, which is just for members of the House of Lords to swear allegiance to the new monarch.

Actually, the King has decided to kind of open this up.

Very generous.

Extremely generous.

Very generous of his own majesty.

I said to us ever so humble working-class people could doff our cap and pledge our allegiance.

So I don't think that James Cleverley has done our King any favours with that line because I think that King Charles would be horrified by how this has landed in a way.

And I totally get that it's, you know, he sent the Archbishop Canterbury out, didn't he, saying it's not a supplication, it's just an invitation.

Just do it if you want.

I think in King Charles' mind, he thought it was going to be loosely based on the Eurovision, where you basically join in, you get your voting number and you have your chance as an audience at home to be part of the whole event.

I think genuinely, that's what he thought.

Do you think Eurovision was in his hands?

I would love to believe that.

This is wrecking my head.

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The fusion of the coronation and a week later, the Eurovision dog contest.

Well, Paddy O'Connell, I think coined the phrase the Corovish before us, but I do think that the way King Charles has set it up is being, I am serving you and you can choose whether you want to be part of this or not.

And I don't know.

I mean, we stand, jokes aside, we stand for the National Anthem at the beginning of the World Cup games.

We do.

I mean, it's the thing.

We sing along.

We quite enjoy all that.

What, you're at home?

You stand up?

Yes.

You don't.

I mean, we do that for a lot of the different anthems to be vet.

We love an anthem, but I'm just saying we kind of get into the whole spirit.

And I think he's saying not everyone will be in the Abbey.

Not everyone will be on the Mall.

Not everyone will have a front seat, but yeah, this is for you.

I did not have you down as a sort of Emily Maitlis kind of like porcelain China coronation memorabilia kind of girl, but now I'm thinking about your sort of cupboards, your cabinets at home, full of the stuff.

Right.

Tea towel?

Mug?

No, none of that.

I mean, yeah, there is some royal memorabilia in my house, which I will leave to your imagination, which is not entirely savory, but...

Prince Andrew's scalp.

But, but I would say that take me out of it.

I think this is meant to be him appealing to a wider sentiment that people want to actually join in something.

The PR around this has obviously been awful.

Everyone very predictably goes into their camps about it.

Emily's right.

One sense, which is that sometimes those of us who are skeptical of this sort of stuff don't necessarily have enough understanding and patience for people who really yearn to belong to something.

They yearn to belong to this community, to a moment to partake in it.

That is a very human reaction.

It is.

And we don't do it very much in this country, whether we like it or not, for a huge number of people, we basically look to our monarchs and the monarchy as an institution of togetherness

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and of unity.

I have to say, yeah, instinctively, I can't imagine that many people deciding to do it, but that is true.

And we can be too sniffy about that, I think.

I hate to say this, but I think I need to get something off my chest about this.

Oh, yeah?

The soapbox!

Get the soapbox out.

The soapbox out.

All right, come on.

Look, I would describe myself as a mildly enthusiastic monarchist.

I love the Queen.

I greatly admire Prince Charles, but I was sitting around on Saturday and heard this offer to declare my loyalty or whatever to the king, and I thought this is absurd.

Now, when I say I'm kind of slightly pro-monarchy, I also am aware that the idea of, say, Boris Johnson being our president is a really good argument for keeping a monarchy so that we don't have elected presidents who are populists and maybe charlatans and lead this country in a terrible direction.

I don't think the royal family has done that.

But don't make the absurdity of the hereditary principle so obvious to me as to say, will you please sit at home on the couch on Saturday morning and declare your allegiance to the king?

It just makes you think about the idea of the hereditary principle.

So you're thinking North Korea now, aren't you?

Well, I just think that this is ridiculous and it just...

Very un-British.

And I just think it doesn't feel British.

Now, I lived in America where at every sporting occasion, on every event, you would have the national anthem.

No matter what league it was, even if it's two local teams playing, you'd have the national anthem.

I know that in American schools, every kid will pledge allegiance to the flag every morning.

This is a republic and that is what they kind of are proud of and I loved American patriotism.

But the idea of actually thinking about pledging our loyalty to the king, it just seems to me to point up the anachronistic nature of the system that we've got.

It might work, it might not be perfect, but it draws attention to it in a way that I find uncomfortable.

So what you're saying is, see it, don't say it.

I mean, it's fine.

But I think you have to put it back into the context of what we know about King Charles, right?

And he has been a friend of the environment.

He's sending out wild flower seeds to elementary school children so that they can start growing things.

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He's creating coastal walks.

He's creating national parks.

I don't think this feels like a death spot, right, who's come in to make sure that if you don't say your lines properly, you're going to be hanged and make sure you've got a picture of me on the wall.

It doesn't feel very him, does it?

And more than anything else, leaving aside the kind of political elements to it, it is so earnest and that's why it sits uncomfortably.

That's why it doesn't feel very British, is it's too earnest and act.

It just feels like it's taking you to a place that I'm happy to watch the ceremony, the pomp, the braid, the polished brass, the uniforms.

OK.

I've never been a godfather.

Yes.

Have you renounced the devil?

I mean, in a church service, in a Christian service, you have to renounce the devil.

I mean, you feel ridiculous saying that.

You have to repeat it at the end of the thing.

I will renounce the devil.

Have you ever been at a wedding where you had to stand there and promise to uphold the bride and groom's union, right?

But I suppose...

I say a lot of things.

The trouble is, when you say it in English, as opposed to something sort of, you know, that you don't understand, Latin, you know, it sounds weird.

It's just a weekend that Emily Mote, this is a household, just reading out ancient Minoan pledges.

But that's the point, though.

Those are traditions, though, aren't they?

And although this is a tradition...

This is a tradition.

Yeah, it is.

But it's not been a sort of public tradition.

Like, if this had happened for a thousand years, you can imagine it just be...

They haven't had television for a thousand years.

No, no, no.

But the point is, is that it hasn't been something that the whole public has been expecting to do that whole time.

And it is an innovation, in a sense, and that's where the backlash comes from.

Sure, exactly.

And so, whilst it is a ceremony and an event that I can cope with the idea that behind this kind of veil, there is going to be the anointing with holy oil, which, you know, what is holy oil for goodness, so it doesn't mean presumably it's not...

It's very, very good Ligurian olive oil, I think.

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Or Esso.

Esso.

Oh, it's Ligurian olive oil.

Yeah, it's really...

Again, more of a weekend make list.

Yeah, I thought it might have been part of BP's Billions of Profit that it was BP oil.

But no, it's something else.

So whatever the holy oil is, I'm happy to go along with all of that.

Coronation sponsored by BP's.

But once you are asked to say, right, I am part of this and I am pledging my allegiance, it just takes me across a line that I'm not sure I want to go.

Well, if you're not part of it, if fundamentally, and I don't mean us, obviously, but I mean, if the country is not endorsing the monarchy, then the monarchy cannot exist any more.

It's as simple as that.

When you see the polls, the polls say actually three-quarters of the country still believe in and support the monarchy.

So somewhere along the line, you've got to accept that either we're part of this or we're not.

Because if all of us aren't, the monarchy will cease to exist.

And these moments of splendour, I mean, I actually think all the pageantry stuff, that's the thing that leaves me cold.

Because most of it's...

Oh, I love it.

No, this is...

Most of it's invented and made up.

It isn't even that long a tradition.

Like long ago.

Your own robes are longer Lewis.

Oh, well, that's true.

Yes.

Yes.

I have to admit that.

I have my royal polo.

Still the limelight for one king.

I mean, even if...

But I hate it when people say, oh, this is what Britain's good at.

What a bloody depressing thing to be good at.

Is that all we got up?

We're basically a living museum now.

Is that all we are?

It'd be so nice to be known in 2023 for being good at something else.

But I accept that these moments are crucial for the monarchy or in terms of renewal because we see usually after them, obviously we haven't had a coronation for a long time, but after jubilee moments, weddings and so on.

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There is usually in the polling a significant uptick in the royal family's popularity and what people think of them.

And that is a tale as old as the monarchy itself, you know, being seen these moments of literal majesty and splendor imbue the whole institution with a magic and a popularity which is completely essential for, as Emily says, public consent.

Even if it...

That's what it is.

It leaves me cold.

That's what it is.

It's about saying yes, essentially.

Yeah.

And the pageantry is an absolute integral part of it and part of the magic and part of what travels around the world and actually I think gives Britain a soft diplomatic power.

I'm not in any way an anti-monarchist at all.

As I say, I kind of admire them and I think that King Charles so far is doing a fabulous job and, you know, and some of the symbolic things that he has done in terms of sending out these seeds and all the rest of it.

I think it quakes...

Okay, don't fixate on the seeds, I just meant that it was quite a smooth thing.

Symbolically, what has he done?

He's repaired relations with Europe.

Yeah.

He's spoken German in Germany.

He's tried to go to France, okay, the riots.

He's been, dare I say, to Liverpool to open the Eurovision.

I mean, these are things about, and I'm not actually laughing at this, these are things about the soft power that you're talking about.

It's about putting what might have been a little Britain back onto a world stage.

And I think that he's done that very well.

I don't think that realistically he has put much of a foot wrong since he ascended to the throne.

There has been more unease, I think, about the monarchy than I expected in the wake of the Queen's death.

I mean, I thought that there would be far less sense of, and maybe it's partly about Harry and Meghan, and maybe it's just the sort of lingering shadow of the fact that she's gone.

But it feels to me, and you've seen this in some of the polling even that was out last week, it does feel to me as if there is a lot more uncertainty at the start of this reign than I thought there would be just because I thought that there would be slightly more public sympathy for him.

I thought that the fact that there was no transition, he's King straight away.

Are you actually looking at polling now?

The polling was out last week showing that it's a popular sport for the monarchies.

Now it's lowest since 1983.

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You see, the thing that strikes me, it's so interesting, because I come at this with a complete reverse view, which was I thought that when the Queen died, there would be a really bumpy period where people would say questioning the legitimacy of Charles becoming King, of say, you know, kind of all what happened with Diana and all the rest of it, and saying he's not the right person to be King.

And we knew that there were members of the royal family who had big doubts about Prince Charles becoming King Charles.

And I thought actually it all seemed rather seamless, and that since he's taken on the role, he's been doing it rather well.

And, you know, the yes in Australia, the new five dollar bill does not have the King's head on it and has something else on it.

But it felt to me like it was rather smooth.

It's not Kylie.

Although it's clear, as I say from the polling, that there has been a bit more unease about it, a bit more skepticism about it, it hasn't really translated within the media context of any more significant scrutiny of them as an institution.

They are a really significant and important part of our constitution, and yet they basically don't obey any of the rules of other parts of our public realm.

They're not subject to the Freedom of Information Act.

We don't even know how or what and how much the King inherited when the Queen died, because the royal family is not subject to the same rules around wills and public disclosure as everybody else in the entire country.

There is still so much opacity about them, far more than is commonly appreciated.

And I do think there is a question, again, I'm always very, we've discussed it before and I'm quite ambivalent about it in some ways, and I can see arguments for and against it.

But I do think, you know, there is an argument to say, actually sometimes having a political or more political head of state wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing.

Look what happened in the Brexit years, when we're basically, we've actually been quite useful to have had a German style or Italian style president who would be able to break gridlocks in a parliament.

We don't have any of that.

Our head of state is literally subject or confined to sending bloody wildflowers to kids, which is a lovely thing.

But you know, they ain't home base, the royal family.

You know what I mean?

Right.

So you have talked about opacity within the finances of the royal family literally last week on Friday.

Exactly.

We talked about the opacity of the finances of Boris Johnson, how we still don't know where the £800,000 loan came from.

I think those two things are linked.

I think having a head of state and a royal family, which in some ways is subject to this

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idea of sort of magic and splendor and being beyond question, feeds through and transfers to our government overall about it being secretive and having this sort of old boys network and having a constitution, which is frankly, I think it just shows the opposite that actually, even if you have democratically elected heads of your government or heads of state, you can still end up with somebody like Boris Johnson screwing it up for everyone.

I mean, on that, I just think it's so outrageous that we have no idea where that money came from to prop up an elected prime minister.

The idea that we have no knowledge of that just seems to me absolutely unbelievable, incredible.

Okay.

So Lewis's point is, should you feel as outraged as you do about that, as you do about King Charles's finances?

I think so.

And yeah.

I don't.

No.

Why?

Just because they're the head of state and because they're born into it, we should have far more transparency around politicians that are government than there is about the Royal Family.

Would you like to see the King before the select committee?

Yeah, I would.

Absolutely.

Because I don't.

Why not?

Because I don't.

He's not better than anybody else.

Because he's not influencing decision making.

Yes, he does.

John, come on.

The Royal Family doesn't have unbelievable access to ministers.

He's sending flowers.

Yeah, but they come on.

You've just said he's sending flowers.

He literally has a meeting with the prime minister once a week and impossible not to have influence.

In fact, as you will, let's bring up Badger, Badger says that the monarch can influence prime ministers.

That's part of his...

That's part of his...

I'd love to know what he's saying.

If they could, then the Queen wouldn't have prorogued Parliament when Boris Johnson put the pros and cons to do so.

That's not true.

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That's not true at all.

They can choose what they exercise their influence over and I doubt she much cared about that until it was found to be unlawful.

I bet she did.

Well, I'm sure she did in the end, but at the same time, you know, when it comes to sort of things around...

This is wonderful, isn't it?

We don't know.

Yeah, exactly.

I mean, the most amazing thing about the monarchy is, except for on the few rare occasions, we don't know what they think.

But we do know what the Princess Royal thinks, a slim down monarchy.

And this is her, Brackets's, the 16th in line to the throne, closed Brackets's, speaking to CBC in Canada.

And when you hear sometimes people refer to a slim down monarchy, I can't imagine what that might mean for a royal like yours.

I don't know how many more hours in the day do you have to take more things on?

Well, I think the slim down was said in a day when there were a few more people around to make that seem like a justifiable comment.

Great.

The world changes a bit.

It changes a bit.

I mean, it doesn't sound like a good idea from where I'm standing.

Yeah.

So not a good idea to have a slim down monarchy.

From where she's standing.

From where she's standing.

When you're 16th in line to the throne, you can kind of understand.

On the other hand, though, I mean, Princess Anne says that, you know, though it's been slim down a bit now, or there are a few people around.

Sorry, there are still a lot of them around, many of whom people have never even heard of.

Never mind the Queen's children.

You've got her cousins, you know, like Duke of Gloucester, Prince Richard, you've got the Duke of Kent, Prince Richard.

Yeah.

We've got Prince Richard.

Exactly.

And he receives.

I'm sorry.

I'm getting my hobby of mice.

Pass the box over.

Okay.

Pass the box.

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It's the Lewis Goodall box now.

He and all of these pretty obscure royals receive a significant proportion or receive a proportion of the sovereign grants, which supports the royal family's money.

And most people have never heard of them.

Now, no idea what they do and don't ask for what they do and no idea what they're going to do on a daily or weekly basis, and yet they still receive public money.

So I think the idea that there are only a few royals around is nonsense.

You look to the Scandinavian monarchies, I mean, you saw the King of Sweden very recently get rid of everybody in terms of having a public body other than himself and the crown prince.

Quite frankly, some of these people could just go and get jobs.

We'll be back in just a moment.

Welcome back after that bank holiday, which of course makes it a bit harder to count the days of the week.

We saw off one of our producers this week, sent him on a long two-week holiday to get a really, really good rest, and we knew that he was enjoying his trip around the southern states of America hugely when he started Sunday us late night.

You go pulse.

And also, what was on the front page of the Sun newspaper because we might need to know that for the morning.

Yeah, you can only tell that from Memphis.

Yeah.

He needs to get a life that lad, honestly.

He's trying.

He's trying hard enough.

So Gabriel, we have a message for you.

Go back to your holiday.

Mind you, am I the person to deliver this message after doing Australian television when I was in Australia?

I tell you what, if he turns up on US television doing some work for us, then fine.

He's basically undercut our whole podcast.

Yeah.

We'll see you tomorrow.

Switch off.

Enjoy.

Kick back.

Bye.

Bye-bye.

Bye.

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