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A-levels

Number of top A-level grades falls sharply as north-south divide grows

As and A*s down 8.4 percentage points on last year's teacher-assessed grades, amid warning of 'stark' private-state divide

- [Why A-levels are far from returning to normality](#)



Results overall are higher than pre-pandemic levels. Photograph: Adrian Sherratt/Alamy

[Sally Weale](#), [Pamela Duncan](#), [Rachel Hall](#) and [Carmen Aguilar García](#)

Thu 18 Aug 2022 15.50 EDTFirst published on Thu 18 Aug 2022 04.30 EDT

The number of top grades at A-level has fallen sharply this year after a return to examinations, with warnings about large regional variations and a

“stark” divide between the state sector and private schools, where pupils were almost twice as likely to get an A or A*.

Results awarded in England, Wales and Northern Ireland revealed top grades down by 8.4 percentage points on last year’s record results, while A*s alone decreased by 4.5 points, in line with government plans to bring results gradually back to pre-pandemic levels.

The attainment gap between the more affluent London and south-east regions and the north-east is growing, however. While the gap between the south and the north-east was between 4 and 5 percentage points in 2019, it now stands at more than 8 percentage points.

Chris Zarraga, the director of [Schools](#) North East, said: “We are incredibly proud of the students and school staff in our region and all they have achieved despite unprecedented circumstances. However, the results also reflect the disproportionate effect the pandemic has had on our region.”

The shadow education secretary, Bridget Phillipson, said: “Students in the north-east are no less capable but, after 12 years of Conservative governments, they’re seeing their results go backwards compared to their peers across the south of England.”

In England just under 36% of A-level entries gained A and A* grades this year, compared with 44.3% last year. The number of high-flyers who got three A*s at A-level has also gone down, from 12,865 last year to 8,570.

[Graphic](#)

England’s exam regulator, Ofqual, has urged students not to compare their results [with 2021](#) when grades were awarded based on teacher assessments, insisting that a comparison with 2019 when exams were last sat is more appropriate.

On that measure, results overall are higher than pre-pandemic levels, with the proportion of As and A*s up from 25.4% in 2019 to 36.4%, and in the three years since exams were last sat the share of A*s has gone up by almost seven percentage points, from 7.7% to 14.6%.

Meanwhile, university admissions have fallen on last year after one of the most competitive admissions cycles in recent memory, but, at 425,830 so far, are still the second highest on record, according to the university admissions service Ucas.

The number of students without a university place increased by a third, the highest in a decade, while about 24,000 are estimated to have missed out on their first choice.

The Ucas chief executive, Clare Marchant, said: “My advice is to take advantage of the wide range of choices on offer, which includes over 27,000 courses in clearing, along with a range of apprenticeship opportunities.”

University admissions teams reported high levels of interest in clearing, a process that matches unplaced students with unfilled courses.

Ella Kirkbride, the head of admissions at the University of Hull, said calls had risen by 286% on last year, with many of the students having received better results than expected. “They are relieved that they have not been faced with the kind of disappointing results that they were really concerned about as a result of all the speculation and uncertainty. In fact they have achieved Bs and Cs – and are very well prepared to go through the clearing process,” she said.

Some students complained about unpredictability in results. Will, 18, who attended a state grammar in Bradford, achieved grades AAB and missed out on his firm offer at Newcastle but was accepted at Royal Holloway, University of London, to study psychology.

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“Many friends who had excelled throughout the whole two years and who had revised a massive amount to account for poor Covid teaching ended up dropping three to four grades from what they were predicted or what they achieved in mock exams,” he said.

Dr Jo Saxton, the chief regulator of Ofqual, said this year’s results were pitched broadly midway between 2021 and 2019 and marked a staging post on the return to pre-pandemic grade levels next summer.

“Today’s results are higher than those of 2019, and – as we have always said – lower than in 2021, when there was a different method of assessment.

“I felt strongly that it would not have been right to go straight back to pre-pandemic grading in one go but accept that we do need to continue to take steps back to normality.”

Female students fared worse in grade deflation, though still outperformed their male counterparts. Whereas 44.3% of students in England achieved an A grade in 2021, that fell back to 35.9% this year, an 8.4 percentage point drop. But female students’ grades fell by 9.5 percentage points compared with 7 points among males.

[Graphic](#)

Teacher-assessed grades, which replaced exams across the UK last year, resulted in a huge boost in grades across the board, but disproportionately benefited those at independent schools, where the proportion of top grades rose 9 percentage points to 70%, compared with 6 percentage points overall.

This year they continued to have the highest proportion of top grades, with 58% achieving an A* or A, 12.4 percentage points lower than in 2021 but still above pre-pandemic levels, and the gap between secondary comprehensives and private, fee-paying schools remains large.

There was a 27 percentage point difference in students graded A or above between independent schools and secondary comprehensives this year,

slightly smaller than in 2021, when the difference between both schools reached 31 percentage points.

[Graphic](#)

The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) said the overall pass rate – the proportion of entries graded A* to E – fell by 1.1 percentage points from 99.5% in 2021 to 98.4% this year. But this is up by 0.8 points from 97.6% in 2019. The proportion of entries graded A* to C dropped from 88.5% in 2021 to 82.6% this year, though it is up from 75.9% in 2019.

Maths remains the most popular A-level and the number of students taking psychology and business studies jumped by more than 10% this year. Just 53,323 students took one of the three English subjects available to them, down from 75,000 in 2017.

[Graphic](#)

In Scotland, results published last week showed a similar pattern as pass rates for Scottish pupils [fell significantly](#) with the return of exams for the first time since 2019. The overall pass rate for Highers, heavily used for students aiming for university, fell from 89.3% in 2020 to 78.9%.

As well as A-levels, approximately 200,000 students received BTec results. This year has also been a landmark year with 1,000 students receiving results for the first time for the new [T-level technical qualifications](#), for which they began studying in September 2020.

Kath Thomas, the interim chief executive officer of the JCQ, said: “These students are the first to have taken formal summer exams in three years, so we should all celebrate this achievement.”

[A-levels](#)

A-level results 2022: top grades fall but 180,000 get first choice university places – as it happened

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[Business live](#)Business

RMT chief warns rail strikes could go on ‘indefinitely’ as action halts 80% of services – as it happened

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[Rail strikes](#)

Unions on brink of ‘synchronised’ strikes, says RMT’s Mick Lynch

Railway workers leader predicts ‘massive response’ to impact of rapidly rising inflation on wages



Mick Lynch (right) with MPs Jeremy Corbyn (second left) and Zarah Sultana on the picket line outside London Euston train station. Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

[Matthew Weaver](#)

Thu 18 Aug 2022 04.53 EDTLast modified on Thu 18 Aug 2022 10.47 EDT

The leader of the RMT union, Mick Lynch, has suggested unions are on the brink of calling for “synchronised” strikes over widespread anger at how much soaring inflation is outpacing wages.

Speaking from a picket line in Euston as railway workers staged another strike in their dispute over pay and conditions, Lynch predicted “a massive

response coming from working people”.

Asked by Sky News how close the UK was to a general strike, Lynch said: “Only the TUC can call a general strike.” The TUC’s general secretary, Frances O’Grady, was on the picket line behind the RMT boss as he spoke.

Lynch added: “There is a wave of reaction amongst working people to the way they’re being treated. People are getting poorer every day of the week. People can’t pay their bills. They’re getting treated despicably at the workplace. I think there will be generalised and synchronised action. It may not be in a traditional form.

“But we’ve seen the Post Office workers and BT [on strike] we’ve seen the bus workers in London out on strike tomorrow and over the weekend. I think there is a massive response coming from working people because they’re fed up with the way they’ve been treated.”

Rail strikes 'will continue until we get what we deserve', says RMT – video

This week official figures showed [pay had fallen behind inflation at a record rate](#), and the rate of [inflation hit 10.1%](#).

Lynch repeated that RMT workers did not want to be on strike, but said the union would not back down. He said: “We will keep going until we get a negotiated settlement and our members decide whether it’s acceptable or not.”

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Rail strikes 'will continue until we get what we deserve', says RMT – video

He confirmed that the RMT had rejected an 8% pay increase offer from Network Rail because it was over three years.

He said: “That is an offer for Network Rail – on the train operating companies we’ve haven’t had an offer. And we would have to accept massive changes to our members working lives.”

He pointed out that other transport workers had been offered better deals.

Lynch said: “We’ve had a deal done in the aviation industry of 12% and 13% this week, so they’re not offering us anything really, they’re offering a real term pay cut. That’s not acceptable to our people. If we were to accept 4% for this year, and 4% for next year, members would be poorer as a result of that deal.”

And Lynch again accused ministers of scuppering the negotiations. He said: “The obstacle here at the moment is the stance of the minister Grant Shapps, backed up by the Treasury, and I think that’s got a bit wound up with the Conservative party leadership process.”

He added: “If we can get the companies negotiating freely, without being shackled by the government, we can negotiate a settlement in this dispute and get the railways back to running fully.”

Speaking earlier to ITV’s Good Morning Britain, he said the union had been working with Network Rail and the train operating companies but “the gap between us is still there”.

Lynch said: “We’ve got to find a way to bridge that but I fear that because of the political interference that’s happening with the public transport and the Treasury, we’re not able to do that.”

“We’ve also got a dispute tomorrow with London Underground, which is more of the same – that the funding from the railway has been cut – and that means an attack on rail workers across the land and I think many workers are suffering from that at this moment.

“They’re not getting a square deal but we’ll keep working with the companies to get a negotiated settlement and as soon as we can do that, will put it to our members and hopefully we can get the railway back providing service the that public needs.”

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‘A damaged person’: Alan Cumming on playing the schoolboy who was actually 30



‘It’s shocking how, in plain sight, people can get away with the most incredible things’ ... Alan Cumming in *My Old School*.

In 1993, a 16-year-old pupil at a Glasgow school was unmasked as a fully grown adult. Now his classmates have made a documentary – My Old School – about the astonishing deception



[Libby Brooks](#)

Thu 18 Aug 2022 01.00 EDT Last modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 06.40 EDT

What most people remember about Scotland's notorious schoolboy impostor Brian MacKinnon is the size of the lie. How did a 30-year-old man, with only a dodgy accent and a worse perm, succeed in passing himself off as a 16-year-old high-school pupil in one of the most salubrious suburbs of Glasgow, hoaxing teachers who had already taught him some years before? Moreover, why would anyone want to?

MacKinnon made sky-high headlines in the mid-1990s, but these questions are re-posed three decades later with curiosity, humour and some tenderness in My Old School. Directed by [Jono McLeod](#), a school contemporary of MacKinnon's (the second time around), the film pieces together the recollections of former classmates, friends and teachers, finally allowing his peers their say on the subterfuge that defined their coming of age.

Should memory require refreshment, the extraordinary deception went so: calling himself Brandon Lee, MacKinnon enrolled at Bearsden Academy in

1993 with the intention of completing his Highers and applying to medical school. But Lee wasn't 16. He was a man of 30 who had already graduated from the same school a decade earlier, and been thrown off his course at Glasgow University after failing his exams.

He was eventually exposed but not before dazzling his teachers, hosting house parties for his new teen pals and taking the lead in the school musical *South Pacific*, delivering an off key and – in hindsight – bravura performance of *Younger Than Springtime*. Although he secured the necessary grades, he was later expelled from his medical course at Dundee University when his double life was exposed in the media.

As a Glasgow teenager myself back then, I vividly recall the photographs of pupils crowded round a lone copy of the *Daily Record*, on their open faces a combination of awe, thrill and confusion. There was a dubious undercurrent to this tallest of tales even then – a grown man in a room full of teenagers, whose hyper-focused desperation trumped all other propriety – but somehow it was overshadowed by the glorious, bonkers boldness of the episode.

When you're dealing with this many lies, it's really difficult to get to the truth

Without ever seeking to blame, *My Old School* untangles some of the questions that back then most tested credulity: how could not one single teacher have noticed another adult in their classroom? Why did nobody question it when the kids in the playground immediately nicknamed the new arrival “thirtysomething”? Did his peers accept he could drive a car because the age limit was 14 in Canada, where MacKinnon claimed to have lived with his opera-singing mother before she died in a tragic accident and his professor father returned to live in the UK?

The documentary features Alan Cumming as the young pretender. MacKinnon agreed to be interviewed for the project but not filmed, so McLeod asked the actor, who he knew had a longtime fascination with the story, to lip-sync MacKinnon's taped words – which he does so seamlessly that he swiftly evaporates into the character. The ordinarily puckish

Cumming sits stiffly behind a desk in the classroom dressed in beige and quietly communicating a lifetime of discomfort in his own skin.



‘Nicknamed thirtysomething’ ... the real Brian MacKinnon, AKA Brandon Lee, in 1995. Photograph: Image Scotland/Alamy

“It’s shocking how, in plain sight, people can get away with the most incredible things,” Cumming told me when we met in Glasgow. “People pretend to be different things all the time, but as Scots we think of ourselves as canny. ‘You can’t pull the wool over my eyes.’ So for that to happen here ... that’s why it was such a huge story and why we’re still talking about it all these years later.”

It is hard not to ask Cumming questions as though he gave a straightforward performance, especially when so much of this thoughtful film revolves around the reasons why MacKinnon was performing himself. “It feels slightly disingenuous talking about this ‘character’ when it’s actually a documentary,” admits Cumming. “I feel protective of him. It is a tragedy too. At the centre of it is a very damaged person.”

It’s a reflection echoed by McLeod: “It’s hard to talk about Brian MacKinnon because I don’t know him that well. But we all knew Brandon Lee.” McLeod says that MacKinnon, who was the first person he

interviewed for the project, “is the ultimate unreliable narrator. My take on it is just that there are some people in life who are wired differently to the rest of us,” he says with a generosity that everyone speaking for the film extends to MacKinnon. “When he’s explaining to you the reasons why he did it, it makes an odd kind of sense.”

The film-making process was like trying to piece together a jigsaw, he explains. “When you’re dealing with this many lies, it’s really difficult to get to the truth. So this is just as close as 30 classmates and teachers can get by coming together.”

It’s also immediately apparent from watching the film that this is a story that could only be told by McLeod. At one point, a former classmate expresses her amazement that she was so fooled by MacKinnon before she looks directly at McLeod behind the camera and shouts across to him: “So were you, ya mug!” The mutual experience of being duped means the trust between director and subjects is palpable, and his probing is never supercilious.



Class act ... a school photo with 30-year-old MacKinnon, centre.
Photograph: PA Images/Alamy

Indeed, while the now 59-year-old MacKinnon remains a largely unknowable figure, *My Old School* is far more about the experience of Brandon's peers. It's a point that Cumming emphasises: "Imagine being able to go back and discuss something that happened to you at a very formative age, to revisit that together as adults. What I find fascinating is how we can all have experienced the same incident and have very different memories of it."

It's quite lovely to see how protective the classmates are of one another, and even of MacKinnon (whom they all still call Brandon), perhaps in order to preserve the purity of their own memories. This is especially so around some of the darker threads of the film. Lee is remembered with especial warmth by a black student, Stefan, who says the new boy defended him against racist bullies. On the other hand, his South Pacific co-star Val blanches as she realises what his enthusiastic kiss at the end of the production looks like from the perspective of adulthood.

That kiss proved a particular challenge for McLeod. While concerns were raised at the time of MacKinnon's exposure, there was not the safeguarding outcry that there would be nowadays – a reminder of how significantly responses to potential sexual exploitation have changed in a fairly short space of time. "We all collectively felt that, while the film someone else would make would be that sinister, dark take, we didn't want that," says McLeod. "But then, when I came upon the South Pacific tapes, I realised: 'Well, actually I am going to have to hold this guy to account.' I took my steer from Val. Her take on what happened is it makes her feel a bit icky, and that was as far as she wanted to go in terms of condemnation."



MacKinnon in 1995. Photograph: Murdo Macleod/The Guardian

The film also spotlights the brutality of high-school life. As a gay teenager, McLeod's own memories of Bearsden Academy are "hellish", he says, and he was determined to place the racism Stefan suffered on the collective record. "It was a surprise for a lot of the classmates who came to the screening, and then told me afterwards they had no idea that was what Stefan's experience was. I don't even know if Brandon helped Stefan all that wittingly, but he absolutely changed the guy's life for the better, so it was only right that I depict that."

For McLeod, one of the overriding themes of *My Old School* is privilege: "Bearsden is a town of ambition: people want to live there because they want their kids to do well." In the film, classmates dissect this sharply, differentiating between the posh houses and "spam valley", the area for less well-off families who moved in with the aspiration to send their children to the local school. One of those families was MacKinnon's, and the film reveals the hefty inter-generational pressures on him to succeed. Another former classmate reports that MacKinnon can still be seen on the computers in Bearsden library, searching for medical schools around the world that might yet accept him.

In a culture in which the imperative is to follow one's dream no matter what, when does the relentless pursuit of a goal end up damaging yourself or those around you? Cumming picks up this question: "What's dangerous about that message – and I find it in America particularly – that anything will come to you if you want it enough, if you work hard enough, is that it's just not true," he says. "Tell that to a single mum with four kids on a council estate. You can work as hard as you can, but if your circumstances and the political situation you live in are not conducive to helping you then it's not going to change."

My Old School is released on 19 August in the UK. It is also screening in Australia on 21 August as part of the Melbourne international film festival.

This article was amended on 18 August 2022. Brian MacKinnon posed as a 16-year-old when he returned to Bearsden Academy, not a 17-year-old as an earlier version said.

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The century of climate migration: why we need to plan for the great upheaval

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‘Handing over cold hard cash makes you think twice’: the people ditching cards in the cost of living crisis



Composite: Guardian Design; Andy Andrews; Dr TJ Martin/Getty Images; Ben Molyneux/Alamy

With inflation raging and real wages falling, more and more of us are taking an old-school approach to staying on top of spending. Suddenly coins and notes are back in favour

[Amelia Tait](#)

Thu 18 Aug 2022 05.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 18 Aug 2022 07.16 EDT

A year ago, buying a Starbucks coffee didn't feel "real" to Samantha Thomas. "It was just tapping," the 41-year-old private tutor from Wigan says. "It didn't feel like real money, it was just my card." Nowadays, Thomas pulls out a £5 note every time she wants a hot drink. "When you're physically handing over solid money," she says, "it just makes you think twice."

For the last 12 months, Thomas has been a cash-only consumer. She leaves her debit card at home when she does her weekly food shop, bringing only the budget she has allocated in notes. As a result, Thomas could "sit here and tell you to the penny" what most items in the supermarket cost. "I know that if I go to Aldi something would cost me 6p less than if I went to Asda and about 5p less than if I went to Tesco," she says. Thomas's "solid money" habit hasn't just changed her attitude to Starbucks; it's changed the way she spends and saves entirely.



Research shows that we experience the ‘pain of paying’ when spending cash. Photograph: georgeclerk/Getty Images/iStockphoto

Thomas is not the only one turning to cash during the cost of living crisis. In July, more than £800m in banknotes was withdrawn from Post Office counters, a 20% rise from the same month the year before. Martin Kearsley, banking director at the Post Office, told the BBC: “We’re seeing more and more people increasingly reliant on cash as the tried-and-tested way to manage a budget.”

Since records began five years ago, Post Office withdrawals have exceeded £800m only once before – and that was last Christmas, a time when a lot of cash is tucked into cards. Shortly after [UK wages fell at their fastest rate](#) in 20 years, Kearsley said it was clear that Britain is “anything but a cashless society”.

Thomas first ditched her debit card post-lockdown after she was troubled by her online spending during the pandemic, but she says her cash-only budget is helping her to prepare for rising costs. “I feel like I’m ahead of the game, I feel like I’ve got an advantage,” she says. “It’s definitely going to be tricky, but I feel like I’ve already got lots of tools in place to help me.”

Contactless promotes increased spending and increased use of debt

Warwick business school

Personal finance and consumer expert [Sue Hayward](#) concurs that “handing over cold hard cash often makes you think twice about how much you’re spending”. She also notes that it’s easier to keep track of purchases when paying with banknotes, “as contactless payments can take several days to show up on your statement”.

In 2020, [researchers from Warwick business school](#) analysed more than 300m transactions from 260,000 consumers and found that people with contactless cards spent “significantly more” than those without. Contactless spenders were also more likely to be charged overdraft fees and made more purchases overall. The researchers concluded that contactless: “promotes

increased spending and can promote decreased cash usage and increased use of debt.”

Conversely, almost 30 years of academic research have shown that we experience the “pain of paying” when spending cash: handing over money feels like losing it, activating the [insular cortex](#), the part of our brain that deals with physical pain. (Interestingly, it seems that some alternatives to cash are less painful than others. One 2018 paper, from the Frankfurt School of Finance & Management, found that consumers feel lower levels of pain when they pay with mobile phones and smartwatches than when they use credit cards.)

“It’s just being savvy and going back to old-school ways,” Thomas says of her cash use. On her YouTube channel, [The Budget Mum UK](#), she shows her 2,600 subscribers how she withdraws her wage at the start of the month and separates the notes into different laminated envelopes. Among others, there’s an envelope for food shopping, one for travel, one for credit card debt and one for emergencies.



Old-style budgeting ... ‘cash stuffing’ involves setting aside money in envelopes, one for each expense. Photograph: FotoDuets/Getty Images/iStockphoto

On social media, this budgeting technique is called “cash stuffing”: the envelopes help people keep track of their spending and saving without complicated spreadsheets. Google searches for the technique [spiked at the beginning of the year](#), and TikTok videos hashtagged #cashstuffing have now accumulated almost 550m views.

Jade Edmondson is a 29-year-old teaching assistant from Coventry who sells cash-stuffing materials such as labelled plastic envelopes, binders and savings tracking sheets on her [Etsy](#) page. She says she has seen a recent rise in sales. In total, Edmondson personally uses 30 cash-stuffing envelopes for things such as petrol money, Christmas savings and her Slimming World membership. Putting away money gradually in one envelope over the course of the year helps Edmondson save for bigger costs: she now has £350 saved to buy her four children’s school uniforms. “If this was me last year, I would be panicking: ‘How am I going to pay for all of this?’” she says. “Whereas actually now, I don’t worry about money.”

Yet a cash-only lifestyle can cause problems in an [increasingly cashless society](#). In 2010, half of the UK’s transactional payments were made in cash, but by 2020, this had [dropped](#) to just 17%. A number of shops banned cash payments for public health reasons during the pandemic, but [a 2021 survey by Which?](#) found that one in five consumers had been prevented from making a cash payment between April and July of 2021, when restrictions were easing.

The reality is you will pay more using cash because you can’t shop online

Natalie Cenney

Thomas has run into trouble when paying for petrol – and when she sent her daughter to the cinema with cash recently, she was unable to buy her ticket and snacks. “It’s just been trial and error,” she says. Six weeks ago, she decided to set up Apple Pay on her phone as a backup for emergencies, but she refuses to leave her credit card in her car to avoid temptation.

Natalie Ceeney, chair of the Cash Action Group, says many small businesses don’t accept cash because it’s increasingly difficult to deposit takings due to

the closure of high street banks. Ceeney is now campaigning to get ATMs to take cash deposits (you can currently do this inside banks, but opening hours can be prohibitive). However, she says, “setting up a whole new network” is “not quick”. Meanwhile, Ceeney notes that many consumers depend on cash due to “some form of vulnerability”, such as not having a proper internet connection, smartphone or bank account, or having a disability. A May study by the [Royal Society of Arts](#) found that 15 million people in the UK rely on cash to budget.

“The main reason people will tell you they use cash is for budgeting: you can see it, you can feel it,” Ceeney says. “With the cost of living crisis, more people are strapped for cash so it shouldn’t be a surprise that people are going back to using cash, withdrawing money to get through the week safely without getting overdrawn.”

Although cash can have its advantages, Ceeney warns that there’s a “poverty premium” when avoiding cards. “The reality is, if you can’t shop online you will pay more using cash because you can’t get online deals or direct debits where you often get a discount, you can’t shop around or buy in bulk,” she says. Ceeney explains that although many families know this, they’re “going back to cash because they can’t afford to go overdrawn – this is about necessity”.

Even with cash-stuffing systems in place, Thomas and Edmondson are concerned about the ever-increasing cost of living. “I feel like it’s going to be a big hurdle,” Thomas says of rising bills, while Edmondson adds: “It’s still very nerve-racking. It’s like: ‘Where are we going to find this extra money from?’” While using cash can be helpful for individual consumers, it is not a substitute for government intervention, nor a long-term solution to our economic crisis. With food prices [rising at their fastest pace](#) in 14 years and annual energy bills expected to cost [two months’ worth of wages](#) next year, coins can only go so far.

Additional reporting by Rachel Hall

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‘I had a very welcome lie-in on Friday’: the joys and challenges of switching to a four-day week



Digger Mosey, who now works a four-day week for the charity Helping Hands, visiting Mary Coen in Irlam, Salford. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

Workers at 70 companies are taking an extra day off each week, on full pay, as part of a UK-wide trial. We asked four of them how they found the first month



[Ammar Kalia](#)

Thu 18 Aug 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 18 Aug 2022 17.03 EDT

In June, the UK embarked on the biggest trial of a four-day work week in the world. More than [3,300 employees at 70 companies](#) agreed to work one day less, for full pay and a commitment to keep up their usual productivity levels.

The pilot, which is being monitored by academics from Oxford and Cambridge universities and Boston College in the US, runs for six months. “It has been almost 100 years since the transition from a six-day week to a five-day week, so we are long overdue a change,” says Joe Ryle, the campaign director with the study’s partner, [4 Day Week UK](#). “The UK has an unhealthy culture where it is seen as a badge of honour to be working all the time, yet our productivity levels are low and younger generations increasingly don’t want to be defined by a lifestyle of burnouts.”

The latest figures [from the Office for National Statistics](#) back that up. In 2019, the UK’s output for each hour worked was lower than that of the US

and France, while other G7 countries' output per worker was 13% above the UK's. But in terms of hours worked, [research](#) places the UK more than an hour above the EU average of 40.5 hours a week in 2019.

In the UK, [10 million people](#) say they would like to work fewer hours, with 3 million willing to accept less pay in return.

Studies suggest working one fewer day a week can lead to improvements in workers' happiness and productivity, as well as increasing access to the labour market and having possible knock-on benefits for the environment thanks to the reduction in commuting.

In Iceland between 2015 and 2019, a four-day-week trial among public-sector employees resulted in a "[dramatic increase](#)" in worker wellbeing. Afterwards, more than 80% of the country's workforce negotiated shorter hours. In [New Zealand](#), a 2018 pilot led to the company Perpetual Guardian making the changes permanent.

Not every four-day-week pilot has resulted in lasting success, though. In 2019, the Wellcome Trust [scrapped plans](#) for its 800 head office staff to work one fewer day a week after a three-month study, owing to "operational complexity". The business organisation the CBI has also expressed opposition to the four-day week, stating that "rigid approaches feel like a step in the wrong direction" at a time when a choice of flexible working is seen as increasingly essential.

Research [conducted by Gallup](#) also suggests that while employees want more flexibility at work, when it comes to overall wellbeing, other issues such as better management, better pay or more meaningful work can outweigh hours worked.

Still, Joan Fielder, the CEO of Helping Hands, which provides support to the elderly and is one of the organisations taking part in the UK trial, says so far she is pleased with the change. "It doesn't take away from our service or commitment; instead it allows a better work-life balance and keeps us all focused and refreshed."

With the upheavals of the coronavirus pandemic having already led to a [re-evaluation of priorities](#) – and staff resigning from their jobs in droves – just how much of a difference could an extra day of free time make? We spoke to four employees in various industries as they embarked on the first month of the pilot.

Week 1: ‘Is it expanding my free time or window-dressing it?’



Dr Fatima Ajia. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

In Coventry, 35-year-old Dr Fatima Ajia might start her typical working day as early as 5am. As the campaigns and social research manager for the environmental non-profit Waterwise, her role involves compiling research, leading training courses and attending multiple meetings. Her hours are flexible and she works from home, sitting at her desk until her to-do list is all ticked off.

“I’m a creature of habit and work is part of my life’s structure, so I wonder if the four-day week will be about expanding our free time or just window-dressing it,” Ajia says. “Will it be that easy to switch off from the all-

consuming aspects of work on Fridays and to engage in life? Or will I feel reduced in some way?"

Over in Salford, 49-year-old Digger Mosey is finding the change a welcome respite. "I've been at Helping Hands, where we assist elderly people, since April. Before that, I was at an NHS mental health support unit where I would work nights," he says. "Having a normal working day and an extra day off on Friday is a dream come true."

With most of his friends employed full-time, Mosey spent his first Friday off at home, getting round to DIY tasks. "I live alone so I have to crack on with the jobs eventually," he says. "I had a few drinks on Thursday and had a very welcome lie-in on Friday. Getting back to work on Monday, I felt so much more refreshed."

Mark Herbert, 52, lives in south London with his wife and two teenage boys. As a manager at Charity Bank, he has concerns about starting the pilot. "It will require a different approach to work, since I can't just compress my usual five-day workload into four," he says. "There's always some faffing involved, so I'll have to be really focused to get all my tasks done by Thursday evening and probably will have to share the load more, too."

"Prior to lockdown, I would be leaving home about 7am and getting back by 6.30pm," he says. "Since Covid, most of our work has been remote, so it's much easier to have no set finish time. With the four-day week I really hope I can spend more time with the boys and see if I can get back to working on my own health and fitness."

Opting for a Wednesday off, rather than the typical Friday, creative copywriter Emma Colton, 28, who lives in Northampton, has productive plans for her first month of four-day weeks. "I wanted to be switched on for my day off, to fill it with personal projects," she says. "I'm in the process of selling my flat and starting to write a novel, so I have quite a bit on."

Her first Wednesday off consisted of a "glorious nap", journalling, tidying her flat and meeting a friend; she chalks it up as a success. "Being around other people really helps with my creative process, and getting enough sleep helps with productivity," she says. "I think it was a day well spent."

Back in Coventry, Ajia is equally surprised with her first week's progress. Despite responding to work emails over the weekend, she also managed a long-overdue visit with her nieces. "Spending time with family this weekend awakened me to the social value that I'm being robbed of," she says. "I'd like to make more time to nurture this 'me-outside-of-work'."

Week 2: 'I don't know why this wasn't done years ago'



Digger Mosey. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

"I no longer know what day of the week it is," Colton says from her home in Northampton. "Having a Wednesday off is great for keeping productive all week long, but it also means I don't get a Friday feeling. Weekends don't have the same importance as they used to."

Two weeks into the pilot, Colton is still balancing her expectations with the realities afforded by her free time. With plans to crack on with her novel, she ended up spending her Wednesday tidying her flat for viewings that were ultimately cancelled. "That was disappointing," she says. "But it was useful to realise that my free time might not always go to plan."

Meanwhile, Ajia is still finding it difficult to implement a work-life balance. “This week has been busier. Every day, I’ve been glued to my desk, unable to take my lunch break or even to stretch,” she says.

By contrast, Herbert’s colleagues have been cutting down on unnecessary face-time. “We have fewer meetings booked now and they are shorter, while interactions with other staff are more focused,” he says. “Having four days means you always think about what is the best use of your time, so you carry as little forward to the next week as possible.”

Still, he says he couldn’t resist checking his emails over the weekend. But he also fitted in a parkrun – “the first time I’ve managed one since lockdown”, he says.

Mosey, for his part, is becoming increasingly productive. “I used to do homeless outreach volunteering on a Saturday, but now I have Fridays off, I’ve moved it to Thursday night,” he says. “It is much better and it means I can switch off properly for the weekend.” He spent Saturday going out to a local bar with friends and planning a trip the next weekend to a music festival.

“That extra day means everyone gets back on Monday buzzing,” he says. “There’s a really great team spirit, and everyone can save their annual leave for a proper holiday. I don’t know why this wasn’t done years ago – I’m properly dreading it if we have to go back.”

Week 3: ‘I should cut myself some slack’



Emma Colton

On an away day with her team this week, Ajia found that everyone was waxing lyrical about the pilot. “People have their Friday lists, for the fun things they want to experience on their days off,” she says. “Everyone seems in favour of the pilot, even with its teething problems, and to be honest, I’m at ease with it now, too ... This week, I’ve done what’s practical and let go of the impossible – in work and in my personal life. I hope it can carry on that way.”

Colton has spent the week coming to a similar realisation, after planned flat viewings on her day off fell through again. “I’ve found I’m putting a lot of pressure on myself to make the most of the day I have been given when I actually have a lot going on and should cut myself some slack,” she says. “I’ve realised that I don’t want to plan personal projects as rigidly, since while the four-day week is allowing me to be flexible in my work, it’s also been teaching me to be flexible in my personal life, too.”

On Monday, Mosey is so flexible with his newfound free time that he misses our usual slot to catch up on the week’s activities. “I forgot that I took another day off,” he laughs. “It’s a bit like having a bank holiday every week – you have to keep track of your days. Still, I got all my work done and I had a great time this weekend at the music festival watching Duran Duran. I’m

so thankful, since this time last year I was on shifts and the lack of sleep kills you – I’m too old to go back to that now.”

Week 4: ‘I don’t get that Sunday night fear any more’



Mark Herbert

With the end of the month in sight, Herbert still feels he is learning how to work more effectively in a four-day timeframe. “Sometimes the work week can feel like the mad panic you get before you’re about to go off on holiday – you’re just rushing to get everything done,” he says. “It’s worth it for the extra day off, though, since it sends you into Monday calmer – I don’t get that Sunday night fear any more.”

He feels a permanent move to four-day weeks wouldn’t be too far a stretch. “We all want it to carry on after the pilot – my family included – and it will be great having the extra time in the autumn when the kids are back at school. There won’t be any excuse to not be prepared for Christmas this year!”

Making up for last week's fun, Mosey is up extra early this Monday, raring to get back to work. "It sometimes felt like no one got much done on a Monday but now I feel renewed," he says. "I can't waste time in the week any more and I feel much more motivated. I honestly can't think of any downsides, since everyone is getting their work done. My only worry is that we'll end up doing five days a week again come November."

In Northampton, Colton has finally managed to organise her flat viewings and get started on her novel. "Not a lot of this month has gone according to plan, but I need to remember to give myself breathing space," she says. "There is no point in taking part in this trial with the hopes of reducing stress if I am going to pile it on myself in my spare time. Life gets in the way, and that's OK."

I just needed to get more comfortable with what I can achieve in a limited time

Fatima Ajia

The four-day week could especially benefit the creative sectors, she feels: "My copywriting is improving because I am making more time to write creatively. Creative jobs work better when you have the time to unwind and think more clearly."

Perhaps the biggest shift in mindset has come from Ajia. "I'm surprised I've enjoyed this month; I usually never like to be idle. It felt as if I had withdrawal from work initially, as it's such a large part of giving my life meaning," she says. "But I just needed to get more comfortable with what I can achieve in a limited time and to say a resounding no when I can't complete something to the standard I want to."

She feels she has also discovered more of a supportive community at work through the trial, despite initially finding her colleagues' emails draining. "I don't need to do everything myself," she says. "I'm lucky that my colleagues will step in when I need them to."

Ajia is advocating for the trial to become permanent, but with caution. "It's not a magic bullet for solving all the problems in the workplace," she says.

“If we truly want work to be better, there are many more issues that need to be addressed alongside our work-life balance – things like diversity, gender equality and pay-gap issues.”

In the meantime, though, she believes that a continued extra day off could have significant consequences for her own life. “I am starting to realise that the accumulation of this free time could allow me to explore much more than I used to,” she says. “I could enrol for an MBA; perhaps I could even have time for a family. These things I thought weren’t possible for me seem like they might be within reach now.”

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Truss and Sunak are promising sunshine without rain – don't believe them

[Martin Kettle](#)



From Churchill to Roosevelt, great leaders have told the public the truth: that in dark times, sacrifices must be made for the greater good



Illustration: Bill Bragg

Thu 18 Aug 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 18 Aug 2022 11.44 EDT

There was never any formal announcement to the effect that modern British politics would no longer call on its citizens to make [significant](#) sacrifices. It just turned out that way. Perhaps it was after the 1970s oil crisis that politicians began to suspect such appeals were too great an electoral risk. Perhaps it got another push from the financial crisis of 2008. Either way, the mindset still remains strong of not trusting or relying on the public to stay the course when normality is put on hold.

No modern British politician would now make the speech that Franklin Roosevelt did when he became US president in 1933. “If I read the temper of our people correctly,” Roosevelt said in his first inaugural, “we now realise as we have never realised before our interdependence on each other; that we cannot merely take but we must give as well; that if we are to go forward, we must move as a trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline, because without such discipline no progress is made, no leadership becomes effective.”

Nevertheless, Roosevelt’s underlying sentiment, that it is important for everyone to do their bit in a crisis, remains massively relevant, even after the

transformations of the past century. For a nation and a Conservative party whose foundational reference point still remains Winston Churchill's 1940 statement that he had nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat, the abandonment of this spirit of sacrifice and duty is particularly odd.

It is even stranger in view of the often positive lessons of Covid. The pandemic showed that exhortations to sacrifice can still work. People were ready to [do their bit](#), making sacrifices for the common good. In fact, they were more ready to do so than the government was. Boris Johnson spent the pandemic squirming over the disruption and ignoring it. Much of his party has concluded that the lockdown was less a reminder of the enduring place of sacrifice in public policy and more a libertarian outrage.

The [Tory leadership contest](#) has confirmed that calls for sacrifice are no longer part of a 21st-century government's repertoire. Britain faces daunting and difficult issues, and every household is affected. But in the Potemkin village Britain where the contest between Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak is being fought out, it is as though all the answers to all the problems facing the country are somehow easy, faith based, cost free and involve no serious inconvenience. The most obvious example is Ukraine, where Johnson has acted the role of war leader, even though no British forces are involved.

The reality gap will narrow after 5 September, when Truss or Sunak steps into 10 Downing Street. But it is striking that complex problems have not been debated at the hustings in ways that recognise that [living costs](#), [climate change](#) and [Ukraine](#) carry both costs and benefits that cannot be avoided. Life in the 2020s is increasingly insecure for most people, but you would never know this from the hustings.

Take the climate crisis as a primary example, which the leadership contest has conspicuously not done. The broiling summer of 2022 could hardly provide a more potent warning that the planet is in distress and Britain unprepared. A long-term strategy – in which everyone has a part to play – for moderating and reversing the crisis is long overdue. The public is almost certainly on board for the sacrifices that will be involved. Yet there has been almost no hint of that in the Tory debates. It is as though [Cop26](#) never happened.

Instead, focusing only on Tory party members, Truss talks about axing the so-called [green levies](#), while [Sunak wants VAT to be cut](#) from energy bills for a year. Both are hostile to solar panels and onshore windfarms. Several key Truss backers are net-zero delayers and some are full-on climate sceptics. Above all, there has been no attempt by either Truss or Sunak to use the contest to confront businesses, households and citizens with the need for long-term, irreversible and life-changing sacrifices. It adds up to a massive national failure. No wonder politicians are little trusted.

There is a similar missed opportunity over the impact of the [Ukraine](#) war on energy supplies and living costs. Neither candidate has tried to make the big argument that gas shortages and high costs are part of the price that Europe and the democracies must pay to stop Russia in Ukraine. Neither has gone on to suggest that something approaching Rooseveltian sacrifices and discipline may even be required across the nation and that spending must be targeted on the most needy while this is so. Instead, Truss proposes tax cuts that will give rich people even more money.

The new and more feckless approach is an extraordinary and jaw-dropping contrast with the more collectively responsible past. It is a very strange kind of leadership that says the whole country faces a financial crisis and so I am not going to do anything for you unless you are already well off. Yet it is also a very contemporary leadership trope to elevate a problem while telling people that the solution is not going to hurt.

Brexit is a classic example. Although Brexit was extremely difficult and disruptive, neither Theresa May nor Johnson allowed themselves to admit it. May might have succeeded better if she had levelled with the public about the problems while arguing at the same time that the rewards would make Brexit worthwhile. The same may also apply to Nicola Sturgeon over [Scottish independence](#), if she can bring herself to admit that separation from the UK will also involve major disruptions and sacrifices.

British politics has not just lost the ability to talk about necessary sacrifices. It also seems to have lost the will to make them. The United States is similarly uncertain and even more divided against itself. Both societies find it hard to square their liberal individualism with their self-interest as nation states and democracies in hard times. Both appear overly dependent on

hedonism and overly casual about existential threats. Putin is relying on this hesitancy. He seems depressingly right about the lack of ambition and leadership among too many of our politicians. But I think and hope he underestimates the public.

Martin Kettle is a Guardian associate editor and columnist

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[Swipe right: the decade that changed dating](#)[Online dating](#)

Grindr is the daddy of today's dating apps – it wasn't just about simpler hookups

[Justin Myers](#)

LGBTQ+ people blazed a trail with swipe culture, which fulfils a genuine need for those who are less confident or conventional



Before they went mainstream, dating apps were beloved by the gay community. Photograph: Tero Vesalainen/Alamy

Thu 18 Aug 2022 03.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 18 Aug 2022 03.11 EDT

Disco. Brunch. Iced coffee. All beloved by the gay community way before they went mainstream. Similarly, no celebration of a decade of dating apps would be complete without acknowledging that the LGBTQ+ community ran to a different calendar there, too.

The daddy of our contributions to now-ubiquitous swipe culture is the infamous [Grindr](#), launched in 2009 and originally designed to coordinate hookups between likeminded gentlemen tired of chatting on glitchy websites or over discounted cocktails in samey bars. Grindr's runaway success wasn't just down to cutting out various dating-world middlemen, it also fulfilled a genuine need for the LGBTQ+ community.

Marginalised people have always found sanctuary on the internet, scurrying to secluded corners to be better understood by those who shared their distinctive struggles, kinks or slightly nerdy hobbies; all things that might be mocked by the more conventionally attractive bantersauruses roaming our school corridors and haunting the chain pubs on our high streets. The walled gardens of early hookup apps also offered protection. There was no chance of barking up the wrong tree, or the immediate fear of physical violence. The rules of engagement were crystal clear and all but unspoken: the only prerequisite for entry was that you understood why you were there.

In 2011, the founder of Grindr, Joel Simkhai, launched [Blendr](#), to include women and straight men, beating all-in apps like Tinder by a full year. "Are there women out there who want to semi-randomly meet and hook up with guys just because those guys are good-looking and located close enough to them that it would be convenient to do so?" [asked HuffPost](#), incredulously. Imagine! The answer was not really. Not yet.

Although looking for sex on the internet wasn't a new idea, Blendr distanced itself from its little yellow sibling and positioned itself as an app for "friendship", confusing straight people more accustomed to making friends on social media rather than specialist apps. Tinder's later success perhaps hinged on being more upfront about its romantic intentions. Either way, Blendr was soon hijacked by gay and bi men seeking ... each other, with a veneer of respectability that Grindr's reputation as a knocking shop didn't offer.

Complaining about the "state of the apps" is now a rite of passage for everyone, and LGBTQ+ users road-tested the uglier side of virtual interactions: from scolding each other for requesting nudes without a decent prelude; or imploring potential mates to "say more than just hi"; to enduring,

then screenshotting and sharing, racism, fetishisation, fatphobia, transphobia and ageism, to name just a few. Calling out these behaviours may not have lasered them out of existence, but there's been a definite shift toward kindness, and an understanding that noxious creeps won't be tolerated.

Nostalgic romantics will tell you pulling is best done in real life. A ritual meant to be performed in packs, where chemistry can brew and sparks can flare and any losers can be weeded out by your supporting crew. All well and good if you're popular and live in a big city. Elsewhere, the LGBTQ+ scene is likely to be much reduced and underfunded, if it exists at all. Coming-of-age dramas are packed with brash, sprightly upstarts who jump on trains with all their belongings in a backpack, but for the shy and retiring, the financially stretched or those perfectly happy in the provinces, it's not an option. The apps provided a space for those still curious about what was out there and who might struggle with the cut and thrust of IRL courtship rituals.

Just as the squeakiest wheels always get the oil, the ripped torsos no doubt receive the most attention, but dating apps still forge communities among those who don't fit that aesthetic, and they've been an important place for anyone struggling with their sexuality, or unable to live authentically publicly. Toxic arseholes aside, there has always been a sense that there's someone out there for everyone and specialist apps carry a "take me as you find me" attitude that has perhaps been missing from real life interactions.

Away from the sneers of peers, people were more willing to give each other a go. You could shoot your shot and, as long as you'd been respectful, hold your head high in the face of rejection. Listing your (harmless) likes and dislikes might seem cold and distant to a casual observer, but those who might otherwise have been ignored slowly managed to find each other.

For lonely people, or those less able, less body confident, or less conventional, getting yourself in the room in the first place was always the hardest part. With dating apps, the room came to you – and so for once, you had the chance to own it.

- Justin Myers, also known as The Guyliner, is a freelance writer, and author of three novels, including The Fake-Up

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Cyclists, welcome, you have just become the latest target in the culture wars

[Peter Walker](#)

Why would Grant Shapps have us think that number plates for bikes are a good idea? The only place that has them is North Korea



‘Why did Grant Shapps venture so far off piste?’ Photograph: Wiktor Szymanowicz/REX/Shutterstock

Wed 17 Aug 2022 10.14 EDTLast modified on Wed 17 Aug 2022 14.56 EDT

Political certainties are rare these days, but the zero chance that Grant Shapps’ ideas about mandatory insurance and registration plates for cyclists are ever enacted is about as close as you can get.

The transport secretary floated the idea of compulsory insurance for all bikes on the road and number plates for cyclists in an [interview with the Daily](#)

[Mail](#) that made the front page today: “How are you going to recognise the cyclist, do you need registration plates?” he asked. He then said the opposite in an interview [with the Times](#): “I’m not attracted to the bureaucracy of registration plates. That would go too far.” His confused interventions would have been news to his junior ministers at the Department for Transport, too, whose [longtime view](#) has been that such schemes are a waste of time.

It is not just his own political staffers – more or less every official within the Department for Transport, and any expert outside it, would tell Shapps, if asked, that such plans have been mooted many times in numerous places, but have been very rarely implemented. When they have, it has never been with success. Switzerland [had a try](#) for a period. Argentina once tried, as have several US cities. But the only place to stick with the idea [has been North Korea](#).

The argument for registering bikes can seem initially tempting. Cyclists, like cars, are road users, they can and sometimes do break laws, and they can also cause serious harm to others. Why should they be exempt from identification and enforcement? The reason is very simple: practically, it would be enormously difficult to enforce – and evidence shows it would deliver very little benefit.

First, the logistical hurdles of registering and identifying cyclists: a number plate needs to be big enough to be legible, which is tricky on its own. It would also only identify the bike itself, not the person on it. Some advocates have mooted the idea of rider-specific numbered tabards. But again, something big enough to be seen would be hugely impractical – sweaty to wear in summer, and impossible to get over a coat in the wet or cold.

And what about children? No one has seriously suggested that a 12-year-old cycling to school needs to face such administrative hurdles. But if the under-18s are exempt, would 16- and 17-year-olds need to start carrying ID to prove their age?

Even if some half-workable administrative fudge could be found, you run into the other glaring drawback of such schemes: there is very strong

evidence that they bring no net benefit either to road safety or to overall national wellbeing. In fact, they do the opposite.

Identifying road users does not eliminate danger. The UK has an estimated [one million uninsured drivers](#), according to the Motor Insurers' Bureau, and [about 70 people a day](#) are either killed on the roads or experience potentially life-changing injuries.

Almost all road casualties are caused by cars. Focusing finite police resources on bikes would be to concentrate on a group that kills an average of [two](#) a year, against around the [1,700 lives](#) lost each year in car accidents.

All you would get from these draconian measures is, most likely, fewer cyclists. Mandatory helmet laws in places such as Australia – a far less onerous administrative barrier – have been shown to [suppress cyclist numbers](#). And if you get people switching from bikes to cars you get worse public health, more pollution, more congestion – and more road deaths.

So why did Shapps venture so far off piste? Probably because with discipline evaporating in the last weeks of Boris Johnson's government, he felt he could. Before now, cycle policy had largely been imposed on Shapps by No 10, with Johnson giving his longtime adviser, Andrew Gilligan, the lead on the issue.

Shapps is by no means the only incumbent minister showing off in the hope he might land a ministerial role if a Truss government becomes a reality. Within his brief, cyclists are an easy target that will score well with members who support a more populist candidate such as Truss. Cyclists remain in the minority – despite a [boom in numbers](#) during the pandemic, only about 1% of [all mileage on Britain's roads is from cyclists](#). So cyclists are a conveniently small population for Shapps to take aim at.

Overall, the media treatment of cyclists has deteriorated recently. The Mail has routinely run scare stories about bikes for years – but the previously bike-positive Times [declared in January](#) that it now supported registration plates.

This media coverage matters. Some [studies have linked](#) anti-cycling media coverage to drivers being more aggressive towards cyclists on the roads. So while it's tempting to write off Shapps' comments – given how unlikely his ideas are to be implemented – the consequences for cyclists on roads could be much more serious.

- Peter Walker is author of The Miracle Pill: Why A Sedentary World Is Getting It All Wrong

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[Opinion](#)Life and style

I was being yelled at by a group of lads driving past – then they got their comeuppance

[Adrian Chiles](#)



I don't usually enjoy being heckled in the street. But this episode left me wanting to punch the air



Road rage ... I harboured a fantasy that the driver shunted the car in front – and then it happened. Photograph: RapidEye/Getty Images/Posed by model

Thu 18 Aug 2022 02.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 18 Aug 2022 16.54 EDT

The last time [West Bromwich Albion](#) won at Swansea City, as I was walking away from the ground, a carful of their fans treated me to a volley of the foulest abuse, focusing on my team, my looks and my professional competence. On one hand, it didn't bother me that much. I understood their pain at the defeat and the need to vent their fury in this vile way. Graeme Souness would doubtless say this was all part of football being a man's game, although I have to report that at least two of the in-my-face trolls were women. On the other hand, I must confess that I briefly harboured a fantasy in which the driver of the vehicle, being so focused on joining in the abuse, shunted the car in front. An unworthy thought, I know.

And then, this week, it happened for real. As I walked to the shops some lads packed into a small car all had a right yell at me, making various hand signals. I would say it was all in that uncertain grey area between abuse and banter, but I can't be sure because as I looked up they rear-ended the van in front of them. Before I knew it I was hurrying away, resisting the urge to punch the air. But before long guilt had set in. It was hardly my fault: apart from looking round at them, I hadn't engaged at all. They had meant no real harm, though, and the poor bloke in front was plainly blameless. I couldn't

imagine anyone was hurt; it was a relatively minor shunt. I was concerned it could have turned ugly if I'd got involved but I should have stayed as a witness. Tremulously, I returned to the scene. All was quiet; there was no evidence anything had happened at all. I suppose interested parties can find me easily enough should they need to.

Adrian Chiles is a broadcaster, writer and Guardian columnist

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Taiwan

US and Taiwan to hold formal talks to boost trade ties amid China tensions

Washington and Taipei to begin negotiations later this year in bid to create ‘economically meaningful’ agreements



The United States and Taiwan will start trade talks under a new initiative, in another sign of stepped up US support for the island. Photograph: Ann Wang/Reuters

[*Helen Davidson*](#) *with agencies*

[*@heldavidson*](#)

Wed 17 Aug 2022 21.56 EDTLast modified on Thu 18 Aug 2022 06.05 EDT

The United States and [Taiwan](#) have agreed to start formal trade negotiations, in a move aimed at building support for Taiwan and ensuring supply chain resilience amid growing hostility from China.

The US trade representative announced the two sides had “reached consensus on the negotiating mandate” for the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st-Century Trade, which was unveiled in June. It said they wanted to reach agreements with “economically meaningful outcomes”.

The agenda for the formal talks covers issues including trade facilitation, agriculture, anti-corruption, and removing discriminatory barriers to trade. It was expected that the first round of talks will take place in the next few months.

It did not mention the possibility of a broad free trade deal, which is something Taiwan has been pressing for.

On Thursday afternoon a spokesman for China’s ministry of foreign affairs called on the US to “refrain from signing agreements” with Taiwan. The spokesman, Wang Wenbin, reiterated his government’s claims that Taiwan is a province of [China](#) and its wish that no other countries have formal interactions with it in a way which has “sovereign connotations”. Taiwan functions domestically as an independent country, with its own democratic government, military and currency, but internationally is only recognised as such by 14 other governments.

“The Chinese side will take resolute measures to safeguard sovereignty and territorial integrity, and advise the US side not to misjudge,” he said.

The announcement comes amid high tensions in the region, with China continuing military exercises targeting Taiwan. Washington, despite the lack of formal diplomatic ties, has been keen to bolster support for Taiwan, especially as it faces stepped up political pressure from China to accept its sovereignty claims.

Earlier this month China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) conducted live-fire drills surrounding the island, including missile tests, in purported response to a visit by US House speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Since the conclusion of the drills, the PLA has maintained near-daily crossings over the median line unofficially demarcating China and Taiwan in

the Taiwan strait. Beijing has also announced [sanctions against senior Taiwanese officials](#), and import bans and other economic restrictions on Taiwanese businesses.

In a press call on Thursday morning, the US assistant secretary of state for east Asia, Daniel Kritenbrink, said the trade talks provided “an opportunity to assist Taiwan in building its resilience, and ensuring ... supply chains”.

Taiwan produces most of the world’s highest-tech semiconductors, used in electronics from toys and phones to cars. Citing the product as an example, Kritenbrink said Taiwan had an “increasingly central role in the global economy” and peace and stability across the strait was “crucial”.

Beijing has recently begun to claim the strait as its own sovereign waters, and warned the US not to conduct its freedom of navigation transits through the passage. On Tuesday China’s ambassador to the US, Qin Gang, said such operations would be viewed by Beijing as “escalatory” and supportive of what Beijing terms a “separatist” movement in Taiwan.

Kritenbrink said the freedom of navigation trips were routine, longstanding, and would continue.

“The US will continue to fly, sail and operate anywhere that international law allows,” he said.

“It would be deeply destabilising and irresponsible of the PRC (People’s Republic of China) if it were to try and take steps designed to control or restrict the ability of the US or others to transit the strait or ... to threaten the ability of shipping and commerce to transit the strait.”

Reuters contributed to this report

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China

China to send troops to Russia for joint week-long military drills

Beijing says its participation in Vostok exercises ‘unrelated’ to current events and part of ongoing cooperation with Moscow



China will join Russia, and other countries including India, for the joint Vostok military exercises later this month. Photograph: Reuters

[Andrew Roth](#) and agencies

Thu 18 Aug 2022 12.09 EDTFirst published on Wed 17 Aug 2022 19.33 EDT

Chinese troops will travel to Russia for large military exercises amid heightened tensions over Moscow’s invasion of [Ukraine](#).

The joint exercises in Russia’s far east, which will include India, Belarus, Mongolia, Tajikistan and other countries, are held every four years. But the week-long manoeuvres will be presented by [Russia](#) as a symbol of

international support despite sanctions and other efforts to isolate the country due to its war with Ukraine.

China's defence ministry said its participation in the exercises was "unrelated to the current international and regional situation". Beijing recently held its own military exercises near Taiwan following a controversial visit by a US delegation led by Nancy Pelosi.

Under Xi Jinping and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, [Beijing and Moscow have grown increasingly close](#). While China has claimed it has taken a neutral position in Russia's war in Ukraine, the US has accused it of tacit support by failing to condemn the invasion and criticising western sanctions against Moscow.

Putin has used military cooperation, including weapons sales, as a way to lure in partners despite his conflict with the west. During an arms expo this week, he said Russia valued partners who "do not bend to the hegemon."

"Russia sincerely values historically strong, friendly, and truly trusting ties with the states of Latin America, Asia, and Africa," he said, adding that he was willing to offer them modern weapons.

The exercises, called Vostok, are usually massive, involving hundreds of thousands of troops involved in simulated war games. But Russia may invest fewer troops and vehicles in the drills this year as the country is bogged down in Ukraine and is attempting to prevent a potential counterattack in the country's south.

In a statement, Beijing said its participation in the exercises was part of a bilateral annual cooperation agreement with Russia.

"The aim is to deepen practical and friendly cooperation with the armies of participating countries, enhance the level of strategic collaboration among the participating parties, and strengthen the ability to respond to various security threats."

A year ago this month, Russia and China held joint military exercises in north-central China involving more than 10,000 troops. The Russian defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, praised the Sibu/Cooperation-2021 drills in China's Ningxia and suggested they could be developed further.

In October, Russia and China held joint naval drills in the Sea of Japan. Days later, Russian and Chinese warships held their first joint patrols in the western Pacific.

The next month, South Korea's military said it had scrambled fighter jets after two Chinese and seven Russian warplanes intruded into its air defence identification zone during what Beijing called regular training.

Shortly before Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, Beijing and Moscow announced a "no limits" partnership, although US officials say they have not seen China evade US-led sanctions on Russia or provide it with military equipment.

Russia's eastern military district includes part of Siberia and has its headquarters in Khabarovsk, near the Chinese border.

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[Mexico](#)

Mexico's citizens caught in crossfire as cartels launch attacks across the country



Mexico's defense secretary deployed the national guard to reinforce a security operation to curb violence in Tijuana. Photograph: Jorge Dueñes/Reuters

Brazen strikes by organised crime leaders have left bystanders killed as many question the president's security policies

[*Analy Nuño*](#) in Guadalajara

Thu 18 Aug 2022 05.30 EDTLast modified on Thu 18 Aug 2022 10.31 EDT

For Carlos Holguín it was supposed to be just another day of toil.

After leaving the factory where he works morning shifts in the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juárez, the 24-year-old began his nightly routine last Thursday as a food app delivery driver.

Holguín was collecting a pizza when something hot pierced his left foot. Seconds later he saw people running for their lives. Still unsure what was happening, the delivery driver – who has a hearing impairment – threw himself to the ground as two more bullets struck his legs.

“When my mother got to the pizzeria he was lying there ... groaning, covered in blood, and had been shot three times,” said his brother, César Holguín, 27.

“Unfortunately, we live in a city and a country under assault from organised crime,” Holguín said – as [Mexico](#) came to terms with the latest explosion of bloodshed in its traumatic modern history.

The shooting in Ciudad Juárez came during a headline-grabbing week of violence that paralysed some of Mexico's most important cities, left more than a dozen people dead and raised fresh questions over the security policies of Mexico's [nationalist president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#).



Carlos Holguín, 24, a food delivery driver, was shot three times during a day of cartel violence in Ciudad Juárez. He is recovering in the hospital. Photograph: Supplied

The mayhem began on 9 August, when security forces reportedly tried to arrest a senior leader from the country's most notorious organised crime group, [the Jalisco New Generation cartel](#). The response from Jalisco hatchet men was fast and furious: in a series of brazen strikes they torched buses, cars and dozens of convenience stores as they rampaged across central cities such as Guadalajara, Guanajuato and León.

Forty-eight hours later the violence spread north as rival gangsters clashed in a prison in Ciudad Juárez, just over the border from El Paso, Texas.

The violence, seemingly unrelated to the havoc in Jalisco and Guanajuato, soon [spilled beyond the prison's walls](#) as cartel gunmen hit a series of civilian targets, including the Little Caesar's pizzeria where Holguín was picking up an order.

"Terror," one Mexican journalist tweeted alongside graphic security footage of the moment police entered the bullet-riddled restaurant to find the floor smeared with blood.

The next day, Tijuana, roughly 20 miles (32km) over the border from San Diego, found itself at the eye of the storm, with its usually bustling streets emptying as bandits erected roadblocks and burned dozens of vehicles.

“They are literally torching the country,” [tweeted](#) the newspaper editor Adrián López, who said the direct targeting of civilians was unprecedented.

López Obrador, who was elected in 2018 promising to “pacify” his troubled nation with a controversial policy of “hugs, not bullets”, claimed the attacks suggested those efforts were succeeding. He called the violence desperate cartel “propaganda” designed to project a false sense of power.

Quick Guide

Mexico's evolving war on drugs

Show

Calderón sends in the army

Mexico’s “war on drugs” began in late 2006 when the president at the time, Felipe Calderón, ordered thousands of troops onto the streets in response to an explosion of horrific violence in his native state of Michoacán.

Calderón hoped to smash the drug cartels with his [heavily militarized onslaught](#) but the approach was counter-productive and exacted a catastrophic human toll. As Mexico’s military went on the offensive, the body count sky-rocketed to new heights and tens of thousands were forced from their homes, disappeared or killed.

Kingpin strategy

Simultaneously Calderón also began pursuing the so-called [“kingpin strategy”](#) by which authorities sought to decapitate the cartels by targeting their leaders.

That policy resulted in some high-profile scalps – notably Arturo Beltrán Leyva who was [gunned down by Mexican marines in 2009](#) – but also did little to bring peace. In fact, many believe such tactics served only to

pulverize the world of organized crime, creating even more violence as new, less predictable factions squabbled for their piece of the pie.

Under Calderón's successor, Enrique Peña Nieto, the government's rhetoric on crime softened as Mexico sought to shed its reputation as the headquarters of some of the world's most murderous mafia groups.

But Calderón's policies largely survived, with authorities targeting prominent cartel leaders such as Sinaloa's Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán.

When "El Chapo" was arrested in early 2016, Mexico's president bragged: "Mission accomplished". But the violence went on. By the time Peña Nieto left office in 2018, Mexico had suffered another record year of murders, with nearly 36,000 people slain.

"Hugs not bullets"

The leftwing populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador took power in December, promising a dramatic change in tactics. López Obrador, or Amlo as most call him, vowed to attack the social roots of crime, [offering vocational training](#) to more than 2.3 million disadvantaged young people at risk of being ensnared by the cartels.

"It will be virtually impossible to achieve peace without justice and [social] welfare," Amlo said, promising to slash the murder rate from an average of 89 killings per day with his "hugs not bullets" doctrine.

Amlo also pledged to chair daily 6am security meetings and create a 60,000 strong "National Guard". But those measures have yet to pay off, with the new security force used mostly to hunt Central American migrants.

Mexico now suffers an average of about 96 murders per day, with nearly 29,000 people killed since Amlo took office.

Was this helpful?

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“I want to tell the people of Mexico to remain calm,” said the president, who is known as Amlo, accusing conservative political rivals of “magnifying” the turmoil.

Yet the scale of the violence needed no amplification and offered a terrifying reminder of the muscle of wealthy and heavily armed groups such as the Jalisco cartel and the government’s inability to respond, even in major cities.

While Holguín was being taken to hospital in Ciudad Juárez, another civilian, 22-year-old Jovanni Varo, was gunned down while leaving a bank with his girlfriend.

“They went to withdraw some money for the week and were walking out when Jovanni just shouted at her, ‘Run!’” said the victim’s mother, Candelaria Varo. “When she turned around she saw he was injured and within seconds he was dead,” she added.

The security specialist Óscar Balderas said that far from being an isolated event, the wave of violence was the result of an ill-conceived security strategy still based on [catching senior cartel leaders](#) without targeting the finances or assets of their groups.

“Drug cartels are less and less drug cartels and increasingly criminal enterprises,” Balderas said. “Rather than simply arresting criminal operators, these [police] operations need to be closing bank accounts, seizing property, confiscating buildings and weapons, above all high-caliber ones, that only the army is allowed to use.”

Mexico’s defense secretary, Luis Cresencio Sandoval, has defended his government’s tactics, calling the attacks a counteroffensive against growing government pressure, including the deployment of hundreds of members of the national guard and a series of major operations and arrests. The defense chief claimed increasingly frail organised crime groups wanted to show strength, “when in reality these underworld structures are being gradually eroded”.

Yet experts are unconvinced by such claims, with Balderas one of many to question the government’s strategy. “An operation’s success is being gauged

by the number of people arrested when this is actually a very poor indicator,” he said.

López Obrador’s government has made some significant arrests in its anti-cartel crusade but such operations have not always gone to plan.

In October 2019, the son of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, was briefly detained in Culiacán but then [freed on the president’s orders](#) after cartel gunmen [brought the city to a standstill](#) with a wave of attacks.



A spate of violence in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, was touched off on 9 August when security forces reportedly tried to arrest a senior leader from a notorious organised crime group. Photograph: José Luis González/Reuters

The 9 August attacks that sparked Mexico’s recent week of violence came as authorities attempted to seize Ricardo Ruiz Velasco, a Jalisco cartel founder nicknamed Double R who is close to the group’s notorious leader, Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, El Mencho.

Balderas said such outcomes highlighted the lack of operational intelligence and political will when it came to fighting organized crime. Examples of success included the July arrest of [the legendary drug boss Rafael Caro Quintero](#) and the 2020 capture of the leader of the Santa Rosa de Lima cartel, [El Marro](#).

“But beyond that operations have been sloppy, unconvincing and based on scant criminal intelligence ... simply responding to occasions when [criminals] are caught red-handed,” Balderas added. “This prevents intelligence-based operations and leads to the dire results we have seen in the streets [recently].”

Mexico’s political opposition has called the August attacks acts of terrorism and alleged Amlo’s government is losing control of the country.

But Balderas questioned that definition: “Terrorist groups seek to destroy the state in order to establish its own regime, while Mexico’s criminal groups – criminal enterprises such as the Northeast cartel, the Jalisco cartel or the Michoacán Family – seek not to govern but rather ... to take advantage and join forces with the state.”

However the violence is defined, the human consequences have proved devastating.

“We didn’t ask for this situation, it isn’t fair,” said César Holguín, who said the long-term extent of his brother’s injuries remained unclear.

“My brother is a decent person who supports his family and two daughters,” he said. “He didn’t deserve this.”

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Japan

Hanae Mori, renowned Japanese fashion designer, dies at 96

Nicknamed ‘Madame Butterfly’, Mori was the first Japanese designer to make it in the world of French haute couture



Hanae Mori is applauded by her models at the end of her 1998/99 fall/winter haute couture collection in Paris. The Japanese designer has died aged 96. Photograph: Thomas Coex/AFP/Getty Images

[*Justin McCurry*](#) in Tokyo and agencies

Thu 18 Aug 2022 02.19 EDTLast modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 06.32 EDT

Hanae Mori, the Japanese fashion designer who broke into the world of French haute couture almost half a century ago, has died aged 96, her office said on Thursday.

Mori, who earned the nickname “Madame Butterfly” for her signature motif, was regarded as a symbol of Japan’s growing status as a modern,

fashionable nation, and as a pioneer for the country's women.

She designed clothes for Grace Kelly and Nancy Reagan, as well as the wedding gown worn by the current Japanese empress, Masako.

Her career took her from Tokyo, where she started out making costumes for cinema, to New York and Paris. In 1977, her label became the first Asian fashion house to join the rarefied ranks of haute couture.

Her global empire expanded to include perfumes, handbags and publishing, and her umbrellas and scarves, often decked with colourful butterflies, became a status symbol with working women.

Mori was born in 1926 in rural Shimane prefecture, western Japan, and studied literature at Tokyo Women's Christian University before becoming a designer. She started specialising in designs for film actors after she opened her first atelier, above a noodle shop in Tokyo.

Her quickly expanding business mirrored the breakneck pace of Japan's postwar economic development in the 1960s, when her business partner and husband, a textile executive, encouraged her to try her luck in the fashion capitals of Paris and New York.



Models display creations by Japanese designer Hanae Mori during the autumn-winter 2004-05 haute couture collection in Paris. Photograph: Jean-Pierre Muller/AFP/Getty Images

“This was a kind of turning point for me,” she said of those visits, which included an encounter with Coco Chanel at her studio in Paris that turned out to be a turning point.

The French designer suggested she wear something in bright orange to contrast with her black hair.

“The whole Japanese concept of beauty is based on concealment,” Mori said of the meeting in an interview with the Washington Post. “I suddenly realised that I should change my approach and make my dresses help a woman stand out.”

In 1965, Mori unveiled her first collection abroad, in New York, under the theme “East Meets West”. Her designs combine traditional patterns such as cranes and cherry blossoms – along with her trademark butterflies – with western styles.

In 1985, she created stage costumes for a performance of “Madame Butterfly” at La Scala in Milan, and showed her collections for decades in Japan and abroad until she retired in 2004.

Fusing traditional Japanese kimono into dresses, Mori designed the uniforms for Japan Airlines flight attendants and the Japanese team for the opening ceremony of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics.

Mori's office said on Thursday she had died on 11 August at her home in Tokyo. No cause of death has been given.

Many in Japan will remember her for the white gown adorned with rose petals she designed for Masako for her marriage to the then crown prince, Naruhito, in 1993. She also created costumes for hundreds of Japanese movies in the 1950s and 60s, and in later years for Noh and Kabuki theatre.

Her designs aside, Mori became a formidable businesswoman – a rarity in Japan – and in 1986, became the first female member of the Japan Association of Corporate Executives.

Looking back at the early years of her marriage, she said that she was never invited out with her husband's friends. "Japan was a gentlemen's country," she said, according to the Kyodo news agency. "I wanted to be different."

Mori won official recognition for her achievements from the Japanese government, which awarded her the Medal with Purple Ribbon in 1988 in recognition of her contribution to art. In 2002, she was awarded the Legion of Honor, France's most prestigious decoration, in the rank of officer.

"She was a pioneer of fashion in Japan. At a time when the industry had not been established, she shaped what it meant to work as a designer," fashion curator and researcher Akiko Fukai told Kyodo.

"Being the first Japanese listed as a haute couture designer in Paris, the highest peak of the fashion world, means that she was recognised on the global stage. She has left a huge imprint."

Mori is survived by two sons, a daughter, seven grandchildren, and several great-grandchildren, her office said. Her husband Ken Mori died in 1996.

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Headlines monday 15 august 2022

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- [Labour Starmer says his radical plan to freeze energy bills is needed to cut inflation](#)
- [Energy price crisis What are parties and Tory leader hopefuls proposing?](#)
- [Live Business: Inflation leaves £12bn hole in UK government energy support says IFS](#)

[Politics live with Andrew Sparrow](#)Politics

Starmer says government ‘just not good enough’ on cost of living crisis as he defends plan to freeze energy bills – as it happened

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2022/aug/15/keir-starmer-labour-energy-bills-cost-of-living-crisis-liz-truss-rishi-sunak-uk-politics-live>

Labour

Starmer says his radical plan to freeze energy bills is needed to cut inflation

Labour leader contrasts his party's proposal to help households with the inaction of 'lame duck' government

- [Politics live: latest updates](#)

Keir Starmer sets out Labour's plan to freeze energy bills – video

[Peter Walker](#) and [Mark Sweney](#)

Mon 15 Aug 2022 04.25 EDTLast modified on Mon 15 Aug 2022 18.07 EDT

Keir Starmer has said Labour's [plan to freeze energy bills](#), funded in part by an expanded windfall tax, is the radical approach needed to help households and reduce inflation, contrasting it with the inaction of a "lame duck" government.

In a round of media interviews on Monday morning intended to seize the initiative on the crisis, the [Labour](#) leader rejected the idea he had been too slow to propose a solution, given he was on holiday last week.

Under the proposals, the energy price cap would be frozen at the current level, meaning a planned 80% rise in October, taking the average household bill to about £3,600, would not happen.

Quizzed on why he was spending close to £30bn on a scheme that also assisted better-off people, Starmer said that while some other targeted measures would remain in place, his was the best overall approach.

Windfall tax on energy companies 'right compromise' to keep prices down, says Starmer – video

“We asked ourselves: do we want a plan that allows those prices to go up, causes that anxiety, and then rebates some people after the event, but doesn’t do anything about inflation, or do we want to be more radical, more bold, more ambitious?” he told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme.

“One of the benefits of our proposal is that it brings inflation down, which benefits everybody, but particularly those who are most vulnerable, and those who are least well off.

“So I’m not going to apologise for a scheme which is comprehensive, which is costed, which has the double benefit of eliminating those price rises, and which is an effective measure against inflation.”

Paul Johnson, of the Institute for Fiscal Studies economic thinktank, has queried whether Labour’s plan would help greatly with inflation, saying the rate would go up again once the energy subsidy ended.

Quizzed about this in another interview, with ITV’s Good Morning Britain, Starmer argued it would nonetheless help with inflation over the winter.

“What [Johnson] is rightly saying is that what happens after April matters, because you have to maintain measures to reduce inflation,” he said. “Of course, we’d have to do that in April when we see the circumstances.”

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An existing plan to give an extra £650 help for pensioners and those receiving universal credit would remain in place, Starmer said, and the party

would also push ahead with changes to pre-payment meters, used by many of the most financially vulnerable households.

In the longer term, he said, Labour would spend billions of pounds insulating homes so people needed to use less energy.

Starmer contrasted his plan with the lack of action from Boris Johnson amid competing plans from the two candidates to replace him, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak.

“The Conservative party hasn’t made that choice,” he told Good Morning Britain. “It can’t make that choice. Because all we’ve seen from them is internal squabbling between the leadership hopefuls, who are all arguing about just how awful they have been in government, and a prime minister who is a lame duck.”

Labour says the plan could be funded by extending the scope of the windfall tax on energy companies, halting the proposed £400 payments for all households, and lowering government interest payments on debt due to reduced inflation.

Starmer has faced criticism for the time it has taken for Labour to put out its plan. A week ago, the Liberal Democrats [said the energy price cap rise](#) should be stopped, while last week the former Labour prime minister Gordon Brown [set out his own plan](#) for the crisis.

Brown took what was seen as a thinly veiled swipe at Starmer, who was away at the time, saying crises “don’t take holidays”.

Asked about the comment, Starmer told BBC One’s Breakfast programme that his team had been working on the plan for more than six weeks.

He added: “The second part of my answer is this: I’ve got a very important job as leader of the Labour party, leader of the opposition. But I’ve also got another job that’s really important, and that is I’m a dad.

“I’m not going to apologise for going on holiday with my kids. It’s the first time we’ve had a real holiday for about three years.”

Brown's plan also calls for ministers to consider temporarily nationalising energy suppliers, as happened with banks during the 2009 financial crisis.

Starmer rejected this, telling Today: "In an emergency like this, I think every penny should be used to reduce the bills of households across the country, not used to compensate shareholders in energy companies."

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UK cost of living crisis

Energy price crisis: what are parties and Tory leader hopefuls proposing?

Labour unveils plan to freeze bills, Truss is relying on tax cuts, and Sunak pledges targeted help for poorer households

- [All the day's political news – live](#)
- [Starmer says his radical plan to freeze energy bills is needed to cut inflation](#)



The caretaker government has offered no concrete policies to tackle the energy price crisis. Photograph: Simon Dack/Alamy

[Peter Walker](#) *Political correspondent*
[@peterwalker99](#)

Mon 15 Aug 2022 05.21 EDT Last modified on Tue 16 Aug 2022 00.12 EDT

With [no concrete policies](#) from a caretaker UK government on how to tackle the energy price crisis, the vacuum has been filled with a number of ideas from prime ministerial hopefuls, opposition parties and others. Here are the main proposals:

Boris Johnson's government

With its pledge to not make any major policy or fiscal decisions, Downing Street is limited in what it can do, while Johnson himself has been largely absent for the summer. Last week, the prime minister did join a meeting with energy firm bosses, [after which Johnson said](#) he would be “urging” the electricity sector to keep bills low.

Liz Truss

The Conservative leadership frontrunner has focused her attention on tax cuts, pledging to reverse the recent increase in national insurance. The only specific help on energy bills she has proposed is to suspend green levies, which would save the average household about £150 a year. Truss has [not ruled out further help](#), but has repeatedly stressed her preference for tax cuts, although these would disproportionately help higher earners, and do nothing for pensioners or those not in work.

Rishi Sunak

The former chancellor has in part pledged to stand by assistance he announced while still in government, and said last week that [he would cut VAT on energy bills](#), at a cost of about £5bn a year, pledging a similar sum again on targeted help for poorer households.

Labour

Under a plan formally announced late on Sunday, the party would spend £29bn with a [six-month scheme that would freeze energy prices at the current cap](#), before it goes up in October. This would assist all households, even richer ones, but Keir Starmer has argued it would bring certainty and

help to curb inflation, thus helping people with other bills. It would be paid for in part by an expanded windfall tax on energy producers.

Liberal Democrats

In a similar scheme – one [announced a week earlier](#) – the party called for what the party’s leader, Sir Ed Davey, called an “energy furlough scheme”, that would freeze bills and also be financed in part by a wider windfall tax.

An updated version of the plan called for what the party called a “double freeze” on cost of living issues – stopping energy price rises and an inflation-based increase in rail fares, which is due to come into force in January.

Greens

The party is expected to formally announce its proposals later this week. They are expected to call for energy prices to be not just frozen but reduced to the level of last October, before the price cap rise in April. The other element will be a proposal to permanently nationalise the main energy supply firms, allowing a low price cap and assisting with longer-term green energy efforts.

Gordon Brown

Announced last week in the absence of a formal Labour proposal, [the ex-PM’s plan, outlined in the Guardian](#), would mean a halt in any further rises in the price cap, negotiations on prices with individual companies over bill levels, and the possibility of temporary nationalisation for energy supply firms who could not keep bills down, modelled on what happened to some banks after the 2009 financial crash.

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[A new start after 60](#)[Life and style](#)

A new start after 60: ‘I became a security guard at 66. Am I ever scared? No’



‘I’ve always had the feeling you must work until you drop’ ... Anne-Marie Newland. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

From her first job, at 11, cleaning a factory floor, Anne-Marie Newland has always worked – as a choreographer, as a drummer for Toyah and as a yoga teacher – while raising four children. Then, when Covid struck, her life took yet another turn

[Paula Cocozza](#)

[@CocozzaPaula](#)

Mon 15 Aug 2022 02.00 EDT Last modified on Mon 15 Aug 2022 05.18 EDT

Anne-Marie Newland is a mistress of career change. By the time she opened her shop, Sweet Charity, in Kensington Market in 1982, selling psychedelic clothing to, among others, [Annie Lennox](#) and Kim Wilde, she was 25 and had already pursued several paths. At 19, she had choreographed dancers for [Vangelis](#) and covered classes for [Arlene Phillips](#), who had taught Newland at Arts Educational London (she was then Anne-Marie Khachik).

She was a youth worker and played drums in bands, briefly with Toyah Willcox. Later, she became a “stay-home mother” to four children, “the highlight of [her] life”, and for many years she worked as a yoga teacher and trainer. But it still feels surprising to hear her say that, at 66, she qualified as a security guard.

As about-turns go, the yoga mat to the security tabard feels like a sharp one. “It is all about psychology,” Newland says. As a security guard, “you have to be very observant. You have to be willing to challenge, without being aggressive. I have had antiterrorist training, terrorist-awareness training, how to arrest people, how to de-escalate.” And she has found she is good at it.

I have always felt powerless. Wearing a uniform, I feel protected

When Newland started, she enforced Covid-19 security at venues while restrictions were in place, and now manages a team at high-profile events and festivals. The job offers flexibility “and keeps you physically active”.

She stands a little over 5ft tall. Is she ever scared? “No,” she says. “And that’s an interesting one. Why don’t I feel scared?”

Since childhood, Newland has had a complicated relationship with security. She was born in Iraq and spent her early years in Kirkuk, Baghdad and Basra. “We were always moving, quickly.” She was five when she saw her father arrested at gunpoint. “He was a political prisoner” – accused of taking papers from the university where he taught draughtsmanship – “which was ridiculous.” The family fled to Leicestershire, the county Newland’s mother was from. But it was six years before her father could join them, in 1967.

At 13, Newland won a scholarship to board at the Arts Educational School in Tring, Hertfordshire. Her parents took her on the train, with her belongings in a plastic bag. “I thought, ‘I’m just going to move on,’” she recalls.

Tring was “a world of money, of privilege”. Newland seesawed between this and “abject poverty” when she went home – though she had never seen it as such before. The family slept on mattresses on the floor. But what stung most was “seeing how hard my parents worked”. Her father struggled to find employment. “He’d get a job – until they heard his voice on the phone, or they saw him, and suddenly the job was gone.” Police knocked often: “We were the only foreigners in the village.”

The disconnect between home and school “taught me how to manoeuvre the world”, Newland says. “Constantly divided between two worlds – that’s my story.” The thread that joined those worlds was work. “Primarily, no matter what I’ve done in my life, I’m a worker,” she says. She got her first job at 11, cleaning a factory floor, but applied herself as she would at Tring. That’s where she recalls a teacher saying, “If your pointed shoes aren’t full of blood, you haven’t worked hard enough.”

Even now, she retains the feeling that “you must work until you drop”. It must have been hard, then, when Newland felt her energy leave her after Covid-19 sent her yoga teacher-training business online. “I was coming up to retirement. I thought, ‘This is a natural closing down.’”

Sometimes she wonders: “How have I ended up in security? And it occurred to me that I have always felt powerless,” she says. “It was always them and us. Wearing a uniform, I feel protected.” In a strange way, the security work has made her confront her vulnerability.

After her mother died in 2009, Newland found that she was grieving her loss, and other losses too: Iraq, the language she grew up speaking. “You can be strong for a long time and something happens and suddenly you’re not strong,” she says. “It’s like building yourself again. I want to take off all the labels, and find out who I am – the essence of me.”

- [Tell us: has your life taken a new direction after the age of 60?](#)

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Interview

‘I was very shaky when I started acting’: Hannah Einbinder on Hacks, standup and sexual identity

[Hannah J Davies](#)



‘There’s a lot of romanticisation of pain in standup, especially among young comedians’ ... Hannah Einbinder. Photograph: Ryan Pfluger

After building a career in comedy, the 27-year-old landed her first screen role in the series about the relationship between two female comics. And after being twice nominated at the Emmys, she is finally starting to believe she is doing a good job



[@hannahjdavies](#)

Mon 15 Aug 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 15 Aug 2022 08.30 EDT

There’s a scene in series two of [Hacks](#) that Hannah Einbinder can’t bear to watch. In it, her character Ava is in the crowd as her boss – storied, old-school comedian Deborah – performs a standup show aboard a lesbian cruise. Deborah arrives on the stage dad dancing to Pharrell’s Happy (“Oh no, she’s doing Ellen,” Ava sighs), before proceeding to comprehensively bomb, offending everyone in the audience and riling the captain’s wife (who she assumes is married not to a woman but a man, because of course only a man can captain a ship). “God, it’s painful – it’s really cringe to watch,” says Einbinder. “So tough. I feel for her because I know just how it feels.”



‘Our actual relationship has only positively affected our on-screen one’ ... Hannah Einbinder with Jean Smart in *Hacks*. Photograph: HBO Max

Einbinder is living what she describes as an “incredibly meta” existence. As well as performing her own standup comedy (she’s on tour in the US when we speak, with a stint in London on the horizon), the 27-year-old stars in a series that revolves around it. *Hacks* centres on the unlikely bond between Ava – a down-on-her-luck, entitled millennial comedy writer – and Deborah (TV veteran Jean Smart), an equally down-on-her-luck, Joan Rivers-esque comic inching closer towards retirement with every hokey gag she performs on stage in Las Vegas. Together, this oddest of odd couples attempt to revamp Deborah’s tired image from QVC saleswoman back to comedian, while interrogating the misogyny and double standards that have underpinned her career. Of course, it wouldn’t be as moreishly watchable – and critically acclaimed – as it is if there weren’t several bumps in the road, from ill-advised email exchanges to human ashes being accidentally thrown in the bin.

The series has recently been renewed for a third season, and been nominated for a glut of Emmys (17 this year alone, including a second supporting actress nod for Einbinder), with critics praising its complex, complicated women. And, like all the best comedy about comedy – from [30 Rock](#) to [BoJack Horseman](#) – *Hacks* shows the dizzy highs and wretched lows of

making other people laugh. “These characters take two step forwards and one step back,” says Einbinder. “They’re two flawed people, which only drives the plot forward ... Ava is growing rapidly as a human being and having to learn a lot of tough lessons via Deborah.”



Hannah at the Ice House comedy club in Pasadena, LA, 2019. Photograph: Michael S Schwartz/Getty Images

When I speak to Einbinder, she’s standing outside her home in Los Angeles, plumbing issues having temporarily relegated her to the garden. She’s softly spoken and wry, and far less highly strung than anyone who has seen the series might expect (she has previously quipped that the only traits she shares with Ava are “cystic acne, red hair and no upper body strength”). She pulls her Wayfarers up now and again to make eye contact, although the mid-morning sun bounces off her phone camera.

The daughter of the original Saturday Night Live cast member Laraine Newman and her former husband, the actor Chad Einbinder, she had what she describes as the “incredible privilege” of being raised in LA. While humour was an important part of family life (“everybody in my family shares the various multiple insecurities that makes a person need laughter – need to be validated through laughter”, she says), the entertainment industry was more of a background hum than something she focused on. Instead,

inspired by news pundits such as Rachel Maddow, Einbinder studied journalism at California's Chapman University. "I was on a *lot* of [the attention-deficit drug] Adderall. And I would read the newspaper cover to cover," she says. "I had gone to high school around the time of Barack Obama's presidency, and it was a very exciting time here. I was full of hope." Now, unsurprisingly, it all feels like "a lifetime ago. Another planet!"

Halfway through college, Einbinder stumbled into performance. She had stopped taking Adderall, which had also made her feel inhibited and "mildly sedated", and started taking her material to open mic nights. Of the clips still available online, skits about Osama bin Laden (is he actually ... attractive?) and parodies of 30s film noir stand out, Einbinder's polite veneer giving way to increasingly oddball character comedy. "I enjoy sprinkling character work through a set where my voice is naturally low and monotone," she says. "It's my way of breaking the 'me' up for a viewer who is like me and maybe needs a little extra stimulation."

Naturally self-deprecating, with a self-professed tendency to bat away compliments, she guesstimates that 90% of her gags didn't land in those early performances. Even so, she plugged along, sometimes doing three gigs in one night in the early days while working as a barista by day. "I had such a hunger for [performing] and I romanticised that – there's a lot of romanticisation of pain in standup, especially among young comedians. And obviously the capitalist machine fosters that ..." She pauses. "You could call it work ethic, but it's really just a survival tactic." Breaking through is, she says, "right place, right time. A lot of things need to align."



‘It’s been such an affirming thing for me as a queer person to see this experience reflected’ ... Hannah Einbinder and Lorenza Izzo in Hacks. Photograph: AP

Things did indeed start to align in 2020. Einbinder made her television debut as the youngest comic to have performed on Stephen Colbert’s late-night show and she then landed the part in Hacks. It was her first acting role, and one that many other professional actors had auditioned for, but it didn’t go to Einbinder’s head. “I was very shaky when I first started acting,” she says. “I had no barometer of whether or not I was doing well. My barometer used to be whether or not people were laughing, and then when you’re acting, they’re recording sound, so everyone has to be quiet. That was a bit of a mindfuck. It went against everything every instinct that is wired within me, but I’m starting to finally believe that I’m doing a good job.”

Einbinder does more than merely a good job in Hacks, as she conveys the peaks and troughs of Ava’s existence. She embodies the pain of becoming persona non grata in her industry (for tweeting a joke about a rightwing senator) and the joy of steering Deborah away from trite one-liners to something more substantive. In season one, the process of cataloguing Deborah’s archive leads Ava to better understand her boss, and see her as a trailblazer rather than a has-been – and a hack. Their relationship is often – at least at first – based on barbs and put-downs, but there is also something

pure about it, cutting across seemingly entrenched generational divides. After all, Einbinder explains, it's not as if it's as simple as young comics being on the right side of history compared with their older counterparts.

"I know a ton of comedians who are in their 50s or up who are still really good – their quality hasn't waned as a result of their age, because they're intelligent, and they understand the intent of their jokes. In some cases, people get older, and they become the old man or woman yelling at the new generation. And that absolutely happens. But I think you are either devoted to an interesting take – and one that doesn't punch down – or you're not. I know people who are incredibly young, who are ignorant and offensive and bigoted, and use standup as a vehicle for that bigotry."

Watching the show, the quasi-mother/daughter relationship between the leads (Smart is 70, the same age as Einbinder's actual mother) fizzles with the kind of chemistry that can surely only be rooted in real life. "Our actual relationship has only positively affected our on-screen one, and you know ... I really love her," says Einbinder. "I don't have to go anywhere else [to portray those emotions]. When things are heartbreaking, it's easier to imagine because of the depth and importance of my relationship with her."

I've had to perform to utter darkness, when they turn the lights on you and you can't see a single face in the crowd. It's terrible

Little, you might imagine, could be as heartbreaking as filming a funeral scene together not long after the death of Smart's husband, Richard Gilliland. "Jean is the toughest," says Einbinder. "She really put the crew and the cast and the production first, and thinks nothing of it. She pushed through for as long as we needed to finish the shoot, so that she could then go in and take her time. But I mean, watching her that week was," Einbinder takes a long pause, sounding emotional. "She's just really incredible, and very strong".

As well as being funny and touching and sometimes downright silly (not least when Ava and Deborah bond over weed edibles while the latter recovers from plastic surgery), Hacks has gained acclaim for its rounded cast of queer characters. These include the perennially put-upon business

manager, Marcus (Carl Clemons-Hopkins), who is trying to run his own life and Deborah's, and Ava herself, who – like Einbinder – is bisexual, and schools Deborah about the need for nuance when it comes to sexual identity. “I think there are only a handful of shows that have even attempted to portray bisexuals as being humans worthy of love, and humans whose identities are seen as valid and accepted,” says Einbinder. “It is a dream as a queer person to be able to be a part of that representation that I’d loved to have seen growing up. It’s been such an affirming thing for me as a queer person to see this experience reflected ... I could not have thought of a better gig. When I got the audition, I thought, I’m not going to get this, but I can’t wait to watch it – I just really love it.”



Jean Smart and Hannah Einbinder in *Hacks*. Photograph: Karen Ballard/HBO Max

Despite starring in a show that often shows the total horror of standup, and where a bad set can truly make Einbinder's – and the audience's – skin crawl, you get the sense that it has only made her fall further in love with live performance.

“I love an intimate crowd,” she says. “I’ve had to perform to utter darkness, when they turn the lights on you and you can’t see a single face in the crowd

– it’s terrible. I find that unless I can see the whites of people’s eyes, I don’t really feel like I’m doing the thing.”

While Deborah’s trip to the cruise ship eventually devolves into a back and forth of heckling and offence, Einbinder happily tends to have an easier ride on stage. “Since Hacks, a lot of people just yell out nice things,” she says. Despite her self-effacing tendencies, as she heads off to call the plumber Einbinder sounds proud of herself – and maybe just a little relieved.

Hacks is available on Amazon Prime Video in the UK, HBO Max in the US and Stan in Australia. Hannah Einbinder is at [Soho Theatre](#), London, from 26 September to 8 October

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[Energy industry.](#)

Wind, hydrogen, no demolitions: how next PM can put UK on net zero path

Boris Johnson's plans are behind schedule and the CBI says Britain is falling behind Europe and the US



A windfarm off Redcar, in the north-east of England. Photograph: Ian Forsyth/Getty Images

[Phillip Inman](#) and [Alex Lawson](#)

Mon 15 Aug 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Thu 18 Aug 2022 10.39 EDT

There is little mention of [Boris Johnson's "green industrial revolution"](#) on the campaign trail of the two Conservative party leadership candidates.

Maybe it's not surprising when [Rishi Sunak](#) and Liz Truss are focused on formulating plans to deal with the more immediate energy crisis. That said,

Labour and the Liberal Democrats are pressing ahead with announcing the investments they would make to achieve net zero by 2050.

A new prime minister could do worse than crack on with some of the plans in Johnson's 10-point programme, announced to great fanfare in 2020. The plans are behind schedule and several of the ideas are considered by experts to be dead ends.

The CBI has accused the government of relying too heavily on private-sector investment, which it blames for Britain falling behind Europe and the US. The Biden administration is [poised to pass a near \\$370bn bill](#) to promote climate-friendly infrastructure. Johnson's 10-point plan committed the government to spending £12bn. The government's own adviser, the Climate Change Committee, said the money on offer needed to be closer to £50bn to make a difference.

Nevertheless, piecing together the ideas and investment needed to create a zero-carbon economy is achievable and could create more sustainable jobs, if the new regime can decide what it wants to do.

Offshore wind

The offshore wind industry has put the UK in the front rank of countries managing the switch away from fossil fuels. More arrays in the sea are planned on the east and west coast.

Official figures show that meeting net zero targets would mean cutting gas use by 65% by 2035, and almost 100% by 2050. At the moment gas accounts for about 90% of home heating and 40% of electricity generation. At 37%, heating accounts for the largest proportion of UK greenhouse gas emissions.

Kwasi Kwarteng, a chief ally of Truss's, said this year he [would expand onshore wind](#), helping speed up the transition. While the UK has only limited capacity to make wind turbines, and the number of jobs created by businesses servicing windfarms is small in relation to the size of the

investment, the employment is highly skilled and expert firms could export their knowhow.

Sunak said at a recent hustings that regulations governing offshore wind, rooftop solar and nuclear would be overhauled to scale up supply, despite the critics arguing that solar is held back by a lack of power storage facilities and all renewables are at the mercy of an electricity grid in desperate need of an upgrade to cope with a coal, oil and gas-free world.

Low-carbon hydrogen

The UK's ambition for hydrogen production was recently doubled to 10 gigawatts by 2030. [Green hydrogen](#) is produced by using renewable electricity to drive an electrolyser that splits water into hydrogen and oxygen. The gas is burned to produce power, emitting only water vapour and warm air, and no carbon greenhouse gases. A favourite of the Tees Valley mayor, Ben Houchen, hydrogen is also seen as the green fuel of the future by the car company Toyota and the Spanish energy firm Iberdrola, which owns Europe's largest production site for green hydrogen for industrial use, at Puertollano in Spain.

Iberdrola's subsidiary Scottish Power plans to use government subsidies to build a [100 megawatt plant at Felixstowe](#) to provide enough fuel to power 1,300 hydrogen trucks operating inside the port from 2026. Hydrogen cells could take over from diesel to power trucks, farm equipment and diggers, but there would need to be significant funding to create a UK industry.

Nuclear power



Construction work at Hinkley Point C. Photograph: Finnbar Webster/Getty Images

There is a new power station taking shape at Hinkley Point in Somerset and the government has approved another at [the Sizewell site in Suffolk](#) at an expected cost of £20bn. Both will be built by the French electricity company EDF.

The Sizewell C site could be challenged if local people pursue an appeal over the next few weeks. The CBI boss, Tony Danker, has urged the government to push on with the investment, and Sunak has promised to go ahead should he become leader, presumably whatever challenges lie ahead.

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Delays and cost overruns are likely and could help Rolls-Royce, which expects to have a series of [mini-nuclear power stations](#) ready by the end of the decade, though these have faced their own time and cost overruns.

Zero-emission vehicles

Britain spends about £27bn on new roads but very little on subsidising electric car production or the infrastructure of charging points that supports electric vehicles.

Car firms, almost all of them foreign-owned, have complained that subsidies for UK production are small. Car parts suppliers have little incentive to adapt to electric cars. The [battery maker BritishVolt](#) is on “life support” as it wrestles with funding problems.

Green public transport, cycling and walking

Public transport is becoming green as electric buses become more popular. Electric cycles and scooters are being adopted at a rapid pace in some towns and cities. Cars are being forced to lower their speed in built-up areas. But pedestrians are being left out of schemes to create more livable cities, persuading families to stick with the suburbs and new housing estates that rely on private car travel.

More investment in electric-powered trains would create jobs and make links across the railway network more reliable. There are plans to electrify the Midland mainline and the Transpennine route and upgrade the east coast mainline, but with HS2 likely to be stopped at Manchester, the spur to Leeds abandoned and HS3 across the northern cities scrapped, the opportunities to revive the push for electrification are many.

The payback from integrating cycling, walking and public transport will be significant, as the Netherlands and Denmark have found.

Greener buildings



Heat loss from a property, seen through an infra-red camera. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

A building with solid walls built before the second world war costs about £20,000 to insulate and between £10,000 and £20,000 for a heat pump. There are about 8m of these homes.

Even the best-insulated homes gain a category B certificate when an A is needed to meet zero carbon targets. It means even those built or refurbished in the last 30 years will need another facelift.

And before embarking on this investment, ministers must stop developers checking their own homework. There are concerns that builders are cutting corners knowing local authorities lack the staff to check on them.

Sunak or Truss could also put a moratorium on the demolition of existing commercial and residential buildings. The UK would put itself at the forefront of a global construction industry that focuses on refurbishing existing structures to make them low-carbon. Most architects and developers remain attached to the idea of constructing new buildings, but western countries have most of what they need if the current stock is upgraded and empty homes are brought back into use.

Natural environment

Protecting nature has obvious benefits. Sunak commissioned a 360-page report from the eminent Cambridge economist Partha Dasgupta detailing how the economy will suffer unless we protect the natural environment, but didn't say what action he would take.

Chancellors always delay taking action because while they understand investments create jobs and save the exchequer money in the future from flooding and drought, it is less clear how it creates businesses that generate tax income or export cash.

This article was amended on 18 August 2022. An earlier version said that no greenhouse gases are emitted when green hydrogen is burned; that meant to refer to carbon greenhouse gases.

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[Architecture](#)

What the Marble Arch Mound architects did next: a skyscraper shaped like Albania's national hero



Goodness nose ... a digital rendering of the Tirana tower. Photograph: © MVRDV

A building with the aquiline profile of a 15th-century warrior is the latest proposal by MVRDV to transform Tirana, the capital of Albania. But not everyone is happy with the Dutch firm's plans



[Oliver Wainwright](#)

[@ollywainwright](#)

Mon 15 Aug 2022 01.00 EDT

With his distinctive aquiline nose and magnificent flowing beard, Albania's national hero, [Skanderbeg](#), has long been a familiar presence in the country's streets and squares. The 7ft warrior king known as the Dragon of Albania, slayer of the Ottoman Turks, is celebrated in numerous monuments and reliefs, his imposing stature and fiery eyes keeping watch over the territory he fought for in the 15th century.

Now his face will loom larger over the capital than ever before. Construction has begun on an 85-metre-high block of apartments, offices and shops in the centre of Tirana, designed in [the shape of Skanderbeg's head](#). Images of the project depict an amorphous white tower ringed with balconies that ripple in and out to form a lumpy approximation of the hero's features, imprinting his profile permanently on the skyline in concrete and glass. Wealthy future residents will be able to look out from the warrior's eyes, hang out on his

ears or dine alfresco on the end of his nose – from which greenery will dangle in an unfortunate snot-like drip.

Is nationalism good or bad? Albania needs it to show that it is sexy and cool

Winy Maas

The surreal vision is the work of Dutch architects MVRDV, who are no strangers to concocting buildings shaped like supersized novelty objects – or “figurative sculptural projects”, as they prefer to call them. Their [disastrous Marble Arch Mound](#) in London, which arguably [cost the Conservative council its leadership of the local borough](#), was merely the latest in a long line of cartoonish creations that seem to have been plucked from the depths of a joke shop bargain bin. The architects have designed [a museum in the form of gigantic comic speech bubbles](#), an [art storage depot in the shape of an Ikea salad bowl](#) and [an apartment complex that spells out the word HOME](#) in the form of its blocks. But it seems they have saved their most banal metaphors for the Balkans, perhaps assuming that fewer of their clients and critics will ever see the buildings in person.



MVRDV's vision for Downtown One, a 140-metre tower whose cantilevered houses and offices form a pixelated 'map' of Albania.

Photograph: © MVRDV

A short distance from where the giant Skanderbeg head is planned to rise, there already looms another tower designed by MVRDV, named [Downtown One](#). Topping out last year, its 140-metre concrete frame makes it the tallest building in the city, and it continues the pop-nationalist theme. Rather than a face, this hefty slab of luxury flats and offices features a pixelated map of Albania protruding from its facade – although the form is so indistinct, it looks more like the concrete formwork slipped on the way up, leaving a wonky mess in its wake. The dramatically carved volumes imagined by MVRDV appear to have been value-engineered into more shallow dimples, giving the impression that the building is prematurely eroding.

“These days, cities around the world increasingly look like each other,” says Winy Maas, founding partner of the Dutch architecture firm. “I always encourage them to resist this, to find their individual character and emphasise it. Tirana has the opportunity of a blank canvas for high-density structures. It can be progressive in that sense and build up character and a sense of place.”

But many local residents aren’t so sure about the sense of place being created by Maas, and the roster of other international architects who have been flown in to reshape the city. A handful of towers are rising around Tirana’s central Skanderbeg Square, with four already complete and at least another six in the pipeline. There have been vocal [protests against the destruction of Ottoman-era villas](#) to make way for the slew of high-rise developments, with critics bemoaning the loss of heritage and rocketing property prices, and accusations that the projects are being used as money laundering schemes for organised crime.



Value engineered ... Downtown One under construction, with its relief map dramatically reduced. Photograph: Idit Riza/© MVRDV

[Two historic villas were demolished](#) to make way for the Skanderbeg tower in May 2020, when the city was in pandemic lockdown. At the same time, the city's cherished National Theatre, dating from the 1930s, was also bulldozed to make way for a project by Danish architect Bjarke Ingels, [to widespread condemnation](#).

“The future of Tirana will be full of ghost skyscrapers,” says Vincent WJ van Gerven Oei, a Dutch writer who has lived in Tirana for the last 12 years and closely tracked the city's development. “I love MVRDV – the things they build in the Netherlands are among my favourite buildings – but then they come to Albania and become lousy assholes. They think they can get away with crappy design, checking off all the stupid nationalist tropes you can think of.”

[In a 2018 lecture](#), when the two towers were in development, Maas addressed the overt nationalist symbolism of designing a building in the shape of the country's map. “I had a discussion with some of the European politicians about that,” he said. “Because, can you do that? Is nationalism good or bad? But Albania needs it, to show it's sexy and that it's actually quite cool.”



The original vision for the Tiptani shopping centre ... Photograph: © MVRDV

Dashing back and forth on stage, speaking like a hyperactive child who had consumed too many E-numbers, Maas rhapsodised his love affair with [Albania](#). He described it as “a country with no money, that drinks only coffee, and where there is nothing to do” – the perfect blank slate for his outlandish ideas, “like a mini-China” with bountiful opportunities for architects. “Developers are getting richer,” he said excitedly, but made no mention of where the money might be coming from to build such heady visions, given the country’s impoverished economy.

A 2020 [report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime](#) noted that the Albanian construction industry had become a popular hotspot for international criminal gangs to launder money, primarily from drug trafficking. It estimated that €1.6bn worth of “dirty money” had been laundered through the Albanian real estate sector in the previous three years, with 60% of project funding coming from illicit sources. Albania’s own [Office of the General Directorate for the Prevention of Money Laundering](#) said that it observed “considerable real estate investments with unknown source of funds”, which it classified as “suspicious”.



... and the drastically watered down reality of the mall as it stands.
Photograph: Peter Forsberg/Shopping/Alamy

Last year, anti-mafia prosecutors in Italy found that the 'Ndrangheta crime syndicate had identified Tirana's new high-rise developments as [a prime opportunity for laundering their cash](#). In one wiretap, two of those arrested were heard discussing a building constructor in Albania who held three building permits for buildings worth €180m, but had only €10m to hand. "The new skyscrapers are to be sold for €3,000-4,000 per square metre," one of the suspects says. "And do you know how much it cost to build? €510." MVRDV says that, in accordance with Dutch law, it runs background checks on its clients using a third-party company that scans for criminal activity, among other things, and there is no suggestion of illegal funds. A spokesperson for the city of Tirana said: "The duty of the municipality is to ensure that construction plans, aesthetics, architecture rules and mobility plans are respected. We understand we live in a toxic political environment in the Balkans and have repeatedly asked opposition leaders to point out: which one of these towers is suspect of such [criminal] activity? To date, we have no response and there has been no official claim with the Tirana prosecution."

The radical reshaping of the Albanian capital over the last two decades can primarily be credited to [Edi Rama](#), who served as its mayor from 2000-2011

and has been the country's prime minister since 2013. Rama was a professional basketball player and artist in the 1990s, and Maas says in his lecture: "I know Edi from Paris, when he was a painter". Rama returned to Albania to become minister of culture in 1998, and embarked on a radical clean-up operation when he became mayor. He made headlines with his policies of [painting grey soviet buildings in bright colours](#) to liven up the city, planting trees, creating bike lanes and holding international architectural competitions – reforms that landed him [the inaugural World Mayor prize](#) in 2004.

One of the first projects MVRDV scooped under Rama's reign was the [Toptani shopping centre](#) in 2005, which was conceived as a hollowed out pixelated mass covered in giant LCD advertising screens. Having won the competition, Maas heard nothing until a few years later, when he realised the building had in fact been built by other architects, and [drastically watered down in the process](#). The digital facade was exchanged for standard grey cladding panels, while his vision for an open arcade became a generic closed-off mall.



Unrealised project ... MVRDV's proposal for Tirana Rocks, an apartment complex by Tirana Lake. Photograph: © MVRDV

“Projects here are often realised in a totally different way to how the architects originally intended,” says Van Gerven Oei. “There’s the reality of the digital render, always beautiful, brilliant and groundbreaking, and then the reality of Albanian construction companies, who want to do the easiest, fastest thing at the lowest possible price.”

Not to be dissuaded by the Frankenstein mall, MVRDV continued to seek work in Albania. Several unrealised projects followed, from a colossal pile of oblong apartment blocks planned for a lakeside site in 2008, dubbed [Tirana Rocks](#), to a coastal resort for a Russian client designed as an artificial hillside that would glow eerily at night – “better than any James Bond movie,” Maas promised. He explains how Downtown One began as a three-dimensional Albania-shaped building, but proved too expensive, so they decided to imprint the shape of the map on a simple rectangular tower instead. A further commission came in 2018 to transform the striking marble-clad [Pyramid of Tirana](#) – built in the 1980s as a museum to celebrate the country’s former communist dictator – which had become a popular place for the city’s youth to scramble up and slide down. [MVRDV were appointed](#), without a public competition, to transform it into a tech hub – smothering the sloping sides with concrete steps in the process. Finally, when it comes to the Skanderbeg tower, the origins are as blunt as you might expect. As Maas recalls: “Then Edi said: ‘I want to do something with history.’” And so the giant head was born.

Local people have joked that, as Rama cultivates an elder-statesman look – his 6ft 6in frame and growing beard giving him an increasingly Skanderbeg-esque appearance – the head-shaped building may end up looking more like a lasting monument to the artist-politician who reshaped the capital, forever gazing out over his vision of empty towers.

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2022.08.15 - Opinion

- If we don't defend free speech, we live in tyranny: Salman Rushdie shows us that
- After this drought, there will be another one: here are 10 things you should know
- I've drifted left with age, not right. If only Labour would do the same
- Admire Rushdie as a writer and a champion – but don't forget he is a man of flesh and blood

OpinionSalman Rushdie

**If we don't defend free speech, we live in
tyranny: Salman Rushdie shows us that**
Margaret Atwood



The Satanic Verses author didn't plan to become a hero, but as he recovers from this attack, the world must stand by him



‘Salman Rushdie never missed an opportunity to speak out on behalf of the principles he’d been embodying all his writing life.’ The author in February 1989. Photograph: Adam Butler/PA

Mon 15 Aug 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 15 Aug 2022 07.46 EDT

A long time ago – 7 December 1992, to be exact – I was backstage at a Toronto theatre, taking off a Stetson. With two other writers, Timothy Findley and Paul Quarrington, I’d been performing a medley of 1950s country and western classics, rephrased for writers – Ghost Writers in the Sky, If I Had the Wings of an Agent, and other fatuous parodies of that nature. It was a PEN Canada benefit of that era: writers dressed up and made idiots of themselves in aid of writers persecuted by governments for things they’d written.

Just as the three of us were bemoaning how awful we’d been, there was a knock on the door. Backstage was locked down, we were told. Secret agents were talking into their sleeves. Salman Rushdie had been spirited into the country. He was about to appear on stage [with Bob Rae](#), the premier of Ontario, the first head of government in the world to support him in public. “And you, Margaret, as past president of PEN Canada, are going to introduce him,” I was told.

Gulp. “Oh, OK,” I said. And so I did. It was a money-where-your-mouth-is moment.

And, with the recent attack on him, so is this.

Rushdie exploded on to the literary scene in 1981 with his second novel, [Midnight's Children](#), which won the [Booker prize](#) that year. No wonder: its inventiveness, range, historical scope and verbal dexterity were breathtaking, and it opened the door to subsequent generations of writers who might previously have felt that their identities or subject matter excluded them from the movable feast that is English-language literature. He has ticked every box except the Nobel prize: he has been knighted; he is on everyone's list of significant British writers; he has collected an impressive bouquet of prizes and honours, but, most importantly, he has touched and inspired a great many people around the globe. A huge number of writers and readers have long owed him a major debt.

Suddenly, they owe him another one. He has long defended freedom of artistic expression against all comers; now, even should he [recover from his injuries](#), he is a martyr to it.

In any future monument to murdered, tortured, imprisoned and persecuted writers, Rushdie will feature large. On 12 August he was [stabbed on stage](#) by an assailant at a literary event at Chautauqua, a venerable American institution in upstate New York. Yet again “that sort of thing never happens here” has been proven false: in our present world, anything can happen anywhere. American democracy is under threat as never before: the attempted assassination of a writer is just one more symptom.

Without doubt, this attack was directed at him because his fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*, a satiric fantasy that he himself believed was dealing with the disorientation felt by immigrants from (for instance) India to Britain, got [used as a tool](#) in a political power struggle in a distant country.

When your regime is under pressure, a little book-burning creates a popular distraction. Writers don't have an army. They don't have billions of dollars. They don't have a captive voting block. They thus make cheap scapegoats. They're so easy to blame: their medium is words, which are by nature

ambiguous and subject to misinterpretation, and they themselves are often mouthy, if not downright curmudgeonly. Worse, they frequently speak truth to power. Even apart from that, their books will annoy some people. As writers themselves have frequently said, if what you've written is universally liked, you must be doing something wrong. But when you offend a ruler, things can get lethal, as many writers have discovered.

In Rushdie's case, the power that used him as a pawn was the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran. In 1989, he [issued a fatwa](#) – a rough equivalent to the bulls of excommunication used by medieval and renaissance Catholic popes as weapons against both secular rulers and theological challengers such as Martin Luther. Khomeini also offered a large reward to anyone who would murder Rushdie. There were numerous killings and attempted assassinations, including the stabbing of the Japanese translator Hitoshi Igarashi in 1991. Rushdie himself spent many years in enforced hiding, but gradually he came out of his cocoon – the Toronto PEN event being the most significant first step – and, in the past two decades, he'd been leading a [relatively normal life](#).

However, he never missed an opportunity to speak out on behalf of the principles he'd been embodying all his writing life. Freedom of expression was foremost among these. Once a yawn-making liberal platitude, this concept has now become a hot-button issue, since the extreme right has attempted to kidnap it in the service of libel, lies and hatred, and the extreme left has tried to toss it out the window in the service of its version of earthly perfection. It doesn't take a crystal ball to foresee many panel discussions on the subject, should we reach a moment in which rational debate is possible. But whatever it is, the right to freedom of expression does not include the right to defame, to lie maliciously and damagingly about provable facts, to issue death threats, or to advocate murder. These should be punished by law.

As for those who are still saying, “yes, but ...” about Rushdie – some version of “he should have known better”, as in “yes, too bad about the rape, but why was she wearing that revealing skirt” – I can only remark that there are no perfect victims. In fact, there are no perfect artists, nor is there any perfect art. Anti-censorship folks often find themselves having to defend

work they would otherwise review scathingly, but such defending is necessary, unless we are all to have our vocal cords removed.

Long ago, a Canadian member of parliament described a ballet as “a bunch of fruits jumping around in long underwear”. Let them jump, say I! Living in a pluralistic democracy means being surrounded by a multiplicity of voices, some of which will be saying things you don’t like. Unless you’re prepared to uphold their right to speak, as [Salman Rushdie](#) has done so often, you’ll end up living in a tyranny.

Rushdie didn’t plan to become a free-speech hero, but he is one now. Writers everywhere – those who are not state hacks or brainwashed robots – owe him a huge vote of thanks.

- Margaret Atwood is a novelist
- ***Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a letter of up to 300 words to be considered for publication, email it to us at guardian.letters@theguardian.com***

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OpinionDrought

After this drought, there will be another one: here are 10 things you should know

[John Vidal](#)

We see grassland ablaze and parched gardens. The water companies are doing too little to fix a problem that isn't going away



A grass fire by Newgale beach, Pembrokeshire, 14 August 2022.
Photograph: Sam Russell/PA

Mon 15 Aug 2022 03.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 15 Aug 2022 13.21 EDT

With more than 30 million people in England and Wales facing a hosepipe ban, and thunderstorms expected but no meaningful rainfall likely for many weeks, it's worth asking what we have learned so far in the great drought of 2022.

Here's a bit of a list, by no means complete.

Water companies leak more than [3bn litres a day](#). That is enough to supply almost 22 million people with their daily water needs of around 142 litres. In some areas, companies are leaking nearly a quarter of all the water they are expensively treating. Thames Water is the largest and the worst company of all, losing more than 635m litres of water a day. All companies regularly pledge to reduce leaks – as they have for many years – but many expect to make cuts of only 50% in the next 20 years. Ofwat figures show that leakage rates have more or less remained the [same for 20 years](#). So much for 20 years of promises.

England and Wales are the only countries in the world to have fully privatised their water supplies. Following intense international grassroots opposition from the 1990s onwards, all other countries retained some state control over pricing, investment and quality. The [evidence suggests](#) that privatisation in England and Wales has led to higher bills, little or no reduction in pollution or waste, and no greater water security. That's called progress.

Climate change is a growing part of the problem, but so, too, are underinvestment, greed, mismanagement and failed regulation. According to Andrew Sells, the chairman of Natural England from 2014 to 2019, Ofwat has allowed the water companies over the past 20 years to borrow at unsustainable levels, while paying out excessive dividends to shareholders [rather than investing](#) in capital equipment. Meanwhile, the Environment Agency has had its [budgets slashed](#) to the point that it is unable to prevent pollution. Follow the money, as they say.

English and Welsh water companies have handed their shareholders billions of pounds since privatisation, including more than [£57bn in dividends](#) from English firms alone in the past 30 years. By contrast, Scottish Water – which is publicly owned – has [invested nearly 35%](#) more per household in infrastructure, and Welsh Water became a not-for-profit company in 2001. Research by the Liberal Democrats suggests water company executives in England were awarded [£27m in bonuses](#) over the past two years, despite pumping out raw sewage into waterways 1,000 times a day. Southern Water, which has brought in a hosepipe ban, paid its bosses £3.4m in bonuses last year.

Water for households costs more in England and Wales than in most regularly drought-ravaged countries in Europe. Despite having some of the heaviest and most reliable rainfall of any industrialised country, British water companies charge more than those in Spain, Germany, Italy and Greece. In this regard, we truly are out in front.

The population of Britain has grown by around 10 million since water privatisation, but no major reservoir has been built in England in that time, and only about 4% of UK water is regularly transferred between traditionally wet areas in the north and west and dry areas in the south and east. Levelling up has yet to happen.

Water companies say they face widespread opposition in building new reservoirs, but Thames Water, Severn Trent and Southern Water, among others, have all [sold off](#) some of their reservoirs in recent years to save money, or used them to build houses. Only one new reservoir near Portsmouth currently has planning permission.

Britain has some of the most polluted water in Europe thanks to lax regulation of the companies. It has become routine for some to dump sewage into rivers to save money and there were more than [400,000 water pollution incidents](#) in 2020. According to the Wildlife Trusts, rising pollution levels place 10% of freshwater and wetland species [at risk of extinction](#).

Despite plans to build hundreds of thousands of new homes every year, many in drought-prone areas in the south and east of England, there is little or no requirement for housebuilders to automatically install water-saving devices or incentives for consumers to use less water.

The drought that now stretches across Europe, the extreme heatwaves and the cost of living crisis are all ultimately the result of our reliance on fossil fuels, which is causing extreme changes in the distribution of water. Yet the UK government continues to offer lucrative “investment incentives” to fossil fuel companies in the certain knowledge that the sorts of droughts and heatwaves that much of the northern hemisphere is now experiencing will become more frequent and intense.

So we have learned a lot, some of it a reminder of things we already knew, but what is also clear is that if we don't join the dots and demand better than this, nothing will change. We also know the next drought is coming. See you there.

This article was amended on 15 August 2022 to clarify that the £57bn dividend figure applies to English water companies alone, and that Welsh Water became a not-for-profit company in 2001.

- John Vidal is a former Guardian environment editor

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Opinion**Socialism**

I've drifted left with age, not right. If only Labour would do the same

[Lynsey Hanley](#)

Hope is far too important to dismiss as youthful idealism. Faced with our current political reality, it's the only option we have



‘As Labour held power over 13 years, I gradually saw most opportunities for transformative change rot away.’ Tony Blair in Downing Street after Labour’s 1997 election victory. Photograph: Max Nash/AP

Mon 15 Aug 2022 05.00 EDTLast modified on Mon 15 Aug 2022 07.21 EDT

I became a socialist at the age of 41, just at the point where conventional wisdom says I should have been heading in the opposite direction. In truth, I always was a socialist at heart, but my generation – born in the social ferment of the 1970s, raised amid the deranged individualism of the 1980s,

coming of age in the era of Blair and Brown – grew up believing that socialism was a dirty word, not to be embraced or admitted aloud.

If, like me, you're in your late 40s and came of age declaiming that Things Can Only Get Better, look around you now. Everything I learned about “global warming” as a primary school child in the mid-1980s is coming true as we speak. Fuel hikes set by conglomerates are going to [treble the bills](#) of every household in the country. Your children are less protected in every sense from the predations of landlords, profiteers and exploitative bosses. If they go to university, they will probably be in tens of thousands of pounds of debt for a higher education you didn't have to pay for.

In 2017, my fatalism disappeared – as if overnight – when Labour published its general election manifesto, [For the Many Not the Few](#). There were no signs whatsoever of an unhappy accommodation with the idea that there was “no alternative” to the free market. It presented, clearly and confidently, exactly what the alternatives were. I wouldn't even describe the manifesto as an expression of socialism; more rigorous social democracy of the kind that worked economic miracles in capitalist countries throughout the postwar period. Public ownership of essential services; good wages for good jobs; decent, affordable housing for everyone.

That June I voted, enthusiastically, for Labour's vision of social democracy. A week later, following the horror of 72 avoidable deaths at Grenfell Tower, I knew I was a socialist. I hadn't changed my mind overnight: a confident, growing movement for change had captured my imagination and articulated what I'd always known to be true. Grenfell represented the nadir of 40 years' complacency, both from Conservative governments and the [Labour](#) governments so many people of my generation campaigned for in our 20s.

What can now be seen as complacency looked like compromise back then. New Labour so successfully neutralised opposition to their mashup of neoliberal economics and social liberalism that most Labour voters either put up or shut up or simply stopped voting. When Labour came to power in 1997 and restricted child benefit and income top-ups for single parents, I batted it away on the grounds that “it has to be done”, and that anyone who

complained was either “middle class” (cringe) or deluded as to the scale of Labour’s task in holding power.

When the language of “rights and responsibilities”, so popular in the 1990s and 2000s as a cover for demonising people living on council estates, became ever coarser and more rabid, I shifted awkwardly in my seat and mumbled that it went down well in precisely those council estates. (This had a lot to do with having [grown up on one](#) where the received wisdom was hang ‘em, flog ‘em, and vote for Maggie.)



‘Keir Starmer is making Labour the party of “not-Tories” rather than a movement that stands confidently for its founding values of equity and justice.’ Photograph: Danny Lawson/PA

As Labour held power over 13 years, I gradually saw most opportunities for transformative change rot away. In that time, I became incredibly disillusioned, but still voted for them. There were several reasons for this. First, like young adults now who have grown up under David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson, if you were born in the late 1970s, you came of age only knowing a cruel, divisive and seemingly unending Tory government. Whatever Labour did, it had to be better than the Tories, simply because Labour was not the Tories.

Second, we grew up at the nerve-shredding tail end of the cold war. For most of the 1980s the end of the world through nuclear exchange seemed inevitable. The fall of the Berlin Wall came as such a relief that, naturally, we wanted to believe that it really was “[the end of history](#)”. We’d had quite enough of history, thank you: it nearly killed us all.

Many people of my age wanted to be done with politics, with believing in things: it seemed too earnest by half. The fact was, if a Labour government entered power promising to keep things pretty much as they were, while creating a load of money and spreading it around a bit better, who were we to complain?

And yet, to some, there were still reds under the bed, and they needed to be vanquished at all costs. As a student in 1994, my best friend –then at Manchester University and, like me, a member of Labour Students – reported with approval that he’d received a Christmas card from someone high up in the campaign to get Tony Blair elected. Instead of “Season’s Greetings”, the message inside read: “Keep kicking the Tories and the hard left”.

In the 1980s, as now, it was very easy to hate the Tories and “the Trots” without particularly articulating what it was you were *for*. Defining your outlook by what you were *against* was so much easier. We didn’t stop too long to ask what sort of a Labour government we were after, only that one was necessary and largely involved more attacking than defending.

I’ve thought about this a lot in recent weeks, as Keir Starmer dedicates himself to making Labour the party of “not-Tories” rather than a movement that stands confidently for its founding values of equity and justice. It was the incredible surge of enthusiasm and optimism during the Jeremy Corbyn period that made me recognise, with a shudder of shame, that it was people around my age who could have done things differently. What right does Starmer have to throw away that enthusiasm, to crush that optimism, and say, “let’s keep things as they are, only this time there’ll be no money to spread around a bit more fairly”? It won’t be long before he finds out that not only is he wrong, but he’s done it all for nothing.

[In a 2020 article](#) published in The Journal of Politics, American researchers tested the truism that most people drift towards conservatism as they get older. Although they found that “political attitudes are remarkably stable over the long term ... liberals are more likely to become conservatives than conservatives are to become liberals.” The researchers refer coyly to the role of “folk wisdom” in bringing this about, perhaps better described as the triumph of experience over hope. But experience has taught me that hope is far too important to dismiss as youthful idealism. It’s no longer the case that anyone over the age of 40 who isn’t a conservative doesn’t have a brain; surely, it’s anyone who isn’t a socialist.

- Lynsey Hanley is a freelance writer and the author of *Estates: an Intimate History* and *Respectable: Crossing the Class Divide*
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Opinion **Salman Rushdie**

Admire Rushdie as a writer and a champion – but don't forget he is a man of flesh and blood

Nesrine Malik

In the struggles of many decades, we have asked the novelist to carry the weight of our anxieties. Can we now just let him be human?



‘It is a tragedy that Rushdie had to work so hard to get away from the fatwa as both a physical threat and a professional one.’ Photograph: Grant Pollard/Invision/AP

Mon 15 Aug 2022 04.00 EDT Last modified on Mon 15 Aug 2022 06.19 EDT

In a 2017 episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Larry David launches his idea for a new show on Jimmy Kimmel’s talkshow. It is to be called [Fatwa! The Musical](#) – a Broadway rendering of the Salman Rushdie affair. This angers

an ayatollah in Iran, who issues a fatwa on David's life. All his backers vanish, he walks around in a disguise unable to live his life, and hires an overly paranoid, aggressive bodyguard, who also has very demanding taste in food and thread counts.

Fed up, David seeks out, and is granted an audience with [Salman Rushdie](#). In a terrific coup, the man who receives David is played by Rushdie himself. Rushdie sits David down, chides him for being afraid and tells him the biggest secret about being the subject of a fatwa – “fatwa sex”.

“There are a lot of women who are attracted to you in this condition,” explains Rushdie. “The fatwa is wrapped around you, like a kind of sexy pixie dust,” he says, “but you have to stop acting like a wuss. Be a man, stop this, and fatwa sex will follow.” The show's executive producer has said that the pixie dust line was “[100% Salman Rushdie](#)”.

One surprisingly fun thing about this performance, and there are many (the most striking of which is just how good an actor Rushdie is), is how Rushdie voluntarily skewers his status as some priestly symbol. A fatwa bifurcates a person into either a demon or an angel. In this, Rushdie is neither, refusing to play either of the roles that were assigned to him decades ago..

Because, over the [33 years](#) since the fatwa against Rushdie was issued, he has been involuntarily cast as a divisive central character in a series of ersatz cultural and geopolitical conflicts. Like leaders, crises are made, not born. And the timing of the publication of The Satanic Verses teased out many strands of a globe in flux that wrapped themselves around Rushdie.

At the time of the fatwa, the Ayatollah Khomeini had notions not just of “supreme leadership” of Iran, but of all Muslims globally, having stabilised his regime after the Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis nine years earlier. The fatwa, in fact, came a whole six months after the publication of the book.

Before Iran, it had actually been India that had [first taken action against Rushdie](#), banning the import of the book in a hapless attempt by Rajiv Gandhi's government to prevent its “misuse” by religious fanatics. Other

governments had their own agendas. I remember the new government in Sudan banning the book to burnish its credentials as a player on the Arab stage, even though the country was impoverished and few had even heard of the book.

These cowardices and cynicisms then coalesced into a contour of Muslim identity, one that Muslim minorities in the west could latch on to. All this was then pressed into servicing a “clash of civilisations” course of politics and culture that saw conflict between the “Muslim world”, whatever that meant at the time, and the west as inevitable.

And, for two decades, it seemed like it was inevitable, with western invasions and terrorist attacks defining the era. But the world began to change and interests moved on. Al-Qaida and then Islamic State ran out of steam, then purpose. And with the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US and the UK ran out of appetite for costly projections of power when they had more pressing matters to attend to at home.

Since 2016, Brexit and its ensuing economic and culture wars have become the new clash of values. In the same year, the US was dragged into similar discord. The [politics of identity](#) became central to these new conflicts, and with them came vexatious questions about the parameters of free speech in societies with vulnerable minorities, the policing of white supremacy and far-right violence, and what constitutes proportional response to offence.

Once again, Rushdie is seen as a totem in these tussles. Someone who stands, even more so since his stabbing, as both [an inspiration](#) and a warning to all those who take the right of free speech for granted. The enemies today aren't Muslims or bearded clerics, but those described as social justice warriors, whose overzealousness in protecting marginalised identities wields what some equate to a fatwa: self-censorship, no-platforming, “[cancellation](#)”.

There is an inevitability but also a danger in crowbarring Rushdie as a fixed point of moral centre into these messy and often not straightforward fights – both 30 years ago and today. He is, as both a writer and a thinker, far more and far less than that, one who only a few weeks ago said he was happy that

his books were being reviewed on the arts pages rather than in the political sections of the newspapers. A brilliant writer who knows rather too well that he is a brilliant writer, he guarded his position as fatwa oracle less jealously than that of a literary figure.

There are two tragedies to Rushdie's life. The first is that it has all caught up with him. In the end it came for him no matter how hard he had worked and succeeded in [transcending it](#), no matter how the world had changed. Every era leaves remnants of its darkness with us. The [accused attacker](#) was born a decade after the fatwa was issued.

The second tragedy is that he had to work so hard in the first place to get away from the fatwa as both a physical threat and a professional one. And so in his hospital bed he is best honoured not solely with accounts of near martyrdom, but also with a heightened understanding that this is a man of flesh and blood who is not there only to carry the weight of our anxieties, or even his own.

A death threat almost fulfilled is a heavy thing to approach with this perspective, but as Rushdie himself said to Larry David when he asked him how he felt about the risks of the fatwa itself, fatwa sex aside: "Well, you know, it's there. But fuck it."

- Nesrine Malik is a Guardian columnist
- ***Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a letter of up to 300 words to be considered for publication, email it to us at guardian.letters@theguardian.com***

2022.08.15 - Around the world

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- [Explained in 30 seconds What's behind the China-Taiwan tensions?](#)

Chinese economy

China's economy slows unexpectedly as Covid outbreaks and property crisis bite

Retail sales and industrial output lower than forecast, with fears that China could miss its annual growth target for first time since 2015



July's industrial output in China grew by 3.9% year on year, lower than analyst's expectations for the economy. Photograph: Jade Gao/AFP/Getty Images

Reuters

Mon 15 Aug 2022 00.01 EDT

China's economy unexpectedly slowed in July, with factory and retail activity squeezed by Beijing's zero-Covid policy and a [property crisis](#), while the central bank surprised markets by cutting key lending rates to revive demand.

July's industrial output grew 3.8% from a year earlier, slightly down from 3.9% in June, data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) showed. That compared with a 4.6% increase expected by analysts in a Reuters poll.

Retail sales, which only turned positive in June, rose 2.7% from a year ago, greatly missing analysts' forecast for 5% growth and below the 3.1% growth seen in June.

The world's second-biggest economy narrowly escaped a contraction in the June quarter, hobbled by the [lockdown of the commercial hub of Shanghai](#), a deepening downturn in the property market and persistently soft consumer spending.

However, risks to growth abound as many Chinese cities, including manufacturing hubs and popular tourist spots, imposed [lockdown measures in July](#) after fresh outbreaks of the more transmissible Omicron variant were found.

“The risk of stagflation in the world economy is rising, and the foundation for domestic economic recovery is not yet solid,” the NBS warned in a statement.

The property sector, which has been further [rocked by a mortgage boycott](#) that weighed on buyers' sentiment, deteriorated in July. Property investment tumbled 12.3% in July, the fastest rate this year, while the drop in new sales deepened to 28.9%.

Chinese policymakers are trying balance shoring up a fragile recovery and eradicating emerging Covid clusters, with the economy expected to miss its official growth target this year – set at about 5.5% – for the first time since 2015.

“All economic data disappointed in July, with the exception being exports. Loan demand from the real economy remained weak, suggesting cautious outlook for the months ahead,” said Nie Wen, a Shanghai-based economist at Hwabao Trust, adding that Covid outbreaks and the heatwaves in July weighed on activity.

“Now it is looking increasingly challenging to even achieve the 5-5.5% growth in the second half.”

The employment situation remained fragile. The nationwide survey-based jobless rate eased slightly to 5.4% in July from 5.5% in June, although youth unemployment stayed stubbornly high, reaching a record 19.9% in July.

In order to [prop up growth](#), the central bank on Monday unexpectedly lowered interest rates on key lending facilities for the second time this year. New yuan loans tumbled by more than expected in July as companies and consumers stayed wary of taking on debt, data showed on Friday.

Wang Jun, economist at Zhongyuan Bank, believe authorities will focus on implementing existing policies, rather than roll out aggressive new stimulus.

“We are now facing a typical liquidity trap problem. No matter how loose the credit supply is, companies and consumers are cautious in taking on more debt,” Wang said. “Some of them are now even paying back their debt in advance. This may herald a recession.”

Fixed asset investment, which Beijing had hoped would drive growth in the second half as exports soften, grew 5.7% in the first seven months of the year from the same period a year earlier, versus a forecast 6.2% rise and down from a 6.1% jump in January-June.

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[India](#)

Modi pledges to make India a developed country in 25 years on partition anniversary

PM says ‘self-reliant India is the responsibility of every citizen’ 75 years after end of British rule

Modi pledges to make India 'developed country in our lifetime' – video

Agencies

Mon 15 Aug 2022 05.24 EDTLast modified on Tue 16 Aug 2022 00.14 EDT

The Indian prime minister, [Narendra Modi](#), has pledged to turn India into a developed country within the next 25 years.

Wearing a flowing, cream-coloured turban with stripes of orange, white and green, the colours of the Indian flag, Modi addressed the country from New Delhi’s 17th-century Mughal-era Red Fort to mark the 75th anniversary of India’s independence from British rule.

Modi said the world’s view of India was changing and it was looking to the country to help resolve global issues.

Following a 21-gun salute, reportedly executed using howitzers made domestically for the first time under Modi’s “Make In India” industrial strategy, the prime minister said Indians should shed “colonialism in our minds and habits”.

“Hundreds of years of colonialism has restricted our sentiments, distorted our thoughts. When we see even the smallest thing related to colonialism in us or around us, we have to be rid of it,” Modi said in a 90-minute speech

from the ramparts of the fort in the Indian capital, which was decorated with portraits of freedom fighters and guarded by mechanical elephants.

[Partition map](#)

Modi also said India should crush the “termite” of corruption and nepotism, follow an “India First” mantra and ensure that “in speech and conduct, we do nothing that lowers a woman’s dignity”.

“Self-reliant India is the responsibility of every citizen, every government, every unit of society,” he said.

President Joe Biden in a statement celebrating Indian Independence Day said the US and India were indispensable partners, and their partnership was grounded in a shared commitment to the rule of law and the promotion of human freedom and dignity.

Biden said he was confident “the two countries will continue to stand together to defend the rules-based order; foster greater peace, prosperity and security for our people; advance a free and open Indo-Pacific; and together address the challenges we face around the world”.

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Modi said India would be guided by the ideals of self-reliance and the spirit of international partnership to attain excellence in science and technology, set up industries, and attain food and energy security. He said billions of dollars in investment were flowing into the country, turning it into a manufacturing hub.

India's efforts have already launched the country of 1.4 billion people into the ranks of leading countries in information technology, pharmacy, space science and civil nuclear energy.

Modi said millions of people across the country were commemorating the 75th anniversary of independence by hoisting orange, white and green national flags at their homes and businesses for three days as part of a government campaign "of awakening the spirit of patriotism in every heart".



Narendra Modi (centre) greets participants after addressing the nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort in New Delhi. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Modi said the journey of the past 75 years had seen ups and downs with India battling against all odds with resilience and perseverance. He asked people to remove any trace of a colonial mindset.

The main opposition Congress party accused the Modi government of leaving opposition parties out of celebrations.

"There were special functions in parliament's historic Central Hall to mark the 25th, 50th and 60th anniversary of India's independence," said Jairam Ramesh, an India National Congress party spokesperson. "Sadly, nothing like that has been organised for the 75th anniversary, which has been

reduced to an occasion to glorify the Sarvagyaani,” using a term meaning “a person who knows all” in reference to Modi.

In his speech, Modi made no reference to India’s tense relations with its immediate neighbours Pakistan and China, nor any steps to improve relations.

He called for unity among Indians but did not respond to experts and critics who say the country has been gradually departing from some democratic commitments and argue the backsliding has accelerated since Modi came to power in 2014. They accuse his populist government of using unbridled political power to undermine democratic freedoms and preoccupying itself with pursuing a Hindu nationalist agenda.

Modi pledged to fight corruption and nepotism in the country’s politics, which he said were acting as termites eating away the gains of development.

AP and AFP contributed to this report

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Taiwan

China sanctions Taiwan officials and stages new military drills after US lawmakers' Taipei visit

Beijing carries out 'combat drills' and acts against seven individuals for allegedly supporting Taiwan independence



US lawmakers were expected to meet Taiwan's president, Tsai Ing-wen.
Photograph: Taiwan Presidential Office/Reuters

[Vincent Ni](#), [Helen Davidson](#) and agencies

Tue 16 Aug 2022 03.01 EDTFirst published on Sun 14 Aug 2022 23.44 EDT

China has sanctioned senior Taiwanese officials and staged a new round of military drills around [Taiwan](#) in response to a brief visit to the island by a delegation of bipartisan US lawmakers. The arrival of the lawmakers took place after the House speaker Nancy Pelosi's controversial visit to the island.

On Monday, Chinese state media announced seven individuals had been sanctioned for allegedly supporting Taiwan independence, including Taiwan's de facto ambassador to the US, Hsiao Bi-khim, the head of Taiwan's national security council, Wellington Koo, and Lin Fe-fan, the deputy secretary general of the governing Democratic Progressive party.

The seven – who are barred from traveling to [China](#), Hong Kong or Macao, and from making profit in China – join Taiwan's premier, foreign minister, and speaker, who were sanctioned in November 2021.

The island's foreign ministry said Taiwan was a democracy that “could not be interfered with by China”. Lin said while the sanctions were “a blow to the current state of cross-strait relations”, he viewed those imposed on him as a “great honour”.

“People in Taiwan have congratulated me on the ‘distinction’, and I understand why – I am proud to be labeled as a staunch advocate for my home,” Lin told the Guardian.

“China's choice to impose sanctions as a response to our engagement in diplomatic dialogue casts a dark shadow over the current state of global relations,” he said.

“While Taiwan is by no means enthusiastic about the prospect of war, in the face of such threats we are unwilling to give up on our way of life ... Aggression will only damage our willingness to engage in dialogue and improve our overall relationship with Beijing.”

Beijing earlier said it had carried out a fresh round of “combat readiness patrol and combat drills in the sea and airspace around Taiwan island”. Military officials and state media also renewed their “prepare for war” rhetoric on Taiwan, over which Beijing has long claimed sovereignty.

Wu Qian, a spokesperson for China's defence ministry, said: “The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) continues to train and prepare for war, resolutely defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and resolutely

crush any form of ‘Taiwan independence’ separatism and foreign interference attempts.”

“We warn the US and the DPP authorities: using Taiwan to contain China is doomed to failure,” he added, referring to Taiwan’s ruling Democratic Progressive party.

Taipei’s government condemned Beijing’s bellicosity. On Monday evening, [the island’s defence ministry](#) reported that 30 PLA aircrafts and 5 PLA vessels had conducted military activities around Taiwan. The ministry also said that out of the 30 aircraft, 15 had crossed the median line, an unofficial maritime line that crosses the middle of the Taiwan strait.

Taiwan’s president, Tsai Ing-wen, told the American delegation that the self-ruled island was “committed to maintaining the stable status quo in the Taiwan strait”.

The bipartisan US delegation, led by Senator Ed Markey of Massachusetts, arrived in Taipei on Sunday evening. The unannounced brief visit came after Beijing sent warships, missiles and jets into the waters and skies around Taiwan, prompting fears of military calculation between the world’s two largest militaries.

Their visit would focus on trade, regional security and climate change, Washington’s de facto embassy in Taipei, the American Institute in Taiwan, said.

Taiwan’s foreign ministry hailed the visit as another sign of a friendship between Taipei and Washington “that is not afraid of China’s threats and intimidation”.

But the bipartisan trip prompted another caustic response from Beijing. The state news agency Xinhua published a commentary after the lawmakers’ arrival on Sunday with the headline “US politicians should stop playing with fire on Taiwan question”.

It called the visiting American lawmakers opportunists, thinking about their own political interests as November’s midterm elections draw near.

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“Those US politicians who are playing with fire on the Taiwan question should drop their wishful thinking,” the agency said. “There is no room for compromise or concessions when it comes to China’s core interests.”

Taiwan’s government has accused Beijing of using Pelosi’s visit as an excuse to kickstart drills that would allow it to rehearse for an invasion.

That decades-old threat was reiterated in a white paper published last week when China’s Taiwan Affairs Office said it would “not renounce the use of force” against its neighbour and reserved “the option of taking all necessary measures”.

It added, however: “We will only be forced to take drastic measures to respond to the provocation of separatist elements or external forces should they ever cross our red lines.”

Pelosi has stood by her visit but president Joe Biden said the US military was opposed to the trip by his fellow Democrat, who is second in line to the presidency after the vice-president.

Congress is constitutionally an equal branch of government with lawmakers free to travel where they wish, and Taiwan enjoys bipartisan backing in divided Washington.

The US switched diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing in 1979. But it remains a key ally of Taiwan and maintains de facto diplomatic relations with Taipei. Washington’s official policy opposes Taiwan declaring

independence or China forcibly changing the island's status. It remains deliberately ambiguous about whether it would militarily come to Taiwan's aid if China invaded.

Visits by senior US officials to Taiwan have happened for decades and even Pelosi's trip was not without precedent – a previous house speaker, Newt Gingrich, visited in 1997.

But the frequency and profile of US visits has increased under the former president Donald Trump and now under Biden. Taiwan has also bought an increased amount of US weaponry in recent years as China continued to pressure the island amid deteriorating US-China relations.

In the UK, the House of Commons foreign affairs committee is planning a visit to [Taiwan](#) later this year, also to show its support to the island democracy.

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[In 30 seconds](#)China

China-Taiwan relations: what's behind the tensions – in 30 seconds

Unification is a key goal of Chinese leader Xi Jinping and analysts say threat that Beijing will invade Taiwan is higher than ever



Guardian design composite. Taiwan air force pilots run toward F-16V fighter jets during a military drill. Under Xi Jinping's rule, China's aggression towards Taiwan has increased and analysts believe the threat of conflict and invasion is higher than ever. China and Taiwan cross-strait relations and tensions explained in 30 seconds. Photograph: Ritchie B Tongo/EPA/EPA

[Helen Davidson](#) in Taipei
[@heldavidson](#)

Wed 3 Aug 2022 00.55 EDTFirst published on Sun 31 Jul 2022 21.50 EDT

The Chinese government claims [Taiwan](#) as a province of China and has not ruled out taking it by force.

At the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949, the losing Kuomintang government fled to the island of Taiwan, establishing the Republic of [China](#) (ROC) government in exile. On the mainland the Chinese Communist party (CCP) established the People's Republic of China. From the 1970s onwards many nations began switching their formal ties from the ROC to Beijing, and today fewer than 15 world governments recognise the ROC (Taiwan) as a country.

The CCP has never ruled over Taiwan and since the end of the civil war Taiwan has enjoyed de facto independence. Since the decades-long period of martial law ended in the 1980s, Taiwan has also grown to become a vibrant democracy with free elections and media.

But unification is a key goal of the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping. The island's president, Tsai Ing-wen, has said Taiwan is already a sovereign country with no need to declare independence, but Beijing regards Taiwan's democratically elected government as separatists.

Under Xi's rule, [aggression towards Taiwan has increased](#) and analysts believe the threat of invasion is at its highest in decades. In recent years the People's Liberation Army has sent hundreds of war planes into Taiwan's air defence identification zone, as part of [greatly increased "grey zone" activities](#), which are combat-adjacent but don't meet the threshold of war. Taiwan is working to modernise its military and is buying large numbers of military assets and weapons from the US in the hope it can deter Xi and the CCP from making a move.

Headlines tuesday 16 august 2022

- [Pay UK wages in June fall at fastest rate for 20 years](#)
- [Live UK real pay falls by record 3%, as job vacancies also decline](#)
- [Analysis Glass half empty or full? The two ways of viewing latest UK jobs figures](#)

Inflation

UK wages in June fall at fastest rate for 20 years

Real pay continues to be outstripped by soaring inflation amid a continuing cost of living crisis



The real value of workers' pay packets dropped in June by 3% – the fastest decline since comparable records began in 2001. Photograph: Daniel Harvey Gonzalez/In Pictures/Getty Images

[Richard Partington](#) *Economics correspondent*

[@RJPartington](#)

Tue 16 Aug 2022 04.10 EDTFirst published on Tue 16 Aug 2022 03.06 EDT

The real value of UK workers' pay continued to fall at the fastest rate for 20 years in June as wage increases were outstripped by soaring inflation amid the cost of living crisis.

The [Office for National Statistics](#) said annual growth in average pay, excluding bonuses, strengthened to 4.7% in the three months to June against a backdrop of low unemployment and high job vacancies.

However, the real value of workers' pay packets dropped by 3% – the fastest decline since comparable records began in 2001 – after taking account of its preferred measure of inflation.

Growth in average earnings including bonuses was 5.1%, although also failed to keep pace with the soaring cost of living.

The latest snapshot showed early signs of a slowdown in hiring demand among employers despite job vacancies remaining close to a record high. The ONS said unemployment rose slightly to 3.8% in the three months to June, while the number of new job openings fell for the first time since summer 2020.

Growth in employment slowed to 160,000 in the three months to June, well below analysts' forecasts, suggesting the jobs market is beginning to cool as Britain's economic performance falters.

Ruth Gregory, a senior UK economist at the consultancy Capital [Economics](#), said: "June's labour market figures revealed further evidence that the weaker economy is leading to a slightly less tight labour market."

The chancellor, Nadhim Zahawi, said the latest figures showed Britain's jobs market was in a strong position, with unemployment lower than at almost any point in the past 40 years. "[That is] good news in what I know are difficult times for people," he said.

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“Although there are no easy solutions to the cost of living pressures people are facing, we are providing help where we can. We are delivering a £37bn package of help for households through cash grants and tax cuts so people can keep more of what they earn.”

However, the figures underlining the unprecedented hit for workers’ pay are likely to add to the pressure on the government and Conservative leadership candidates amid the cost of living crisis.

Labour said the figures showed the Tories had lost control of the economy. Jonathan Ashworth, the shadow work and pensions secretary, said: “This zombie government is offering no solutions to the cost of living crisis.”

Inflation as measured by the consumer price index reached [9.4% in July](#), the highest rate for 40 years. With a fresh increase in energy bills expected this autumn, the [Bank of England](#) forecasts inflation to peak above 13%, alongside a long recession as households rein in their spending.

Frances O’Grady, the general secretary of the Trades Union Congress, said the figures showed urgent government action was required to support households ahead of a difficult winter. “They should cancel the increase to the energy price cap. And they must do far more to get pay rising – starting with boosting the minimum wage this autumn and giving public sector workers a decent pay rise.”

The pay data revealed a widening gulf between public and private sector workers, with pay in the private sector rising by 5.9% over the past year, more than three times the 1.8% growth rate in the public sector.

According to analysis by the accountancy firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, the pay of the richest 1% of workers rose by almost four times the rate of the poorest 10th, highlighting how some households are more insulated from the cost of living crisis than others.

The Resolution Foundation said the scale of the pay squeeze was deeper than official figures suggest, with the real value of average weekly wages falling by the most since the Queen's silver jubilee in 1977.

Nye Cominetti, a senior economist at the thinktank, said: "This squeeze has come about despite robust pay growth and a lively jobs market, with pay settlements strengthening slightly, and almost a million people moving jobs in the last three months."

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UK real pay falls by record 3%, as job vacancies also decline – as it happened

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[UK unemployment and employment statistics](#)

Glass half empty or full? The two ways of viewing latest UK jobs figures

Analysis: While chancellor says unemployment has rarely been lower, Bank of England predicts recession will push up jobless rate

- [All the day's business news – live](#)



Ultimately, the labour market data shows where the economy has been but doesn't necessarily show where it is heading. Photograph: Alex Segre/Getty Images/iStockphoto

[Larry Elliott](#), *Economics editor*

Tue 16 Aug 2022 04.41 EDTLast modified on Wed 17 Aug 2022 00.12 EDT

There are two ways of looking at the state of Britain's labour market. In one it is a case of the glass being half full, in the other half empty.

If you are a government minister you take the former view. [Nadhim Zahawi](#) said the unemployment rate of 3.8% has rarely been lower in decades and the chancellor is right about that.

What's more, the economy continued to create net new jobs in the three months to June, with employment rising by 160,000 over the quarter. Flash estimates suggest the pattern continued into July.

With job vacancies at near-record levels, the labour market looks in good shape to withstand the [recession the Bank of England is forecasting for the UK](#). The economy contracted slightly in the three months to June, but demand for workers remained strong.

That's the upbeat way of looking at the [latest jobs figures](#) from the Office for National Statistics. Ruth Gregory, UK economist at Capital Economics, says "by any metric the labour market is still very tight".

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A glass half empty observer sees things differently, and would point to the slower pace of employment growth, evidence that job vacancies are past their peak and the [record gap](#) between regular pay (unadjusted for bonuses) and the rate of inflation.

Samuel Tombs, the chief UK economist at Pantheon Macro, says demand for labour is stabilising just as the supply of workers is picking up. The increase in the size of the workforce is being driven by immigration, he

notes, with the number of non-UK nationals either working or looking for a job rising by almost 250,000 in the past year.

The domestic labour force is also likely to increase as people try to maintain their living standards at a time when cost of living pressures are intensifying, and this will lead to higher unemployment as a weakening economy leads to fewer job opportunities.

Ultimately, the labour market data shows where the economy has been but doesn't necessarily show where it is heading. Employment growth was healthy as the UK came out of lockdown. Annual regular pay growth has picked up to 4.7% as firms have struggled to find workers.

The question is whether those days are now in the past, as the [Bank of England](#) certainly thinks. Threadneedle Street sees a protracted recession pushing the unemployment rate to above 6% by 2025. Judging by the most up-to-date evidence, that process has started.

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2022.08.16 - Spotlight

- ['It's where I learned how to be a comedian' Nish Kumar on why the Edinburgh fringe still matters](#)
- [Bring that beat back: why are people in their 30s giving up on music?](#)
- [When Megan Rapinoe met Ada Hegerberg 'Euro 2022? Everyone was late to the party'](#)
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[Edinburgh festival 2022](#)

‘It’s where I learned how to be a comedian’: Nish Kumar on why the Edinburgh fringe still matters



‘It can feel as though defending the fringe is morally indefensible, like eating meat or supporting Manchester United’ ... Nish Kumar in Edinburgh this month. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

The festival stands at a crossroads, with costs for performers soaring and many younger acts staying away. But it still offers comics a boot camp like no other

[Nish Kumar](#)

Tue 16 Aug 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 16 Aug 2022 04.59 EDT

At the last Edinburgh fringe BC (before Covid), more than 3m tickets were sold for 3,841 shows at 323 venues, reported [the New York Times](#). Those numbers, according to one comedian who attended (me), are “loads”. For what started as a side event to the international festival, it is staggering. To performers, the fringe has become a combination of arts festival, summer camp, trade show, shop window and breeding ground for alcoholism.

But with reports that [artists are turning their backs on it](#) in the face of escalating costs, does it have a future? If it does, will there be performers, or will it all be holograms, [like Abba](#) and [Tupac](#)? (The first of those questions is worth considering; the second was a waste of my time and yours. The answer is obviously yes.)

But first, because I am pathologically incapable of engaging with any subject without centring myself in it, a little of my own history with the festival. I have performed at almost every conceivable level: from student comedy and free fringe shows to theatre, standup comedy and presenting for the BBC. This year, I will do a week of shows, performing [Your Power, Your Control](#), which I began work on at 2021’s greatly reduced and socially distanced festival.



Early inspiration ... We Are Klang, AKA Marek Larwood, Greg Davies and Steve Hall, in 2006. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

I first attended the fringe in 2006 as a member of the Durham Revue, a student comedy group that is like the Cambridge Footlights, minus the prestige and the everything. We spent all day handing out flyers with our faces on them to uninterested passersby, before performing an hour of sketch comedy. Our evenings were then spent drinking badly watered-down lager from the venue bar and trying to see as many shows as humanly possible.

The truth is, I was in heaven. I was a lovely brown sponge, soaking up everything I could. I saw Greg Davies screaming in a portable building as part of the sketch group We Are Klang, an experience I would have subsequently at even closer quarters as a contestant on Taskmaster, a show the bearded weirdo [Alex Horne](#) developed initially for the fringe. I also saw a seminal performance by the even more bearded and even weirder [Daniel Kitson](#), a comedian, playwright and professional recluse.

The fringe never stopped being an education for me. When I was starting to write hourlong shows of my own, I went to see [Bridget Christie](#) and realised everything I was doing was shit and needed to be overhauled. I have watched shows by contemporaries, such as my ex-flatmate turned sitcom superstar [Rose Matafeo](#), the sketch masters [Lazy Susan](#) and the genius/serial

award-loser [James Acaster](#), that reminded me why I fell in love with comedy.

When I hosted Edinburgh Nights for the BBC in 2018 and 2019, I was even forced to watch things that weren't comedy. I saw [Rachael Young](#) marry live music, dance and Afrofuturism in Nightclubbing, a show that paid homage to Grace Jones. I saw [Pussy Riot](#) and was fortunate enough to interview them, where I was informed that they hadn't been smuggled out of Russia to perform at the festival, as reported in the press, but had travelled "by unicorn".

When I wasn't watching shows, I was performing; learning how to be a comedian, step by excruciating step. In 2010 and 2011, I performed in a sketch double act with Tom Neenan. We were called the Gentlemen of Leisure and the show was a parody of The Culture Show on BBC Two and was exactly as financially profitable as it sounds. But we learned a huge amount about joke-writing and the partnership ended up with Tom becoming my partner in crimes against comedy on various radio shows and [The Mash Report](#).

Meanwhile, I was doing standup on the Free Fringe, where the audience members aren't charged, but can offer a donation to the performers on leaving the venue. The aim is for the donation to be in cash, but we were often compensated in old playing cards, flyers for our own show and bits of string. Still, these were formative experiences, performing on 25 consecutive days, accelerating my development more than months of infrequent gigging on the open mic circuit in London possibly could.



Gentlemen of Leisure ... with his double-act partner, Tom Neenan.
Photograph: Alex Brenner

This is not to say that the festival has been without its lows. And my Gods (I am Hindu), those lows were low.

In 2007, I was chased off stage by a heavy metal band – the venue had been double booked and the band and its fans were not in the mood for my brand of whimsy. That year, my student sketch group did a gig that went so badly that we exited through a fire escape so as not to have to speak to any of the other performers.

In 2011, Tom and I arrived at our venue to find a bucket where the second row of seating should have been, as the cave we were performing in had sprung a leak. In 2013, a group of audience members waited outside to beat me up.

Despite all this, I love the fringe. It is where I learned how to be a comedian and created work opportunities that I continue to benefit from. On my 30th birthday, I was nominated for the Edinburgh comedy award and offered a slot on Have I Got News for You and Live at the Apollo. Then [David O'Doherty](#) and I spent an hour searching for chips at 6am, so it wasn't all glamour. The producers of The Mash Report saw me do a political show in

the aftermath of the Brexit vote in 2016 and felt I would be a good fit as host for the nascent TV series.



Beyond comedy ... Rachael Young, the creator of Nightclubbing. Photograph: Marcus Hessenberg

At times, it can feel as though defending the fringe is morally indefensible, like eating meat or supporting Manchester United. Landlords have been encouraging students to stay in their flats in August, leading to a shortage of properties and driving up prices. The Fringe Society was forced to [launch a drive](#) to find Edinburgh residents who would be willing to rent properties to performers for less than £280 a person a week. Some performers are staying out of town in caravans or on campsites.

Meanwhile, the Fringe Society is facing criticism for [scrapping its app](#), a valuable tool for performers to direct audiences to their shows, sell more tickets and hopefully mitigate some of those astronomical rents.

The fringe is supposed to be a place where performers can come to experiment and evolve. However, it is turning into a playground for those born wealthy – like Monaco, but with more people who went to clown school.

It has been heading this way for years – and I am not exactly an example to the contrary. I grew up middle class and went to a fancy university that subsidised my first two trips here. More significantly, when I started doing solo standup shows, my first three were paid for by a management company. At the time, the going rate for a solo show (including venue hire, accommodation and PR costs) was about £10,000. I was performing in venues that were so small that even if I had sold every single ticket I would still have lost money.

Some performers are staying out of town in caravans or on campsites

It would be disingenuous not to acknowledge my fortune. It would make me no better than the swines in our cultural and political life who are the children of wealth, but proudly proclaim that they “did it on their own, without any help”. It is our most pernicious myth, aside from the one that brussels sprouts taste nice if you fry them with bacon. Your dad bought you a flat and the thing that tastes good is bacon. Sprouts taste like small, hard farts.

This is to say nothing of the woeful underrepresentation of female acts, ethnic minorities and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Organisations such as [Fringe of Colour](#) and [Best in Class](#) work hard to address this, but wholesale change is needed. No one seems to be able to put the finger on who is to blame. Landlords, venues, PRs, Edinburgh university and the Fringe Society blame each other, but in the end the bill is footed by performers.

It is no wonder that younger comedians are increasingly seeing the benefits of social media exposure to their careers; the startup costs required are minuscule in comparison to those of doing a show on the fringe. But allowing the fringe to slip slowly into obsolescence would be a shame. At its core, it offers performers a boot camp to hone their skills and a collision of different styles of performance.

Being a performer at the fringe can feel like being a character on a film set in Las Vegas, because the house always wins. And I mean one of the bleak

Vegas films, not Ocean's Eleven – there is no sign of Clooney or Pitt. The only time it resembles Ocean's Eleven is when you hear some drama student attempt a truly disgraceful cockney accent that would make even Don Cheadle say: “Bleeding heck, guvnah.”

I still believe in the fringe. Perhaps that is inevitable, given my whole life is tied to it, like a pointless Forrest Gump. My birthday is in August, so I can measure my life through the festivals I have attended. My first years I was there, I spent almost every waking moment with Tom and [Ed Gamble](#). In the past three years, I have been best man at their weddings. In 2010, I met a woman who was funny and charming, but whom I presumed disliked me intently. In October, we will have been in a relationship for 10 years. I cannot separate my own life from the fringe and the city of Edinburgh. It has given so much to me, professionally and personally.

But even I understand that it stands at a crossroads. It must find a way to recapture its egalitarian spirit to remain relevant. It is not enough for charitable organisations to fill in the gaps; systemic change is needed. I say this not out of malice, but simply because I strongly believe, to quote my own mother: “If you love something, you must be willing to relentlessly point out everything that is wrong with it,” a phrase she often says to and about me.

[Nish Kumar: Your Power, Your Control](#) is at Assembly George Square, 22-28 August

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Music

Bring that beat back: why are people in their 30s giving up on music?

[Daniel Dylan Wray](#)

It would have been unimaginable in our 20s, but these days more and more friends are disengaging from a passion we once shared. Surely this is premature?



‘The late DJ Andrew Weatherall, with his boundless curiosity, knowledge and passion for music, right up until his untimely death, is a personal benchmark.’ Photograph: Graeme Robertson/the Guardian

Tue 16 Aug 2022 03.11 EDTLast modified on Tue 16 Aug 2022 03.32 EDT

There are many things you notice as you plow deeper into your 30s. It’s a transitional period with incredibly visible milestones: babies, weddings, houses, more babies. What gets added to people’s lives can feel loud and inescapable – but often what drifts away is less visible.

For the last few years, I have felt the inescapable disappearance of music from my friends' lives. Even people with whom I have longstanding relationships that were born from a shared love of music have simply let it go, or let it fade deep into the background. A 2015 study of people's listening habits on Spotify found that most people stop listening to new music at 33; a 2018 report by Deezer had it at 30. In my 20s, the idea that people's appetite to consume new music regularly would be switched off like some kind of tap was ludicrous. However, now I'm 36, it's difficult to argue with.

The capacity to be amazed, overwhelmed or sucker-punched by music remains a constant presence and ecstatic joy in my life. It's something I've experienced a million times but when it hits it still feels new. The late DJ [Andrew Weatherall](#), with his boundless curiosity, knowledge and passion for music, right up until his untimely death, is my personal benchmark and inspiration. I write about music for a living, and naturally I don't expect others to maintain anywhere near the same level of interest – and not everyone reaches their 30s and gives up on music, as the success of BBC Radio 6 Music shows. Not that there's anything wrong with tapping out, either – interests and priorities change. A parent with two kids under five has things higher up their to-do list than checking out [Jockstrap](#). Gigs become less attractive when a small person screams you awake at 5am. I get it.

Nevertheless, it's a strange and alienating experience to have a fundamental part of your relationship with someone deteriorate. The shift is a subtle one; a sudden realisation that hits as the once regular conversation of "what are you listening to?" is seemingly replaced permanently by "what are you watching?" I've lost count of the amount of free +1 tickets I've had go unaccounted for; the seat next to me becoming a coat stand. I've not been able to give away free tickets to see [Nick Cave](#), staggeringly expensive arena pop shows, or even entire festival weekend passes.

It's easy to chalk this up to simply getting older, as the rabid enthusiasm, naivety and passion of youth dwindles, but that has an ageist presumption baked into it. There may be more hurdles to committing to cultural discovery but people don't become fundamentally less curious because they get older. Most people don't stop discovering new books, films, podcasts or

TV. Yet music seems to be something that more commonly slips away – or is even perceived as something you’re supposed to grow out of. Music is a key part of youthful identity formation: once your idea of yourself becomes fixed, perhaps by distinct markers like marriage and kids, the need for it slips away. Sometimes when I speak to people about going to gigs, festivals or raves, I see an almost pitying look wash over their face: “Really? You’re still doing that? Bless.” As if clinging on represents some childish refusal to let go of youth, the equivalent of a balding mod refusing to shave off their depleting feather cut.



No takers ... Nick Cave performing in Austria. Photograph: Hannes Draxler/Fotokerschi.AT/AFP/Getty Images

One similarly aged and child-free friend who admits to a dwindling passion for music says it’s a combination of going out less – and so music is no longer the centre of socialising – preferring to listen to podcasts, and having more options available across streaming. Another simply says it’s harder to muster that same level of excitement about anything, period, while one former consumer and maker of music happily admits that he now only really listens to three bands.

This lack of interest in new music seems to coincide – or perhaps even feeds – huge surges in nostalgia around my age group: take the odd phenomenon

of [so-called indie sleaze](#), with its warped rose-tinted shutter glasses and desire to retroactively create something that didn't exist. Objectionable as that particular fetishism is, it's an interesting generational insight into how those staring down middle age recalibrate their relationship to music. Though I'm not begrudging anyone some nostalgia. The world can be an overflowing cesspit, and if using familiar music to ignite fond memories helps, then drink it up.

Nor is there anything wrong with stepping away from the endless churn. I loved [Emma Garland's recent article](#) on deactivating her streaming accounts and giving up on endlessly chasing the zeitgeist (ie mediocre TV) simply because that's what's directing the conversation. Keeping up with new music can feel like an equally exhausting task bordering on the futile. I get numb from time to time too, and listening to albums can feel like going through the motions without absorbing anything. The sheer volume of culture makes it easy to feel as though we are trapped within a huge content-spewing factory working harder than ever to keep up with the production line. Stepping away from that madness makes sense.

But this desertion of music that I have observed feels different – less a tactical retreat and more a mushrooming apathy or indifference. Trying to remain dedicated to music during these apparent wilderness years can be a lonely pursuit. Something you once associated with camaraderie, shared experience and collective memories becomes a one-way exchange. It's still special, and for many people that's how they prefer to enjoy music – and there's always community to be found online, though it's a thin substitute when you've known the real thing. While the thrill of falling in love with a record hasn't dimmed, it's dispiriting to know that you have a shrinking group of friends to share it with, as more people seemingly outgrow the one thing you never thought was possible to outgrow.

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When Megan Rapinoe met Ada Hegerberg: ‘Euro 2022? Everyone was late to the party’

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Discreet Crete: exploring the Greek island's gorges and ancient villages on a new eco-tour



The Sfakia coastline, where small villages are connected by water taxis and footpaths. *All photographs by Lorna Parkes*

Away from the bars and bustle, Crete's spectacular White Mountains are opening up to sensitive and sustainable travel – with scrumptious food

Lorna Parkes

Tue 16 Aug 2022 02.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 16 Aug 2022 02.32 EDT

‘Tonight there will be you and me and the goats,’ my guide Vassia Mastrogrianni explained as we began our car journey into Crete's White Mountains. At the wheel was Antonis who, ominously, Mastrogrianni had just introduced as “a very good driver.” It wasn't long before I could see why, as the road became a tangle of ascending switchbacks and plunging valleys. It was the kind of road that would have caused a meltdown had I been the one driving.

[Crete map](#)

We were headed for a remote mountain guesthouse in western [Crete](#), where the deep creases of Samaria national park rise up to limestone crests more than 2,000 metres high before crashing into the southern coast. For half the year the White Mountains are slick with snow, but in summer the rocky summits are famous for their gleaming, milky complexion, continuing to give the appearance of snow long after it's all but melted away.

Crete's White Mountains, *Lefka Ori* in Greek, are about as far away as you can get from your typical sun, sea and sand Greek island holiday. Our ride through the foothills was layered with olive groves, clumps of wild thyme and bushy vineyard blocks bookended by twinkling ocean. Bearded vultures careered overhead. Nonchalant goats slowed our progress into the mountains as they grazed by the roadside.



Antonis Georgedakis and a hiker at Agios Ioannis, in a very remote part of south-west Crete

My trip here was part of Intrepid Travel's new [Highlights of Crete](#) itinerary – the B Corp tour operator's first foray into Crete. Starting in Heraklion and ending in Chania, the tour combines mountain and gorge hikes with boat-hopping on Crete's south coast and visits to meet artisans and small local food producers.

It's been designed through a new partnership with Meet (Mediterranean Experience of EcoTourism), a non-profit organisation that supports protected areas and the people living in them by developing sustainable experiences to help disperse tourism.



The bridge connecting Aradena and Samaria

“We’ve always had concerns about overtourism, as a whole, and most definitely in the Med,” Zina Bencheikh, Intrepid Group’s managing director for Europe, the Middle East and Africa, told me. Because of this, Intrepid has historically steered clear of sun, sea and sand destinations such as the Greek islands.

A strong scent of pine hung in the air as we headed to a clifftop clearing where a sparkling bay hooked around the coast

Bencheikh hopes that the partnership with Meet will help Intrepid finally break into some of these destinations in a sustainable way. “We want to demonstrate that it’s possible and that it can be very enjoyable as well,” she said. Crete and Croatia are the first two collaborations, and there are three more in the pipeline.

On the edge of Samaria national park, we stopped at the yawning mouth of Aradena gorge to take a walk through an abandoned stone village torn apart by a 1940s vendetta. The heinous crime? A goat’s bell, taken by a boy who then refused to return it. Seven people died because of the family feuds that ensued, said Mastrogianni, resulting in a slow exodus from which the village

never recovered. Such travesties characterised an era of deprivation and lawlessness after the second world war, when Greece was racked by civil war and the White Mountains harboured militia and guns.



Aradena's byzantine church

But now there are signs of life in the village again. Amid the goats and rubble, some families have returned to rebuild their houses. A waymarked walking trail through the village is bringing tourists. The vertiginous bridge connecting Aradena and this south-eastern pocket of Samaria national park to Crete's road network was only built in 1987, but is in itself now an attraction. We found a bungee jumper there, goading himself to dive into the throat of the 138-metre-deep gorge from a metal platform.

Ten minutes further down the road, our base village of Agios Ioannis emerged out of nowhere as a cluster of houses sprawled across an 800-metre-high plateau. Here, the seven-room [Alonia Guesthouse](#), where we would stay, was built by resident Antonis Georgedakis and his uncle in the early 2000s, after the arrival of the bridge.



Goats in inhabit ruins in Aradena village

“When I was young there were no cars and no road. It was very different,” Georgedakis told me, as we picked our way between limestone boulders as big as grazing flocks of sheep, on a woodland hiking trail cleared and waymarked with help from Meet. “It took two hours to get to the next village.”

A strong scent of pine hung like incense in the close air as we headed gently downhill to a clifftop clearing where a sparkling bay hooked around the southern Sfakia coast – a region where small villages are connected by water taxis and footpaths alone. Far below, the sea lapped at the doors of a 1,000-year-old church as small as a chess piece.

Beyond it, Georgedakis pointed out Agia Roumeli, the small coastal town at the exit of the Samaria Gorge – Crete’s second most visited tourist attraction after the Palace of Knossos. Despite being so close, there is no road to Samaria from this south-eastern swathe of the national park. Agios Ioannis felt utterly disconnected from it.



View from the Alonis guesthouse

In Samaria, Meet's objective is to promote low-impact tourism that helps preserve the traditional culture and the natural environment that is so undisturbed in this area of the park. But local businesses must meet strict sustainability criteria before coming on board. For Alonia Guesthouse, this involved reporting huge amounts of granular business data – from how much rice is used in the guesthouse meals and the consumption of fuel used in its daily activities, to how many kilowatts and cubic metres of water are consumed each year.

That evening, at the instruction of our hosts, we didn't eat until the bees had gone to sleep. The light of a silvery moon illuminated the mountaintops like a floating spectre – and there was no rice on the dinner table. Only specialities such as Cretan salad with mizithra cheese, boureki potato pie, sweet pork and butter-soft lamb with heaped mounds of creamy tzatziki and Greek fava dip drenched in local olive oil. Invisible goat bells played an erratic tune, like a toddler running riot with a tin can through the hills. Tomorrow we would discover the little-visited Sfakia coast, but I knew that I'd be reluctant to leave these mountains.

Trip provided by Intrepid Travel. The full seven-night Highlights of Crete tour costs from £1,140pp (accommodation, local transport, 6 breakfasts and

1 dinner included; price does not include travel to Crete), [intrepidtravel.com](https://www.intrepidtravel.com)

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Britain has been avoiding its biggest problems for decades. Now we're paying the price

[John Harris](#)



From the climate to water and energy, our country is facing multiple crises that are a product of total political failure



Illustration: R Fresson/The Guardian

Tue 16 Aug 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 16 Aug 2022 06.10 EDT

“Almost nothing seems to be working in Britain,” says [the Economist](#). The Financial Times reckons the country is “[creaking](#)”; one Daily Telegraph columnist, with characteristic restraint, foretells “[the coming collapse of basketcase Britain](#)”.

Whatever conclusions follow, the basic observation is much the same: what with skyrocketing bills, crisis-plagued railways, a drought worsened by our decaying water infrastructure and an NHS once again on the brink of collapse, the United Kingdom is being confronted with huge problems it can no longer wish away. Up to now, it has been easy to pin the blame for our malaise on whatever crisis was then afflicting us. But there suddenly seems to be a dawning understanding that the era of Covid-19, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the overarching climate emergency have exposed fundamental failures that have been festering for decades.

Mounting predictions of a national meltdown only highlight a story that ought to be very familiar by now: the deep and enduring problem of [British underinvestment](#), and a national mindset innately averse to thinking about the future. From time to time, some or other grand project – London’s new

Elizabeth line is a good example – suggests that the right people can just about get their act together. But for the most part, we have an economic model that excels at ephemeral stuff, but fails when it comes to the things that everyday life – let alone a healthy, future-proofed economy – actually depend on.

In that sense, the quintessential modern British experience is that of being stranded in the kind of mainline railway station where the consumerist wonderment extends into the distance – able to buy the latest in coffee, sushi and so-called Cornish pasties – but being faced with points failures, shortages of train staff, and that grimly British incantation about “any inconvenience caused”.

In 2018, a [report by the TUC](#) revealed that private and public investment as a proportion of national income put us 34th in a ranking of 36, trailed only by Portugal and Greece. In the 40 years to 2019, fixed investment in the UK averaged [19% of GDP](#), the lowest in the G7. Now, business investment in the UK remains more than 9% below its pre-pandemic level. Crucial parts of our national infrastructure have been failed twice over: first when they were state-owned and let down by the stinginess of the man from the ministry – and then when they became privatised victims of modern capitalism’s increasing fondness for stripping out, squeezing down, and chasing dividends.

The fate of England’s water is a particularly vivid example. Pipes, reservoirs and treatment works were once owned and run by local councils, but [are now in the possession](#) of a mind-boggling mess of interests that includes a Malaysian conglomerate called the YTL corporation, Norway’s state-owned bank and JP Morgan Asset Management. The consequences have been as mad as that suggests: between 1991 and 2019, such shareholders were paid [£57bn in dividends](#) – nearly half what the water companies spent on maintaining and improving their infrastructure.

Late last week, there were [reports of ministers](#) threatening electricity generators with an extended windfall tax, unless they used hugely increased profits to invest in green energy rather than pay shareholder dividends – a story that once again highlighted the tensions between instant payouts and

longer-term considerations. Given that the average company share is now held for about six months, the former usually wins.

Executive bonuses based on annual results are part of the same problem. In the consumer economy, the results are bad enough (think of the hours most of us spend on poorly staffed customer helplines). But once that logic dictates decisions that affect our most basic infrastructure, you get a mixture of tragedy and disaster: national resilience coming a distant second to the kind of greed that finds a home in offshore tax havens.

Our systems of politics and power hardly help. With elections seemingly arriving every couple of years, and with our fourth prime minister since 2016 imminent, it is hardly surprising that planning – and spending – for the future so rarely intrude on the national conversation. The problem is made worse by the stupidities of a two-party system built on the idea that consensus is for wimps, and by post-Thatcher Conservatism – funded by bond traders and hedge fund managers, and deeply averse to any suggestion that the state should spend significant amounts of money.

Perhaps the biggest issue of all is that the British state is so centralised: overloaded Whitehall departments cannot possibly deal with demands for investment from wildly different parts of the country, and are usually beholden to the penny-pinching mindset of the Treasury.

What may or may not happen once Boris Johnson's successor takes over is a very interesting question. Current levels of [public sector investment](#) have just about moved us away from the chronic self-harm of the austerity years, but they still fall short of the emergencies we will carry on facing – and besides, the Tories' evident post-Johnson lurch to the right makes such small gains feel fragile. Most big investment ideas remain for the birds: all our big cities should have modern transit systems, but given that such things get nowhere without permission from the centre, most of them look set to remain stuck in the past. The climate crisis demands an energy revolution and home insulation programme that shows no convincing signs of materialising.

Meanwhile, the term Theresa May and Boris Johnson used to describe renewed investment in parts of the country that had been denied it has literally become a joke: at a recent leadership hustings in Darlington, when Rishi Sunak was asked what “levelling up” actually means, he [simply laughed](#). As the last few weeks have proved, neither public nor private investment really capture the Tory imagination: its members – and financial backers – want the sugar-rush economics of tax cuts instead.

On the other side of the House of Commons, the opposition has better ideas – witness Labour’s [£28bn-a-year climate investment pledge](#). But Keir Starmer’s party hardly feels like it has the confidence or ideas to push us out of our current short-termism and future-denial (when the frontbencher Steve Reed was recently asked about taking energy companies back into public ownership, he ruled it out on the basis that “[nationalising companies costs an awful lot of money](#)”).

Those of us who make the case for a progressive politics that would run well beyond Labour – and [embrace coalition](#) and consensus instead of rejecting them – don’t do so because it would be nice if everyone got along better. The case for a more pluralistic way of doing things is all about the realisation that long-term thinking and lasting change require a different political mentality. Unless it arrives, the crises over housing, water, energy and all the rest will grind on, and the kind of corporate governance that might help push us somewhere different will always be deferred until tomorrow.

Whatever the alarm about a country that no longer works, this is exactly the impasse in which we find ourselves: well aware of the danger, but as the David Bowie song put it, [always crashing in the same car](#).

- John Harris is a Guardian columnist

OpinionMonkeypox

With monkeypox, profits are once again being put ahead of protecting life

[Nick Dearden](#)

As with Covid, corporate interests are taking priority over getting vaccines to people and areas that most need them



‘Comparisons have been drawn between the monkeypox outbreak and Covid-19. While the disease is very different, access to vaccines is just as unequal.’ Photograph: Lynne Sladky/AP

Tue 16 Aug 2022 04.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 16 Aug 2022 04.02 EDT

Two weeks ago I queued for more than five hours outside a London hospital to receive a monkeypox vaccination. But I’m one of the lucky ones; thousands of people in at-risk groups haven’t been so fortunate, and it’s about to get worse. Britain, despite being one of the centres of the outbreak, expects to [run out of vaccines](#) in the next couple of weeks, with no further deliveries planned until late September.

This matters because it's a race against time to prevent monkeypox becoming an endemic disease. At that point, we'll be stuck with it, and it will continue to circulate at low levels indefinitely, with regular danger of outbreaks and possibly new and more dangerous variants. Even in the optimistic scenario that it gets no more severe, lives will be lost. And while [LGBTQ+ groups have led the way](#) in demanding a stronger response, we know that the disease is particularly dangerous for several groups, including small children, pregnant women and those with compromised immune systems.

There's plenty of blame to go around for this dangerous situation, not least years of damaging cuts to sexual health services on the part of the government. But one stands out: a pharmaceutical system that routinely places profits ahead of the protection of human life.

As things stand, the sole supplier of the only approved vaccine for monkeypox is a Danish pharmaceutical company called Bavarian Nordic. In a case of almost unbelievably unlucky timing, the company's [bulk production line](#) has been closed for refurbishment. Even more ironically, the [company has millions](#) of doses in the freezer, but getting them into vials and ready to go isn't a small job. The company is looking for other factories to help with this. But even when it does happen, the [overwhelming bulk](#) of the doses have been bought by the US, with a trickle going to other high-income countries.

The vaccine – known as Jynneos, Imvamune or Imvanex – was developed as a safe immunisation for smallpox, and was being kept on hold in case of a biological terrorist attack. It was funded, to the [tune of \\$2bn](#), by the US government, but like most medicines, it was patented. Bavarian Nordic, which holds the patent, dictates who can make the vaccine, how many doses are made, who gets to buy them, and at what price.

Bavarian Nordic is far from the biggest pharmaceutical company in the world. Its revenues are a drop in the ocean next to the well-known pharma giants. In fact, in early 2021, the company [offered to produce](#) Covid vaccines if only one of those bigger players would share their knowhow. The offer was not taken up.

Now the shoe is on the other foot. Bavarian Nordic is reportedly looking into licensing its vaccine to other manufacturers, but details are confidential so far. As we saw with Covid-19, leaving production entirely to the market can be slow, opaque and unequal. It would be tragic to see this repeated with monkeypox. Africa is so far the only continent to suffer more than a couple of deaths from monkeypox to date, yet it [hasn't received](#) a single dose of vaccine so far.

Covid-19 was the final proof for many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America that they couldn't rely on the western-dominated pharmaceutical companies to provide them with medicines. Even when it was so clearly in all of our interests to stamp out Covid-19 everywhere, the vaccines were hoarded. Here in Britain, we were [getting third and fourth](#) doses while many countries had still barely received any vaccines at all.

In response, several southern governments ramped up their own research, development and manufacturing capacity, preparing for the next time. Some of these factories now have spare capacity and could be helping us – as well as themselves – to deal with monkeypox.

To miss this opportunity to bring the situation under control would be unforgivable. Bavarian Nordic should openly share its knowledge and patents so we can expand vaccine production as quickly as possible worldwide. [Bavarian Nordic](#) will make a huge windfall, producing and selling as much as the company can manage. Its shareholders have already seen the [price of their stock](#) triple. The company must now share the knowledge, so others can benefit and we can all reap the rewards of more advanced medical science in the future.

This is particularly vital if we are to address the fact that many people in the world simply don't matter in our profit-driven pharmaceutical model. Monkeypox has been endemic in a handful of African countries for years. Even though we had the medicines to deal with it, we didn't do anything until an outbreak spread to the west. The monkeypox vaccine – like other medicines which could treat diseases primarily suffered in the poorest countries – [isn't even registered](#) in those countries where the disease is endemic. The medicines, it seems, exist simply to protect *us* from those diseases. We can now see that that policy is as shortsighted as it is unethical.

How many more times must we approach public health emergencies with both hands tied behind our backs by this pharmaceutical monopoly model?

During the HIV crisis in the late 1980s, a previous generation of LGBT activists had to fight for their rights to decent healthcare in a deeply discriminatory society. As they won their own battle, receiving life-saving antiretroviral drugs, [they realised](#) that their own marginalisation was part of a much deeper inequality at a global level.

Today, as gay and bisexual men have to once again fight for our own right to decent healthcare, in a system which seems almost comically set up to fail us, we also need to look further. It's time to join together with those in countries that experience this injustice on a permanent basis, to challenge pharmaceutical control, just as we did 30 years ago.

- Nick Dearden is director of Global Justice Now

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[OpinionSociety](#)

Can the Groucho ever be cool again? Not if money is all that matters

[Zoe Williams](#)



The Soho club used to be the place to see and be seen. But that was 30-odd years ago



The Groucho Club, Soho, London. Photograph: Wilfrido Tunon/Alamy

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The peak of London's Groucho Club was probably in the Julie Burchill era, before she went hell-for-leather anti-woke, when she used to do nice things, such as giving £20 notes to homeless people. I suppose this was the late 80s, early 90s, when those were the people we lionised, the ones who were kind to people on the streets, not the Bullingdon Club tradition of *burning* £50 notes in front of them. Then something changed, the kind became unkind, and the already unkind became heroes, and here we are; and [the Groucho, meanwhile, has changed hands](#), bought by the international gallerists behind Hauser & Wirth.

The original consortium was a group of publishers and agents, including Carmen Callil, Ed Victor, Liz Calder and Michael Sissons. I know nothing about their finances, but I'm guessing that all those people had already made a packet. We're not talking about a metropolitan *un*-elite, put it that way. They benefited hugely from the advertising boom of the era, but they weren't interested in a place without characters, and that meant – from hearsay mainly; [I was more of a Trisha's](#) person myself – that the staff were as important as the punters. There was no culture of servility. Bernie Katz, front of house, was higher in the hierarchy than anyone, and his moral judgment – that, for example, it was more important for him to get someone

in a wheelchair (OK, it was Jeffrey Bernard) home safely than it was to remain in situ – set the mood.

The club took corporate money in the mid-2010s, the atmosphere changed, Katz resigned and later died: the ghost of its heyday is pretty distant. But the ambitions of the new owners, to recreate that early spirit by [getting more young people in](#), misses the point. For a club to be cool, even if it's expensive, it has to be able to make money without worshipping it. This is something that high net worth individuals find it notoriously hard to figure out.

Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist

- ***Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a letter of up to 300 words to be considered for publication, email it to us at guardian.letters@theguardian.com***

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[Swipe right: the decade that changed dating](#)[Dating](#)

Dating apps have made our love lives hell. Why do we keep using them?

[Nancy Jo Sales](#)

I inadvertently became a critic of Tinder a decade ago, and the stories I hear about apps are only getting worse

- Nancy Jo Sales is a writer at Vanity Fair



‘We’re talking about demands for nudes and sex; rude comments about someone’s appearance ... and, of course, [ghosting](#).’ Photograph: Alexander Medvedev/Getty Images/iStockphoto

Tue 16 Aug 2022 03.00 EDTLast modified on Tue 16 Aug 2022 08.28 EDT

Every week, I get emails from people who want to tell me their dating app horror stories. Sometimes, it’s about a single night of hell; and sometimes it’s about a relationship that started out on a dating app and ended up in

some hellish place – often because their significant other was still, secretly, on dating apps. Betrayal is a common theme, unsurprisingly, at a time when these apps have made the array of options for potential partners seemingly endless, and the ability to access them virtually immediate.

I've been a critic of the dating app industry almost since its beginning, a role I never planned to take on. When [Tinder launched its mobile app](#) a decade ago this year, I had just started doing a [story for Vanity Fair](#) on teenage girls and how social media was affecting their lives. I was at the Grove, a Los Angeles mall, talking to a 16-year-old girl, when she told me about a new app, Tinder. She showed me how she was on it, matching and talking with men in their 20s and 30s, and how some of them had been sending her sexual messages and nude images.

The culture of dating apps that has evolved in the decade since then can be very rough, as anyone who has ever been on them (which includes myself) can tell you. The most outrageous and offensive sort of behaviour has been normalised. We're talking about everything from demands for nudes to demands for sex; rude comments about someone's appearance or communication style; and, of course, [ghosting](#). None of what I'm saying here is news, although I was one of the first people to write about it, in Vanity Fair in 2015, in a story entitled Tinder and the Dawn of the Dating Apocalypse – a piece that got Tinder so mad that it infamously tweeted at me [more than 30 times](#) in one night.

And yet, despite the pushback that that story got, its revelations have now become commonplace, part of our general understanding of the disruptions dating apps have caused. After doing that story, I went on to further investigate the ways that dating apps are rife with sexism, racism and transphobia, as did many other journalists. And yet, dating app use has only increased over the last 10 years, especially [during the pandemic](#), which has seen a surge in the number of users and the hours they spent on these platforms.

Some of the people who contact me say they do so because they feel as if there's no one else they can tell – including the dating app companies themselves, which are notoriously slow to respond to complaints from their

users (if they ever do), even complaints involving, distressingly, [sexual assault](#). There hasn't been a lot of movement towards reform on these apps, and depictions in pop culture are often sunny and romanticised.

My first impression of dating apps in that LA mall was that they were something dangerous for children and teens – which, clearly, they still are. Tinder doesn't officially allow underage users to communicate with adults, but kids have been doing so since it was launched, and still do. Kids are on Tinder, Bumble, Grindr, Hinge and many other dating platforms – it's easy to make a fake profile and sign on, and there are still [no effective age checks](#), despite calls for them from various quarters. Even an app specifically designed for teens aged 13 to 17, Yubo – which has millions of users all over the world – has been called out for [inappropriate content and harassment](#).

Why do people continue to use these apps, if they've made dating such hell? (Even more hellish, I would argue, than it always was.) There are a few reasons for this, I think: one is that the dating app industry has overwhelmed the landscape of dating to the point where many people feel there is no other way to meet someone. They did this by making their apps seem easy, by promising love through just a few swipes. They did it by eliminating the need to put oneself out there in person.

Another reason is that dating app users bear the same hopes as millions of gamblers who enter casinos every day, knowing full well that the odds are stacked against them, and that the house always wins. And so it is with dating apps, which, though they promise they'll find their users lasting connections, offer no data to support this – in fact, data from outside sources suggests that most people on dating apps are [not finding lasting relationships](#) or marriages through these platforms.

But people keep on swiping, scrolling, swiping, sometimes for hours a day, as if they can't stop – and many really can't. These apps are designed to be addictive. “It's kind of like a slot machine,” Jonathan Badeen, the co-founder of [Tinder](#), and inventor of the swipe, told me in my HBO documentary, *Swiped: Hooking Up in the Digital Age*.

Turning love into a casino game was never a very romantic idea, but it has proved very lucrative for dating app companies – though perhaps at our expense.

- Nancy Jo Sales is a writer at Vanity Fair and the author of *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*
- This article was amended on 16 August 2022. A previous version described Yubo as a dating app; it is a social video livestreaming app.

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2022.08.16 - Around the world

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China

China rations electricity to factories as heatwave sees power demand surge

Move likely to hit output of lithium, used in electric car batteries, from factories in Sichuan where temperatures sit above 40 degrees



China will ration electricity supply to factories in Sichuan until Saturday, state media reported, as a heatwave sends power demands soaring. Photograph: REX/Shutterstock

Agence France-Presse

Tue 16 Aug 2022 01.12 EDT

Chinese lithium hub Sichuan province will ration electricity supply to factories until Saturday, state media reported, as a heatwave sends power demands soaring and dries up reservoirs.

Temperatures in the province – home to nearly 84 million people – have hovered above 40-42 degrees Celsius (104-108 degrees Fahrenheit) since last week, according to data from China's Meteorological Administration, increasing the demand for air conditioning.

The region relies on dams to generate 80% of its electricity, but rivers in the area have dried up this summer, Beijing's Water Resources Ministry said.

The province in China's south-west produces half the nation's lithium, used in batteries for electric vehicles, and its hydropower projects provide electricity to industrial hubs along the country's east coast.

But the local government has decided to prioritise residential power supply, ordering industrial users in 19 out of 21 cities in the province to suspend production until Saturday, according to a notice issued Sunday.

Several companies including aluminium producer Henan Zhongfu Industrial and fertiliser producers Sichuan Meifeng Chemical Industry said in stock exchange statements they were suspending production.

A plant operated by Taiwanese giant and Apple supplier Foxconn in the province has also suspended production, Taipei's Central news agency reported.

Some companies will be permitted to operate at a limited capacity, depending on their production needs.

"Sources estimate at least 1,200 tonnes of lithium output will be cut due to the operations disruptions in these five days," Susan Zou, an analyst at Rystad Energy, told AFP, adding the cost of lithium carbonate had jumped since Monday.

A summer of [extreme weather in China](#) has seen multiple major cities record their hottest days ever.

China's national observatory reissued a red alert for high temperatures on Monday, state media reported, as the mercury soared past 40 degrees Celsius

(104 fahrenheit) across swathes of the country.

Provinces including Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Anhui that rely on power from western China have also issued electricity curbs for industrial users to ensure homes had enough power, according to local media reports.

Scientists say extreme weather across the world has become more frequent due to climate change, and will probably grow more intense as global temperatures rise.

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Brazil

Brazil's presidential campaign launches amid fears of violence and upheaval

Far-right president Jair Bolsonaro is trailing in the polls and has hinted he will not cede power if defeated



Former Brazilian president Lula attracted a crowd of 50,000 people in pre-campaign act in Teresina, Piaui, Brasil, 3 August 2022. Photograph: Roberta Aline/Zuma Press Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

[Andrew Downie](#)

Tue 16 Aug 2022 05.15 EDTLast modified on Tue 16 Aug 2022 10.39 EDT

Campaigning in Brazil's most important election for years formally gets under way this week amid fears of political violence on the campaign trail and possible turmoil before and after the October ballots.

Far-right president [Jair Bolsonaro](#) is trailing in the polls and has hinted he will not give up power if defeated by the leftist frontrunner and former

president [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#).



A woman holds a fan with the image of 'Lula' da Silva during a Black Women's March in Rio de Janeiro, 31 July. Photograph: Bruna Prado/AP

A former army captain, Bolsonaro has sharpened his rhetoric in recent weeks, [telling foreign diplomats that Brazil's electronic voting system is not reliable](#) and ordering army officers to monitor the source code used in more than half a million ballot boxes.

His supporters have attacked two Lula rallies in recent weeks, throwing faeces, urine and a crude explosive device at Lula backers, as well as [shooting dead one prominent Workers' party official](#) in the western city of Foz de Iguaçu.

Politicians and poll watchers fear that political violence will only escalate ahead of the 2 October elections for president, congress and 27 state governors.

“There is real reason for concern because even though political violence has been a fact of life here for years the situation today has been exacerbated by the way Bolsonaro has promoted violent discourse as a way to resolve political conflicts,” said Pablo Nunes, head of the CESeC thinktank.

On the national stage, Lula's security details have requested more manpower to deal with the threats and the 76-year-old now wears a bulletproof vest at public events. His campaign kicks off this week with rallies in São Paulo and Belo Horizonte.

Ironically, the most prominent victim of violence in recent years is Bolsonaro, who was [stabbed at a campaign event in September 2018](#), just weeks before the election that brought him to power.

He spent three weeks in hospital and was forced to undergo surgeries as a result of the attack, carried out by a lone assailant with mental health problems.

The incident, though, did not temper his outlook.



Jair Bolsonaro during a March for Jesus Christ in Rio de Janeiro on Saturday. Photograph: Mauro Pimentel/AFP/Getty Images

The former army captain was already notorious for his love of weapons and his close links to the military, where he served for 15 years. One of his trademark moves is to make a gun with his thumb and index finger and he once joked he would like to “strafe” members of the Workers’ party.

It was only weeks after taking power that his justice minister sought to reduce punishment for law enforcement officials who killed suspects while acting with “excusable fear, surprise or violent emotion”.

The wording was removed from the eventual bill but under Bolsonaro’s watch congress has passed 20 different measures [making it easier to buy weapons](#). In the first two years of his government alone the number of gun licenses issued in Brazil rose by 65% to more than 1m, according to the NGO Instituto Sou da Paz.

Bolsonaro, a former paratrooper, has also spent much of the last year undermining the electoral system, repeating baseless claims about the reliability of Brazil’s electronic ballot boxes and insulting the judges who preside over the supreme electoral court, which organises the election and sanctions results.

He has hinted at the possibility of closing congress and in May told evangelical voters that “Only God can remove me” – a comment that prompted fears of a Trump-like insurrection if the vote goes against him.

“There is good reason to fear a possible Brazilian January 6 kind of situation,” said Nunes. “The conditions are there for this to happen.”

Although Bolsonaro has the backing of many in the military, it is unclear whether the top brass would support any attempt to subvert the democratic process.

Bolsonaro, though, is obviously preparing his supporters for action. Last week he told agricultural leaders, “Buy your guns! It’s in the Bible!”

“He is doing it to focus attention away from the country’s real problems and frighten the opposition, as well as to keep his militant base charged,” said Felipe Borba, the coordinator of a political violence thinktank at Rio’s Unirio university.

“It’s also done to prepare his side for a violent reaction if they lose.”

Borba said Bolsonaro wants to accumulate chips for the high-stakes poker game that will come after the election, which will go to a runoff on 30

October if no candidate gets a majority on 2 October.

A congressional inquiry into his disastrous handling of the pandemic – 680,000 Brazilians perished from the Covid-19 virus, more than any other country outside the United States – accused the president of nine offences, including crimes against humanity. He also faces charges related to his spread of fake news.

If he loses, he could face jail time and those close to the president said he is terrified at the prospect. Borba believes the sabre-rattling is a tactic aimed “at gaining power in any possible amnesty negotiation for him and his family. He needs to show strength.”

Bolsonaro continues to trail in the polls with one study this week giving Lula [a 12-point lead](#), although the gap has narrowed slightly in recent weeks.

Lula remains the favourite but Bolsonaro has the government machine at his disposal and has already increased the amount of monthly aid handouts given to 18 million of Brazil’s poorest families.

Whether that will be enough to close the gap remains to be seen but political analysts said the incumbent can win only by taking votes directly from Lula.

“If he keeps growing by consolidating votes from those who in theory should be voting for him, the kind of people who hate Lula more than anything and who were maybe not entirely happy with his government, then that won’t change the game,” said Vítor Oliveira, a political scientist with the Pulso Público consultancy.

“He needs to take votes from Lula to win; there is no other way.”

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[Japan](#)

Japan beachgoers warned to steer clear of dolphins after spate of attacks

A single dolphin thought to have injured at least six people at beaches in Fukui prefecture, with one person requiring 14 stitches



An Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin, as seen here, is thought to be behind a spate of attacks on swimmers at beaches in Japan's Fukui prefecture. Photograph: Natalia Pryanishnikova/Alamy

[Justin McCurry](#) in Tokyo

Tue 16 Aug 2022 01.36 EDTLast modified on Wed 17 Aug 2022 00.09 EDT

Beachgoers in [Japan](#) are being urged to stay away from dolphins following a spate of attacks thought to involve a single animal that have left at least six people with minor injuries.

The cetacean – believed to be an adult Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin – has bitten several swimmers at three beaches in Fukui prefecture on the Sea of

[Japan](#) coast since the end of July.

Most of the incidents occurred within 10 metres of the shore, the Mainichi Shimbun said – a sign that [dolphins](#) in the area have grown accustomed to encountering humans in shallow water.

The newspaper said officials had installed an underwater device that emits ultrasonic waves in an attempt to deter the animals, but added that two attacks had occurred after the equipment was put in place.

In the most serious case, one swimmer required 14 stitches after being bitten on the hand on Koshino beach, a popular destination for sun-seekers.

In response, local police have started patrolling the beaches and handing out leaflets alerting people to the potential threat and warning them to keep their distance until the beach closes to bathers at the end of the month.

While dolphin attacks are extremely rare, they are not unheard of, especially if the animals feel threatened.

“There are certain body parts where dolphins don’t like to be touched, like the tip of their nose and their dorsal fin,” Masaki Yasui, an official from the tourism promotion department, told Agence France-Presse, adding that [videos](#) posted on social media appeared to show swimmers trying to touch the Fukui dolphin.

“We encourage visitors to watch the dolphin from afar if they come across it.”

Experts at an aquarium in Fukui said descriptions of the assailant’s appearance led them to believe that the attacks were the work of a single dolphin that was first spotted in the area in April.

The victims include two men in their 40s – both of whom received hospital treatment for minor injuries sustained on the same day at Koshino beach – and a man in his 60s who was swimming less than four metres from the shore at Takasu beach when he was bitten on his right arm.

“I’d heard about the dolphin on the news and was going to get out of the water immediately if I saw it, but by the time I noticed it, it was right next me,” he told the Mainichi.

The man said he had tried to prise the dolphin’s mouth open, but it refused to let go of his arm and appeared to be trying to force itself on top of him, nearly pushing him beneath the water. “I panicked, but I was saved when someone nearby drove it away,” he said.

One local café owner said dolphins had occasionally nudged swimmers in the past, but the recent incidents had escalated “to the point that they’re lunging on top of them”.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/16/japan-beachgoers-warned-to-steer-clear-of-dolphins-after-spate-of-attacks>

Metal

Steve Grimmett, frontman of metal band Grim Reaper, dies aged 62

Part of the new wave of British heavy metal, Grim Reaper formed in 1979, with Grimmett joining in 1982



Steve Grimmett performs with Grim Reaper at Sweden Rock festival in 2015. Photograph: Gonzales Photo/Alamy

[Laura Snapes](#)

Tue 16 Aug 2022 05.40 EDTLast modified on Tue 16 Aug 2022 05.41 EDT

Steve Grimmett, the frontman of British heavy metal band Grim Reaper known for his piercing head voice, has died aged 62.

The news was [confirmed by his son Russ Grimmett](#) on Facebook: “We can’t begin to put into words the current feelings. But as dad was so well known the news is starting to reach out earlier than we would have liked.

Unfortunately, our dad passed away today and leaves a massive hole in the world and our hearts.” No cause of death was given.

Part of the new wave of British heavy metal, Grim Reaper formed in Worcestershire in 1979 and Grimmiett joined in 1982, replacing Paul de Mercado on vocals. Grimmiett cited Elton John as an unlikely inspiration and “the reason I sing”, he [told the Cosmick View](#). He also referenced David Coverdale, Dio and Judas Priest’s Rob Halford as influences.

Grimmiett would become the only constant member of the band during their two stints together, until 1988 and then again from 2006 to the present day.

They released their debut album, See You in Hell, in 1983 via RCA. It reached No 73 in the US Billboard album chart. The group thrived until legal battles with their record label delayed their third album for almost two years, by which time their melodic sound had been usurped commercially by thrash and speed metal. It led to the abandonment of a fourth album and the band’s first disbandment. “The legal stuff hit us while we were writing that album and we just lost faith,” Grimmiett said.

During this period, Grimmiett would front the groups Onslaught and Lionsheart, and Grim Reaper would find their music being lovingly mocked on episodes of the MTV animation Beavis and Butt-Head.

Grim Reaper: The Show Must Go On – video

They reunited in 2006 in response to demand to perform at festivals and tour. In 2016 the band – now known as Steve Grimmiett’s Grim Reaper – released their first new studio album in decades, Walking in the Shadows.

In January 2017, Grimmiett was hospitalised during a show in Ecuador for an infection in his right leg. Surgery led to a partial amputation. He began to walk again with a prosthetic leg, and the group continued to tour. “I laid in a hospital bed for seven weeks with no entertainment and just half an hour of internet per day,” Grimmiett said. “Half that time I spent ... talking to my family, and the other 15 minutes a day looking at how the hell I could get back up on that stage to do what I do for the fans. It drove me mad that I just

didn't have more time than that, but that was the driving force that kept me going.”

They released another album, *At the Gates*, in 2019. “It’s about me very nearly dying when I lost my leg in Ecuador,” [Grimmett told Metal Temple](#). He said he had been suffering with PTSD and depression.

In January 2022, Grimmett said that the band were working on new material. In a [May 2022 interview](#), Grimmett said he had no regrets “whatsoever” despite being penniless.

“I’m on welfare at the moment because of Covid, and a lot of people do think that I am a millionaire, but I can tell you now, I’m not. I’ve never received a penny – not one penny – from Grim Reaper, so that says it all, doesn’t it? But still, no regrets. I still love getting up there and playing. I still love watching the smiling faces in front of me. That says it all and does it all for me.”

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[Julian Assange](#)

Julian Assange lawyers sue CIA over alleged spying

Suit alleges CIA and its ex-director Mike Pompeo violated US constitutional protections for confidential discussions



Lawyers for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange have filed a lawsuit against the CIA and its former director Mike Pompeo. Photograph: Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty Images

Agence France-Presse

Mon 15 Aug 2022 22.23 EDT

Lawyers for WikiLeaks founder [Julian Assange](#) are suing the US Central Intelligence Agency and its former director Mike Pompeo in a suit filed in a New York district court on Monday, alleging the agency recorded their conversations and copied data from their phones and computers.

The attorneys, along with two journalists joining the suit, are Americans and allege that the [CIA](#) violated their US constitutional protections for confidential discussions with Assange, who is Australian.

The suit alleges that the CIA worked with a security firm contracted by the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where Assange was living at the time, to spy on the WikiLeaks founder, his lawyers, journalists and others he met.

Assange is [facing extradition from Britain to the US](#), where he is charged with violating the US Espionage Act by publishing US military and diplomatic files in 2010 related to the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

Robert Boyle, a New York attorney representing the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, said the alleged spying on Assange's attorneys means the WikiLeaks founder's right to a fair trial has "now been tainted, if not destroyed".

"There should be sanctions, even up to dismissal of those charges, or withdrawal of an extradition request," Boyle told reporters.

The suit was filed by attorneys Margaret Ratner Kunstler and Deborah Hrbek, and journalists Charles Glass and John Goetz.

They all visited Assange while he was living inside the Ecuadorian embassy in London under political asylum, since withdrawn.

The suit names the CIA, former CIA director and former US secretary of state Pompeo, and the security firm Undercover Global as defendants.

The suit alleges Undercover Global, which had a security contract with the embassy, swept information on their electronic devices, including communications with Assange, and provided it to the CIA.

In addition it placed microphones around the embassy and sent recordings, as well as footage from security cameras, to the CIA, the suit alleges.

This, the attorneys claim, violated privacy protections for US citizens.

Assange is awaiting a ruling on his appeal of the British extradition order to the US.

The charges he faces could bring a sentence of up to 175 years in prison.

The suit alleges that while Undercover Global controlled security at the embassy, each visitor had to leave their electronic devices with a guard before seeing Assange.

“The information contained on the plaintiff’s devices was copied and, ultimately, given to the CIA,” it reads. “Defendant Pompeo was aware of and approved the copying of information contained on plaintiffs’ mobile electronic devices and the surreptitious audio monitoring of their meetings with Assange,” the suit claims.

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[Michael Gove](#)

Gove backs Sunak and says Truss is ‘taking holiday from reality’

Former cabinet minister says he does not expect to return to frontbench politics as he backs underdog in race to be PM



Michael Gove with Rishi Sunak, who he is backing to be the Tory leader. Photograph: House of Commons/Jessica Taylor/PA

[Peter Walker](#) *Political correspondent*

[@peterwalker99](#)

Fri 19 Aug 2022 16.53 EDTFirst published on Fri 19 Aug 2022 16.20 EDT

Michael Gove has thrown his support behind Rishi Sunak in the Conservative leadership contest, warning that Liz Truss’s refusal to offer more support over rising energy bills and to just focus on tax cuts marked a “holiday from reality”.

In a sometimes hard-hitting article [in the Times](#), Gove said he did not expect to be made a minister again and that many people expected Truss to win, but he believes Sunak “makes the right arguments”.

Arguing that millions of people and huge numbers of businesses could be financially crippled by high energy costs, Gove wrote that it was vital the new government had a coherent economic plan.

“And here I am deeply concerned that the framing of the leadership debate by many has been a holiday from reality,” he said.

“The answer to the cost of living crisis cannot be simply to reject further ‘handouts’ and cut tax,” he wrote, a reference to Truss’s insistence that she would reduce national insurance and resist most forms of direct help.

“Proposed cuts to national insurance would favour the wealthy, and changes to corporation tax apply to big businesses, not small entrepreneurs. I cannot see how safeguarding the stock options of FTSE 100 executives should ever take precedence over supporting the poorest in our society, but at a time of want, it cannot be the right priority.”

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Gove added: “In contrast, I believe Rishi makes the right arguments.”

The endorsement of the former communities secretary, a Conservative big hitter who has spent over a decade in the cabinet under David Cameron,

Theresa May and Boris Johnson, will be a blow to Truss, even if it is unlikely to revive Sunak's campaign.

Gove had initially endorsed Kemi Badenoch, with whom he worked in the communities department, but who was knocked out as MPs whittled the field of contenders down to the final two.

Saying Truss, who was a junior minister with him in the education department, is "tenacious, brave and has a huge appetite for policy detail", Gove said she had also been "admirably clear, consistent and principled in the case she has made" during the leadership race.

He went on: "But I do not think her prospectus is the right answer for the world we face. It does not address the fundamental problems of potential neglected, productivity suppressed and the vulnerable suffering the most."

In endorsing Sunak, Gove is less likely to win a place in Truss's cabinet, despite his experience, and his record as a trusted minister.

"I do not expect to be in government again," he wrote. "But it was the privilege of my life to spend 11 years in the cabinet under three prime ministers. I know what the job requires. And Rishi has it."

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US news

‘Dangerous misogynist’ Andrew Tate removed from Instagram and Facebook

Self-described sexist removed for violating Meta’s policies on ‘dangerous organizations and individuals’



The former kickboxer and reality TV star was removed for violating Meta’s content policies. Photograph: [@cobratate](#)

[*Kari Paul*](#)

Fri 19 Aug 2022 18.09 EDTFirst published on Fri 19 Aug 2022 15.51 EDT

The controversial online influencer and self-described misogynist Andrew Tate has been banned from Meta platforms [Instagram](#) and Facebook.

Tate, a former kickboxer and reality TV star, was removed for violating [Meta](#) policies “on dangerous organizations and individuals”, the company confirmed by email.

Tate first rose to prominence after appearing on the TV show Big Brother in 2016, when he was removed from the series after a video of him beating a woman outside the show surfaced.

Since then, he has garnered backlash for his posts across social media, which domestic abuse charities have called “extreme misogyny”. He stated on Twitter in 2017 that women belong in the home and that rape victims “bear responsibility” for their attack, after which Twitter [permanently banned](#) him from the platform.

Tate has grown a following for his advice videos to men, many of them veering into sexist territory. On one YouTube video, Tate described himself as “absolutely a misogynist”. He said: “I’m a realist and when you’re a realist you’re sexist. There’s no way you can be rooted in reality and not be sexist.”

In a statement to the Guardian, Tate characterized many of his videos as parody, stating he was “playing a comedic character”.

“Internet sensationalism has purported the idea that im [sic] anti women when nothing could be further from the truth,” he said, adding that he has donated to charities benefitting women. “I am genuinely innocent.”

Tate was a vocal supporter of former president Donald Trump and has appeared on a number of rightwing podcasts, including shows like Infowars, hosted by the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. More recently [Tate has become](#) “impossible to avoid” on social media, and at the time of his ban from Meta platforms he had more than 4.7 million followers on Instagram.

TikTok has also banned Tate’s official account on their platform and is working to remove content related to him that violates guidelines. Videos using hashtags related to Tate have been seen more than 12.7bn times. The UK advocacy group Hope Not Hate called Tate a “dangerous misogynist” and called on more social media companies to deplatform him.

“Misogyny is a hateful ideology that is not tolerated on TikTok,” a TikTok spokesperson said. “We’ve been removing violative videos and accounts for

weeks, and we welcome the news that other platforms are also taking action against this individual.”

A previous version of this story incorrectly reported that Tate’s account was active on TikTok. It is not. It was a parody account. The story has been corrected to reflect that.

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[P&O Ferries](#)

P&O Ferries will not face criminal proceedings for mass sacking of staff

Insolvency Service's decision has prompted calls for a change in the law to better protect workers in the future



P&O Ferries sparked anger when it sacked almost 800 workers in March with no notice. Photograph: Gareth Fuller/PA

Agencies

Sat 20 Aug 2022 06.23 EDTFirst published on Sat 20 Aug 2022 04.39 EDT

P&O Ferries will not face criminal proceedings over its mass sacking of almost [800 workers earlier this year](#), it has emerged, sparking calls for a change in the law.

The company provoked public anger and was hauled in front of MPs to answer questions when it sacked hundreds of workers without notice in March.

The business secretary, [Kwasi Kwarteng](#), had asked the Insolvency Service to investigate whether any criminal or civil offences had been committed.

But in a statement, the government agency said it had determined there was “no realistic prospect of a conviction”.

A spokesperson said: “After a full and robust criminal investigation into the circumstances surrounding the employees who were made redundant by P&O Ferries, [we have concluded that we will not commence criminal proceedings](#).” A civil investigation is ongoing.

Tory MP Huw Merriman, who chairs the Commons transport committee, called for legislation to ensure that a company like P&O could not do the same thing again.

“The disgrace is on P&O but the disgrace will be on parliament if we don’t fix it and stop it from happening again,” Merriman said.

He told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme: “The law isn’t strong enough and as MPs we need to legislate to make sure that it is.

Nautilus International, a union which represents maritime professionals, said the Insolvency Service’s decision would be a blow to the “discarded” workers.

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General secretary, Mark Dickinson, said: “This is a deeply disappointing decision and will be met with frustration and anger by the 786 seafarers and

their families who were so cruelly discarded by P&O Ferries.

“Only one day after P&O Ferries parent company [announced record profits](#), making the company’s claims on operational sustainability questionable, we are further let down by a system that fails to punish apparent criminal corporatism.

“The message is clear, P&O Ferries must be held properly accountable for their disgraceful actions and we will continue the campaign to ensure that the CEO and his fellow directors are held to account and to make certain this can never happen again.”

During the hearings in parliament, the business admitted it had broken the law that would have forced them to give notice of the firings. This was because no unions would have accepted its new proposals, bosses said at the time.

Labour accused the government of breaking its pledge to hold P&O to account and warned of a repeat of the mass firing.

Shadow employment rights minister, Justin Madders, said: “For all the handwringing of Tory ministers, they’ve broken the promises they made after P&O’s outrageous behaviour and instead changed the law to open the door for others to follow in their wake elsewhere.

“This outcome is a sign of a broken economy under the Tories and the fundamental weakness of employment protections under their government.”

A government spokesperson told the BBC: “In sacking 800 dedicated staff on the spot, P&O Ferries not only acted callously but failed to uphold the high standards we expect of British businesses.

“Given their appalling behaviour, it’s very disappointing that the company will not face criminal proceedings.”

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[Rail strikes](#)

Further disruption on rail and bus services as transport strikes continue

Rail services will be much-reduced, and buses in west and south-west London and Surrey also affected



Near-empty escalators at Liverpool Street station in London during strike action by tube staff on Friday. Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

[Nadeem Badshah](#)

Sat 20 Aug 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 20 Aug 2022 01.03 EDT

Travellers are facing a further day of disruption on Saturday as thousands of transport workers go on strike in a long-running dispute over pay, jobs and conditions.

Network Rail, several train companies, and bus services in London and parts of Surrey will be hit by industrial action by the Rail, Maritime and [Transport](#)

(RMT), TSSA and Unite unions which will also affect Sunday morning train services.

Rail services on Saturday will be substantially reduced, with only about a fifth running and half of the lines closed. Trains will only operate between about 7.30am and 6.30pm.

The disruption to bus services in west and south-west [London](#) and parts of Surrey is the result of a strike on Friday and Saturday by London bus drivers who are members of Unite, in a separate dispute over pay.

Saturday will be the third consecutive day of industrial action by public transport employees this week.

Mick Lynch, boss of the RMT union, apologised for disruption to the tube caused by strike action on Friday but warned it would not be the last, if the dispute cannot be resolved with negotiations for a new pay deal looming next year.

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Lynch said: “We’re very sorry that people are inconvenienced. We are hoping that people have sympathy for us. We’re ordinary men and women that want to do our jobs and provide a service, but when you’re being cut to pieces by an employer, and by the government, you’ve got to make a stand.

“We can’t stand by and watch our conditions be chopped up. So we’ve got to show them that we’re deadly serious about the future of the services across

all of TfL, but also across our members' conditions, because we don't know what they're discussing."

Lynch said the union had been shut out of talks between the government, the Treasury, and the office of the London mayor, Sadiq Khan.

In response to Lynch's claims, Khan said he and the RMT union were "on the same side here, nobody wants the government to be attaching unreasonable conditions to our deal".

A spokesman for the Department for [Transport](#) accused union leaders of "opting to inflict misery" by disrupting travel.

He said: "It's clear strikes are not the powerful tool they once were and union chiefs are no longer able to bring the country to a standstill as, unlike them, the world has changed and people simply work from home.

"All these strikes are doing is hurting those people the unions claim to represent, many of whom will again be out of pocket and forced to miss a day's work."

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Interview

From crime lord to Michelin award: how a notorious Marseille prison was the making of a top French chef

[Laura Spinney](#)



Krishna Léger: ‘It sounds strange, but the possibility of changing my life hadn’t even occurred to me.’ Photograph: Denis Dalmasso/The Guardian

He spent 13 years behind bars after smuggling drugs for Mediterranean gangs. Now Krishna Léger is one of the country’s most exciting chefs. What made him change his ways?

Sat 20 Aug 2022 05.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 20 Aug 2022 07.00 EDT

Krishna Léger is confident he is the only person to have smuggled fresh fish into Les Baumettes in Marseille, one of the most notorious prisons in France. With the fish he made bouillabaisse, the famous Marseillais soup. One of his fellow inmates – also from Marseille – said it was the best he had ever tasted.

These days, Léger serves bouillabaisse on the first Sunday of every month at his restaurant, [Volver](#), just outside the pretty medieval town of Uzès, in the southern French département of the Gard.

The setting is a little different from Les Baumettes, with its once high walls and watchtowers (the old prison buildings were demolished this year, to be replaced with new ones): Volver is set in a lemon-coloured stone farmhouse with shutters as blue as the Cévennes mountains visible in the distance, and a terrace shaded by a pergola. In 2021, only two years after it opened, Léger was awarded an [“assiette”](#) – the first rung on the Michelin ladder. And though he is discreet about his past, once the service is done, he can sometimes be persuaded to recount how he, an ex-con, conquered the world of French [“bistronomy”](#) (“quality ingredients ... superb cooking”).

On the afternoon of 27 February 1994, Léger, then a 24-year-old firefighter, flew from Paris to Nîmes. His girlfriend, Karine, and another friend met him at the airport, and the three of them got into Karine’s car.

After a harsh winter, spring was stirring in the Gard. Happy to be together again, the trio stopped at a bar in the town of Remoulins. Dusk fell. When they got up to leave, Léger says that Karine asked him to drive the short

distance to his home, because she wore contact lenses and didn't like driving in the dark.

Messing about in the car, one of the passengers accidentally thumped the steering wheel. The car spun off the road and hit a plane tree, then an oncoming car smashed into its side. Karine died. Léger, his friend and the driver of the other car were seriously injured. The police found him to be just over the alcohol limit.

Léger had fractured his spine and was warned he might not walk again. He did, but only after six months of rehab. A court in Nîmes found him guilty of manslaughter and gave him a six-month suspended prison sentence. Losing his driving licence made it almost impossible to work. Karine's parents supported him throughout. "They saw what happened as an accident, fate, even though they were devastated by the death of their daughter – as was I." Still, he adds: "From that moment on, everything fell apart."

They aren't obliged to make life easy for a criminal who decides he wants to cook, but all they did was throw a spanner in the works

Named Krishna for the Hindu god of compassion by his mother (one of the many [*soixante-huitards*](#) who came to the Gard in the 1960s in search of a freer life), Léger viewed his childhood as a joyful time, even though his parents separated when he was four (the name was a burden for a small French boy, but "Kris" learned to live with it). However, his mother remarried and with her new husband made him feel unwelcome, so, aged 16, he left home and moved to Uzès. He got into fights, and channelled some of his energy into boxing.

At first he worked as a volunteer firefighter. Then he passed his exams and joined the Paris fire service, sloping off at night to take part in clandestine bare-knuckle fights. After a team he was part of rescued seven people from a blaze at the now defunct Laennec hospital in 1991, he was awarded a medal for bravery. Soon he had a second, the National Defence Medal. The five years he spent in the capital were the best he had known.

Sitting in Volver, surrounded by some of the colourful, abstract paintings his father left him, Léger, now 52, smiles easily beneath his cropped hair and five o'clock shadow. But his smile vanishes when he remembers the courtroom in Nîmes.

There, he says, he encountered “only cold judgment, no humanity”. Nobody took into account his track record as a firefighter or his medals, he says. Nobody acknowledged that what had happened had been an accident, or that he was grieving, and there was no consideration of his plea to keep his licence so he could work. “They tear up your life, fling you to the bottom and say, ‘Now deal with it.’”

Léger’s deep sense of injustice at that first brush with the law set him on a different path – one that would take him far from the Gard and even farther from the ideals represented by his namesake. “I revolted, turned my back on society, and, through some acquaintances, I pretty quickly entered into a parallel world of professional crime.”

Léger is tall – 1.84 metres (6ft) – with the physique of a boxer. When he is wearing his white chef’s tunic, you sometimes catch a glimpse of the tattoo, an abstract design of his own creation, that covers the whole of his right arm.

The first job he got after the accident was as a bouncer in a club. The owner had one foot in the underworld and, at Léger’s request, arranged his entrée into it. Before long, he had been sucked into the racket around illegal slot machines and was rubbing shoulders with the various mafias that worked the Côte d’Azur – Corsican, Italian, *Grenoblois*. He turned out to be good at judging which bars and arcades would bring in the most cash if he placed machines in them. It was the late 90s. He was earning a living, and moved to Nice.

In 1999, after a settling of scores between crime groups on the Riviera that ended in gun violence, the police searched Léger’s home. They found a key that opened a garage containing a cache of arms, some of which had been used in the shooting. Arrested and charged with homicide and possession of firearms (the homicide charge was later dropped), he spent 96 hours in

police custody before a court in Nice determined that he should be remanded in jail.

He still remembers his state of mind as he sat alone in a cell beneath the courtroom, awaiting the van that would take him to prison. “I suddenly felt the weight of the choices I’d made. I didn’t regret them, but I did realise that I had played the game and now I would pay the price.”



Léger at his restaurant, Volver, near Uzès in southern France. Photograph: Denis Dalmasso/The Guardian

A court found him guilty of the firearms charge and he spent four months in prisons in Nice and Grasse – his first jail time, which he experienced as an initiation rite, a test he had to pass in order to be fully accepted into the world he had chosen. By then, Léger was in a relationship with a model named Valérie he had met through associates on the Côte d’Azur; she had just given birth to their daughter. His police interrogators tried all kinds of techniques to make him give up his colleagues, he says, even bringing Valérie in and threatening to have the baby, Elyne, taken into care. “I didn’t denounce anyone; none of my associates had any trouble because of me.”

On his release in 2002, he was welcomed into the “family”. What rules this family had, he observed scrupulously, and he found his niche at a new, more

serious level of crime. In prison he had met some drug traffickers and, despite never having smoked a joint, he now worked those connections. The first operation he took part in involved smuggling 300kg of hashish from Morocco to Spain, crossing the Strait of Gibraltar at dawn in a rigid inflatable boat.

Léger graduated to smuggling cocaine and acquired a nickname – *le Grand*, the Tall One. He started making serious money. Not long after France adopted the currency in 2002, he was a euro millionaire. Still in his early 30s, he moved his family to a villa in Marbella and bought a Porsche Cayenne.

It was around then that he began to indulge his passion for food. He had always loved experimenting in the kitchen, he says, but hadn't always had the resources to dedicate to it. Having known hunger as a teenager, it gave him particular pleasure to cook for friends – finding the ingredients; tweaking classic Spanish recipes such as gazpacho or tortilla – or invite them to restaurants. He loved everything about this new world: the cash, the coke, the women, the bling. “It was my revenge on life.”

The role of prison is to separate dangerous people from society, and to work on their re-insertion. But that second part doesn't exist – it's a lie

Eventually, his luck ran out. It was 2003. He had started travelling to South America to meet the suppliers, and, having crossed the Atlantic in a catamaran with more than a tonne of Venezuelan cocaine in the hold (a record haul for European law enforcement at that time, though [peanuts](#) now), was off Cádiz on the Spanish coast. The intended recipients had been arrested, and before Léger and his two associates knew what was happening their vessel had been surrounded by police boats.

At the trial in February 2005, he was sentenced to 14 years – later reduced to 12 and a half – and fined €10m (calculated as a percentage of the street value of the haul; he never could have paid it, he says, and technically it remains on the books). He passed through a string of Spanish prisons before escaping in 2009 from the Ocaña jail near Madrid by paying off a prison employee.

The plan was to retrieve cash that was owed to him, revive his dormant business interests and, as soon as possible, head for South America. His relationship with Valérie hadn't survived the stretch inside, but they separated amicably. His parting gift to her was a house in Saint-Tropez. And before he left, he wanted to reconnect with his 10-year-old daughter, Elyne. The plan went awry, mainly because his former associates were either dead or in jail, placing his cash out of reach, and he didn't get away as quickly as he had hoped. In December 2009, in a blur of false papers, motorway hotels and burner phones, he celebrated his 40th birthday.

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The following September, after he had been a fugitive for 18 months, the police caught up with him again in a layby near Narbonne, close to the Spanish border, having tapped his phone. He had been driving in a convoy with two other men, transporting nearly 5kg of cocaine from Spain to France. One of the lawyers who defended him at the trial, which took place three years later in Marseille, found him intelligent, courteous and unusually trustworthy. "In fact, that was one reason he was given a heavy sentence," Thibaut Rouffiac says. "He wouldn't trade names."

He got nine years, more than anyone else implicated in the affair, and was shipped off to Les Baumettes. There, he considered another escape, involving the helicopter he had used to transport drugs from Morocco to Spain, but the pilot had been arrested, too – in a Paris hotel room, with a Brazilian sex worker. "End of story," he says.

In total, Léger was sentenced to 21 years, of which he served 13 and a half.

In prison, his passion for food remained a constant, and he did what he could with the single electric plate in his cell and the uninspiring wares at the prison shop. He watched cookery programmes on TV and jotted down recipes in exercise books.

At Les Baumettes, he took stock. He was more than 40 years old. His “home” was a filthy, overcrowded, rat-and-cockroach-infested jail where the food was dismal and violence endemic. However, life was bearable for him and his associates, dozens of whom he was thrilled to recognise in the exercise yard, because they were there for organised crime. They had individual cells in one of the less dilapidated buildings, and they ran the place. This meant they could smuggle in any number of desirable items – including fish – from outside, with visitors and prison officers acting as go-betweens.

But it was a poor existence whose rhythm was set by the desultory game of cat and mouse the prisoners played with the guards – passing illicit mobile phones from cell to cell, for example, from false shoe sole to tin can, before routine searches. He pitied the officers. “At least I would get out one day.” And all around him were youngsters – mostly black or of north African heritage – who had grown up in poverty and were serving time for minor crimes. Unlike him, they didn’t seem to have chosen their path. He taught some of them to box, watched others radicalise.

During his time in Les Baumettes, Léger saw what the anthropologist Didier Fassin observed from his own deep dives into the French justice system. The prison population has more than tripled in the last half-century (the increase has been even greater in the UK and the US) and the main “growth sector” has been minor crime: failure to pay child support, driving without a licence, or possessing small quantities of cannabis. Fassin argued that this punitive turn had been counterproductive, making society less rather than more safe – notably due to high rates of recidivism. “The power to punish has become uncoupled from its rational justification,” he wrote in 2015. Prison had become “senseless”.

Léger's initial response to his penal experiences was simmering resentment, but over the years he managed to put his feelings into words: "The role of prison is, first, to separate dangerous people from society, and second, to work on their reinsertion. But that second part doesn't exist. In France, at least, it's a lie."



Léger at his restaurant. He trained at Ferrandi, the Harvard of French gastronomy, while still in prison. Photograph: Denis Dalmasso/The Guardian

When an old friend, Mireille (not her real name), whom he had known growing up in Uzès, paid him a visit, he confided in her that he felt he was wasting his life. In that case, Mireille said, why not change it? "It sounds strange," Léger says, "but that possibility hadn't even occurred to me." When he saw a TV programme about Ferrandi Paris, a cookery school that turns out top chefs, a plan began to form in his mind: to open his own restaurant.

Executing this new plan wasn't easy. First he had to get his baccalaureate, which he did after being transferred to a prison in Béziers (considered an escape risk, he was transferred relatively often over the years). Then he had to acquire the computing and administrative skills essential for setting up a business, and finally he had to secure a place at Ferrandi – the [Harvard of](#)

[French gastronomy](#), which at that time received at least half a dozen applications for every place on its coveted adult cooking course. Whenever he requested permission to leave the prison for an interview or administrative task, the authorities either refused his request or responded too late. “I understand they aren’t obliged to make life easy for a professional criminal who is doing 20 years and decides he wants to cook,” says Léger, “but when I wanted to rehabilitate myself, all they did was throw a spanner in the works.”

Luckily, he had loyal supporters, starting with Mireille, who continued to visit him after his move to Béziers, and eventually became his girlfriend. Though educational opportunities are hard to come by in prison, especially for long-haulers, he had teachers who went the extra mile. One of them, Claude-Emmanuelle Pallo, taught him computer skills at Béziers. She recognised someone with great psychological strength who might actually do something with those skills. But she had an ulterior motive for bringing him into her class, which consisted mainly of mouthy young men. “A profile like his commands respect,” she says. “It calms the troops.”

Léger didn’t say much during lessons – he was too busy learning Excel – but when he did, the others listened. The Béziers prison couldn’t have been more different from Les Baumettes. It was new, semi-private, hi-tech and clean. In the prison shop, basic products were more expensive than on the outside. But when the prisoners worked, they were paid less than the minimum wage. “Where is it written that you should make money out of prisoners?” he says. “It’s shameful.”

In 2015, he took up a place at Ferrandi – paid for with Mireille’s help. His persistence with the prison authorities had paid off, too; he had managed to get himself transferred to La Santé prison in Paris, from where he could commute. He was in semi-liberty, meaning he was allowed to travel alone, on condition that he returned to his cell each night. Initially his mentors were told only that he was a prisoner; the other students weren’t allowed to know even that. “Our first reaction was, what has he done?” says one of those mentors, chef Jérémy Touzelet. “There were knives in the kitchen. Did we need to count them? Chain them up?”

At the school, he wore no handcuffs. He mingled with the other students, then returned to a very different milieu at night

The new student's unusual name meant that Touzelet could easily Google him. He discovered Léger's past as a drug lord, but also that he hadn't been convicted of any violent crimes. It was a relief, of sorts, and that relief soon turned to admiration. Of all the students in his intake, Touzelet says, Léger "was the most talented, the hardest working and the most dedicated". He graduated top of his class, earning a perfect score for his red mullet accompanied by a black olive and thyme tapenade, ratatouille, rouille sauce and crushed herby potatoes – a dish with unmistakable notes of Marseille.

For Léger, that prize was extremely hard-won. The eight months at the school were wonderful in one way – an opportunity to shine doing what he loved – but torture in another.

Apart from the shock of encountering a world that had moved on – travelling on trains whose passengers were glued to their phones (had there been a catastrophe?), learning to order fast food from a computer – he found juggling his double life incredibly tough. At the school, he wore no handcuffs or electronic bracelet. He mingled with the other students, listening to them chat about their blameless lives, then returned to a very different milieu at night. "There were times when I no longer knew who I was," he says.

His mentors helped discreetly, allowing him to shower at the school, for example, since his schedule left him no opportunity to do so in prison. And there were moments of comedy, as when the class was required to weigh gelatine to within a gram or two – more accuracy than the average kitchen scales provide. "I let slip: 'We need a dealer's scales,'" says Touzelet, "then swore inwardly and glanced at Krishna. But he took it well. He understood it was the price he had to pay for being treated naturally." Nevertheless, it was a liberation in more ways than one when, in 2016, he got parole along with his diploma.

Touzelet recommended him to a colleague who worked as a second to the Parisian chef Guy Savoy. She, in turn, recommended him to Rémy Doridam,

who was setting up a bar in Paris specialising in artisanal beers. Impressed, Doridam gave him his first paid role running a kitchen: “There were people who didn’t like beer who came every lunchtime for Kris’s cooking.”

He had dreamed of opening a restaurant in Paris, and calling it Les Baumettes. But Paris was expensive and he found himself drawn back to the Gard, where diners might not recognise the irony in that name. Banned from the part of France south of the Bordeaux-Lyon axis until his parole ended in 2021, he requested a special dispensation to open a bistro in Uzès. It was only granted because Mireille owned the building that would house the business, which duly launched in January 2018 under the name Caractère. Nine months later, he and Mireille split up. In the short existence of their joint project, it had received a [glowing write-up](#) from the respected restaurant critic François-Régis Gaudry – who praised Léger’s “inspired pairings”.

He found himself, once again, without a home, a job or a girlfriend. Technically, having no permanent address, he was violating the terms of his parole and in danger of being sent back to prison. This was the reason for his wariness when, in late 2018, he met Céline Simitian, the judge who oversaw his parole in Nîmes. Sympathetic to his plight, she ensured that he remained free, and he started again – from scratch.

He persuaded a bank to give him a loan – no mean feat given his criminal record – and bought the converted farmhouse that houses Volver for a snip at €32,000, the previous owner having gone bankrupt. He sold his scooter to make up the shortfall, salvaged some of his kitchen equipment from Caractère, and chose, as a name, the Spanish word for “return”.



Léger with his daughter, Elyne, in 2003, when she was four Photograph: Courtesy of Elyne Léger

Since he wasn't yet allowed to own a business in the region, he created a holding company for Volver, with his daughter Elyne – now in her early 20s – as managing director. Less than a year after the restaurant opened its doors, Covid struck. Léger tightened his belt, and once the first lockdown had been lifted, chalked up a stunning summer season. “Elegant and precise,” is how one fan, Yves, describes his cooking. “He often uses quite humble and local ingredients,” says another, Arline: “squash, mackerel, squid, lots of fresh vegetables.” The poached egg with mushrooms, herbs and parmesan cream is a reliable hit. People make detours to taste his limoncello baba.

Léger is now looking to take on a second in the kitchen, so he can devote some time to his next project: a training centre where former prisoners can learn the basics of the restaurant trade. The idea is to offer them decently paid work, dignity and prospects, while at the same time addressing the shortage of staff in the trade post-pandemic.

It is news that delights Simitian. She understands Léger's anger towards the system she represents. “The problem is obvious,” she says. “When you have to manage a very large number of people, with the means at the disposal of

the justice system and rehabilitation services, it's difficult to tailor those services to individuals." But she also believes that the system can be a force for good, and that it is people like Léger – who turn their experience into something positive – who make her job worthwhile. She is aware of the paradox in that. "You don't see people like Krishna every day," she admits.

The paradox isn't lost on him either. Looking back over his life, he says that the same skills that made him a good firefighter, and a good crime lord – discipline, attention to detail, a certain fearlessness – make him a good chef, too. And, though he considers the justice system unfit for purpose, he also acknowledges that it is the reason he is talking to me in his own restaurant today. He deserved his punishment, he says, and he paid his debt. Anyone can taste the results.

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Blind date: ‘It’s going to be awkward if he slags me off!’



Photograph: Linda Nylind/The Guardian

Kat, 28, charity marketing manager, meets Jack, 33, consultant

Sat 20 Aug 2022 01.00 EDT

Kat on Jack



What were you hoping for?

Good food, good company and, if nothing else, a funny story to tell.

First impressions?

Confident and relaxed.

What did you talk about?

Alanis Morissette. Skydives and bungee jumps. Cycling and running. Our dream meals if we were on the Off Menu podcast. Weird games we play with our friends (Où est le Poulet for me and a sort of real-life Cluedo game for him).

Any awkward moments?

We agreed to not slag each other off in the article. It's going to be awkward if he goes against his word.

Good table manners?

All good. And hopefully I managed to look like a natural using chopsticks.

Best thing about Jack?

He's so easy to talk to and asks lots of questions, which is always a good

sign.

Would you introduce Jack to your friends?

He seems like the kind of person who could chat to anyone, so sure.

Describe Jack in three words.

Laid-back, kind, genuine.

What do you think Jack made of you?

I'm really unsure, but hopefully he enjoyed my company. We definitely had quite a few things in common.

Did you go on somewhere?

We didn't, but we did stick around drinking cocktails in the restaurant until around 11pm.

And ... did you kiss?

Sorry to disappoint, but no.

If you could change one thing about the evening what would it be?

I wish it didn't suddenly tip it down as I was approaching the restaurant.

Marks out of 10?

A strong 8.

Would you meet again?

I'm not sure: a romantic spark was probably missing. But he's definitely good company, so I'd be open to it even if just as friends.

Q&A

Want to be in Blind date?

Show

Blind date is Saturday's dating column: every week, two strangers are paired up for dinner and drinks, and then spill the beans to us, answering a set of questions. This runs, with a photograph we take of each dater before the date, in Saturday magazine (in the UK) and online at theguardian.com every

Saturday. It's been running since 2009 – you can [read all about how we put it together here](#).

What questions will I be asked?

We ask about age, location, occupation, hobbies, interests and the type of person you are looking to meet. If you do not think these questions cover everything you would like to know, tell us what's on your mind.

Can I choose who I match with?

No, it's a blind date! But we do ask you a bit about your interests, preferences, etc – the more you tell us, the better the match is likely to be.

Can I pick the photograph?

No, but don't worry: we'll choose the nicest ones.

What personal details will appear?

Your first name, job and age.

How should I answer?

Honestly but respectfully. Be mindful of how it will read to your date, and that Blind date reaches a large audience, in print and online.

Will I see the other person's answers?

No. We may edit yours and theirs for a range of reasons, including length, and we may ask you for more details.

Will you find me The One?

We'll try! Marriage! Babies!

Can I do it in my home town?

Only if it's in the UK. Many of our applicants live in London, but we would love to hear from people living elsewhere.

How to apply

Email blind.date@theguardian.com

Was this helpful?

Thank you for your feedback.



Kat and Jack on their date

Jack on Kat



What were you hoping for?

Interesting conversation, a connection and a fun evening. Also to avoid making a complete arse of myself.

First impressions?

Relaxed, confident and talkative.

What did you talk about?

Où est le Poulet. Travelling. Hangover cures. Off Menu menus. Weddings. Recent shows we'd seen (Alanis Morissette and Beauty & the Beast). Bungee jumping traumas.

Any awkward moments?

My rotten egg-smelling cocktail.

Good table manners?

Immaculate, including some top-notch chopstick skills.

Best thing about Kat?

Her curiosity – for new challenges, experiences and places.

Would you introduce Kat to your friends?

I think they'd get on well and would love a game of Où est le Poulet!

Describe Kat in three words.

Social, sporty and curious.

What do you think Kat made of you?

Hopefully interesting and engaging. We were one of the last in the restaurant, so I can only assume I didn't bore her too much.

Did you go on somewhere?

We didn't – it was pretty late by the time we left the restaurant.

And ... did you kiss?

No.

If you could change one thing about the evening what would it be?

That we'd left enough room for dessert.

Marks out of 10?

9.

Would you meet again?
Of course, but just as friends.

Kat and Jack ate at [Fatt Pundit](#), London WC2E. Fancy a blind date? Email blind.date@theguardian.com

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

‘I said, put me in a corset asap’: Zawe Ashton on period dramas, pregnancy and embracing silliness

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/aug/20/zawe-ashton-interview-period-dramas-pregnancy-and-embracing-silliness>

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Angela Griffin: ‘I want to be one of those actors who passes away on set at 95’



Angela Griffin: ‘My celebrity crush? Beyoncé.’ Photograph: Amanda Searle

The actor on her big feet, how she met her husband, and why she’d like to say sorry to her Coronation Street co-star

[Rosanna Greenstreet](#)

Sat 20 Aug 2022 04.30 EDT

Born in Leeds, Angela Griffin, 46, joined [Coronation Street](#) at 16. Her other TV work includes Cutting It, White Lines, Lewis, Help, Waterloo Road and ITV's The Suspect, which is out later this year. She has co-hosted The One Show and presented live from the red carpet at the Golden Globes and the Academy Awards. Unwinds is her new Sunday programme on BBC Radio 2 from 10pm to midnight. She is married to the actor Jason Milligan, has two children and lives in London.

When were you happiest?

During the first week or two of lockdown. We didn't know what was coming and it didn't feel dangerous at that point; there was just a real sense of family and hunkering down.

What is your greatest fear?

Not working. I want to be one of those old actors on the set of Casualty at 95, who quietly passes away in the actual scene rather than at home.

What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?

Catastrophising.

What is the trait you most deplore in others?

People who are not self-aware.

Describe yourself in three words

Energetic, driven, grounded.

What would your superpower be?

Being able to do 376 things simultaneously.

What makes you unhappy?

Lack of sleep.

What is your most unappealing habit?

Picking my ears.

Who is your celebrity crush?

Beyoncé.

To whom would you most like to say sorry, and why?

Lee Warburton. He had just left drama school and was doing the Alexander technique in the Corrie green room. I hadn't been to drama school, and really took the piss out of him.

What do you most dislike about your appearance?

My size nine feet.

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What is the worst thing anyone's said to you?

Every racial slur in the world.

Would you choose fame or anonymity?

Fame.

What or who is the greatest love of your life?

My husband, Jason. My friend went on a date with Jason's brother Max Beesley; she didn't want to go on her own, and Max brought Jason with him. Nothing happened that night – we were both in relationships. Then, about six years later, we met on a night out, and nine months later I was pregnant.

What does love feel like?

Security.

What was the best kiss of your life?

Ben Daniels in Cutting It.

How often do you have sex?

Not enough.

What single thing would improve the quality of your life?

A personal assistant.

What keeps you awake at night?

The fact that there are not enough hours in the day and I've taken on too much.

Would you rather have more sex, money or fame?

Sex.

How would you like to be remembered?

As somebody who was hardworking, kind and nice.

What is the most important lesson life has taught you?

That just because you're nice it doesn't mean you get anywhere.

What happens when we die?

Absolutely nothing.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/aug/20/angela-griffin-interview-coronation-street>

2022.08.20 - Opinion

- Water company CEOs try to woo me, but I've got only one message for them: do your jobs
- Who better than Liz Truss to lead a country whose own sewage laps at its shores?
- Work doesn't pay. Labour will fix that
- Why generation Z should give up striving to be their best selves
- Lucy Mangan Crap sifting and seed gathering – I was born for middle age

[Opinion](#)Water

Water company CEOs try to woo me, but I've got only one message for them: do your jobs

[Feargal Sharkey](#).

Parts of England could run out of water in the near future. It's the result of 30 years of industry and political failure

- Feargal Sharkey is a campaigner and former leader singer of the Undertones



A dry riverbed close to the source of the River Thames, near Cirencester, 14 August 2022. Photograph: Xinhua/REX/Shutterstock

Sat 20 Aug 2022 04.00 EDT

It came to me while I was standing on a river bank. It was such a ridiculous, nonsensical idea that I instantly tried to dismiss it. But it was like the wiggliest of wiggly earworms that just won't leave you alone, like a tune that just keeps boring its way into your mind. That melody was: London is running out of drinking water.

Don't take my word for it. Try the National Audit Office, which looked into the country's [looming water crisis](#) two years ago and concluded: "If more concerted action is not taken now, parts of the south and south-east of England will run out of water within [the next 20 years](#)." And it's not just London – the same report warned that water shortages are an impending risk for all of the UK.

Then there's John Armitt, the chair of the National Infrastructure Commission, who just this week told the Guardian that the government's approach to keeping our nation's taps running amounted to nothing more than "[keeping \[its\] fingers crossed](#)". And the public accounts committee, which has [berated the government](#) for allowing water companies in England to leak more than 3bn litres of water a day from their badly maintained, underinvested, creaking network of pipes.

How on earth did we ever manage to get ourselves in a position where England is looking at a water [shortfall of 4bn litres a day](#) by 2050? And while I'm thinking about it, can someone please explain to me why over the past two years we have allowed water companies to spend almost 6m hours on [775,704 separate occasions](#) dumping sewage into England's rivers? It's an act of [environmental destruction](#) so wide reaching that not a single river in the country is currently listed as being in "good" overall environmental health. Every single river is polluted and one of the largest sources of the pollution? The water industry.

I'm afraid what you are witnessing right now is simply the physical manifestation of 30 years of underinvestment, 30 years of regulatory failure, 30 years of mismanagement and all of it topped off with 30 years of a political vacuum, devoid of oversight and scrutiny.

Rather obscenely, at the same time, regulators have allowed water companies to pay out more than [£72bn in dividends](#) to shareholders, while saddling the companies with more than £50bn in debt and paying £58m to the chief executives of the dozen largest water firms in just the last three years.

So, what's to be done? From a personal perspective, the time has come for the environment secretary, George Eustice, to start behaving like the environment secretary.

You see, Eustice, Ofwat and the Environment Agency between them have the ability to fix this in England with nothing more than the stroke of a pen. Ofwat, for instance, by merely issuing an “enforcement order” is instantly granted the ability to fine a water company anything up to 10% of its annual turnover for not complying with its instructions.

Would losing 10% of the annual turnover, I wonder, help focus a few boardroom minds? I suspect it would. It is also time we held water company directors personally and collectively liable under the Companies Act for the devastating impact those companies' operations are having on the environment.

But there is another side to this. We, as users, are going to have to redefine and reshape our relationship with water entirely. On average in the UK we use about [142 litres per person per day](#); this is almost double the usage of the [Baltic countries](#) where people use between 61 and 77 litres per day.

If you live in Hertfordshire, that average goes up to 174 litres per day and most, if not all of it, is coming from the chalk aquifer, the underground reservoir that should be feeding our chalk streams. Rarer than coral reefs, about 85% of the world's total supply of these miraculous, [magnificent river systems](#) are in southern England, and we are killing each and every one them. Hertfordshire's chalk streams are drying up, and parts of the rivers Ivel, Ver, Ash, Rib, Quin and Beane are no longer world-renowned rivers of distinction, but have been reduced to nothing more than grassy ditches running through open countryside.

It may come as no surprise to hear that over the past few months I've had any number of invitations from water company CEOs to meet with them, to have tea, to bond as grownups, to muse over water company environmental, social and governance policies. I've even had the occasional invite to visit a sewage treatment works – what fun.

I have declined them all. In my world, there are but two issues facing the water industry and the nation right now: water supply and water quality. In my opinion, if your annual salary is measured in multiples of millions, and your shareholders reap annual dividends measured in billions, you should be in a position to produce a plan that deals with both these issues. Just show me the plan, show me the strategy, do your job.

Alarming, behind these words that wiggliest of wiggly earworms keeps boring into my mind. Currently, [some are predicting](#) another dry winter, like the one last year. If that happens, we will be in serious trouble by 2023. Politicians could be deciding which factory gets to have water and which doesn't, which farmer gets to irrigate their crops and which doesn't, and we may find ourselves waiting in a queue, bucket and saucepan in hand, for our turn at the standpipe.

If that is the outcome and you happen to see me in the queue, do come and say hello. If you are a water company executive, I like my tea with milk, no sugar please.

- Feargal Sharkey is a campaigner and former lead singer of the Undertones

OpinionLiz Truss

Who better than Liz Truss to lead a country whose own sewage laps at its shores?

Marina Hyde



There are just two weeks left in a leadership contest that has been going on since sometime in the early Mesozoic period



‘Liz Truss maintains the remorselessly upbeat demeanour of a holiday rep who regards herself as the life and soul of the booze cruise.’ Photograph: Clodagh Kilcoyne/PA

Fri 19 Aug 2022 08.56 EDTLast modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 12.37 EDT

Given the various crises besetting the UK, the seemingly inevitable passing of power from Boris Johnson to [Liz Truss](#) calls to mind that old political saying: out of the frying pan, into the heat death of the universe. The progression between the previous three prime ministers has shown us the timeline can always get worse. The country is basically trapped in that scene in Toy Story 3 where the toys escape the shredder only to find themselves heading towards the incinerator. Unfortunately, the grabber claw is not going to save us.

You may keep hearing Truss supporters say: “You underestimate Liz at your peril.” But the UK is already in grave peril, so ... I’ll take that bet. Presumably I’ll be permitted to collect on it in a couple of years, if not in cash, then certainly in some form of subsistence bartering in District 11 of the sunlit uplands.

For now, Truss maintains the [remorselessly upbeat demeanour](#) of a holiday rep who regards herself as the life and soul of the booze cruise, and whose

lower back is tattooed with the Chinese symbols for “Only depressing people get depressed”. The overwhelming vibe you get from her campaign appearances is that she is going to make destitution fun for people. The logic puts me in mind of the Depression-era [dancehall marathons](#) epitomised in They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?, where desperate competitors are given the opportunity to twirl, then lurch, then stagger their way out of poverty. Or to death – whichever comes sooner.

The fact that Liz will take over a country whose own sewage is literally [lapping at its shores](#) feels too on the nose – an image so hammily overdone it could have been crafted by recidivist newspaper columnist Boris Johnson. Which, in a more literal way, I suppose it was. We’re both the sick man of Europe and the dirty protest of Europe. Johnson – who wouldn’t dream of swimming in his own excrement, either literally or metaphorically – is currently on his [second foreign holiday](#) in a fortnight, displacing whole hogsheads of the Aegean in the cause of not giving a toss about what happens to the country he let down in the way he has always let everyone down in the end. Back home, consumer confidence has just [hit a record low](#). One expert in charge of monitoring it declared on Thursday: “These findings point to a sense of capitulation, of financial events moving far beyond the control of ordinary people.”

Does anyone truly believe they will be within the control of Liz Truss, whose weathervaning and largely underachieving career thus far has marked her out as a very ordinary politician indeed? Her political philosophy appears to consist of only two immutable tenets: that tax cuts are the answer to everything, and that British [workers are incredibly lazy](#).

Despite being a message somewhat questionably suited to the times, this has apparently caused a twitch in the phantom loins of the 0.42% of British voters who will be deciding the next prime minister. With just the two weeks left to run in a leadership contest that has been going on since sometime in the early Mesozoic period, Truss remains an absolute mine of withheld information. She tells every Tory member hustings all about her [“day one” tax cuts](#), but precisely nothing about how the state will be shrunk to pay for them. Hers is a campaign in which reality is treated like a non-member at the club, whose unauthorised incursion into the 19th hole will be put down with putters and sand wedges, *pour encourager les autres*.

Still, it'll be interesting watching Liz try to give a pep talk to gravity. It emerged on Thursday that the Office for Budget Responsibility is to [update its forecast](#) of Britain's public finances next month, stating that government borrowing will increase as a result of high inflation and a widely predicted recession. This halves the £30bn of fiscal headroom that Truss claims will pay for her tax cuts, which leaves us officially in yawning black hole territory.

Of course, we've spent a lot of this leadership context hearing from Liz that a recession is not even inevitable. So just assume that she'll take the keys to No 10, like the idealistic heroine in a horror movie who buys her dream fixer-upper in Upstate Somewhere, and has barely got her whitewash out before a series of terrifyingly grotesque and inexplicable events begin to unfold.

You might be wondering how much worse our standard of government could actually get, given that we ceded control of the country to a newspaper columnist for almost three years. And in many ways you'd be right. It's actually quite difficult to find people who are more wrong on a regular basis than newspaper columnists – but it's possible that economists do edge it. Patrick Minford certainly does.

The Cardiff university professor so admired by Truss is one of Britain's leading wrong people – tough field – having forecast such fantasies as Brexit [boosting Britain's GDP](#) by almost 7% and significantly reducing consumer prices for British people, to say nothing of his giving the zealot's shrug over the potential self-imposed destruction of the country's car industry. “[These things happen](#) as evolution takes place in your economy,” Minford breezed to a parliamentary committee back in 2012. As for who'll be joining Patrick in executive Loon Town, there are persistent rumours that Truss plans to exhume Iain Duncan Smith and John Redwood to give them operational roles.

So that's the lie of the land, two weeks out from an expected Truss premiership. There will be those of you feeling pessimism is the rational response, and it's hard to disagree. I think we used to produce hope, but as part of some efficiency drive or other we have run down the industry and

allowed other nations to corner the market in it. Ah well. As Team Liz will soon be explaining: these things happen.

- Marina Hyde is a Guardian columnist
- What Just Happened?! by Marina Hyde (Guardian Faber, £18.99). To support the Guardian and Observer, order your copy at the [Guardian Bookshop](#). Delivery charges may apply
- Marina Hyde will be in conversation with Richard Osman at a Guardian Live event in London on 11 October. Join them in person or via the livestream – book tickets via the [Guardian Live website](#)

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[Opinion](#)[Living wage](#)

Work doesn't pay. Labour will fix that

[Angela Rayner](#) and [Rachel Reeves](#)

Squeezed pay has forced too many working people to use food banks. We will bring in a national living wage for all

Angela Rayner is Labour's deputy leader; Rachel Reeves is shadow chancellor



‘People are worn out not just with their jobs, but financial stress.’ Epsom Foodbank in Surrey. Photograph: Jeff Gilbert/Alamy

Fri 19 Aug 2022 11.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 11.14 EDT

There's a fundamental problem with our economy. For too many people, work no longer pays. It is a scandal that [5 million working people are living in poverty](#). There is no clearer sign of a broken system.

People are worn out not just with their jobs, but financial stress. No one should have to lie awake at night worrying whether they'll be able to feed their children. Having a warm, decent home and an occasional meal out should not be a luxury. Two-thirds of adults in poverty are in work. The proportion has been rising and has never been higher.

Both of us represent constituencies in the north of England. We have to refer working people to food banks and clothing exchanges. We have met teaching staff in Manchester and Leeds who go into school early to provide breakfast for pupils, often out of their own pockets. We can't bear to see people being held back like this or to see potential being wasted in grinding poverty. We all deserve better.

But this isn't just because of the cost of living crisis. It is a consequence of a [low-wage crisis](#) from more than a decade of squeezed pay under the Conservatives. Average pay, adjusted for inflation, was lower in May 2022 than in February 2008. We need lasting change to how work and workers are valued in our country.

We are proud that the last [Labour](#) government created the national minimum wage. We won the argument then, but we now need to go further to help restore dignity at work and make sure work pays. That is why the next Labour government will change the Low Pay Commission's remit so that – alongside median wages and economic conditions – the minimum wage will for the first time reflect the need for working people's pay to at least cover the cost of living. Finally, the national living wage will live up to its name.

Young adult workers are still getting a raw deal on pay. Their bills aren't any cheaper, but they have to make ends meet with less. That's just not fair. Labour will take steps to ensure our genuine national living wage applies to every adult worker and is properly enforced. We would also keep a link to median earnings so that all workers benefit from growth.

Many employers already pay a real living wage and that is to be commended. They should not be undercut by those who don't, which is why we need a level playing field. Working people contribute so much to the

wealth of our country. It is only right that they receive a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. But there is a wider economic case too. People's disposable income is spent on products and services that provide a direct return to our economy and public finances, as well as helping our high streets thrive. When working people's pay is squeezed, that removes spending power from the economy.

Poverty pay doesn't just cause financial misery, it undermines many of the things that matter in life. Being compelled to accept every bit of overtime or take an extra part-time job to pay the bills comes at a cost to relationships and mental health. Worn-out parents with less time for family can be damaging for children growing up too.

There are couples who barely get to see each other because they are working extra hours to keep their family finances afloat. They are mentally and emotionally exhausted. That's not sustainable and it's not the standard of living we should tolerate in Britain.

Keir Starmer sets out Labour's plan to freeze energy bills – video

Families are worried about how they will pay their bills, and instead of fixing the real issues, the [Conservatives](#) continue their infighting, offering no substantive ideas to help the British public meet the challenges they face. Labour's plan to freeze the energy price cap would fix the problems immediately and for the future. It would mean people not paying a penny more on their energy bills this winter, saving the typical household £1,000.

But Labour's plan for a stronger, more secure economy would ensure that economic growth raises average wages too. We know that the historically low rates of union membership and collective bargaining have been a brake on good work and fair pay across many sectors of the UK economy.

That is why in sectors such as social care, which have been overlooked and undervalued for so long, the next Labour government will roll out fair pay agreements that will empower unions and the workers they represent to negotiate better pay and conditions, going higher than the living wage and driving up standards across the economy. As well as improving workers'

lives, this is a vital step to deal with the recruitment and retention issues plaguing services such as care.

As we travel the country and meet people, it's a world away from the imaginations of Rishi Sunak and Liz Truss, who would rather accuse working people of a [lack of "graft"](#) than take responsibility for Conservative failure. Those living in poverty often describe the feeling in the pit of their stomach, worrying about how ends will meet. That feeling is all too widespread on the streets of today's Britain, with women and those from underrepresented backgrounds more likely to be consigned to poverty pay. Labour will ensure that working people are not just seen as collateral damage from an economy that is not working. While the Conservatives threaten the limited rights people already have, we will guarantee a real living wage and strengthen individual and collective rights for working people.

We were both teenagers when Labour won power back in 1997 but we cannot and will not forget the transformational impact the minimum wage had back then on so many, or the false arguments of those who conspired to block it. Now is the time to build on that achievement and take the next step. Labour knows that working people are the backbone of our economy and in government we will make work pay once again.

Angela Rayner is Labour's deputy leader; Rachel Reeves is shadow chancellor

- ***Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a letter of up to 300 words to be considered for publication, email it to us at guardian.letters@theguardian.com***

Young people

Why generation Z should give up striving to be their best selves

Zoe Williams



A relentless focus on personal growth means young people can assume it's their fault when life doesn't go according to plan



‘You can make every good choice ... and things are still going to go wrong’.
Photograph: Reeldeal Images/Alamy

Fri 19 Aug 2022 10.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 14.06 EDT

A couple of years ago, I went to a morning rave: exactly as it sounds, like a rave, in a classic rave venue – the Ministry of Sound in Elephant and Castle – except at 6am. There were a couple of hardy old campaigners but most of the crowd were probably not born in the club’s 1990s heyday or, if they were, they’d not have been rave-ready. There was a water station but most people were drinking green juice; there’s a limit to how much hydration you need, absent intoxication, when all you’re doing is dancing. You can never, conversely, have too much kale.

I’d been there before, many times, but this was the first time I’d really observed the place, having previously been – to drop a technical, 1990s term – mashed off my tits. The dancing was very determined, and efficient, like an exercise class. The people were very taut and well groomed, what we used to call hardbodies (we didn’t mean that as a compliment). There was a lot of face-glitter, which I always think is like an am-dram performance of fun, rather than actual fun. My core observation is this: dear generation Z – try not to self-maximise *all the time*.

Look, nobody wants to be ambassador for MDMA, or cheap session lager in plastic cups that splosh. So let's park the specifics and keep this very general: it's important to sometimes make the bad choices; to do things so regrettable that you're still laughing in shame 30 years later. The reason it's important is not some nebulous one about letting your hair down, it's very specific; you can make every good choice, practise self-care and sleep hygiene, exercise, meditate, reflect, feel grateful, eat clean, and things are still going to go wrong. Relationships will still break down, careers will still fail to launch, you'll still be inside your own head. If you're constantly striving to be your best self, the obvious solution is just to try harder. You'll end up like a New Labour government of your own mind and body, constantly setting targets, measuring things, going back to recalibrate the key performance indicator, wondering why, when all the boxes have been ticked, the outcome has not been achieved – then going back to add more boxes.

But a lot of the problems are external to you: your pay isn't high enough because of your employer, not because your alignment is out of whack and it's interfering with your hustle. Sure, hangovers give you anxiety, but so does rent. It's reasonable to bring your serious minds to these serious times, but self-discipline is a lonely creed and solidarity is more fruitful.

I think a lot about the intense hedonism of the long 1990s, and whether there's a connection between that and generation X's failure to make a political impact; all the gains we managed to let slip through our fingers; the sheer thinness of talent in the Cameron/Clegg/Miliband age bracket. I guess you guys could plausibly argue that not being drunk all the time has already made you more politically effective, more challenging, more radical, more searching. Realistically, though, the social fabric has been under sustained attack by late capitalism for the whole of this century, and I'm not sure that gen X drinking less snakebite would have made much difference.

We're going into a period of great material hardship, and nobody knows that better than gen Z: all the joy in life, all the beauty, is going to come from sex, fellowship, revolution and the life of the mind. You know where all those things start? They start in a pub.

- Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/aug/19/why-generation-z-should-give-up-striving-to-be-their-best-self>

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Digested week: crap sifting and seed gathering – I was born for middle age

[Lucy Mangan](#)



Plus, rain at last, A-level nightmares, and losing my height advantage over my 11-year-old son



Storage boxes: a lifetime's ambition fulfilled. Photograph: General Images/UIG/Shutterstock

Fri 19 Aug 2022 07.15 EDTLast modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 11.36 EDT

Monday

Today I took delivery of 20 large, sturdy, matching storage boxes in which to store all the 20 categories of crap in my house, thereby fulfilling a lifetime's ambition of having 20 large, sturdy, matching storage boxes in which to store all the 20 categories of crap in my house.

I also set up a shelving unit above the washing machine and transferred all the dish cloths, dish towels, hand towels, loo paper and kitchen roll on to it. Then I sent a card containing two envelopes of seeds harvested from my garden to my godmother, and another to a friend who has done his back in. Then I took an old toothbrush to all the grimy nooks and crannies in the house that I've been meaning to get to for months – and by months I mean years.

In short, I have unlocked a new level of middle age. It feels great. This is the age I was born for. Some people are good at being children, some light up the sky with their teenage breakneck energy and enthusiasm. Ambitious

types thrive in their 20s and 30s. I did none of those things. I have basically been waiting until life slows to the seed-gathering, crap-sifting, back-twining speed that is my natural tempo. I could not be happier.

Tuesday

What is this? A strange phenomenon is upon us. A sort of ... loose water is falling from the sky. Drops, drips and splashing sounds abound. Puddles are forming. Wait, I remember now! It's [rain](#)! I stand in the rapidly hydrating garden letting the liquid gold run down my face and sluice away for just a few precious minutes my throbbing fear of the climate crisis, my ceaseless fury at the privatised water companies who let billions of gallons of literal life force leak away rather than cut minutely into profits to maintain their pipes, and my enduring bafflement in the face of people who don't turn their taps off while cleaning their teeth.

Then I am recalled to myself and rush to bring out my storage boxes (still empty – I am not made of spare time), flip the lids off and bunch all 20 of the 48-litre treasures on the lawn to gather the good stuff. “Cometh the hour, cometh the woman and her perfectly timed life goals fulfilled!” I scream at the sky and the husband, who reacted with an incredulity bordering on contempt when the first pallet arrived. My parched soul drinks deep of the satisfaction.

Wednesday

Well, that was quick. My son is now taller than me. I find this very rude. I went to all the trouble of making him, and then the much, much greater trouble of giving birth to him – for which he has still not properly thanked me – and now he has overtaken me in the height stakes after just 11 years. Rude, I tell you. Rude.

People of average or above-average height do not know how fragile a hold we shortarses have on normal life. I need heels to be part of any conversational orbit at a party. I have no chance of getting served at a bar. I can't reach the top cabinet shelves in any kitchen. And I simply have no natural authority anywhere. Except, briefly, over my son – as his mother, but

far more potently as someone taller than him. You don't realise quite how powerful a weapon it is in the parental arsenal until it's gone. Now when I issue commands he can literally look me in the eye as he decides whether or not to comply. Generally, being a fundamentally accommodating individual, he does as he's told. But he's only 11. By the time the hormonal storm begins he will be nine feet above me and essentially ungovernable. A friend of mine has twin boys and from the time they turned 13, whenever she started shouting at them, they would simply lift her up and deposit her outside the room. I used to laugh my head off whenever I heard about it. Not any more.



Picture of the week: Ofsted has launched an investigation after it was revealed that just 0.01% of brunette students passed their A-levels this year. Photograph: Joe Giddens/PA

Thursday

[A-level results day.](#) What a godawful Proustian rush it is. I took mine 30 years ago and I *still* have nightmares about them. Literally. I turn up for my exam – English, usually, Spanish sometimes – and realise I've forgotten to go to any classes for the previous two years. I wake up in a lashing sweat.

They are the worst exams you'll ever do in your life, dear youngsters, and I speak as one who trained as a solicitor and once had to take one in land law, with questions such as: "When does a constructive trust arise over a proprietary estopped right of easement without equitable title but with an entailed fee simple and a cherry on top? Give reasons for your answer in the original Norman French, upon whose mad mutterings the entire system is based" scattered lavishly across its pages.

They measure only two things: your maturity (ie how well you've been able to resist every natural urge and stay in to revise instead) and your ability to function under stress. Obviously the first comes only with age, and the second one is a gift you have either been handed by the genetic gods or not. Grade F, the lot of them.

Friday

I feel a deep sense of peace – or at least the closest thing to it that is possible now, a kind of ... desperate acceptance? Forcible resignation? Coma of the soul? – now that [Brexiters](#) have nearly achieved their goal. Not of leaving the EU or restoring British sovereignty or whatever gloss they put on it, but of returning us to the wartime state that was, they know with the feverish certainty of all ideologues, when We Were Best.

For we hover, surely, on the cusp of rationing of all kinds. Water ([hosepipe bans](#) are at last appearing), fuel, food, healthcare, travel – all are in effect becoming more and more unavailable to more and more people. Eventually, formal arrangements will have to be made and coupons allocated. I promise you, it is this, ration books rather than blue passports, that they have truly wanted. They want to live in the glorious past for a bit, even if it's not their own, and experience what they have always imagined is the best of British, writ in Spam.

And then – and THEN – it will be out of their systems. They can heave a sigh of satisfaction and/or realise that privation isn't all it's cracked up to be and start romanticising a future of plenty, involving free and steady trade with other countries, jaunts abroad, drugs and hospital beds, petrol at the pumps and all sorts of other exciting things that, if you're an idiot, you don't miss till they're gone.

And then this frothing madness will subside and we can go on with our lives. Just give them the coupons, ASAP.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/aug/19/digested-week-crap-sifting-and-seed-gathering-i-was-born-for-middle-age>

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- 'Catastrophic' 22 million people face starvation in Horn of Africa, says UN
- 'I am not blaming anyone' Estonians shrug off 23% inflation
- Tigray Almost one in three children under five malnourished, UN says
- Finland PM Sanna Marin takes drug test after party 'to clear up doubts'
- 'Elvis' Zelenskiy and Trump's wiggle The best and worst dancing world leaders

[Africa](#)

Horn of Africa drought places 22 million people at risk of starvation, says UN

Four years of failed rains in Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia have left the region facing catastrophe this year



Somalis fleeing drought-stricken areas arrive at a makeshift camp on the outskirts of Mogadishu. Famine is a serious risk in the country, the UN says. Photograph: Farah Abdi Warsameh/AP

Agence-France Presse

Fri 19 Aug 2022 20.58 EDTLast modified on Sat 20 Aug 2022 05.08 EDT

The number of people at risk of starvation in the drought-ravaged Horn of [Africa](#) has increased to 22 million, the UN's world food programme (WFP) says.

Years of insufficient rainfall across Kenya, Somalia and [Ethiopia](#) have caused the worst drought in 40 years and conditions akin to famine in the hardest-hit areas, aid groups say.

An unprecedented four failed rainy seasons has killed millions of livestock, destroyed crops and forced 1.1 million people from their homes in search of food and water.

“The world needs to act now to protect the most vulnerable communities from the threat of widespread famine in the Horn of Africa,” the WFP executive director, David Beasley, said on Friday.

“There is still no end in sight to this drought crisis, so we must get the resources needed to save lives and stop people plunging into catastrophic levels of hunger and starvation.”



A man walks in front of a sandstorm in Dollow, south-west Somalia. Photograph: Sopa Images/LightRocket/Getty Images

At the start of 2022, WFP warned that 13 million people across the three countries faced starvation, and appealed for donors to open their purses at a time of great need.

But funds were slow in coming, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine among other crises drawing attention from the disaster in the Horn, humanitarian workers said.

Russia's invasion also sent global food and fuel prices soaring, making aid delivery more expensive.

By the middle of the year, when rain failed to appear again in Kenya, Ethiopia and [Somalia](#), the number in extreme need soared to 20 million and warnings of famine grew more urgent.

WFP says that by September at least 22 million people could face starvation.

"This number will continue to climb, and the severity of hunger will deepen if the next rainy season ... fails and the most vulnerable people do not receive humanitarian relief," WFP said in a statement.

"Needs will remain high into 2023 and famine is now a serious risk, particularly in Somalia", where nearly half the population of 15 million is seriously hungry.

WFP said \$418m was needed over the next six months to help the worst-off.

Last month, the United States announced \$1.2bn in emergency food and malnutrition treatment to help avert famine in the Horn of Africa, and urged other nations to do more.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/20/drought-in-horn-of-africa-places-22m-people-at-risk-of-starvation-says-un>

Estonia

‘I am not blaming anyone’: Estonians shrug off 23% inflation

Those in Europe’s inflation hotspot remain calm about rising prices, but a lack of government intervention could fuel further increases – and discontent



OA Coffee owner Taniel Vaaderpass at his shop/cafe in Tallinn’s old town.
Photograph: Hendrik Osula/The Guardian



[Daniel Boffey](#) in Tallinn

Sat 20 Aug 2022 03.00 EDT

Like his cappuccinos, Taniel Vaaderpass, 33, isn't bitter. His usually profitable company, OA Coffee, one of Estonia's biggest coffee bean roasting companies, may have posted a loss for the first time last year and is set to do so again this year, but Vaaderpass remains strikingly sanguine as he sits on the terrace of the cafe he also owns on a cobbled street in the old town of Tallinn.

The central causes of Vaaderpass's misfortune is a 240% increase in the price of unroasted green coffee and a 20% surge in the cost of the gas he uses to roast his imported beans. He also felt the need to give his staff a 10% pay rise in January despite the lack of company profits.

This is the reality of living in Europe's inflation hotspot. The latest figures, published on Thursday, showed that Estonia has an annual inflation rate of an astounding 23.2% – the highest in the eurozone, vastly [outpacing the average of 8.9%](#).

Vaaderpass is inevitably part of the cycle. He has raised his price to supermarkets by 25% over the last eight months and he fears he will have to

do so again this year. A coffee in his cafe is today half a euro more expensive than it was, and Vaaderpass says he will also have to cut costs to get “back on track”.

But he is not on the streets calling for the government’s downfall. No Estonians are. Indeed the latest polling has the Reform party, the largest party in the ruling coalition, flying high with 34.4% of the vote, and their conservative rivals on 21.3%, six months before the national elections.

“Estonians are not that temperamental,” Vaaderpass says. “Calm northern people. No emotions, you know. The joke is that when Covid hit and people couldn’t meet, it was a lucky day for Estonians. Celebration day.”



A woman picking nectarines at Balti Jaama market in Tallinn. Photograph: Hendrik Osula/The Guardian

Part of the explanation for the lack of a political backlash may be that Estonian salaries have been on a sharp upward trajectory for several years and the economy recovered well and quickly from the Covid pandemic, leading to labour shortages and higher wages. Voters are relatively relaxed about a temporary period of higher prices, it is suggested.

But there is also an understanding in Estonia, once part of the Soviet Union and containing a [large Russian-language minority](#), that the war in Ukraine is

the [source of many of their problems](#), says Kaspar Oja, an economist at Estonia's central bank.

“In many countries people have gone to the streets even with lower inflation rates, but here people are quite calm,” he says. “Of course there are people who complain, but most people understand that the increase in energy prices is broadly related to the war and they understand what it is behind it.”

There is, however, something percolating, he admits.

Estonia's standout inflation rate is also due to some peculiarities in its economy, and potentially some governmental missteps that may be seized upon. Recent pension reforms have allowed people to dip into their nest eggs to spend now rather than later. A large proportion of consumers are on energy deals that are linked to the market price rather than fixed.

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And the newspapers are increasingly full of complaints about how Estonian energy producers, with relatively low production costs, are racking up high profits as they raise their prices in line with other regional producers in the Nord Pool exchange via which electricity is shared and prices set. Estonia remains a relatively poor country within the EU, and so energy and food prices make up an oversized part of consumer spending.

[Graphic](#)

“Lately there have been more complaints about the electricity because they can see companies have benefited from it,” Oja says. “Consumers are paying

more but Estonia has energy producers which are benefiting pretty well and people are not happy about that. That is why the government is planning to have a universal electricity service for small consumers, mostly households, to take effect from October. The electricity companies will have to sell electricity according to the production costs.”

It is also, however, starting to be noticed in the media how little the prime minister, Kaja Kallas, who has spoken of the need to keep tight control over spending, has offered in terms of mitigation on energy prices.

Jacob Kirkegaard, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute For International [Economics](#), says the latest inflation figures show that the more interventionist governments, such as the French, with the lowest annual inflation rate in the eurozone at 6.8%, and the Italians (8.4%), have done best in shielding their voters from the inflationary pressures.

“The underlying issue is that the Estonians haven’t done very much,” Kirkegaard says. “The French have been largely insulated because of the nuclear production and they haven’t had nearly the same pass through. This is unlikely to last because if you look at the forward energy pricing in France, it is higher than most of the rest of the [Europe](#) as the fear is that the river levels are so low that they will have to take the nuclear plants off the grid because they will not have the water to cool them.

“But the government has done quite a lot. They have nationalised EDF [the country’s largest energy company] fully and it will do what the government wants. They have also raised public benefits to low-wage people by up to 10% to basically try to mitigate the cost of living [for low-income groups](#).”



Baristas Elizabeth Liiv (left) and Anastasia Kralle at OA Coffee cafe say they understand why prices are rising. Photograph: Hendrik Osula/The Guardian

The link between lower inflation rates and intervention should not be lost on Boris Johnson's successor in the UK, Kirkegaard suggests. According to data released by the Office for National Statistics this week, consumer price inflation in Britain [jumped to 10.1% in July](#), the highest since February 1982, making it the first major economy to see price growth hit double digits.

"My sense is that the UK when it comes to fiscal transfers or direct government help hasn't done much compared to the continent, certainly southern Europe and France and the pass through of costs has been much larger," he says. "I would say the UK is one of the least activist major governments."

It is yet to be seen whether British voters will be as relaxed as those in Estonia. In central Tallinn, Lisa, 34, a psychotherapist picking up some fruit at the covered Balti Jaama Turg market, says she is buying fewer cosmetics and opting for secondhand clothes over new ones, but is more concerned about the fate of Russians and Ukrainians than that of the Estonian economy. "I feel sad about that rather than angry," she says.

Anastasia Kralle, 21, and Elizabeth Liiv, 17, serving at the OA Coffee cafe, agree. “I have noticed the price of eggs keeps on going up, every time I go to the shops,” laughs Kralle. “Yes, everything is more expensive, but I don’t want to be angry. I am not blaming anyone, we all know why it is happening.”

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Hunger

Tigray: almost one in three children under five malnourished, UN says

Urgent action needed to avert further disaster in war-torn country as funding ‘fast running out’



A child in Tigray. In one area, 65% of children under five were malnourished. Photograph: Claire Nevill/WFP

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[Lizzy Davies](#)

Sat 20 Aug 2022 02.00 EDT Last modified on Sat 20 Aug 2022 02.02 EDT

Nearly one in three children under five in the Ethiopian region of Tigray are malnourished and the UN said urgent action is needed to prevent them from dying.

According to a new emergency assessment carried out by the World Food Programme (WFP), 29% of very young children are suffering from global acute malnutrition (GAM). More than half of pregnant or breastfeeding woman are also malnourished.

Health officials consider malnutrition rates of 15% or over indicative of an emergency situation where the humanitarian needs are critical. In one area of Tigray, 65% of children under five were malnourished. In another, the proportion was 55%, with 16% suffering from the more serious severe acute malnutrition.

A malnourished child is estimated to be 12 times more likely to die than their well-nourished counterparts. The high level of malnutrition in Tigray “calls for urgent action to strengthen wasting treatment interventions [in the

region] to prevent excess mortality due to malnutrition”, said the assessment, published on Friday.

Claire Nevill, a spokesperson for WFP in Ethiopia, said the figures were extremely worrying and likely to worsen as the [UN faces a funding squeeze](#), partly as a result of the war in Ukraine. WFP’s funding to treat malnutrition across northern Ethiopia was “fast running out”, Nevill added.

The emergency food security assessment, the first conducted by WFP in Tigray this year, paints a worrying picture of a society struggling to recover from 21 months of war.

While there is currently an uneasy truce between Tigrayan forces and troops loyal to the prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, and some aid is getting in, the region is still facing restrictions on basic services such as [communications and banking](#), the latter meaning that people do not have easy access to cash.



Some aid is entering the region, but supply chains with the rest of Ethiopia are severely disrupted. Photograph: Claire Nevill/WFP

Supply chains with the rest of Ethiopia remain disrupted and the assessment found the price of staples such as sorghum and teff has “skyrocketed” since the start of the conflict in November 2020. Fuel is in very short supply.

As a result of these and other pressures, WFP said, 5.2 million people – nearly 90% of the population – are now deemed “food insecure”, an increase of six percentage points on the last assessment. Out of this, 2.4 million people (47%) are considered “severely food insecure”, which WFP defines as having “extreme food consumption gaps”.

For [a famine to be declared](#) in a certain part of the world, at least 20% of households must be facing an extreme lack of food, at least 30% of children suffering from acute malnutrition, and two people for every 10,000 a day dying “due to outright starvation or to the interaction of malnutrition and disease”.

Nevill said that although the malnutrition and food insecurity statistics for Tigray were deeply concerning there was no reliable data on mortality that would point to a famine declaration.

“We just don’t know,” she said. “But we do know that the next three months [before the autumn harvest] are critical, and if we don’t scale up our response and get this food into the hands of communities now as the lean season approaches, people will certainly move closer to the edge.”

Nevill said it was essential that the parties to the conflict maintained the access route into Tigray from the neighbouring Afar region, through which all humanitarian convoys have been passing since [their resumption in April](#). However, she called for others to be opened up, too.

“After 21 months of interruption, the banking and communication services and utilities should be restored so that health services can be improved and regular economic trade with other regions can resume, including the trade of fuel. All of this is critical. We need to keep the humanitarian supplies flowing in over these critical next few months ahead of the main annual harvest in October. Otherwise things will deteriorate rapidly.”

The [WFP assessment](#) was carried out in Tigray in June and involved interviews with more than 3,000 families across the region, except in Western Tigray, which remains inaccessible.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/aug/20/tigray-ethiopia-almost-one-in-three-children-under-five-malnourished-un-says>

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[Finland](#)

Finland's PM Sanna Marin takes drug test after party 'to clear up doubts'

Leaked videos show leader drinking at event at which unconfirmed reports claim drugs may have been taken by others

Leaked footage of Sanna Marin dancing sparks controversy in Finland – video

[Jon Henley](#) *Europe correspondent*

[@jonhenley](#)

Fri 19 Aug 2022 12.26 EDT Last modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 14.06 EDT

Finland's prime minister, Sanna Marin, has said she has taken a drug test after videos were leaked showing her [dancing and drinking](#) during a private party at which some reports have suggested drugs may have been consumed.

Marin, 36, told reporters she was tested on Friday and the results would be available in a week's time. She said she had never taken drugs, "not even in my teenage years", and had taken the test "for my own legal protection and to clear up any doubts".

Other guests in the video, reportedly filmed on Saturday 6 August, two days after the prime minister cancelled a planned holiday and declared herself on duty for the weekend, included well-known TV and radio hosts, influencers and a singer.

Finnish media have reported claims, amplified on social media by far-right and anti-government accounts, that a voice on the clip can be heard shouting "the flour gang", supposedly a reference to narcotics, but [there is no certainty the term was used](#).



Finland's prime minister, Sanna Marin (l), with friends. She says she is unaware of any drug use at party on 6 August and says she herself has never taken drugs. Photograph: Twitter

Marin said that to the best of her knowledge no drugs had been consumed at the party. "As far as I know, I have never been in such a situation," she said. "On the night shown in the video footage, I didn't see anyone using drugs."

Asked whether she had been in a fit state to take important decisions at a time of heightened security, Marin said her "ability to function was really good". If the need had arisen, "I could have left to take care of work tasks in the evening", she said.

She described her alcohol consumption as "moderate" and said she had drunk only mild alcoholic drinks at the party. "I walked normally from the restaurant to the car and went home, and woke up feeling normal the next morning," she said.

Questioned about a possible compromise of national security, Marin, who was the world's youngest prime minister when she was elected in 2019, said she could "always be reached by phone, and always be reached by security personnel".

The authoritative daily Helsingin Sanomat [said in an editorial on Friday](#) that prime ministers were entitled to relax, there was no evidence Marin had broken the law, and that experts it had consulted concluded there was no risk to national security.

The Finnish people would be able to say what they thought of Marin's policies and her style, it said. "The institution of prime minister changes over time, and there is no one right way for government to act," it said. "Elections are next spring."

Marin insisted she spent most of her time working, and videos such as this gave a "distorted" view of how she spent her time. "My entire term as prime minister has been a time of crisis and things have been reasonably well taken care of," she said.

The videos were "private, not intended for public viewing", she said, adding that she was sure other material existed. "I feel like footage is shot all the time, everywhere, and it doesn't feel good," she said. "Even normal things are made to look bad."

Asked if she could have done anything differently, she said she hoped that in 2022 it was possible for people in her position to enjoy their free time and dance with friends. "I trust people understand free time and work time can be separated," she said.

But with hindsight, she added, "what could have been done was to take care that such things would not be leaked to the public. Yes, I want to trust people. Yes, I trust my friends. I trust and know that my friends have not leaked these clips."

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World news

‘Elvis’ Zelenskiy and Trump’s wiggle: the best and worst dancing world leaders

As a video shows Finnish PM busting some moves, the Guardian’s dance critic judges other political performers



Donald Trump shows off his moves at a campaign rally in Newport News, Virginia, in 2020. Photograph: Steve Helber/AP



[Lyndsey Winship](#)

Sat 20 Aug 2022 03.00 EDT

Leaked video of Finland's Prime minister, Sanna Marin, [dancing exuberantly](#) has sparked worldwide debate – and highlighted how political leaders have not been shy about showing off their favourite moves.

Sanna Marin, wir alle kennen es pic.twitter.com/cPIDUzd9U3

— Jon Of Us ✨ (@JonOfUs) [August 18, 2022](#)

The Guardian dance critic Lyndsey Winship casts her eye over their routines and divides the showstoppers from the clodhoppers.

Top 3

1. Volodymyr Zelenskiy

Definition of a superhero: someone who can face down Putin and pull off a fuchsia satin Elvis outfit. Zelenskiy won the first season of Ukraine's version of Strictly Come Dancing in 2006 with his confident footwork. It is a long way from Ann Widdecombe being [dragged along the floor](#) by Anton Du

Beke, or even Ed Balls's [inspiring!y_gung-ho Gangnam Style](#).

2. Barack Obama

Obama is a man of effortless grace, and that quality is all over his dancing. Less is more (that's a lesson for all clodhoppers) – he just lets the rhythm creep in and that lovely smile spread over his face and for a moment you can pretend it's still somewhere back around 2012 and there's hope in the world.

'I have dad moves': Barack Obama discusses dancing on David Letterman's new Netflix show - video

3. Boris Yeltsin

Yeltsin's boogie proves that dancing doesn't have to be “good” to be great.



Boris Yeltsin dances at a rock concert in Rostov, Russia, in 1996.
Photograph: Alexander Zemlianichenko/AP

Bottom 3

1. Theresa May

Let us be clear: there is no such thing as bad dancing if you're enjoying yourself. But Theresa May's moves, including this unexpected robot, come

with the forced joviality of someone who's just been pushed on stage by a Spad telling her to "Have fun!", resulting in the same awkwardness as clutching for a "running through wheat fields" anecdote.

Theresa May dances on to the stage at the Tory party conference - video

2. Donald Trump

Remember the weirdly addictive clip? Instead of a Trump rally's usual macho chanting, the ex-president showcased a little move we might call "the Trombone", enhanced with a camp hip wiggle to the sound of YMCA. All confirming his status as the least self-aware person to ever hold office.

3. Boris Johnson

The arms aloft say "football boor".



Boris Johnson dancing at a work event. Photograph: Twitter

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- [Rail strikes Tube strike starts in London](#)
- [Grant Shapps Reforms will be imposed 'if rail workers do not accept deals'](#)

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London strikes: Liz Truss pledges crackdown as Sadiq Khan says government ‘deliberately provoking’ unions – as it happened

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[Transport](#)

Ministers accused of ‘provoking’ strikes as tube action disrupts London travel

Sadiq Khan claims transport secretary ‘deliberately’ seeking industrial action to pave way for legislation curtailing union rights



People waiting for buses outside Victoria tube station on Friday. Photograph: Kirsty O'Connor/PA

[Tom Ambrose](#) and [Nadeem Badshah](#)

Fri 19 Aug 2022 09.08 EDTFirst published on Fri 19 Aug 2022 01.00 EDT

Ministers have been accused of “deliberately provoking” strikes as industrial action on the underground in [London](#) caused travel disruption.

Rail, Maritime and [Transport](#) union (RMT) workers walked out on Friday over issues including jobs and pensions, halting most services on tube lines across the capital’s transport network.

The mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, accused the transport secretary, [Grant Shapps](#), of provoking strikes as a precursor to legislation preventing future industrial action by trade unions.

“The way the government is behaving, it’s almost like they’re deliberately provoking strikes across the country, not just in the transport sector but in other sectors, as a precursor for legislation to curtail the rights of trade unions to go on strike,” he said.

Khan said he and the [RMT](#) union were “on the same side here”. “Nobody wants the government to be attaching unreasonable conditions to our deal,” he said, and that it was “ordinary Londoners, commuters and businesses who are caught in the crossfire”.

He added: “I’m keen to make sure we get the best possible deal for [TfL](#) [Transport for London] because we won’t get a national recovery without a London recovery. We simply will not get a London recovery unless TfL fires on all cylinders. What we don’t want are unreasonable, draconian strings attached by the government.”

By contrast, Liz Truss, the favourite to become the new Conservative party leader and prime minister, said she would not let the UK be “held to ransom by militant trade unionists”.

The TfL [website](#) showed services on the vast majority of tube lines were suspended, with a very limited operation elsewhere.

There was also disruption to bus services in west and south-west London and parts of Surrey. This was the result of a strike on Friday and Saturday by London bus drivers who are members of Unite, in a separate dispute over pay. TfL said 63 bus routes were being affected.

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The strike action came as rail union leaders warned that a long-running dispute over pay, jobs and working conditions would continue “for as long as it takes”.

However, a new survey suggested that only one in eight people have had their travel plans affected by rail strikes. According to the Office for National Statistics, 13% of adults questioned between 3 and 14 August said industrial action had disrupted their plans.

Of those who said they had been affected, 4% said they had been unable to work, 4% had been unable to attend a medical appointment and 2% said they had been unable to care for friends or family.

On Saturday, rail workers will strike again, which will also affect Sunday morning train services. The Unite bus strike will affect London United routes through west and south-west London and parts of Surrey.

TfL urged people to avoid using the tube and only travel if essential on the rest of the network on Friday and until 8am on Saturday.

Across the country, tens of thousands of members of the RMT, the Transport Salaried Staffs’ Association (TSSA) and Unite walked out on Thursday, resulting in about one in five trains running, with some areas having no services all day.

Mick Lynch, the general secretary of the RMT, said: “We’re very sorry that people are inconvenienced. I mean, we’re inconveniencing people that are in the same boat as us. We’re ordinary men and women that want to do our jobs and provide a service, but when you’re being cut to pieces by an employer, and by the government, you’ve got to make a stand.

“So we’re making that stand on behalf of our members, but many other workers in Britain are suffering some very similar things and you’re going to

see a wave of this type of action. We can't stand by and watch our conditions be chopped up."

The strikes came as [Downing Street denied that ministers were deliberately seeking a political fight with rail unions](#) after both sides toughened their language further.

"The priority is on making sure people who use public transport can get to work, school and hospital appointments without such disruption," a No 10 source said.

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[Grant Shapps](#)

Shapps says he will impose rail changes if striking workers do not agree deals

Transport secretary claims ‘union barons’ are not putting offers to members and should ‘get out of way’

Grant Shapps threatens to impose railway overhaul amid strikes – video

[Jamie Grierson](#)

[@JamieGrierson](#)

Fri 19 Aug 2022 04.08 EDTFirst published on Fri 19 Aug 2022 04.07 EDT

Railway changes at the heart of some strike action will be imposed by legislation if workers do not agree to new deals, the transport secretary has suggested.

The UK is gripped once again by a run of strikes hitting train operators across the country and underground services in London.

On Friday, [a strike by Rail, Maritime and Transport union \(RMT\) workers](#) on the underground in London over issues including jobs and pensions has caused travel disruption.

Asked by Sky News if compulsory redundancies were on the table for rail workers, [Grant Shapps](#) repeated accusations that it was “union barons” to blame for failing to put offers to their members.

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“The deal that is on the table actually means largely no compulsory redundancies at all,” Shapps said of one offer. “If [the unions] are not prepared to put that deal to your membership we will never know whether members would accept it.”

Shapps said he would have to enact legislation referred to as a “section 188” to force through some of the measures. He said: “What I do know and I can say for sure is if we can’t get this settled in the way that we are proposing, which is ‘please put the deal to your membership’, then we will have to move to what is called a section 188; it is a process of actually requiring these changes to go into place so it becomes mandated.

“That is the direction that this is moving in now.”

Shapps said work practices needed to be updated, adding: “If we can’t get those modernisations in place we will have to impose those modernisations but we would much rather do it through these offers actually being put to their members.”

He gave an example of an offer made to RMT members of an 8% pay rise over two years, which was reportedly blocked by senior members of the union, including the RMT’s general secretary, Mick Lynch, without putting it to members.

Shapps said: “It’s time for union bosses to get out the way.”

The latest strike comes as the Tory leadership frontrunner, Liz Truss, unveiled plans for a radical shake-up of labour laws. The plan, drawn up by Truss, includes introducing minimum service levels on critical national infrastructure to keep trains, buses and other services running.

New laws would be introduced in parliament within a month of taking office if her leadership campaign is successful. She will raise ballot thresholds to

make it harder for strike action to take place across all sectors.

A cooling-off period would also be introduced so unions can no longer strike as many times as they like in the six-month period after a ballot.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/aug/19/strike-reforms-imposed-if-rail-workers-do-not-accept-deals-grant-shapps>

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House of the Dragon first look review – this epic Game of Thrones prequel is a roaring success



Here be dragons ... House Targaryen in House of the Dragon. Photograph: HBO

The long-awaited follow-up to the fantasy drama is here – and it's every bit as great as its predecessor in its heyday. It's fun, fantastic-looking and seems set to get us hooked all over again



[Lucy Mangan](#)
[@LucyMangan](#)

Fri 19 Aug 2022 03.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 15.34 EDT

The Iron Throne has been taken out of storage and returned to the Great Hall of the Red Keep. The wardrobe department has de-mothballed its finest furs and thrown them round the shoulders of a new cast. The creator of High Valyrian, David J Peterson, has likewise been brought out of hibernation to supply new dialogue.

And there be dragons.

Yes! The long-awaited prequel to the epic fantasy series Game of Thrones, which dominated the televisual landscape for eight riotously expensive seasons is here. It is derived from parts of author George RR Martin's 2018 bestseller Fire and Blood (the release was a bittersweet moment for fans who hoped he had been completing the Song of Ice and Fire book series from which Game of Thrones was adapted, rather than writing a prequel). [House](#)

[of the Dragon](#), then, is the tale of the Targaryens who began the whole bally thing.

Everyone who wasn't in [Game of Thrones](#) or filming *The Crown* when principal photography started is here. *House of the Dragon* begins in the ninth year of King Viserys I Targaryen's reign (played by Paddy Considine) – and about 200 years before we TV viewers first set foot in Westeros. His wife is pregnant. Their firstborn was a daughter, Rhaenyra (Milly Alcock), so everyone in the Seven Kingdoms is hoping for a male heir. Some of us at home are kind of hoping for another girl, otherwise Viserys's arrogant, bellicose younger brother – and heir presumptive – Prince Daemon (Matt Smith) is going to kick off and there will be more plot than anyone knows what to do with.

Alas and alack. After a spectacularly bloody and pain-meds-free birth, mother and baby (boy) die. The King's Hand, Ser Otto Hightower (Rhys Ifans) gives his boss five minutes to grieve before ordering his comely teenage daughter Alicent (Emily Carey) into her late mother's dress and Viserys's chamber to make herself useful to the king. This is a post-#MeToo prequel, so they bond over their shared griefs and his stone model of the Seven Kingdoms rather than dish up one of the rapey sex scenes so beloved of *GoT*. God, feminists ruin everything.

So here's a pickle! Viserys knows – though he gets very narked when members of his council point it out to him – that Daemon is fundamentally unsuited to governing the realm. But he's only got a lousy girl-child with any kind of claim to the throne instead. What to do, what to do? Nothing that makes anyone too happy, that's for sure.

By the end of the first hour, all the main pieces are in play, countless political, domestic and actual storms are brewing, old alliances are being broken, new ones formed and treachery is never more than a spear's length away. *House of the Dragon* looks set fair to become the game of political seven-dimensional chess that its predecessor was, designed to reward diehard fantasy fans in full measure without alienating the masses that will propel it to the top of the ratings.

For the avoidance of doubt and anxiety, the first hour also contains:

- Bloody beatings
- Bloody deaths
- Terrible wigs
- Extensive exchanges in High Valyrian
- Boobs and bums in brothels (take THAT, feminists!)
- Incest vibes (AGAIN!)
- A king's council filled with self-interested twunts and one good man
- Countless brewing political, domestic and actual storms
- Alliances, counter-alliances, treacheries and broken loyalties
- All the money up on screen
- Dragons

By the end of the second hour, you can add more dragons, more extended exchanges in High Valyrian, a dragon's egg, some decapitations, a hand in maggots, more bums and boobs, some arterial spray, narrative twists and turns that are still comprehensible (though we are still in the early stages and you can feel the barely controlled crowds of more jostling in the wings), a potential forbidden-love interest for Rhaenyra, and sailors fed to crabs – a lot more frightening than it sounds, actually.

In short, all is as it was in GoT's heyday. Fun, propulsive, looking great and sounding passable. And that, after the bizarrely poor finale to what had been a roaring success of a show, is a relief. There are also signs that in the remaining eight episodes there will be much more of the magnificent Eve Best as Viserys's cousin Rhaenys, known since her thwarted ascension to the Iron Throne as the Queen Who Never Was and I suspect to the writers as And One Who Might Be After All. Overall, a good time is coming.

- *Episode one of House of the Dragon airs on Sky Atlantic at 9pm on Monday 22 August in the UK. In the US, it's available on Sunday 21 August at 9pm on HBO and HBO Max.*

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/aug/19/house-of-the-dragon-review-game-of-thrones-prequel-got>

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[Drought](#)

Why are some areas of the UK in drought? A visual guide



A satellite image of the UK taken on 10 August 2022 shows swathes of scorched brown. Photograph: Met Office/Crown copyright/PA

Despite the arrival of heavy rain, nine UK regions remain drought zones. But what is a drought and why is it happening?

[*Theresa Malone*](#), [*Ashley Kirk*](#), [*David Blood*](#), [*Lucy Swan*](#) and [*Antonio Voce*](#)
Fri 19 Aug 2022 03.59 EDTLast modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 05.50 EDT

Despite the [heavy rain and thunderstorms](#) that have hit the UK this week, several areas of the country remain in drought. Drought was officially declared across [eight regions of England](#) on Friday 12 August, with a ninth – Yorkshire – added a few days later.

What is a drought?

There is no single definition for a drought, but one way of describing it is a prolonged period of abnormally low rainfall, leading to a shortage of water. In the UK, many areas had much lower than average rainfall for July.

[Regional UK rainfall graphic](#)

This lack of rainfall, relative to what would normally be expected in the UK at this time of year, has been combined with record high temperatures.

[Temperature records chart](#)

What are the effects of drought?

The combination of record temperatures and low rainfall has left the UK's land much drier than it should be. Data from the [UK Centre of Ecology and Hydrology](#) shows that most of south and east England have very dry conditions underground. Such conditions are of particular concern to farmers, who typically drill their seeds at this time of year – a job that could prove impossible [when the land is hard and dry](#).

[Groundwater in the UK - map](#)

Across the UK, [scenes of dead grass and dried-up rivers](#) have become a familiar sight. These changes are so stark they can be seen from space. Satellite imagery shows the UK has been scorched, turning from green to brown in a matter of months, even more so than in recent years as this comparison with August 2020 illustrates.

[Satellite image](#)

Image: Sentinel 3, European Space Agency

What can the UK do about drought?

Water companies have a responsibility to invest in infrastructure to ensure a reliable supply of water. However, many have been [criticised for failing to do this](#). Some companies have failed to tackle leaks and pollution, or to build more reservoirs, even as their bosses continue to be [rewarded with large bonuses](#).

While the government has emphasised that essential water supplies to households are not at risk, water companies are asking people to [try to save water](#) where possible. Hosepipe bans have been announced in several of the worst-hit areas, with Thames Water the latest to declare the restriction this week.

[Hosepipe bans map](#)

However, with drought conditions expected to continue until October and possibly the new year, alongside fears that droughts will become a more common occurrence, [longer-term solutions from water companies](#) are increasingly urgent.

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‘I got really grounded and loved it’: how grief, going home and gabber built Björk’s new album

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[Experience](#)Life and style

Experience: I unearthed a mammoth from the ice age

An incredible storm blew up, as if we had released more than just an animal



Travis Delawski with the infant mammoth. Photograph: Treadstone Gold

Travis Delawski

Fri 19 Aug 2022 05.00 EDTLast modified on Sat 20 Aug 2022 01.06 EDT

I'd been working as a gold miner for only 30 days when I made my big discovery. The company I'd been employed by, Treadstone Gold, had begun its second season mining a cut in Eureka Creek in a remote region in Yukon, north-western [Canada](#).

I had been operating various machines as I learned the ropes, and early in the afternoon of 21 June this year I was using an excavator with a “ripper” attachment – a big metal hook that allowed me to break through the permafrost.

The cut I was working in was surrounded by pine forests and had been dug down to about 60ft below the treeline. As I chipped at the bottom of a frozen bank of earth, I pulled a chunk away and saw something that I first took to be a skull. Miners often uncover the skeletons of animals such as ancient bison in this part of the Yukon – like other members of the crew, I'd been trained to remove these finds with care. My boss, Brian, was on site, so I called him on the two-way radio. "You'd better come down," I said. "I think I've found a body."

"Is it human?" asked Brian.

"I think it's a buffalo or something," I said. At that stage, we assumed we were dealing with a few bones, but when I looked closer I realised I was looking at something much more unusual. Wiping away some of the black muck coating the head, I saw it was more than a skull – it still had skin and ears, as well as what appeared to be a trunk. I grabbed the radio again.

"It's like a tiny elephant," I said. "Brian, I think it's a baby mammoth."

Brian told me to dig out the body and bring it straight up to camp. I had uncovered only the front half of the body, and wondered if there was more, so used the ripper attachment to cautiously poke around in the same area, eventually uncovering the mammoth's back legs and rump, complete with a cool little tail. All in all, the body was about 4ft 6in long.

I loaded the remains into an excavator bucket and drove them up to the mine's main camp, where Brian and I examined them further. He was pretty taken aback – I don't think I'd prepared him for how well preserved the mammoth was. It looked like it could have died the week before, and you could make out pores in the skin and the patterns on the pads on its feet – there was even hair still clinging on.

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Brian contacted the Yukon government palaeontologist Grant Zazula who promised to scramble a field crew as fast as he could. Meanwhile, we were advised to cover our find in wet blankets and tarpaulin. When the geological survey team arrived, it was clear how excited they were. They spent an extra couple of hours surveying the site of the discovery and found more hair from the mammoth, and preserved greenery from the time it had been entombed. We later learned the body was that of a female, probably a month old, and that she'd died during the ice age, at least 30,000 years ago.

She was packed with ice to help preserve her long enough to make the two-hour journey to Dawson City, where she could be stored in a freezer. As she left the site on the back of a truck, the most incredible thunderstorm blew up out of nowhere and rolled through the valley. Thunderbolts were striking the ground nearby, rain was coming in sideways and we were pelted with hailstones the size of golf balls. Brian had to shut down the whole operation until it passed. It was like a scene from a movie, as if we'd released something more than just the mammoth.

It took a few days for me to realise how significant the discovery was. We knew our find was a rare one, but soon learned I'd uncovered the [most complete and best-preserved](#) mummified woolly mammoth found in North America.

The land we're mining belongs to the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation people, whose elders have called the mammoth calf Nun cho ga – in their Hän language, this means “big animal baby”. There has been a blessing ceremony at the Eureka site, and I gather she'll remain on the traditional territory where she was found.

Meanwhile, I'm concentrating on mining for gold, though always conscious of what else I might find. Who knows – perhaps Nun cho ga's momma is still in there.

As told to Chris Broughton

Do you have an experience to share? Email experience@theguardian.com

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Thatcherism is an obsolete ideology – but it's the only one that Sunak and Truss have

[Andy Beckett](#)

The Tories see fresh thinking as a luxury, so their leaders are sticking with an orthodoxy that's well past its sell-by date



Illustration: Nate Kitch/The Guardian

Fri 19 Aug 2022 03.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 09.32 EDT

It's generally agreed that the last dozen years have been some of the most turbulent in our modern history. So much has changed or been called into question: our climate, the cost of living, the state's ability to protect us, capitalism's ability to spread prosperity, the continuation of the United Kingdom, our relationship with Russia and the EU, even our sense that we can be a functional society. To an extent that was almost inconceivable in

2010, when the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition took office, this has become a different country.

Some politicians have tried to adapt. Labour has moved leftwards and then back towards the centre. The Lib Dems have moved rightwards, supporting Tory austerity, and then become more hostile to the [Conservatives](#) under Ed Davey. The SNP has become more assertive in its push for independence. Meanwhile some Tories, such as Boris Johnson and Theresa May, have at least talked about governing in new ways, by “levelling up” or helping the “just about managing”.

Yet one group of politicians, who have gradually become the most powerful in the country, and are about to become our rulers, whoever wins the Tory leadership contest, have seemingly not adjusted their thinking at all amid the chaos and flux. As a result, we may face our worst peacetime crisis since the 1930s under a government with a disastrously out-of-date worldview.

Eleven years ago, five Tory MPs first elected in 2010 – Liz Truss, Kwasi Kwarteng, Dominic Raab, Priti Patel and Chris Skidmore – set out this worldview in a now largely forgotten book, [After the Coalition: A Conservative Agenda for Britain](#). “The future of Britain’s prosperity lies in ... free market values,” declared its introduction. Taxes should be cut, “the ‘handout’ culture” should be ended, and “Britain should seek to regain control” from the EU, and negotiate “its own trade deals”. If these steps were taken, the book concluded, “Britain’s relative decline ... is not inevitable”.

In its optimism and broad-brush solutions, its combativeness and air of utter conviction, the book now reads just like a leadership race speech by Truss. It also prefigures many of the promises currently being made by her rival, Rishi Sunak, who became an MP five years later than the Tory class of 2010 but shares much of their outlook. While Truss has become known for sometimes dressing and posing exactly like Margaret Thatcher, last month [Sunak told the Telegraph](#): “My values are Thatcherite.”

When Truss and Sunak first began promoting that version of Conservatism in the 2010s, it was already showing its age. Thatcher’s heyday had been a

quarter of a century earlier. Much more recently, the 2008 financial crisis had discredited deregulated capitalism. And then came the stagnant wages and regional decline of the 2010s: problems serious enough to persuade May and Johnson that a Conservative government could no longer just be about liberating business and confining the state.

Yet though Truss, Sunak, Raab, Patel, Kwarteng and Skidmore all served in these mildly heretical Tory governments, and could easily have noticed that British free market capitalism was in difficulties, they never renounced the Thatcherite faith. Why not?

One answer is that May and Johnson's economic rethinks rarely produced more than rhetoric. Their governments remained good places for economic rightwingers to build careers. Another answer is that the rightwing press – which has become even more important for the Tories as newspaper readerships and Conservative voters have aged – remains essentially Thatcherite in its economic assumptions. In its pages, unions and regulation are nearly always bad, and shareholders and homeowners are the interest groups that matter.

Meanwhile, Toryism increasingly values politicians who refuse to change direction, and instead become more dogmatic – who “double down”, as political reporters often admiringly put it. The success of the leave campaign, built on decades of stubbornness and escalation, has helped make rigidity seem a virtue. The fact that the Conservatives have not lost a general election for 17 years, despite how detached they have often seemed about Britain's alarming socioeconomic shifts, has convinced many Tories that fresh thinking is a luxury they don't need. Since 2010, a greater and greater proportion of the party's supporters have been people who grew up under Thatcher, and who probably still see her governments as the gold standard.

Much of the party's funding also comes from people who want Thatcherite policies to continue. Hedge funds, private equity firms and property developers tend to favour looser regulation, and are often not hugely concerned about the social consequences of their working practices. The government has prioritised these interests, through housing market subsidies and plans to further deregulate finance, while increasingly neglecting other

businesses, such as the many small manufacturers and exporters being steadily choked by Brexit.

It's hard to think of a modern precedent for the broader problems Britain now faces: much of the population and the state in deep financial trouble, while the governing party – if that's not too generous a description – becomes less, rather than more, flexible in its thinking. When the financial crisis happened, Labour had been in power for a similarly long time; but by then it had become increasingly self-doubting and prepared to change its policies, as Gordon Brown's largely improvised rescue of the banking sector demonstrated. Even Thatcher could be less conventionally rightwing in a crisis than her disciples like to think. During the recession of the early 1980s, she allowed her chancellor Geoffrey Howe to raise taxes – the opposite of Truss's promised approach.

When the Tories finally deign to give us a new premier, Truss or Sunak might surprise us. As chancellor, Sunak's response to the pandemic did temporarily break with the free market dogma that economic hardship should be largely for individuals rather than the state to solve. Yet that transgression, partly because it involved raising taxes, is one of the reasons that he trails Truss in Tory membership polls.

She has a history of occasional big U-turns, over Brexit and even her choice of party. But they are in the fairly distant past. Her more enduring attitudes, exemplified by the recording leaked this week of her saying that British workers needed to show [“more graft”](#), are of the Norman Tebbit school: Tory governments are meant to toughen us up.

Such an approach amid an economic catastrophe could lead the Conservatives to a heavy election defeat. But that outcome would also require many more voters to realise how old-fashioned the party has become. Until a large part of the electorate finally renounces Thatcherism, too, her disciples will march on.

- Andy Beckett is a Guardian columnist
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[Opinion](#)**Abortion**

Think abortion is legal in Great Britain? Ask the two women currently facing life sentences

[Charlotte Proudman](#)

The overturning of Roe v Wade is horrific, but vulnerable women are being imprisoned for ending pregnancies right now in Britain. It's time to legalise abortion



Pro-choice supporters march on the US embassy in London in protest at the US supreme court's move to overturn Roe v Wade, May 2022. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Fri 19 Aug 2022 02.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 02.59 EDT

Like many people in Britain, you probably watched with horror the US supreme court's reversal of Roe v Wade, thinking, "Thank goodness women could never be prosecuted for having an abortion here."

But let me tell you, it already happens here.

Two women are currently awaiting criminal trial in England for abortion-related offences, both facing charges that carry a maximum sentence of life. At least 17 women have been investigated by police over the past eight years for having had abortions.

In Oxford, a 25-year-old mother of one is facing trial for allegedly taking the drug misoprostol – one of the two pills routinely prescribed by doctors to abort a pregnancy. But her baby was born alive and she was subsequently reported to the police. She is being charged under the Offences Against the Person Act, a law passed by parliament in 1861, before the invention of the lightbulb and before women had the right to vote. The law states that a woman must be “kept in penal servitude for life” if she procures an abortion.

Another woman is facing trial after she [took abortion pills](#) she obtained from the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) by post when rules were relaxed during the pandemic to allow this. She was allegedly 28 weeks pregnant at the time and is facing charges of “child destruction” (note the visceral language) under the Infant Life (Preservation) Act from 1929, which also comes with a maximum life sentence. She could spend the rest of her life in prison.

We so often think that the 1967 [Abortion](#) Act legalised abortion. But it did no such thing. It partially decriminalised abortion in England, Scotland and Wales, so long as strict conditions were in place, such as a confirmation from two medical practitioners that the pregnancy had not exceeded 28 weeks (subsequently reduced to 24 weeks in 1990), or that the termination was necessary to prevent injury or mental harm. Any abortion outside these criteria is still a criminal offence.

We know that it is overwhelmingly vulnerable women who are investigated and prosecuted for having abortions. One woman collapsed in the dock when she was sentenced to two and a half years in 2015 for taking tablets she had bought online to induce a miscarriage after the 24-week period of gestation. The court heard that she had “a history of emotional and psychological problems”.

Another woman, a mother of one, ordered pills online to induce an abortion in 2019 after her abusive boyfriend had told her not to go to the doctor. She had believed she was eight to 10 weeks pregnant but after a traumatic miscarriage in her bath tub, where she has [described](#) sitting in an inch of blood, she realised her pregnancy had been much further along. She was arrested in her hospital bed and served two years in prison.

These are just some examples of women who have faced trial: there are multiple other women who face gruelling police investigations. In 2021, a 15-year-old girl was investigated for a year after suffering an unexplained stillbirth. Her phone and laptop were confiscated during her GCSE exams, she was self-harming, and the investigation only ended after a coroner concluded that the pregnancy ended due to natural causes. Another woman was [arrested in hospital last year](#) and kept in a prison cell for 36 hours after a stillbirth at 24 weeks, and is now suffering PTSD. My question is this: if a woman has had an abortion late in the gestation period, or a traumatic miscarriage or stillbirth, should she go to prison or should she be offered support from medical practitioners at what is clearly a horrendous time, both mentally and physically?

Women in 2022 are being shackled by a 160-year-old law made at a time when we were not even allowed to set foot in the House of Commons. Urgent reform is needed to protect more women from harm, which is why organisations such as BPAS and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) are calling on the director of public prosecutions for England and Wales, Max Hill QC, to drop all charges against these women. The RCOG [this month has gone further](#), calling on ministers to finally legalise abortion. There is absolutely no public interest in sending vulnerable women to prison for terminating pregnancies. Instead, these prosecutions will only serve to put off women seeking help from doctors because they might get arrested, pushing more women into unsafe and underground options.

Meanwhile, according to the criteria of the Abortion Act, a woman has to show that she would suffer grave permanent injury to her mental health if she did not have an abortion after 24 weeks. Why should women still have to pathologise themselves as mad, hysterical, unfit or suffering to legally access healthcare?

The state currently has a triple lock on women's bodies. By not legalising abortion it has the right to force pregnancy, birth and motherhood upon us. Look to the rules on organ donation: it is illegal to donate people's organs after they die (however desperately they are needed by people on waiting lists) without their permission. The law at present, which denies women the right to abort a pregnancy on their own terms, is to give us less autonomy than a corpse.

- Charlotte Proudman is a barrister specialising in violence against women and girls and a fellow at Queens' College, Cambridge
- ***Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a letter of up to 300 words to be considered for publication, email it to us at guardian.letters@theguardian.com***

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[OpinionCulture](#)

Soaring MDF prices, extortionate interval drinks, cash-strapped audiences: the arts are staring inflation in the face

[Charlotte Higgins](#)



Just putting the lights on is staggeringly expensive. How many of our venues can survive this?



The Old Vic, London, deserted during lockdown, June 2020. Photograph: The Old Vic/Getty Images

Fri 19 Aug 2022 05.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 12.36 EDT

Imagine a small music venue. There are many such places dotted around the UK, the sort of spot where you might catch an up-and-coming band, some folk or jazz, the occasional standup comedian. I'm thinking of a real venue, capacity 500, in the south of England. There's nowhere else to see live music in this town, and it's been going for decades. Only it may not be around for much longer. It's just had its electricity bill, from the [largely state-owned](#) French company EDF (fill in your own ironies). That bill is 640% higher than the last one.

There's no energy price cap for businesses such as this – that's just for households. They've pulled in a broker to try to get them a better rate, without success. The extra £31,000 for putting the lights on is more than what the boss is paid. They're worried that if they go public, the landlord and their suppliers will panic and pull the plug. Which really would be the end.

One possible solution is to increase ticket prices from £8 to £12.50. Another, to put up a pint of lager from £5.70 to £8.20. But the last thing any of them

wants to do is pass on costs to an audience who are already tight for cash, with inflation at a [40-year high](#) and the real value of workers' pay [falling at its fastest](#) for 20 years.

But what's to do? Covid was a nightmare for venues such as this, but the government did eventually step in with the [cultural recovery fund](#). Mark Davyd, who runs the Music Venue Trust, told me that 50 to 100 members of his network are facing a “frankly imminent crisis” – one that is even more threatening than the pandemic, because this is happening completely outside the political conversation, which is focused on household bills. “It is oddly and tragically likely to close more music venues than Covid,” he told me.

It's not just small music venues. Thousands of small businesses and shops are going to be clobbered by massive energy bills and the result will be job losses and high streets yet more desolate than they are now. Let's bring it back to the arts, though: the Lowry, Salford's arts centre, has already gone public with its [tripled energy bill](#) – pushing £1m. There's a similar picture at Sadler's Wells in London, Britain's national dance theatre, where it has just heard its energy costs are also likely to triple, to £900,000. That's on top of a dozen years of standstill funding – which in real terms means a cut in its Arts Council grant of around 25%. It will be happening all around the country, and to your local arts centre, unless it is lucky enough to be locked into a long-term deal that doesn't expire yet, or is part of a government energy-purchasing scheme.

“Frankly, we are looking at ticket prices. And that's difficult,” Sir Alistair Spalding, the theatre's boss, told me. He'll probably hike up the top end of big popular shows, leaving the cheaper tickets be – but even that policy, progressive in its way, letting the rich absorb the cost, is not an ideal vibe for a supposedly inclusive, welcoming theatre.

Inflation and its consequences, as they filter through cultural organisations, will hit people hard: lives actually do get worse, more impoverished, when the Christmas show at your local theatre, a treasured family ritual, becomes unaffordable; when your teenager can't watch bands in her home town; when the museum gets shabbier and cuts its opening hours and there's nowhere warm and free to take the kids for a few activities. When arts organisations are under this much pressure, whole communities suffer.

Of course, the long tail of Covid is making this much worse. Staff are exhausted by the constant crisis mode. Workforces are still getting hit by outbreaks. For many organisations, ticket sales have [yet to recover fully](#). No one really knows if a whole tranche of people will ever kick the comforting Netflix habit and venture out again. The Proms, for example, are not alone in being around 20% down on sales compared with 2019. Audiences are also booking tickets later, hedging their bets. One folk musician, who's embarking on a tour this autumn, tells me that venues are almost begging people to book early. Without enough advance sales they can be pushed into cancelling shows for fear that they won't make back their costs.

It's not just energy bills that are going through the roof: at [Theatr Clwyd](#), in Mold, Flintshire, Steve Eccleson is head of workshop, in charge of building sets. He is staring inflation in the face through the huge hike in the cost of materials. An 8ft x 4ft MDF sheet has gone from £6.79 in July 2020 to £17 in January this year. Plywood has leapt from £29.98 a sheet in January this year to £43.75 in June. The tubing they use for scaffolding was £17.84 in 2020, but £64.90 now. That means the cost of a set – say, for the theatre's new musical, The Famous Five – is up by between 30% and 40%. The theatre is also at the start of a big capital redevelopment, the cost of which Liam Evans-Ford, its executive director, is projecting to go up by 20%, but who knows?

In the long term, there are investments that can be made to mitigate the worst effects of costly energy: insulation, LED lighting, solar panels and the rest. A decade ago Glyndebourne plunged £1m into a [wind turbine](#) that, having paid for itself in six years, is shielding it from the current crisis. (At times the opera house does have to buy energy, but it also exports to the grid, meaning it actually benefits from rising prices.)

The Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester has a [£4.3m government grant](#) to help it decarbonise – in the future, its sprawling buildings and historic working machinery will get their energy from a water-source heat pump. Hampshire Cultural Trust, which runs the county's museums, has used the same grant scheme, designed to decarbonise public buildings, to put [solar panels](#) on four of its buildings. In truth, though, this kind of thing could have been done long ago; energy efficiency should have

been higher up the political and cultural agenda. (A non-profit, [Julie's Bicycle](#), has been agitating for increased sustainability in the arts for 15 years.)

The situation, in the short term, demands urgent political attention, and an energy price cap that goes beyond households. The organisations that survive this will be those that ruthlessly adapt, focusing entirely on “how we sustain people – through their souls as well as their stomachs – in difficult times”, as Elizabeth Newman, artistic director of Pitlochry Festival theatre in Perthshire, told me. Sustaining people and giving places identity and pride are precisely what is needed as the country teeters between a pandemic and a recession. The trouble is, it's just got much harder to do.

- Charlotte Higgins is the Guardian's chief culture writer

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OpinionEnergy industry.

I worked for BP for 30 years – the energy sector has become incompetent and greedy

Nick Butler

If these profiteering firms are failing to meet society's needs, the government should take them back into public control



‘Germany and others are preparing for the risk of shortages with plans for rationing consumption. The UK, apparently considering itself immune, has done nothing.’ Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

Fri 19 Aug 2022 01.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 06.26 EDT

A freeze on the energy price cap now looks inevitable. The increase that Ofgem plans to announce on 26 August and the further increases later in the year should be abandoned by the energy regulator, whose functions have been overwhelmed by events. Ofgem cannot realistically set in motion a

process that further fuels inflation, already running at 10%, and condemns millions to fuel poverty. The honourable resignation of Ofgem board member [Christine Farnish](#) will not be the last departure from an organisation that has lost its way.

The freeze is necessary but far from sufficient. We still rely on natural gas for about 40% of our daily energy consumption. The promised energy transition has barely begun. The price of the gas we import – about half of total consumption – will still be set on the world market, and is likely to keep rising, especially if Europe's hot summer is followed by a cold winter. Further action is needed, from the government and the energy industry.

First, a support scheme must be put in place that protects the poorest people and those struggling on tight budgets. The welfare system can be used to protect those on benefits, but some further action, perhaps through rebates on the lower bands of council tax, may be the best way of helping those for whom current energy prices are [creating hardship](#). Business rates can also be varied, as during Covid, to help those enterprises in greatest jeopardy. Energy retailers should be required to demonstrate they are supporting those in need, not least by ending the pernicious extra charges imposed for those using pre-payment meters.

Second, there must be a forensic examination of the accounts of companies across the energy sector. In each case, they must set out their costs and their profit margins if they are to regain public trust. There is, for instance, no reason why the producers of power from nuclear or renewable sources in the UK should be taking advantage of a price cap dominated by the wholesale price of natural gas. A close examination of the true economics of each company is likely to show that freezing the price cap will be cheaper than is currently imagined and expose exactly who should be targeted by any taxation of unjustifiable profits. Those who resist are in danger of losing their licence to operate.

The cycle of privatisation that began in the 1980s may be coming to an end. I worked for BP for nearly 30 years and I learned from hard experience during the [tanker drivers' dispute](#) in 2000 that the continuity of energy

supply is rightly regarded as a government responsibility. As with the financial sector in 2008, if the private energy sector fails to meet the needs of the society it serves, its functions must and will be taken on by the government. The companies involved now must show they understand that they must use their skills and resources in the public interest.

The third challenge beyond the freeze is to secure adequate physical supplies of gas. This is a matter for close cooperation between the government and the energy sector. Other European countries, led by Germany, have been actively seeking resources on the world market to replace the supplies no longer coming from Russia. The EU has created a single-buyer mechanism and individual countries are pursuing new deals with producers around the world, from [Qatar and Algeria](#) to the US. Spare resources are scarce because investment levels have been low and new supplies typically take three to five years to come onstream. The result is that a physical shortage of gas across the EU is highly likely this winter.

Germany and others are preparing for that risk with serious plans for rationing consumption. The UK, apparently considering itself immune to Europe's problems, has done nothing and is not even matching the current voluntary measures being adopted across the EU to reduce consumption. Ministers seem not to realise that if countries such as France and Norway limit supplies to the UK this winter in order to meet their own needs, the shortages could be real and substantial. The urgent need is to secure a buffer of additional supplies and develop the long-neglected gas storage facilities that other countries take for granted. Securing and maintaining adequate supplies requires a public-private partnership with the common, overriding aim of maintaining energy security.

These steps would help mitigate the risks of the current situation. But they are still not enough to create genuine long-term energy security. Sustained investment is needed in all parts of the energy business – to improve the efficiency of the ways we use energy, to provide the infrastructure necessary for a serious low-carbon transition, and to regulate a complex hybrid sector that combines public policy and private capital. Loose, unsubstantiated and underfunded commitments to ever more ambitious headline targets achieve nothing. A regulator that licenses undercapitalised suppliers in order to promote “competition”, then watches them fail as soon as prices begin to

rise is incompetent. Fatalism in the face of the inevitable volatility of a global market in which supplies are concentrated and vulnerable to being weaponised is pathetic.

The lesson of past experience is that systemic problems make the line between the public and private sector largely irrelevant. Solutions require a combined effort by pragmatic, realistic governments and companies conscious of their social responsibilities. As we lurch towards a new winter of discontent, the only hope is that the current crisis will drive us back to the substance and detail of a serious energy policy.

- Nick Butler is a visiting professor at King's College London, and a former group vice-president for strategy and policy development at BP, and an adviser to Gordon Brown
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2022.08.19 - Around the world

- [Imran Khan Pakistan's ex-PM says Salman Rushdie attack was unjustifiable](#)
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[Imran Khan](#)

Salman Rushdie attack was unjustifiable, says Pakistan's Imran Khan

In a wide-ranging Guardian interview, the former prime minister says he understands anger The Satanic Verses created ‘but you can’t justify what happened’



The attack on author Salman Rushdie was unjustifiable, said Imran Khan, striking a different tone to the muted political reaction elsewhere in Pakistan. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

[Julian Borger](#) in Washington and [Shah Meer Baloch](#) in Islamabad

Thu 18 Aug 2022 21.00 EDTLast modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 11.35 EDT

Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan has condemned the attack on [Salman Rushdie](#), describing it as “terrible” and “sad”, and saying that while

the anger of the Islamic world at Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* was understandable, it could not justify the assault.

Khan also said he expected Afghan women to "assert their rights" in the face of Taliban restrictions in a *Guardian* interview in which he sought to moderate his reputation as a firebrand. He is fighting for his political survival after being ousted from office in April. Khan says his staff and followers are being persecuted and intimidated and he is battling eight-year-old charges of illicit campaign financing that could lead to him being banned from politics.

Ten years ago, Khan pulled out of an event in India because Rushdie would also be appearing and the two men exchanged insults, but Khan does not appear to have expressed support for violent action against the Indian-born author. His denunciation of the attack is striking, however, in a region where most politicians have ducked comment.

Asked for his response to the knife attack in New York state that left Rushdie badly wounded, Khan said: "I think it's terrible, sad.

"Rushdie understood, because he came from a Muslim family. He knows the love, respect, reverence of a prophet that lives in our hearts. He knew that," Khan said. "So the anger I understood, but you can't justify what happened."

'The Afghan people will assert their rights'

A year ago, Khan caused consternation in the west and among many Afghans when he welcomed the Taliban's seizure of power, saying it was "breaking the chains of slavery". He defended the Taliban's treatment of women and girls, describing it as a local "cultural norm" and noting: "Every society's idea of human rights and women rights are different."

One year on, women remain excluded from the Afghan workforce and girls over 14 are still banned from attending school. Khan however insisted that change had to come from within Afghanistan.

“Eventually Afghan women, the Afghan people, will assert their rights. They are strong people,” he said. “But if you push the Taliban from the outside, knowing their mindset, they will just put up defences. They just hate outside interference.”

Since losing a vote of no confidence in April, Khan said his party, [Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf \(PTI\)](#), had been the target of efforts by the new government and the security forces aimed at pushing it off the political stage.

A top aide, Shahbaz Gill, was arrested on Tuesday and was hospitalised while in custody. Khan said he was beaten and “psychologically broken”.

The Islamabad police said that Gill was arrested for inciting the public against state institutions, and “inciting the people to rebellion”. Khan said Gill was targeted because he had said army officers should not obey unlawful commands.

“They are forcing him to say that I was the one who told him to say that,” the former prime minister said.

A medical report on Gill said that he had arrived at the hospital with rapid breathing, noting that he was asthmatic. It also referred to “body aches” and “soft tissue tenderness” on his arm, lower back and buttock. He was reported late on Thursday to have been discharged from hospital and to be back in custody.

The television channel that interviewed Gill prior to his arrest, ARY, has been shut down in some parts of the country.

Khan said Gill’s arrest and the closure of ARY was part of a pattern under the current government of Shehbaz Sharif, who replaced Khan as prime minister.

“What they’re doing to Gill is sending a message to everyone,” he said. “And they have scared our workers. Social media activists have been picked up and we have a very vibrant social media. They’re trying to sort of intimidate the people.”

Pakistan also had a poor human rights record under Khan's tenure, from 2018 to April this year, with extrajudicial killings of dissidents and frequent threats against journalists, especially female reporters who faced torrents of sexual abuse on social media.

Khan blamed the excesses and disappearances on the counter-insurgency tactics of the security forces.

"They were responsible for picking up people, but according to them they were involved in this insurgency, which was going on in Balochistan and the tribal area bordering Afghanistan. So they would blame that, with some justification, because you could not convict terrorists in the courts because you wouldn't get witnesses," Khan said.

"In my time, we never tried to oppress the media. The only problem was that sometimes the ... security agencies – three or four times we found out that picked someone up and immediately when we found out we would immediately have them released," he said.



Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan blamed the security forces for human rights abuses during his reign. Photograph: Saiyna Bashir/Reuters

The free press advocacy organisation Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said the litany of abuses under Khan's government was "endless". But it added

there was a new campaign to intimidate critical journalists.

“There has been no let-up in the harassment of journalists since Khan’s replacement by Sharif as prime minister – quite the contrary,” RSF said in a statement.

Khan is also facing a case against the PTI by the country’s election commission for illegal foreign campaign contributions. He did not deny the allegations but dismissed the case as politically motivated, saying rival parties, such as Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), had not faced similar scrutiny.

One of the founding members of PTI, Akbar Babar, filed a case against the party in November 2014, claiming irregularities in the handling of roughly \$3m in foreign funding. Last month the Election Commission of Pakistan ruled that the PTI had received prohibited funding. The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has been tasked to further investigate and the commission has summoned Khan on Tuesday. Experts say Khan can be banned from politics or his party can be banned if charges are proven.

Khan blamed Washington for engineering the vote of no confidence that brought down his government, suggesting the US had helped persuade members of his party to defect.

He has also blamed Pakistan’s military, which has long acted as kingmaker in the country’s political life. He was more circumspect in accusing the security forces in his interview with the Guardian, but said: “If they were not behind the conspiracy, they certainly could have stopped it because the intelligence agencies, the ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence] and MI [Military Intelligence], are international-quality intelligence agencies, and they certainly would have known what was going on.”

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[Apple](#)

Apple security flaw ‘actively exploited’ by hackers to fully control devices

Users of iPhone, iPad and Mac advised to update software to secure them against vulnerability



Apple released two security reports about the issue on Wednesday.
Photograph: Apple/Zuma Press/Rex/Shutterstock

[Alex Hern](#)

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Thu 18 Aug 2022 20.44 EDTFirst published on Thu 18 Aug 2022 19.17 EDT

Apple users have been advised to immediately update their iPhones, iPads and Macs to protect against a pair of security vulnerabilities that can allow attackers to take complete control of their devices.

In both cases, Apple said, there are credible reports that hackers are already abusing the vulnerabilities to attack users.

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One of the software weaknesses affects the kernel, the deepest layer of the operating system that all the devices have in common, Apple said. The other affects WebKit, the underlying technology of the Safari web browser.

For each of the bugs, the company said it was “aware of a report that this issue may have been actively exploited,” though it provided no further details. It credited an anonymous researcher or researchers for disclosing both.

Anyone with an iPhone released since 2015, an iPad released since 2014 or a Mac running macOS Monterey can download the update by opening up the settings menu on their mobile device, or choosing “software update” on the “about this Mac” menu on their computer.

Rachel Tobac, the CEO of SocialProof Security, said Apple’s explanation of the vulnerability meant a hacker could get “full admin access to the device” so that they can “execute any code as if they are you, the user”.

Those who should be particularly attentive to updating their software are “people who are in the public eye”, such as activists or journalists who might be the targets of sophisticated nation-state spying, Tobac said.

Until the fix was released on Wednesday, the vulnerabilities will have been classed as “zero-day” bugs, because there has been a fix available for them

for zero days. Such weaknesses are hugely valuable on the open market, where cyberweapon brokers will buy them for hundreds of thousands, or millions, of dollars.

The broker Zerodium, for instance, will pay “up to \$500,000” for a security weakness that can be used to hack a user through Safari, and up to \$2m for a fully developed piece of malware that can hack an iPhone without a user needing to click on anything. The company says its customers for such weaknesses are “government institutions (mainly from Europe and North America)”.

Commercial spyware companies such as Israel’s NSO Group are known for identifying and taking advantage of such flaws, exploiting them in malware that surreptitiously infects targets’ smartphones, siphons their contents and surveils the targets in real time.

NSO Group has been blacklisted by the US commerce department. Its spyware is known to have been used in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America against journalists, dissidents and human rights activists.

Will Strafach, a security researcher, said he had seen no technical analysis of the vulnerabilities that Apple has just patched. The company has previously acknowledged similarly serious flaws and, on what Strafach estimated to be perhaps a dozen occasions, has noted that it was aware of reports that such security holes had been exploited.

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[China](#)

Chinese city dims lights as record heatwave hits energy supplies

Highs of over 40C in Chengdu dry up hydropower reservoirs and raise demand for air conditioning



Lights have been dimmed on metro platforms, walkways and in malls, with commuters walking in partial darkness. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

[Helen Davidson](#) and agencies

Fri 19 Aug 2022 05.43 EDTLast modified on Fri 19 Aug 2022 07.48 EDT

A provincial capital in south-west [China](#) has dimmed outdoor advertisements, subway lighting and building signs to save energy as the area struggles with a power crunch triggered by record-high temperatures.

Temperatures rose past 40C (104F) in Sichuan province this week, fuelling massive demand for air conditioning and drying up reservoirs in a region reliant on dams for most of its electricity.

Factories including a joint venture with the Japanese car maker Toyota in the provincial capital, Chengdu, have been forced to halt work, while millions in another city, Dazho, grappled with rolling power cuts.

“Hot and muggy weather has caused the city’s electricity supply for production and daily life to be pushed to its limit,” Chengdu’s urban management authorities said in a notice on social media on Thursday.

Faced with a “most severe situation”, the city, which is home to more than 20 million people, had ordered landscape illumination and outdoor advertising lights to be switched off in notices issued Tuesday, the statement said. Building name signs will also be darkened.

Chengdu metro said in a video on China’s Weibo social media platform that it would also turn off advertisement lights and “optimise” the temperature in stations to save energy.

Photos circulating on Weibo showed dimmed lights on metro platforms, walkways and in malls, with commuters walking in partial darkness.

China has suffered a series of heatwaves and record-breaking temperatures this summer. By Friday, the national meteorological administration had issued red-level heat warnings for eight consecutive days, bringing the total to 30 days since June. The heat is expected to continue in some areas for the next 10 days.

On Thursday, the south-western city of Chongqing registered a record high of 45C, state media reported, hitting a record 11 consecutive days above 40C. As of Friday, Hangzhou had also experienced a record 30 days of high temperatures, the national meteorological administration said.

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Multiple heat records have been broken and a worsening drought has reduced water levels in the country's largest lake by 75%. On Thursday morning, the total area of Poyang lake in Jiangxi province had reduced by more than 2,200 sq km, to 737 sq km.

The drought is also drying up the critical Yangtze River, with water flow on its main trunk about 51% lower than the average over the last five years, state media outlet China News Service reported on Thursday.

Sichuan's power woes could also have ripple effects on the wider Chinese economy – the province is a key supplier of energy generated by hydropower, including to eastern industrial powerhouses like Jiangsu and Zhejiang.

China is battling extreme weather on several fronts, with 17 people killed in a flash flood in the north-west of the country on Thursday after torrential rains.

Meanwhile, weather authorities in the eastern Jiangsu province warned drivers of tire puncture risks on Friday as the surface temperatures of some roads were expected to hit 68C.

The China Meteorological Administration earlier said the country was going through its longest period of sustained high temperatures since records began in 1961.

Scientists say extreme weather across the world has become more frequent due to the climate crisis and that urgent global cooperation is needed to slow an impending disaster. The world's two largest emitters are the US and China.

But earlier this month Beijing announced it was freezing its cooperation with Washington on global heating in protest over a visit by the US House

speaker, Nancy Pelosi, to Taiwan.

With Agence France-Presse

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[US news](#)

James ‘Whitey’ Bulger: three charged with 2018 prison killing of Boston crime boss

Bulger’s death raised questions about why known ‘snitch’ was placed in general jail population instead of secure quarters



James ‘Whitey’ Bulger when he was first arrested in Los Angeles in 1953.
Photograph: KeystoneUSA-Zuma/Rex/Shutterstock

Associated Press in Boston

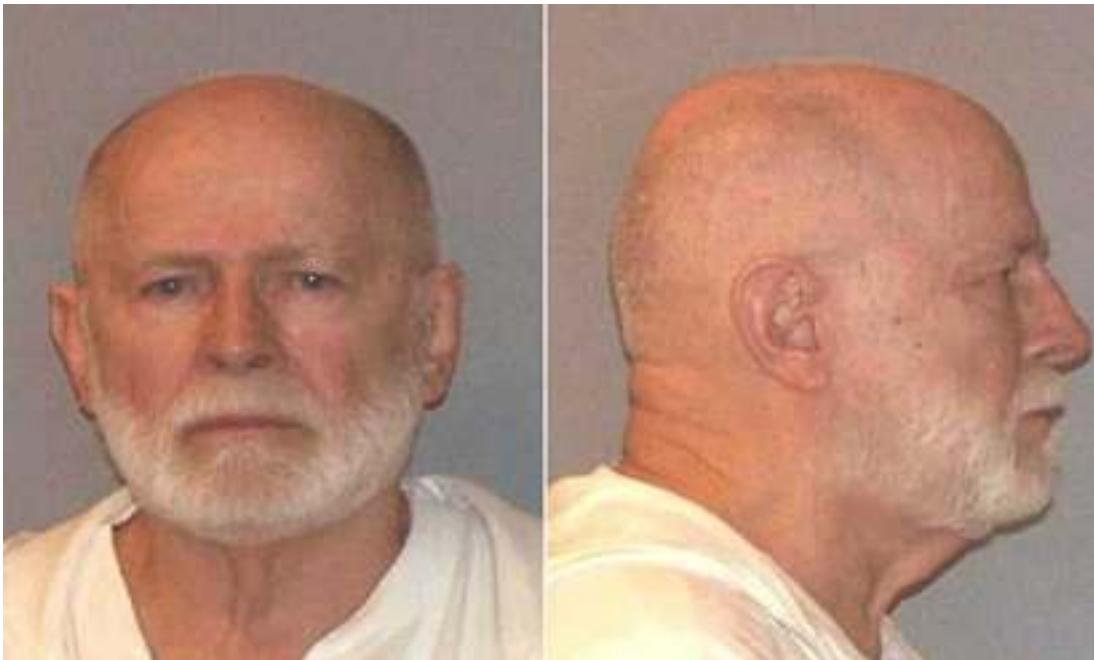
Fri 19 Aug 2022 03.38 EDTFirst published on Fri 19 Aug 2022 03.37 EDT

Three men, including a mafia hitman, have been charged in the 2018 prison killing of the notorious [Boston](#) crime boss James “Whitey” Bulger.

Bulger’s death raised questions about why the known “snitch” was placed in the [West Virginia](#) prison’s general population instead of in more protective

quarters.

The men – Fotios “Freddy” Geas, 55, Paul J DeCologero, 48, and Sean McKinnon, 36 – were charged with conspiracy to commit first-degree murder. Prosecutors allege Geas and DeCologero struck Bulger in the head multiple times, causing his death. McKinnon is charged separately with making false statements to a federal agent.



James ‘Whitey’ Bulger in 2013. Photograph: US Marshals Service/AFP/Getty

Bulger, who ran the largely Irish mob in Boston in the 70s and 80s, served as an FBI informant who ratted on his gang’s main rival, according to the bureau. He later became one of the nation’s most-wanted fugitives. Bulger strongly denied ever being a government informant.

Authorities have not revealed a possible motive for Bulger’s killing, which came hours after he was transferred to USP Hazelton in West Virginia from a prison in Florida. He had been serving a life sentence for 11 murders and other crimes.

“In the truest of ironies, Bulger’s family has experienced the excruciating pain and trauma their relative inflicted on far too many, and the justice

system is now coming to their aid,” the US attorney for [Massachusetts](#), Rachael Rollins, said in an emailed statement.

Geas, who authorities say was a mafia hitman, remains in prison in Hazelton. DeCologero is being held in another federal prison facility. McKinnon was released from prison last month after pleading guilty in 2015 to stealing guns from a firearms dealer. He was on federal supervised release when the indictment was handed down, and was arrested on Thursday in Florida.



Undated photograph released by the FBI in 1998 of James ‘Whitey’ Bulger. Photograph: AP

Geas and DeCologero were identified as suspects shortly after Bulger’s death, according to law enforcement officials at the time, but they remained uncharged as the investigation dragged on for years.

Bulger’s family sued the Federal Bureau of Prisons and 30 unnamed employees of the prison system over his death, alleging it appeared the gangster was “deliberately sent to his death”. A federal judge dismissed the family’s lawsuit in January.

Hank Brennan, who represented Bulger and his family, accused the Department of Justice of waiting to bring charges until after the family’s

lawsuit was dismissed to avoid having information come out in the criminal case that could be used against the government in the family's civil case.

"They are simply protecting themselves like they've always done," Brennan said. "There could be no ongoing investigation that took this long."

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The three men were placed in solitary confinement throughout the investigation, family members told the Boston Globe. McKinnon's mother told the newspaper that her son, who was Geas's cellmate at the time of Bulger's death, told her he didn't know anything about the killing.

Daniel Kelly, an attorney for Geas, said on Thursday that the charges were not a surprise, but did not justify his client's continued placement in solitary confinement. It wasn't immediately clear if McKinnon and DeCologero had attorneys to comment on their behalf.



An FBI poster showing the Boston mobster James ‘Whitey’ Bulger, issued in November 2000. Photograph: Fbi Handout/AP

DeCologero was part of an organised crime gang led by his uncle on Massachusetts' North Shore called the "DeCologero Crew".

He was convicted of buying heroin that was used to try to kill a teenage girl his uncle wanted dead because he feared she would betray the crew to police. The heroin didn't kill her, so another man broke her neck, dismembered her and buried her remains in the woods, court records say.

Geas was a close associate of the mafia and acted as an enforcer, but was not an official “made” member because he is Greek, not Italian.

Geas and his brother were sentenced to life in prison in 2011 for their roles in several violent crimes, including the 2003 killing of Adolfo “Big Al” Bruno, a Genovese crime family boss in Springfield, Massachusetts. Another mobster ordered Bruno’s killing because he was upset he had talked to the FBI, prosecutors said.

Bulger fled Boston in late 1994 after his FBI handler, John Connolly Jr, warned him he was about to be indicted.



Catherine Greig, the longtime girlfriend of James ‘Whitey’ Bulger, in Hingham, Massachusetts. Photograph: John Tlumacki/AP

After more than 16 years on the run and with a \$2m reward on his head, he was captured at age 81 in Santa Monica, California, where he had been living in a rent-controlled apartment near the beach with his longtime girlfriend, Catherine Greig.

His transfer to Hazelton was prompted by disciplinary issues, a federal law enforcement official said. In February 2018, Bulger threatened an assistant supervisor at the prison in Florida, telling her “your day of reckoning is coming”.

A prison workers’ union official told the AP that year that sending Bulger to the troubled federal penitentiary that housed other New England gangsters was like giving him a “death sentence”.

Bulger never admitted to working for the FBI. Court papers made public in the civil case brought by his family showed he was interviewed by staff after arriving at Hazelton about whether there were reasons he should be kept out of the general population. An intake screening form, signed by Bulger, said he answered “no” to the question: “Have you assisted law enforcement agents in any way?”

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Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka ruling party seeks assurances to let Gotabaya Rajapaksa back into country

New president has been approached to provide security for predecessor who fled country amid economic crisis



Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the former Sri Lankan president who fled the country last month, is temporarily in Thailand. Photograph: Eranga Jayawardena/AP

Reuters in Colombo

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Sri Lanka's ruling party has asked the country's new president to provide security and other assistance for his predecessor, who fled to south-east Asia last month after protests flared amid a crippling economic crisis.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa flew to Singapore last month and quit as Sri Lanka's president, making way for veteran politician Ranil Wickremesinghe to win a vote in parliament and take the top job.

Rajapaksa, who has been accused of mishandling the island nation's economy, leading to its worst financial crisis in seven decades, is currently [in Thailand for a temporary stay](#).

Sagara Kariyawasam, general secretary of the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, said on Thursday his party had approached Wickremesinghe for help to enable Rajapaksa's return.

"We requested the president to facilitate and provide the necessary security and facilities for former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa to return to the country," Kariyawasam said. "The date of his return is not finalised."

Local broadcaster Newsfirst, citing a former ambassador, said on Wednesday that Rajapaksa would return home next week.

In an interview with Reuters earlier on Thursday, Wickremesinghe said he was "not aware" of any such plans for the former president's return.

Rajapaksa, a former military officer who took office after winning an election in 2019 by a landslide majority, is the first Sri Lankan president to quit mid-term.

His resignation followed widespread protests in the country of 22 million people, and came after thousands of people stormed the presidential residence and office in the commercial capital of Colombo in early July.

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