

St Augustine's Centre, Halifax

English for Life in the UK

Season 2 Episode 2 - US Presidential Election

November 2020

(Music)

Mark Well, hello and welcome to the podcast **English for Life in the UK**. I'm joined, today, by Sheena and John. Sheena, how are you?

Sheena I'm OK, thank you - a bit tired from trying to follow the election - and confused! But, apart from that: fine, thank you.

Mark More of that later. John, how about you?

John I'm fine, thank you, Mark.

Mark Good, good. Well, I've been a bit poorly, so my voice is maybe a little bit not quite as strong as it usually is, but, hopefully, we'll manage OK¹.

So, today, we're going to talk about the American presidential elections. And we thought we'd do that, partly, because it's topical, in that the elections have been taking place this week, as we record it, and - er well, I suppose some listeners might think well "why, on a podcast about life in the UK, would you do something about the American presidential election?". So, we'll start with a little bit of history around that. John, tell us a bit about why is this important to the UK? Historically and now?

John Well, there's a phrase that people often use about the relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States - and the phrase is "the special relationship", Mark.

Mark Where does that come from?

John Well, it was ... the term "special relationship" was originally **coined by** Winston Churchill, who was obviously, the Prime Minister during World War II [Two]. He made a famous speech in Fulton, Missouri, in 1946, when he talked - he **coined another famous phrase** - "the Iron Curtain", which was describing the division in Europe between the Communist East and the liberal, capitalist West. So Churchill also coined the phrase "the special relationship" to describe the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom. If you look back, obviously, through history, the USA was, of course, originally made up of **thirteen colonies which were founded by Great Britain in the 1600s**. They

¹ sometimes this is written as Okay or OKAY.

fought a "War of Independence" famously, to break away from the United Kingdom. We had a further war in 1812 to 1815, with the United States, but, by the beginning of the twentieth century, we were coming ... we became allies². We were allied together against Germany in World War I [One], and then famously in World War II [Two] we fought alongside the United States, to defeat the Nazis, in Europe, and the Japanese in the Pacific theatre³. Also, obviously, we fought alongside the Soviet Union, but as things progressed, that relationship became more strained, obviously with the Soviet Union being communist and the US and UK being democracies. And this led on, in 1939 [1949]⁴, to us - with several other countries - setting up NATO, which is the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Ever since, throughout the Cold War into the modern era, we've been very closely allied, politically, militarily, and also, we've been very closely linked economically, as well.

Mark How would you describe things today?

(3 minutes:51 seconds)

John We're still - I mean, in the economic sphere, it's very important because the United States is the largest export market for the United Kingdom, as an individual country, we export up to \$130 billion a year. We also have a million workers in the UK, working for American companies and over a million Americans working for UK companies, so our economies continue to be very closely linked - and this, obviously with the looming issue of Brexit - the idea is that we'll be looking **to forge closer links with** the United States, economically going forward, so it's very important from [in] that respect, as well.

Mark I was going to say a little bit about the American political system, just so we can position what's going on now, in that. So, essentially, the Americans have a system with what they call a "separation of powers" between three main branches of the State - so you've got the legislature, which is Congress - that's known as Congress - in which there is a House of Representatives and a Senate, and they are largely responsible for making the laws. Then you have a Supreme Court, so you have a court system leading to a Supreme Court, that in the end makes final decisions about things over which there is a major dispute, particularly, to the extent to which it relates to the American constitution, because America has a written constitution. And then, the third branch, is the Presidency, and the President of the United States is a very powerful figure. Many people would describe that position as being the most powerful position in the world, probably. And, certainly although there are those "separations of powers", the President is certainly a really key, powerful position. The president is elected every four years: so that's a fixed term of four years, and a president is allowed to be ... to stand as president twice, so they can be a president for 4

² when countries become 'allies' it means they work together and defend each other against common enemies or challenges

³ theatre - apart from the usual meaning, often used in connection with wars, "theatre of war" - locus of a battle or series of battles.

⁴ John made a mistake here, NATO was formed in 1949 not 1939

years and then stand for re-election, to be a president for another four years. That's the maximum - you can't do more than 8 years: two terms.

So, as I'm sure our listeners will all know, the President for the last four years has been President Trump, who was elected in quite a surprise result, back in 2016. So here we are, in 2020, and it's the election, and President Trump is trying to get re-elected for a second term. He stands for the Republican Party in America. There essentially are two main parties - the Republicans, who tend to be more conservative, and the Democrats and the Democrats tend to be more liberal in their approach to things. And the candidate for the Democrats, this time, is Joe Biden. So the election's been taking place this week and - it was on Tuesday this week - where everybody in America was allowed to vote, although, actually, lots of people voted ahead of the day, because they were allowed to, and quite a lot of people this time voted by what were called "postal ballots", that means they put their ballot paper, their voting slip, in the post and posted it back. And, partly for those reasons, the results of the election, as we speak, are still not absolutely decided, although I think we could confidently say, at the moment, as we sit here on Friday afternoon, it looks like Joe Biden has won the election, although President Trump is very reluctant to accept that, and there are still disputes going on. So that's broadly where we are. Sheena what do you make it of it all?

Sheena I'd love to be able to say I totally understand the whole situation: but I am confused! I'm also anxious, because I'd like a result and I'm beginning to think there might not be one for quite some time. One of the things I'd read, which I find hard to believe, was that states like Nevada and North Carolina can accept votes until the twelfth of November⁵, so they can still accept votes. So it can't be decided there and that Alaska won't even count its votes until next week - the postal votes - so, I know it's a big country, I know it's complex, because different States seem to have different rules about counting, but I just don't know when we will have a result. Also, President Trump has been talking about legal action, hasn't he? and involving the courts - and even the Supreme Court - and the last time, apparently, when that happened, in 2000, it was thirty-six days where the Country was **in limbo**. This time, I've read, it could be even January, before things might be resolved but Mark, you seem to be more confident that things might be resolved before then. Is that right?

(9:57)

Mark Well, it's always dangerous to say that - isn't it? But I think most commentators are now saying that Biden is ahead in enough of the undecided States - the ones where they haven't ... they aren't yet sure of the results - he's far enough ahead in enough of those, to make it fairly certain. No - you're right - there will be ... there could be some challenges through the courts and that could complicate matters, but even then, the commentators I was listening to most recently were saying that even if ... even those court cases are unlikely to overturn a decision, that was, you know, heading in the direction that it seems to be at the moment. I think I'm more worried about, in a sense, the nature of the

⁵ written here as spoken, but dates are abbreviated in writing often, to, for example, "until 12 November"

way in which Donald Trump has behaved as President - he's been a very unconventional President and he has often done things that, you know, many people would have regarded as being quite unacceptable, in terms of behaviour - and so, quite how he will behave, as it becomes clearer that he is losing this election, is something I suppose that is quite worrying. John - what do you make of it?

John Erm - I think it's interesting that Sheena points out the 2000 election, because that did go on for quite ... an awfully long time, several weeks, didn't it? I think from what I've read, the Democratic Party have kind of learned a lesson from that, if you like, so they're going to be on hand with lawyers and observers - things like this.

Sheena Trying to think afterwards as well, how our relationship will be with America, if Joe Biden gets in: that's something which could be quite different. He's going to have a really difficult job isn't he? because the economy is going to be so difficult, after Covid. He still has a massive job to do, with trying to sort out the Covid situation in America, so he hasn't got an easy job ahead, I don't think. The good thing about him is that he's very experienced isn't he? and he's supposed to be good at working with other people, trying to get consensus⁶, to move forward, but I think he'll have to have a lot of patience, intelligence, all sorts of qualities, to bring America together again, because Donald Trump is very popular, isn't he?

John And one of the other issues that people have been discussing, this afternoon, is the nature of the Republican Party, as well - whether they will move away from Trump's kind of - if you like - populist stance and his populist rhetoric, towards perhaps a more traditional - if you like - a more traditional, conservative stance that they've traditionally held and whether they can go back to - as you say, a consensus between the Democrats and the Republicans, or if it will stay as deeply divided, as it has been, over recent years.

(13:25)

Mark Yeah [Yes] - and I think the other issue that is so prominent, at the moment, in America - which we covered in a previous episode of our Podcast - is the Black Lives Matter issue. Because it's quite clear that racial divisions and tensions and injustices continue to be a major issue in the United States and from my perspective, I would say that Trump has tended to exacerbate those - made them worse. One would hope that Biden would be in a position to try to find a way to calm some of that down and to find a way forward. Certainly, he appears to have had significantly more support from the Black community, than President Trump.

As far as the implications for the UK - you mentioned John, I mean, clearly, one of them is trade and after we, having left the European Union, our trade relationship will be an important one for us, but maybe the more important thing is that this 'special relationship' that we've had, over the years, has meant that we've cooperated very closely with the US on big global issues and particularly,

⁶ the word 'consensus' means finding agreement between different views and opinions

things like climate change, and I would hope that that's something that if Biden does become President, that actually the UK and the USA can work together on. And in fact we, the UK, is going to chair the next big Climate Conference, next year, and if Biden is President, I would hope that that's something we can work with America on, to try to get some kind of world-wide decisions made about how we tackle that really important issue.

John As you say Mark, there's so many things, both internationally and domestically, so important for us. One of the things that has come to the fore in recent weeks has been Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement. So, if you look back to the ... you know, the 'special relationship' underwent strains in the '50's, and the sixties ['60's], through Vietnam and things - but through the eighties [80's], I think, you know a lot of it was to do with President Reagan and Margaret Thatcher having a similar outlook and bringing us closer together on many things domestically and internationally. And famously, Bill Clinton played - the [a] previous President - played a very big part in helping to organise the Good Friday Agreement, which helped to bring peace to Northern Ireland, so one of the things that the Democratic Party and Joe Biden have been very clear about, was that they will be very invested and interested in not seeing a **hard border** so all these issues around Brexit - the Americans do feel as though, obviously, they've a large Irish-American community - they feel they have a stake to play in that, which many people would see as an internal issue to the UK. The Democratic Party have been very clear that any moves that would undermine the Good Friday Agreement would play badly in terms of us, getting a trade deal. So it is - you're absolutely right - Sheena, it's very, very complicated!

(16:52)

Sheena It is! So it's like our trade deal could **be on a knife edge**, as well as the American election. It's all very inconclusive.

(*Music*)

Mark We recorded that main part of the episode on Friday, Friday, 6 November, after the election that had taken place three days before, on Tuesday the 3rd - it's now Monday, the 9th, as I do the tidying up for this episode, and although President Trump has not conceded - that means he hasn't accepted defeat - it's nevertheless the case that almost all serious commentators are saying that Joe Biden has won the election and will be the next President of the United States. It's also worth noting that his Vice-President will be Kamala Harris, the first black woman Vice-President in the history of the USA. They both take up their posts in January and we wish them well.

(*Music*)

Language Support (18:31)

Mark This is the part of the podcast where I choose a few of the words and phrases from this episode and explain their meaning.

The first one: John talked about Winston Churchill "having **coined the phrase** 'a special relationship' ". And in this case - to coin a word or a phrase - just means

to invent, to come up with that particular phrase which then gets used regularly, afterwards.

Second one : John talked about the colonies that began the United States "**having been founded by the British**" - "founded" means established by the British - in other words, it was the British who went out there and began life in those new colonies.

Then we talked about this country wanting " **to forge closer links with the USA**". Now "to forge" usually means something you do with metal - you heat it up and shape it - but in this case, it means "create a strong and long lasting relationship with ... "

We also used the phrase that America, after the election, "was **in limbo**"; - to be in limbo means to be in an uncertain period when you're not sure what's going on.

At the end of the episode, Sheena said that there were a number of questions arising from the election that were "**on a knife edge**" - a knife edge is, obviously, a very sharp edge - and that means it is something which could go one way or the other - so to "be on a knife edge" means you're not quite sure which way something's going to go.

Finally, when John was talking about the "Good Friday Agreement", which was that agreement between the British and Irish government, but with the help of the USA, which brought about peace in Northern Ireland, he talked about concerns about a "**hard border**" returning. Now, at the moment, there has been free movement of people and goods across the north and south of Ireland, across the border, so there has not been a hard border. A hard border would be, if, anybody was having to go from one country to the other, they were stopped and asked questions and goods would have to be checked, so you would actually have people at the border and that would be called a "hard border".

That's it for this week. This podcast is brought to you by a group of volunteers from the St Augustine's Centre, in Halifax, Yorkshire, where we provide support and advice to all those in need, and particularly to asylum seekers and refugees. If you want to know more about our work, or indeed to make a donation to our work, you could find information on our website and that's also where you can find links to all the previous episodes of this podcast and to the transcripts - the written versions of these episodes. We recommend that, first of all, you listen to the podcast and then you listen at the same time as reading along with the transcript and we believe that will be a useful way for you to improve your English.

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www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

and we also have an email address and we would love to hear from you with any questions or comments you have on the Podcast, and that address is:

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So, until next time, it's goodbye, from all of us. (23:50) (*ends*)