Episode Book

EPISODE #5736

The UK's 14 Overseas Territories, From Pitcairn to Chagos

PUBLISHED	5 October 2026 at 20:09 UTC
DURATION	28:43
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/uk-overseas-territories-chagos/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:39 UTC

SYNOPSIS

The UK holds territory on every continent except Australia — but the fourteen British Overseas Territories and three Crown Dependencies are not the same kind of thing, and most coverage blurs the difference. This episode maps the whole scattered system: Gibraltar and the Cyprus Sovereign Base Areas, the Atlantic territories, and Pitcairn, thirty-five people descended from Bounty mutineers with the world's smallest democracy. Along the way, the numbers that surprise people: Cayman and Bermuda together are roughly half the remaining population, and three territories have no permanent civilian population at all. Then the question listener Daniel sent in: what is the Chagos Archipelago dispute actually about, and why doesn't it end? The answer runs through the British Indian Ocean Territory — the third territory with no permanent population, and the reason remoteness and disconnection are not the same thing.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Alright, before we get to Daniel's question, one small piece of housekeeping. Last time we were out in the Southern Ocean looking at South Georgia and those Antarctic archipelagos, and the thing that kept nagging at me was how many of them fly the Union Jack. Herman, do you remember what I said at the end of that one?



Herman

I remember you said remoteness and disconnection are not the same thing. And that the islands prove it.



Corn

And Daniel, God bless him, went off and found a fight that proves it better than anything we said. He wrote in this week. He said he was reading about the Chagos Archipelago dispute, and he had no idea the UK had an overseas territory near Mauritius. Which, fair, most people don't. So he wants the whole thing. The breadth of the UK's overseas territories and dependencies, the lesser-known ones, the fascinating remote islands, and then the Chagos question underneath it: what that fight is actually about and why it doesn't seem to end.



Herman

Four questions in one. That's very Daniel.



Corn

And he's right that there's a shape here, because a lot of these places look like each other from the outside: tiny, distant, British, largely ignored. But they don't work the same way at all. So let's start with the map, because the first thing that surprises people is just how scattered this all is.



Herman

The UK is the only country on Earth with territory on every continent except Australia. Fourteen British Overseas Territories plus three Crown Dependencies. And those are two different animals, which is the thing most coverage blurs.



Corn

Start there. What's the difference?



Herman

An Overseas Territory is a remnant of the empire that stayed under UK sovereignty after decolonisation. It is not part of the UK. That distinction matters, because you'll hear people say "Bermuda is Britain" and it isn't. It's under British sovereignty; the UK Parliament can legislate for it; the Foreign Office handles defence and foreign affairs. But it isn't a county. It doesn't send MPs to Westminster.



Corn

So not a country, not a county. Something else.



Herman

And then the Crown Dependencies, Jersey, Guernsey, and the Isle of Man, are a different arrangement entirely. They're self-governing possessions of the Crown. Not part of the UK, not Overseas Territories. Their relationship is with the monarch, not with the UK government. The 1973 Kilbrandon Report described them as being like miniature states.



Corn

The Isle of Man's parliament claims to date to 979.



Herman

Tynwald. World's oldest parliament in continuous existence, by its own accounting. It sits outdoors once a year on Tynwald Day and reads new laws aloud in Manx and English. Whatever else you say about the arrangement, it's not improvised.



Corn

And the naming of the Overseas Territories is itself a recent invention, isn't it? They were Crown Colonies, then they were Dependent Territories.



Herman

Until 1983 they were Crown Colonies. Then "British Dependent Territories." Then the British Overseas Territories Act in 2002 renamed them and restored full British citizenship to the inhabitants, which had been stripped out by the 1981 Nationality Act. There's one exception carved out, and it's a strange one: people connected solely to the Cyprus Sovereign Base Areas don't get that citizenship.



Corn

So there's a hierarchy of belonging, effectively.



Herman

There's a hierarchy of belonging that nobody designed on purpose. It accreted. Which is the story of the whole system.



Corn

Give me the raw scale numbers before we go island-hopping.



Herman

Fourteen territories. Total land area about eighteen thousand square kilometres, excluding the British Antarctic Territory, which is enormous and mostly ice. Total population somewhere between two hundred fifty and two hundred seventy-two thousand. And here's the number that surprises people: the Cayman Islands alone is twenty-eight percent of that. Cayman and Bermuda together are roughly half.



Corn

Half the empire's remaining population is two financial centres.



Herman

And three of the fourteen have no permanent civilian population at all. The British Antarctic Territory, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, and the British Indian Ocean Territory. Hold onto that third one, because that's the Chagos fight.



Corn

Right. So let's put the ladder together. At the bottom, no people. Above that, a few dozen people. Above that, a quarter of a million, clustered in two tax jurisdictions and a scattering of islands. And then the Crown Dependencies, which are something else again.



Herman

And the Crown Dependencies aren't member states of the Commonwealth either, which trips people up. They have Commonwealth Games teams. They belong to the British-Irish Council. Gavin St Pier, the former Guernsey chief minister, has argued that "Crown Dependency" is a Whitehall invention and he'd prefer "Crown Dominion," which tells you how live the terminology question still is.



Corn

Let's do the fourteen. Region by region, and please, the lesser-known ones first. Anybody can name the Falklands.



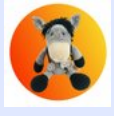
Herman

Start in the Mediterranean. Gibraltar, six and a half square kilometres, the smallest territory by land area. Claimed by Spain. It was the only Overseas Territory that was ever inside the EU, until Brexit. It has its own parliament, its own tax system, and a frontier with Spain that has been a diplomatic football for three hundred years. Akrotiri and Dhekelia, on Cyprus, are the Sovereign Base Areas, which are exactly what they sound like: British sovereign military bases on the island, not dependent on Cypriot consent, and permanent residency there is limited to Cypriot citizens. They're the only territory that uses the euro, which is a funny fact about British sovereignty.



Corn

British territory, European currency, no British residents unless they're stationed there.



Herman

And then the Atlantic, which is where all the interesting ones live. Bermuda, the oldest, accidentally settled in 1609 when a ship got wrecked, chartered 1612. St. George's is the oldest continuously inhabited British settlement in the New World.



Corn

Older than Jamestown surviving, anyway.



Herman

Older than anything else that's still going. Anguilla and the British Virgin Islands and Montserrat and the Turks and Caicos round out that corner. Montserrat, though, has a specific thing. Its capital, Plymouth, was abandoned after the Soufrière Hills eruption. The de facto capital is Brades. There's still an exclusion zone covering the southern half of the island.



Corn

What does it do for money now?



Herman

Small tourism, small offshore finance, and a lot of remittances. Montserrat's population is roughly five thousand, down from about twelve thousand before the volcano. Half the island is still off limits.



Corn

Put a pin in that. The volcano is the first thing on our list that removes a place you can live in without removing the territory.



Herman

And then the Pacific, which is exactly one territory, and it's the strangest one on the list. Pitcairn.



Corn

Thirty-five people.



Herman

Thirty-five, as of the last count. Smallest permanent population of any territory anywhere. The world's smallest democracy, in the sense that it has an elected island council and a mayor and it governs itself with a population you could fit in two minibuses.



Corn

And it's the mutineer island.



Herman

Settled in 1790 by nine HMS Bounty mutineers and their Tahitian companions, and the descendants still make up more than sixty percent of the islanders. The language is Pitkern, which is a creole, and is close enough to eighteenth-century English sailor speech that if you listen carefully you can hear it. The territory is four islands, not one. Henderson is eighty-six percent of the land area and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The whole surrounding marine reserve, designated in 2015, is over eight hundred thousand square kilometres.



Corn

And the 2004 trials.



Herman

2004 there was a series of sexual assault prosecutions, and at the peak of it nearly a third of the adult male population had been charged. The island's legal system effectively had to be rebuilt to hear the cases, because there wasn't a functioning one.



Corn

Thirty-five people and it changes the whole notion of what a jurisdiction is.



Herman

It also sells honey. Disease-free, because there are no bees outside the island's own population, and it's sold at Fortnum & Mason, and it has a royal warrant of sorts in the sense that it's been a favourite of King Charles.



Corn

Of course it has.



Herman

Pitcairn was also declared a Dark Sky Sanctuary in 2019. Zero light pollution, because there's nothing to light up. And the governor is the British High Commissioner to New Zealand, based in Wellington. Which is a fine illustration of how these places get administered: the person in charge hasn't been there and probably won't go.



Corn

Then we have the southern Atlantic again.



Herman

Saint Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha. Administered as a single territory, despite the three parts being three thousand six hundred and forty-two kilometres apart. Saint Helena is where Napoleon was exiled and died, between 1815 and 1821. It got its first airport in 2017, before which the only way in or out was a ship from Cape Town that took about five days. Ascension is a UK-US military staging post, with an RAF station, and it's also the site of one of the strangest ecological experiments ever run: Green Mountain, a cloud forest on a volcanic peak in the middle of the Atlantic, created almost entirely by nineteenth-century plant introductions. Charles Darwin and Joseph Hooker were involved in the thinking that got it started.



Corn

They built a forest on a bare rock and it worked, and the resulting thing is now itself a conservation problem because the plants they chose are invasive.



Herman

That's the whole story of Ascension in one sentence. And then South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, which we covered, so I'll be brief. No permanent population. King Edward Point is the capital. Shackleton died at Grytviken in 1922 and is buried there.



Corn

And Mount Michael.



Herman

Mount Michael, on Saunders Island in the South Sandwich group, has one of roughly eight known persistent lava lakes anywhere on Earth. There's a list, and it's on it. It's also the southernmost land outside the Antarctic Treaty area, and you can't go there without permission, because there's nothing there but rock, ice, and seals, and a few tonnes of guano.



Corn

Good. That's the map. Now, the one I want to sit with for a minute.



Herman

Tristan da Cunha.



Corn

Because it's the purest test case of what we set up at the beginning of this episode, which is that remoteness and disconnection are not the same thing.



Herman

It's the most remote inhabited place on Earth. Six days by ship from Cape Town, and there's no airstrip. There isn't a flat enough piece of ground, and there isn't the traffic to justify the cost. Population roughly two hundred twenty-one or two hundred twenty-two, and they all live in one settlement called Edinburgh of the Seven Seas.



Corn

Every last one.



Herman

Every last one, because there's nowhere else on the island to live that isn't a slope or a lava field. And the entire population descends from fifteen outside ancestors between 1816 and 1908. Eight men and seven women. There are seven founding surnames on the island: Glass, Green, Hagan, Lavarello, Repetto, Rogers, and Swain. If you marry someone on Tristan, there is a reasonable chance you are, genetically, marrying a cousin.



Corn

They must run rings around the usual assumptions about inbreeding and health.



Herman

They actually do rather well, and it's studied, and I'm not going to pretend to know the genetics well enough to give you a clean answer. What I can tell you is that they ran an experiment the rest of us didn't get to run: zero community cases of COVID. Not one transmission inside the island. The supply ship brought the virus's shadow to the harbor and the island absorbed none of it.



Corn

The purest quarantine on Earth, because it's a quarantine with an ocean in it.



Herman

And this year, this spring, we got a demonstration of what that costs. There was a suspected hantavirus case on the island in late April or early May, linked to an outbreak on a cruise ship, the MV Hondius. And the only way to get serious medical help to a patient on Tristan da Cunha is to either wait out a six-day ship journey or fly.



Corn

They flew.



Herman

On the ninth of May a UK military team parachuted onto the island from an RAF A400M. Six paratroopers, plus a doctor and an intensive care nurse. The doctor and the nurse jumped in tandem, because neither of them was a qualified parachutist and the rules don't let you strap two untrained people to themselves and hope. They air-dropped three and a half tonnes of medical cargo. HMS Medway later delivered civilian medics.



Corn

That is the single best illustration of the whole topic I've heard. The British state, in the twenty-first century, in the most remote place it administers, with a population smaller than a village, dropped eight people out of the back of an aircraft to treat one patient.



Herman

And the reason it's possible at all is that the island is British and the base is British and the airframe is British and the pilot is British, and all of that exists precisely because the territory is in the family. Ascension is the staging post. Without Ascension, the distance from the UK to the South Atlantic is unbridgeable in a hurry.



Corn

So the hantavirus story is not a story about a virus. It's a story about infrastructure that only exists because somebody kept the flag up.



Herman

It's a story about what a state does for two hundred twenty people who don't pay meaningful tax. And they got Starlink in September 2024, incidentally, so they're as connected as anyone reading this. Remoteness and disconnection are not the same thing.



Corn

There's a link between the two halves of what Daniel asked. The Chagos fight is also about infrastructure the flag keeps up; it's just that in that case the population didn't get to stay on the island the infrastructure sits on. Which brings us to Chagos.



Herman

Seven atolls in the central Indian Ocean, administered by the UK as the British Indian Ocean Territory since the eighth of November, 1965. Claimed by Mauritius, which says it was illegally detached before independence. And the way the UK got a territory near Mauritius is a sixty-year-old story that starts with the French.



Corn

Go back to the French.



Herman

France administered Chagos as a dependency of Île de France, which is Mauritius, from the mid-eighteenth century. Britain seized Mauritius in 1810 and took formal control via the 1814 Treaty of Paris. So for a hundred fifty years, Chagos was just part of Mauritius. Nobody thought about it much. Then in 1964 and 1965 the United States wanted a military base in the Indian Ocean, and the UK agreed to, in the language of the time, "provide the land, and security of tenure, by detaching islands and placing them under direct U.K. administration."



Corn

That's the whole story in one sentence from a memo, isn't it. Detaching islands.



Herman

On the eighth of November, 1965, the UK excised Chagos from Mauritius, and simultaneously excised Aldabra, Farquhar, and Desroches from Seychelles, to create BIOT. Mauritius became independent on the twelfth of March, 1968. At the time, British officials were prepared to give Mauritius independence but not the archipelago.



Corn

And the Americans got Diego Garcia.



Herman

The largest atoll in the group, and the site of the joint UK-US base that has hosted, since 1971, roughly three thousand military and contractor personnel.



Corn

Now the part I actually want to hear you say out loud. The depopulation.



Herman

Between 1967 and 1973, the UK forcibly expelled roughly two thousand Chagossians to Mauritius and Seychelles. Ostensibly to make way for the base, and partly on the theory, if you can call it that, that there should be no permanent population on a base territory. People were loaded onto ships and told they were going for a visit, and then weren't allowed to return. Some of them died on the way. The livestock they'd kept were killed.



Corn

Say the cable.



Herman

There's a 1966 diplomatic cable that has haunted this whole thing ever since. It says: "Unfortunately along with the birds go some few Tarzans or Men Fridays."



Corn

Which is the British Foreign Office, in writing, in 1966, describing human beings as a bit of fauna inconveniently attached to a piece of real estate.



Herman

That's what it's describing, and that's why it's quoted in every account of Chagos ever since.



Corn

And this is what Daniel stumbled into. He was reading about a legal dispute and found that the dispute starts with a population that was removed for a runway.



Herman

Yes, and the legal case is remarkable. The first big one: the Permanent Court of Arbitration, in 2015, ruled the UK's 2010 declaration of a Chagos Marine Protected Area illegal. And two of the judges went further and said the UK didn't have sovereignty over Chagos in the first place, because Harold Wilson's threat to Mauritian premier Seewoosagur Ramgoolam in 1965 amounted to duress. That's a big word in international law, and it points back to the 1965 detachment.



Corn

And there's a leak about the marine reserve, isn't there?



Herman

A 2009 US diplomatic cable, later leaked, that said establishing the marine reserve would "put paid to resettlement claims of the archipelago's former residents." So the reserve, whatever its conservation merits, was understood at the time also to be a way of emptying the island on paper.



Corn

A conservation area used as eviction paperwork. That's dark, and it's exactly the kind of thing Daniel was asking about when he asked what the fight is really over.



Herman

And then the big one. In 2019, the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion, thirteen to one. It found that the UK's continued administration of Chagos is a "wrongful act," and that the UK has an obligation to bring that administration to an end as rapidly as possible. Only the American judge dissented.



Corn

Thirteen to one. That's about as close to unanimous as a court of that size gets.



Herman

And later that year the UN General Assembly voted a hundred sixteen to six to say Chagos "forms an integral part of the territory of Mauritius." And in 2021 the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea ruled that the sovereignty dispute was already settled, and the Universal Postal Union banned BIOT stamps, which is a niche but real consequence: you can't mail a letter from Diego Garcia with a BIOT stamp and have it be legal in the international mail system.



Corn

I said once that the piece of a territory you can hold in your hand, the stamp, was the first thing to stop working in this fight, and I stand by it.



Herman

Then 2024 and 2025, the deal. On the third of October, 2024, the UK agreed to hand sovereignty of Chagos to Mauritius while retaining Diego Garcia for ninety-nine years. On the twenty-second of May, 2025, the UK and Mauritius formally signed the agreement. That signature is not the end of it. It required ratification by both sides, and US approval was needed to amend the 1966 UK-US base agreement that governs Diego Garcia.



Corn

Which brings us to this year.



Herman

In January, Trump reversed his earlier support and called the deal "an act of great stupidity." In April, the UK announced the deal would not be approved before the end of the parliamentary session. And in March, a BIOT Court ruling, from Justice James Lewis, affirmed that Chagossians have a right of abode on their ancestral islands. Which the deal, even if ratified, wouldn't have guaranteed.



Corn

So the population that was moved off is now legally allowed back on, but the sovereignty arrangement that moved them off is still being litigated, and the Americans have said they don't like the settlement.



Herman

And there's a "Chagossian Government in Exile" now, led by Misley Mandarin, that landed on Île du Coin in 2025 or 2026 to attempt a permanent settlement. The BIOT government doesn't recognise them and served an eviction notice. So you have three governments claiming some version of authority over seven atolls with no permanent civilian population.



Corn

Which is a hell of a thing to put next to Pitcairn, where thirty-five people run their own elections and the honey sells at Fortnum & Mason.



Herman

That contrast is the whole system. The Chagos archipelago has no permanent population because the UK removed it. Pitcairn has thirty-five people because it has thirty-five people. Tristan da Cunha has two hundred twenty because fifteen people and their descendants decided to live on a rock the rest of us can't reach. And South Georgia and the British Antarctic Territory have nobody because nobody can live there, and the international community has agreed to leave them alone.



Corn

So on the sovereignty ladder: presence or absence of a population is not incidental. It's the variable.



Herman

And the Chagos case is the one where the population was removed by a decision that a court later called a wrongful act. That's the difference. That's what makes the fight not go away.



Corn

Two hundred twenty people on Tristan da Cunha got eight paratroopers. Two thousand Chagossians got a cable calling them Tarzans.



Herman

Yes. And the same government had a hand in both.



Corn

We've been going around this thing for a while now, and the internal story of the base keeps slipping away from me. Diego Garcia is the thing the whole dispute is about, but you read the legal accounts and it's all sovereignty and jurisprudence, and the base itself is sort of there in the middle, not really explained.



Hilbert

The base is a runway and a tank farm and a pier, and the reason it's the way it is is that somebody in the late two thousands decided a thing wasn't worth replacing.



Corn

Sorry, go on.



Hilbert

I had a cousin in the trade. Contracting work, logistics, mostly out of a small office in Reading. He did a stint supporting the RAF element that rotated through the Indian Ocean in the mid to late two thousands, not Diego Garcia itself, they flew him in and out of a staging site, but the paperwork all came through the same channel, and he got very familiar with what the base needed and what it didn't.



Herman

What did it need?



Hilbert

A fuel line. There's a fuel line running out along the pier, and the original had been in the ground since the seventies, and by the time my cousin was working on it there was a decision to be made: replace the whole run, which is very expensive and means shutting the pier, or sleeve the section that keeps failing and move on to next year's budget. They sleeved it. Twice. Which is the correct decision, given the money, and it is why the base's fuel delivery is a little slower today than it would be if somebody had signed off the expensive thing in two thousand eight.



Corn

The base we're arguing about in international court is running on patched pipe.



Hilbert

Most things are. The point is that the reason Diego Garcia matters is not the island and it isn't really the base. It's the fact that it's the only place with a runway long enough to take a heavy bomber between the eastern Mediterranean and Australia. Everything else, the islands, the stamps, the negotiations in The Hague, that's all the shape the paperwork takes.



Herman

The Cormorant base, the fuel, the runway length. You can't easily replicate that anywhere else in the Indian Ocean.



Hilbert

You can't. Which is why the deal keeps failing at the point where the Americans get a say. The sovereign question is a serious one. The practical question is: can the runway do what the runway does, after you hand it over. And the answer, until somebody builds a second runway, is no. That's the whole reason the Chagossians are still waiting.



Corn

The thing that's keeping the Chagossians off their own islands is a length of asphalt.



Hilbert

A decision in two thousand eight to sleeve a pipe rather than dig it up. Yes.



Herman

Which reframes the whole thing. It's not that the UK won't give it back. It's that the United States needs a runway, and the runway needs a base, and the base needs fuel, and the fuel needs a pipe that somebody long ago decided not to replace.



Hilbert

That's the story. It's not the treaties. The treaties are downstream.



Corn

Hilbert, you've given us the one fact that makes the argument make sense. The Chagos handover isn't stalled on principle. It's stalled on logistics.



Herman

On the fact that, per Hilbert's point, nobody has built a second runway.



Hilbert

Somebody could. Nobody has. And until somebody does, the pipe holds.



Corn

That's the closing frame. Daniel asked what the Chagos fight is really about, and the answer is: two thousand people removed for a base, and a base that two great powers are unwilling to lose even for a strip of asphalt they laid in the seventies. Everything else is the dispute.



Herman

If you pull the thread all the way out, the BOT system is not really coherent. The fourteen territories range from thirty-five people on Pitcairn to two hundred fifty thousand across the Caymans and Bermuda, from a euro-using base in Cyprus to an Antarctic territory nobody lives in, from a place where the state dropped eight paratroopers to treat a single patient to a place where the state removed two thousand people and hasn't finished the conversation fifty years later. That's not a design. It's a residue.



Corn

Residue that survives because somebody needs the runway and somebody else likes the stamps.



Herman

Because the Crown Dependencies, which are a separate department, keep paying the bills and asking politely to be described differently.



Corn

The cutting-room floor, before we close: my favourite thing from the research was the exact wording of the 1965 instruction, the one where the UK agreed to "provide the land, and security of tenure, by detaching islands and placing them under direct U.K. administration." Detaching islands. As though islands could be detached, like a torn-off coupon.



Herman

It's not the language of decolonisation. It's the language of a contract.



Corn

Which, on the evidence, it was. If this thing with the territories and the Chagos case hooked you, leave us a review. It helps other listeners find the show, and it's useful to us.



Herman

One open question to leave you with. If the Chagos handover does go through, what does it mean for Gibraltar, or the Falklands? Whether the runway survives Diego Garcia is a technical question. Whether sovereignty is decided by international courts, by a parliament, or by whether anybody needs your piece of asphalt is a question about every remaining territory on the map.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer, who apparently knows more about fuel lines in the Indian Ocean than he lets on.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you tomorrow.