

# Paula Keaveney’s Political Week – Episode 6

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Welcome back to another episode of Paula Keaveney's political week with senior lecturer at Edge Hill. Paula Keaveney, of course. It's been fairly quiet the last few weeks, but there have been one or two talking points, I think, Paula.Let's just start with two words. Matt Hancock.

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Yeah, yeah. I mean, if he ever wanted to get himself in the media widely, this this is the way to do it. I suspect we've seen more of him during this I'm A Celebrity period than we did with all those covid press conferences.

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And it's really split opinion, hasn't it? There's been a lot of criticism of him for doing something which some people see as demeaning. There's been criticism of him for not being around in Westminster,

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not being around in this constituency, you know, but there have been some voices saying, well, you know, this is a way of interacting with people, being seen by people that wouldn't normally sit down to watch NEWSNIGHT or listen to Radio four.

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And although I think, you know, this tells me his political career is really over. He's moving on. It will be interesting to see what sort of a response he gets when he comes back. And, of course, you know, he hasn't been the first person recently who's been accused of lowering the standards within the political fraternity.

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You know, Boris Johnson, he he decided to go on holiday at the start of parliament. Yes. So he was away quite a bit. And in parliament, they have a system where you can be paired. So, for example, a Conservative MP can be paired with a Labour MP.

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And what that means is they’re both away, so any votes are cancelled out. So there is a system that tolerates absence and you have to have this to a certain extent because otherwise nobody could go anywhere.

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But whether Johnson was paired or not, and I don't know whether he was, the absence did raise quite a few eyebrows at a time when people are very worried about the cost of living. This is not a good look. Now he's back. Made a speech in parliament the other day, made asked a question.

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But again, you know, there are questions asked about what is the role of an MP. No, I don't think the role of an MP is to literally be there every day, it’s impossible, but there must be some parameters.

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And I think one of the problems here is there is no job description. So when people rail against people going, MPs going off and doing a particular thing or doing too much in the media, there's no comeback because there's no job description. They're not breaking anything.

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It's very difficult, isn't it, to criticise someone who possibly doesn't have a job description to adhere to. So, you know, how are politicians held to account? Well, you know that on a basic level, it's at the ballot box.

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But we can't really say that this holds every individual to account because there are parts of the country where the vote very heavily goes by party, and frankly, the quality of the person is is less important. So that doesn't necessarily work. There are, of course, internal processes within Parliament.

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So often people will find themselves in trouble in Parliament because they've overstepped a mark. And Johnson himself is the subject of an inquiry by the Privileges Committee. But, you know, one of the probably strongest ways that politicians are held to account these days is via the

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critical media and via sort of stories coming up about things that did or didn't happen. And this raises an interesting question, because you can be a newspaper hell bent on getting rid of a politician

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and you can pursue that person in a way that is potentially quite unfair. And so we need to ask ourselves, is that holding people to account or is that actually having a news driven vendetta? And I'm not sure we know where the line is on that yet. There are some agreed parliamentary standards, though.

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Where where do they come into things? Yes. So there are rules about what you can say. So you can't accuse, for example, other MPs of lying in the House and the speaker will throw you out of the chamber if you refuse to take back that sort of a remark.

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So so unparliamentary language is, is one way in which control is kept. There are there is the ministerial code which applies to, to ministers. There are very strict rules about not lying to Parliament. If you mistakenly say something that's untrue, and particularly if you're a minister, you're meant to correct that as soon as possible.

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You know, that's that's one of the issues that Boris Johnson's investigation is about. And there are committees such as the Standards Committee. There are commissioners for standards. There is the Committee for Standards in Public Life.

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So there's quite a lot of different bodies looking at this. But I think the problem is these are often confusing. And with some of these bodies, there's a sense that the MPs are marking their own homework.

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So if it's MPs judging other MPs, isn't there a pressure to go easy on somebody or is there a pressure to go hard on an opponent? And both of those things would be wrong. So we're in a bit of a mess with parliamentary standards because there seems to be a

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proliferating number of people and bodies which overlap in really unhelpful ways. And I think it'll take some time before this is all sorted out. Of course, if there was a job description, there would effectively have to be some body that oversaw that job description working.

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And so I think this all flows from this lack of a job description. Many people will may be under the impression that this is a recent phenomenon by holding MPs to account. Is that right? And I mean, you know, as long as there's been parliament, there's been this issue about room for manoeuvre and how individuals are scrutinised.

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And it's probably easier media wise to scrutinise today because we have 24 hour news,

we have social media, it's much easier to find out what was going on.

And in the Victorian and Edwardian times we didn't have this problem.

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But they were also pretty strict about standards then. And there were instances of people effectively being chucked out of parties or having to resign from Parliament over mistakes they'd made. So I think this is as old as time itself, as it were.

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It's just that the scrutinies have changed. There was a time in the dim and distant past when Parliament didn't want its proceedings published. This is quite odd isn’t it, MPs not wanting publicity.

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Parliament didn't want these proceedings published because they didn't want the king to know what they were talking about.

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So the scrutiny then was almost the monarch scrutiny today is the mass media, and that's the change that we've seen. Obviously, MPs often don't help themselves. What is Matt Hancock getting out of this? Thinking back before Matt Hancock was in government.

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He was one of these MPs that was quite advanced in terms of electric communications. You know, he had a Matt Hancock app, for example and so he was quite known for using unusual methods of communication.

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Think where we are now is that he realises he's not being in the government again and he's thinking about, where do I go from here? I'm still young. There’s other things I could do. And he's he's still developing a brand. So the whole thing with having the app was, was about having a brand. Brand

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Matt Hancock And this trip into the jungle is, is also about the brand. But it's, it's a bigger thing for him because it's about his brand going forward. So this isn't about, you know, I am a former government minister and I now aspire to be another a government minister

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Again. This is about I am Matt Hancock. This is my brand. So this could actually be quite clever thing to do because when he comes out of the jungle, he will be on all sorts of chat shows, all sorts of chat shows,

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and we'll have an opportunity to expand what people know about him quite considerably in a way some of the other participants probably won’t. So I think this is about him sort of shifting his position in the workplace. And if you think about George Osborne is a good example.

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So George Osborne was chancellor, stopped being chancellor, was an MP, suddenly became the editor of London Evening Standard, big shift. So this is about George Osborne saying, you know, I am now shifting the focus of my career.

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You know, Matt Hancock is shifting in a slightly more dramatic way, but this is another brand shift. And actually, George Osborne used to be a great supporter of Matt Hancock. Matt Hancock was very much a protege of George Osborne. So it's quite interesting that both done this sort of brand move.

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It also brings to mind Ed balls. Yes. And the thing is, he was well-known enough to be to be able to take advantage of lots of different media opportunities. If I was trying to do a shift and develop a brand as a famous person,

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I would I would actually think Strictly Come Dancing is a better avenue because it enables you to showcase learning something and looking quite good generally. Ed Balls didn't necessarily look good, but looking quite good at the same time. But you know, Ed Balls had nothing to lose did he.

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Matt Hancock in theory has something to lose. But I think he's worked out that actually his future is not running the country. It's not going to be prime minister. It wasn't going to be prime minister anyway. And he certainly isn't now and he knows that. So it's where do I go with my life?

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Talking of prime ministers, just to tie things up for the end of a quiet fortnight or so politically, what about brand Rishi? How's that going? Yeah, he's a really interesting brand, isn't he? Because, you know, if you look at the way he comports himself and the way he dresses, he's quite a sort of modest appearance.

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You know, he doesn't drink alcohol, for example, you know, and there's a lot of sort of clean living, exercising sort of stuff about Rishi Sunak. And he has a brand which is being quite affable, I think, sort of very bright, but, but very affable. So it'll be interesting to see if that sort of maintains itself.

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It's quite difficult to be affable while doing Prime Minister's questions every week, but I think I haven't seen much of a change in what I thought about him from before he was Prime Minister, which is interesting because sometimes you see a, you know, almost immediate change in the way in the way people behave.

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But time will tell. I mean, he's he's got a terribly difficult job. And, you know, he effectively had to take it. It was his chance. But it's so difficult to see how he can pull things round. And, you know, being affable is not enough when you've been in power for so long that there is this sense of time for change beginning to develop.

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So, I mean, it is this is what makes politics interesting is that you can't predict a year ahead and put money down because there could be all sorts of variations that come along. Generally speaking, if people are unhappy, they will start to take against the, the government. You know, this is a fairly simple rule and actually it's not about whether things are worse.

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It's whether things feel worse. If the perception is things are really miserable, then it will be very, very difficult for the Conservatives. And I think the difficulty they face is however many facts and figures get trotted out and they do have a few good ones to trot out. Out in among the difficulties. If people don't feel good, then everything will seem bad.

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And I think that that is the situation that they're in now. So, you know, we will see. I think I would want to look at opinion polls the other side of Christmas to be sort of clearer about this. But there's no big sign of a conservative bounce back at the moment.

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Well, you heard it here first. Perhaps the new year will bring some light into proceedings. Thanks a lot, Paula. Pleasure. And we’ll speak soon.