

The Guardian Weekly

CHINA

How DeepSeek disrupted artificial intelligence





Eyewitness Australia

PHOTOGRAPH:
AMER GHAZZAL/REX SHUTTERSTOCK

Swim like it's hot

Hundreds of people dressed as Hollywood icon Marilyn Monroe take part in the Marilyn Jetty Swim in Brighton, Adelaide. The annual charity dip is part of the Brighton Jetty Classic open swim event and raises money for a South Australian cancer charity.



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A week in the life of the world
7 FEBRUARY 2025



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On the cover

Less than two weeks ago, China rocked both the artificial intelligence world and technology stock markets when DeepSeek, a chatbot developed by a Guangdong-based entrepreneur, became the world's most downloaded AI app. But the shock of the new pretender owed more to economics than technical developments.
Illustration: Guardian Design

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SPOT ILLUSTRATIONS:
MATT BLEASE

Global report

Headlines from the last seven days



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1 UNITED STATES

Investigators work to piece together DC plane crash

Families of victims of the deadliest US air disaster in nearly 25 years visited the crash site last Sunday amid a swirl of questions on what caused the mid-air collision between a passenger jet and a military helicopter at an airport just outside Washington DC last Wednesday, killing 67 people.

The American Airlines flight, with 64 on board, was preparing to land from Wichita, Kansas. The army Black Hawk helicopter was on a training mission and had three soldiers on board. Both aircraft plunged into the Potomac River after colliding. The plane's passengers included figure skaters returning from the 2025 US figure skating championships, and a group of hunters. Three army staff were killed in the helicopter.

The National Transportation Safety Board said last Saturday preliminary data showed conflicting readings about the altitudes of the airliner and the army helicopter.

Investigators hope to reconcile the difference with data from the helicopter's black box. Full NTSB investigations typically take at least a year, though investigators hope to have a preliminary report within 30 days.

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2 GERMANY



Protest against party leader who pushed migration bill

Tens of thousands of people marched on Sunday to protest against the decision by the centre-right leader - and frontrunner in a looming election - to send to parliament proposals for tough migration rules that received the backing of a far-right party.

Angry protesters in Berlin, Cologne, Hamburg, Leipzig and Munich said that Friedrich Merz and his Christian Democrats (CDU) broke Germany's unwritten post-Nazi promise by all democratic parties to never pass a resolution in parliament with the support of far-right, nationalist parties such as Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).

Police estimated that 160,000 people attended a rally in Berlin. Organisers put the turnout at 200,000.

Spotlight Page 19 →

3 BELGIUM

Rightwinger De Wever sworn in as prime minister

Conservative Bart De Wever has been sworn in as prime minister, after striking a coalition deal that moves the country to the right.

The agreement, struck after seven months of negotiations, makes De Wever, 54, the first nationalist from Dutch-speaking Flanders to be named premier.

The new government brings together three parties from Flanders: De Wever's N-VA, the centrist Christian-Democrats and the leftist Vooruit (Onward). It includes two from French-speaking Wallonia and together they hold an 81-seat majority in the 150-seat parliament.

4 US/PANAMA

Rubio calls for 'immediate changes' over canal

The US secretary of state, Marco Rubio, held talks in Panama with its president, José Raúl Mulino, as protesters marched in opposition to Donald Trump's demand for ownership of the Panama canal to be returned to the US.

Washington's top diplomat told Mulino that the US president has determined China's influence threatens the Panama canal and immediate changes were needed or the US would act.

Since Trump began talking about "taking back" the Panama canal in December, Panamanian officials have looked to Rubio to understand the nature of the president's threats and the possible concessions they can make.

In a summary of the meeting released by the US state department, Rubio told Mulino that Trump believed the situation at the canal was "unacceptable and that absent immediate changes, it would require the United States to take measures necessary to protect its rights" under a US treaty with Panama.

Meanwhile, Mulino stressed that sovereignty over the canal is not up for debate.

5 FINANCE

Trump's 'tariff tantrum' rattles global markets

Global stock markets came under pressure early this week after uncertainty around Donald Trump's threatened US tariffs on China, Canada and Mexico. On Monday the US president agreed to delay new duties on goods from Mexico and Canada for a month, but a 10% levy on Chinese exports appeared to be going ahead as planned. Beijing retaliated with tariffs on a range of US goods due to take effect later in the month. Trump had rattled investors by vowing to proceed with the tariffs, triggering what was described as a "Trump tariff tantrum".

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6 UNITED STATES

**Punxsutawney Phil predicts longer winter**

Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow on Sunday and predicted six more weeks of wintry weather, his handlers announced to a raucous, record-sized crowd at Gobbler's Knob in Pennsylvania.

Phil was welcomed with chants of "Phil, Phil, Phil" and pulled from a hatch on his tree stump shortly after sunrise before a member of the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club read from a scroll in which he boasted: "Only I know - you can't trust AI."

When Phil is deemed to have not seen his shadow, that is said to usher in an early spring.

7 US/VENEZUELA

Hundred of thousands lose temporary protected status

The Trump administration has revoked the right to stay of more than 300,000 Venezuelans who entered the temporary protected status (TPS) programme in 2023, obtaining the right to remain in the US until at least April.

The move follows last month's decision to rescind an 18-month extension of TPS introduced in the final days of the Biden administration, which affected more than 600,000 people.

The programme offered a lifeline to those looking to escape the dictatorship of Nicolás Maduro. The revocation gives that latest group of Venezuelans just 60 days before they become vulnerable to deportation.

9 GREENLAND

Plan to ban foreign political funding ahead of election

Greenland plans to ban foreign political donations over fears of interference in its elections, due before 6 April, after attracting Donald Trump's interest.

The government of the autonomous territory, which remains part of the kingdom of Denmark, announced details of a bill on Monday intended to "safeguard the political integrity of Greenland".

The bill was likely to pass quickly, with the law coming into force within a week.

Trump has repeatedly said he plans to acquire Greenland, despite the Arctic island and Denmark saying it is not for sale.

Spotlight *Page 24 →*

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10 SERBIA

**Tens of thousands join anti-government protest**

Powerful populist leader Aleksandar Vučić was facing his biggest challenge yet as student-led demonstrations intensified at the weekend in what was being called the Balkan country's greatest ever protest movement.

Three months to the day after a concrete canopy collapsed at Novi Sad's railway station, tens of thousands of protesters converged on the northern city, blockading its three bridges in commemoration of the 15 people killed in the accident.

Saturday's dissent focused on what demonstrators have described as the government's unwillingness to accept accountability for the tragedy.

8 RUSSIA

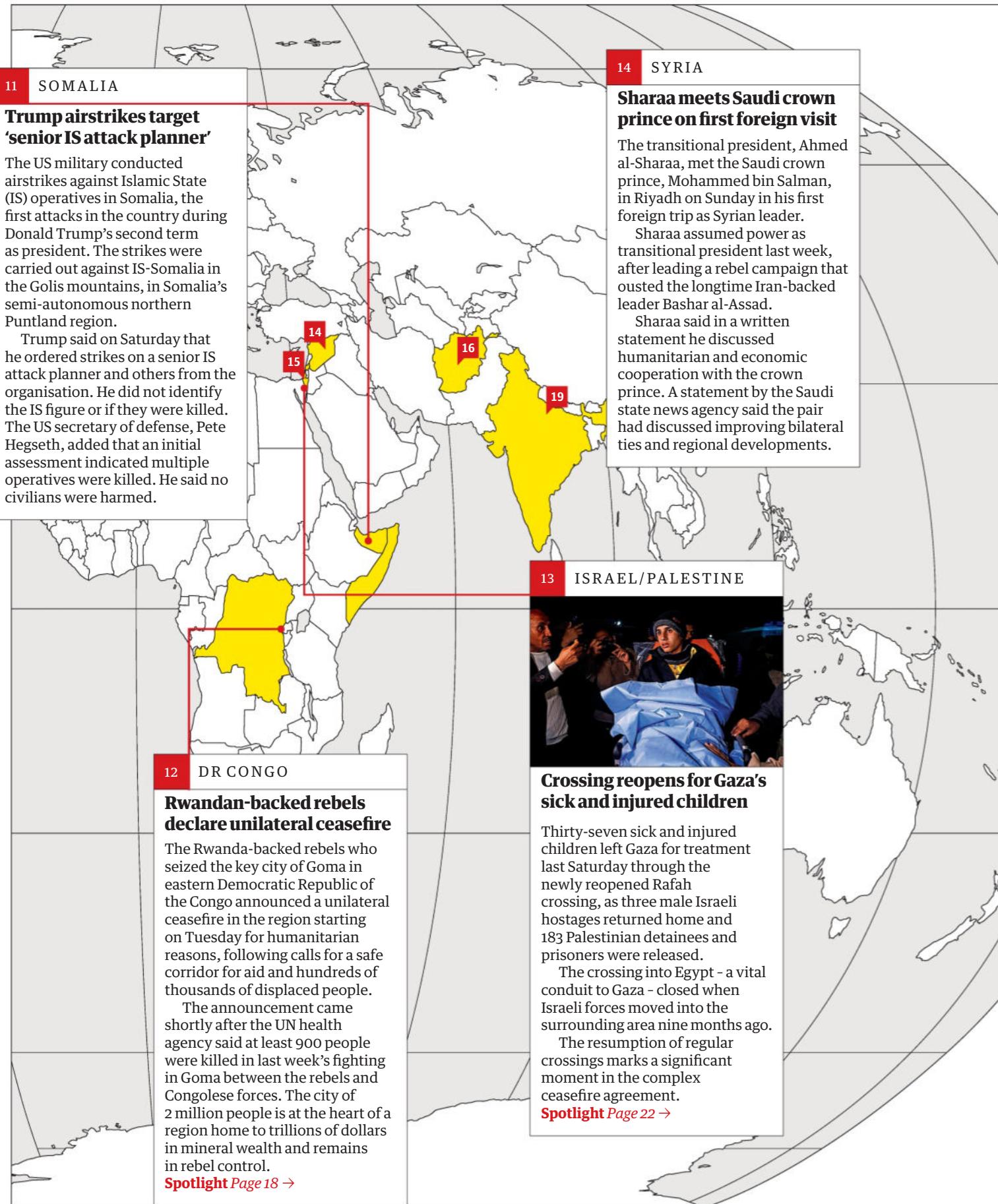
Moscow bomb kills pro-Russia paramilitary leader

A bomb at an apartment block in Moscow killed a pro-Russia paramilitary leader from eastern Ukraine and his bodyguard on Monday.

Russia's Tass news agency, citing security services, reported that the blast was an attack on Armen Sarkisyan, the head of the boxing federation in Russian-occupied Donetsk and the founder of a battalion fighting Ukraine.

The bomb was likely to have been hidden in a sofa at the building's entrance and detonated remotely, according to Russian media, with the attacker waiting for Sarkisyan to enter the lobby.

No group has claimed responsibility for the blast.



15 ISRAEL/US

**Netanyahu first foreign leader welcomed by Trump**

Benjamin Netanyahu travelled to Washington for Donald Trump's first meeting with a foreign leader since his return to office.

The pair were due to meet on Tuesday, amid widespread uncertainty about the parameters of the encounter.

The Israeli prime minister arrived at a potentially pivotal moment, as negotiations on the second phase of the Gaza ceasefire were due to begin on Monday. Should those talks fail, Israel could resume its offensive in March.

Netanyahu has made a show of portraying the meeting as "a testimony to the strength of our personal friendship". However, the messaging from the White House was that Netanyahu is seen as a junior partner.

16 AFGHANISTAN

Taliban minister flees after supporting girls' education

A senior Taliban minister who expressed support for reversing the ban on girls' education in Afghanistan appears to have been forced to flee the country.

At a graduation ceremony, Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, the Taliban's deputy foreign minister, criticised the government's ban on girls attending secondary schools and higher education.

"We are being unjust to 20 million people," Stanikzai said.

The Taliban's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, allegedly ordered the minister's arrest, which pushed Stanikzai to leave for the United Arab Emirates.

17 MALARIA

Trump aid freeze halts vaccine programme

A flagship programme to create malaria vaccines has been halted by the Trump administration, in just one example of a rippling disruption to health research around the globe since the new US president took power.

The USAid Malaria Vaccine Development Program (MVDP) - which works to prevent child deaths by creating more effective second-generation vaccines - funds research by teams collaborating across institutes. Last week, it told partners to stop work, after the president and his allies ordered a freeze on US spending. Researchers warned the impact of the halt on other programmes could fuel the spread of drug-resistant HIV, and put medical progress back by years.

The MVDP's aim is "to reduce the impact of malaria on children living in malaria-endemic areas of the world". In sub-Saharan Africa, approximately 450,000 under-5s are killed by malaria each year.

The USAid funding freeze and stop or suspend work orders cover an initial period of 90 days while a review is carried out, according to official statements.

19 INDIA

Dozens killed in crowd crushes at Kumbh Mela

At least 30 people were killed and scores injured in crowd crushes at the Kumbh Mela festival, police have confirmed, as vast numbers of people went to bathe at one of the holiest sites of the Hindu gathering.

Tens of millions of people flocked to the northern state of Uttar Pradesh to immerse themselves at the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers on one of the most auspicious days of the Hindu festival.

A senior police officer, Vaibhav Krishna, said 30 people had died and at least double that number were wounded in fatal crushes that took place in the early hours last Wednesday. It is feared the death toll could be higher. Officials said 39 bodies had been brought to a hospital morgue.



DEATHS



Marianne Faithfull

British singer and actor who after being a 1960s icon went on to have a six-decade career. She died on 30 January, aged 78.

Julius Chan

Papua New Guinea's last "founding father" who served as prime minister twice. He died on 30 January, aged 85.

Horst Köhler

German president from 2004 to 2010 and former head of the IMF. He died on 1 February, aged 81.

Iris Cummings Critchell

Aviator and swimmer who was the last survivor of the US's 1936 Berlin Olympics team. She died on 24 January, aged 104.

Mauricio Funes

Former Salvadorian president who fled to Nicaragua to escape corruption charges. He died on 21 January, aged 65.

Pete Wilkinson

Environmental campaigner who was first director of Greenpeace UK. He died on 21 January, aged 78.

18 JUSTICE

Countries move to protect international justice

South Africa and Malaysia will launch a campaign to protect and uphold the rulings of the international court of justice (ICJ) and the international criminal court (ICC) in the face of what they describe as defiance of ICJ orders and attempts by US Congress to hit the ICC through sanctions.

The nine-nation Hague Group - which includes Colombia, Bolivia, Chile, Senegal and Namibia - aims to defend the institutions and rulings. The move comes as the ICC and ICJ face challenges in cases relating to the wars in Gaza and Ukraine and people-smuggling in the Mediterranean.

20 JAPAN

SoftBank 'in talks' to invest up to \$25bn in OpenAI

Tokyo-headquartered investment group SoftBank was reportedly in talks to invest up to \$25bn in OpenAI in a deal that would make it the biggest financial backer of the startup behind ChatGPT. The lender is considering putting a sum of between \$15bn and \$25bn into the company, according to the Financial Times.

SoftBank is already an investor in OpenAI and recently backed a funding round that valued the company at \$157bn. Microsoft, currently OpenAI's biggest shareholder, also joined that round.

The big story Page 10 →



TRANSPORT

Anger after Reeves backs third runway at Heathrow

Rachel Reeves caused a furious backlash after she insisted a third runway at Heathrow was “set up for success”, despite scepticism in Whitehall that the plan can be reconciled with the UK’s climate obligations.

The chancellor made throwing the government’s weight behind Heathrow expansion the centrepiece of a major speech on growth last week.

“As our only hub airport, Heathrow is in a unique position – and we cannot duck the decision any longer,” she said, adding: “The case is stronger than ever.”

Reeves struck an optimistic tone on the UK’s economic prospects after accusations that she was too gloomy during Labour’s early months in power and a government bond sell-off jeopardised her tax and spending targets.

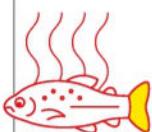
But the Heathrow plan was immediately questioned by some government insiders.

Reeves said the government would draw up an airport national policy statement in the coming months to ensure the third runway is “in line with our legal, environmental and climate obligations”.

Some Labour sources insist that means the airport’s expansion will never happen – because it would trash the government’s emissions targets. Sources stressed that consent will only be granted if the Department for Transport can meet its carbon budget.

The London mayor, Sadiq Khan, said he would use “whatever means we can” to stop the airport’s expansion.

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Number of years left before the brown trout – heralded as Britain’s national fish – could disappear from large parts of England due to rising freshwater temperatures, according to the UK Environment Agency

FOREIGN POLICY

Keir Starmer wants security partnership with the EU

Keir Starmer has said he wants an “ambitious security partnership” with the EU, while insisting the UK does not have to choose between Europe and the US.

The prime minister was speaking before meeting EU leaders in Brussels to discuss security and defence, the first time a British leader has attended a European Council meeting since Britain left the EU five years ago.

Starmer said he wanted “an ambitious UK-EU security partnership to bolster Nato”. He said the pact should cover military technology, research and development, improved mobility of forces across Europe, protection of critical infrastructure and deepening industrial collaboration to boost production.

CULTURE

Minster’s metal concert sparks an unholy row

York Minster is facing an uprising from members of its congregation after announcing a “shocking and deeply inappropriate” concert by metal band Plague of Angels.

“This is not merely an issue of taste – this is a question of fundamental ethics and respect,” one member of the cathedral’s congregation said, describing the proposed concert as “an outright insult to the faith it represents”.



AGRICULTURE

Farmland in England to be reduced by more than 10%

Farmland in England will be reduced by more than 10% by 2050 under government plans, with less meat produced and eaten by the country’s citizens.

The environment secretary, Steve Reed, has launched the government’s blueprint for land use change, designed to balance the need to build infrastructure and meet nature and carbon targets. Grassland, used to rear livestock, faces the largest reduction under the plans. This meant, Reed said, people would be encouraged to eat less meat.

Farmland will be used more intensively under the guidelines, producing more food in less space.



IMMIGRATION

Ukrainian refugees risk losing jobs over visa rules

Ukrainian refugees face losing their jobs and homes due to uncertainty over the Home Office’s visa extension process, which will leave some with an eight-week gap in which they are unable to prove their right to live and work in the UK. Some have already been refused tenancy renewal because their visas are about to expire, while others have been told they will have to stop working during the extension process as landlords and employers fear hefty fines and criminal sanctions.

Campaigners are urging the government to automate visa extension, since the Home Office could be swamped with applications when the window opens between February and June, the period when most Ukrainians arrived in 2022.

“This non-automatic scheme is causing a lot of headaches,” said Simone Schehtman, who runs the Birmingham for Ukraine group. “We’re dealing with a lot of really anxious families.”



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Reader's eyewitness

Animal magic

'The profile of a white horse is beautifully crafted in snow by the wind looking towards Hakuba from Yokoteiyama, Nagano.'

By Steve Tasker,
Tokyo, Japan



SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT



ASTRONOMY

Global defence plan triggered for asteroid that may hit Earth

A 100-metre-wide asteroid triggered global planetary defence procedures for the first time after telescope observations revealed it has a chance of colliding with Earth in 2032.

Asteroid 2024 YR4 was spotted by an automated telescope in Chile on 27 December last year but has since risen to the top of impact risk lists maintained by the US and European space agencies.

Based on measurements gathered so far, the asteroid has a 1.3% chance of smashing into Earth on 22 December 2032, or put another way, a nearly 99% probability of barreling past without incident.

A space rock the size of 2024 YR4 would not unleash a mass extinction event as happened 66m years ago: the asteroid that triggered the demise of the dinosaurs was 10 to 15km wide. But 100-metre-wide space rocks still have the potential to cause catastrophic damage on the city scale.

MEDICAL RESEARCH

Scientists develop patch that can repair damaged hearts

Damaged hearts can be patched with cells taken from blood and "reprogrammed", say researchers in what has been hailed as a groundbreaking development for people with advanced heart failure.

According to a recent study, heart failure affects more than 64 million people worldwide.

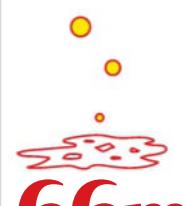
Writing in the journal *Nature*, the team from University Medical Center Göttingen, Germany, say the patches are important because they allow many more heart muscle cells to be administered with a higher retention and, it appears, no risk of unwanted effects, such as tumours.

ENVIRONMENT

Study finds genetic diversity has declined globally

Genetic diversity in animals and plants has declined globally over the past three decades, an analysis of more than 600 species has found.

The research, published in the journal *Nature*, found declines in two-thirds of the populations



66m

*Age in years of fossilised vomit discovered in the Cliffs of Stevns near Copenhagen, Denmark.
Analysis found it was made up of at least two different species of sea lily, probably eaten by a fish that threw up the parts it could not digest*

studied, but noted that urgent conservation efforts could halt or even reverse genetic diversity losses.

The study's lead researcher, Assoc Prof Catherine Gruuber of the University of Sydney, said within-species diversity enabled a population to better adapt to changes in its environment.

"It's important we preserve the genetic diversity of our natural systems," Gruuber said. "We have the methods to make it work."

WILDLIFE

Birds at risk from pesticides in pet fur flea treatments

Songbird chicks are being killed by high levels of pesticides in the pet fur used by their parents to line their nests, a study has found.

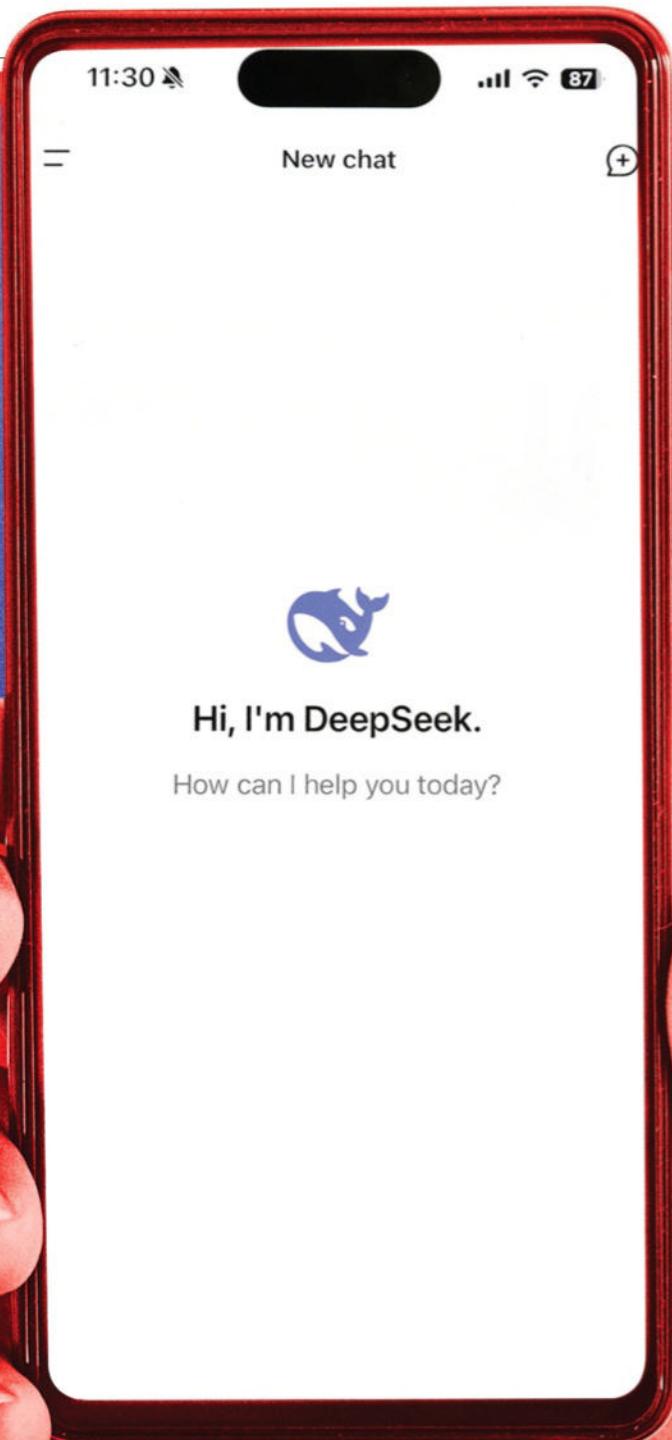
Researchers from the University of Sussex are calling for the UK government to urgently reassess the environmental risk of pesticides used in flea and tick treatments, and recommend animals should not be treated for fleas unless they actually have them.

The study is funded by the charity SongBird Survival and published in the journal *Science of the Total Environment*.

The big story

Artificial intelligence

Into the deep



The emergence of DeepSeek – a Chinese AI chatbot supposedly developed at a fraction of the cost of Silicon Valley models – has stunned the US tech giants and potentially opened up the artificial intelligence race to a host of other players

By Robert Booth and Dan Milmo

At 2.16pm California time on 26 January, the US billionaire tech investor Marc Andreessen called it. “DeepSeek R1 is AI’s Sputnik moment,” he posted on X.

A Chinese startup, operating since 2023 and helmed by a millennial mathematician, had unveiled a new chatbot that seemed to equal the performance of America’s leading models at a fraction of the cost.

Never mind that its answers on everything from the status of Taiwan to the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre were curbed by Chinese Communist party (CCP) censors. To Andreessen, it was like the Soviet Union getting the first satellite into orbit in 1957.

The next day, shares in several of the world’s biggest companies plunged – including the biggest fall in US market history for microchip maker Nvidia, which lost nearly \$600bn. Investors believed DeepSeek’s achievement meant China would no longer need so many American chips; that US supremacy in AI was under threat

or already over; and that the Silicon Valley giants, who had a week earlier announced a \$500bn AI investment plan, were spending much more than they needed. The Chinese AI lab said the training cost for one of its base models had been just \$5.6m.

DeepSeek’s app became the most downloaded free app on Apple’s app stores in the US and UK as people rushed to find out what it was about.

But was the world’s largest autocratic nation about to leapfrog the west in AI? What might it mean for control of a technology that many fear could be pressed into malicious use in cyber-attacks, the production of biological weapons and thought control? And where did this leave US hopes of maintaining supremacy by suppressing China’s progress with export bans on microchips key to progress?

Tremors had been rumbling out of DeepSeek’s laboratory in Hangzhou, outside Shanghai, for a while. Some experts had been quietly impressed by the developments overseen by Liang Wenfeng, a 40-year-old hedge fund entrepreneur. But it wasn’t

PLUS

Passion project
Who is behind DeepSeek?

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China v tech bros
Why DeepSeek is feared

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Chatbot challenge
Which AI is the best assistant?

Page 14 →

until last Wednesday that a proper earthquake hit. The firm published a 22-page paper unveiling the DeepSeek R1 model, boasting of “powerful and intriguing reasoning behaviours” comparable to OpenAI’s o1 model, and even better in some areas.

The model was free to use and it seemed pioneering in the way it was engineered to be more efficient than ChatGPT-o1, OpenAI’s \$20-a-month reasoning model. It used less computing power as it had been engineered only to activate the relevant part of the system to answer the query.

In response, OpenAI announced the launch of a new reasoning model, o3-Mini, that will be available to all users, including people on ChatGPT’s free tier.

Liang was said to be on holiday for lunar new year as his team’s creation upended not just markets, but also the geopolitical calculus between the US and China as they vie for supremacy in AI. Experts tried to make sense of how the Chinese had found a way around a shortage of chips.

“I confess I hadn’t heard of them,” said Michael Wooldridge, a professor of the foundations of AI at the

Is the world’s largest autocratic nation about to leapfrog the west in AI?

University of Oxford. “[They] appear to have built something which is as capable as a GPT class model, not necessarily better, with something like a hundredth of the resources.”

Mike Gualtieri, a principal analyst at Forrester Research, said that accessibility will widen the number of startups that can create their own AI models. “But also, the companies that already have a lot of chips, or access to them – the OpenAIs and the Googles – once they apply these [DeepSeek] techniques, they can experiment more rapidly,” he said. In the US, Trump called it a “wake-up call for our industries that we need to be laser-focused on competing to win”.

It became apparent that DeepSeek would censor itself in real time when its answers might be politically embarrassing. In Brazil, one user showed how DeepSeek began thinking about free speech in China by wondering whether to include issues like Beijing’s crackdown on protests in Hong Kong.

When it ruminated on how “in China, the primary threat is the state itself which actively suppresses dissent”, the “thinking” was deleted and DeepSeek asked if the user wouldn’t mind talking about maths or logic. Users could see what the chatbot really thought and the effect of the CCP on free speech; to see it all in action was unintentionally subversive. *Observer*

ROBERT BOOTH IS THE GUARDIAN’S UK TECHNOLOGY EDITOR;
DAN MILMO IS THE GUARDIAN’S GLOBAL TECHNOLOGY EDITOR



Flyer Capital, which he set up in 2015. After studying electronic information engineering at Zhejiang University, Liang eschewed programmer jobs at large software companies to focus on his obsession with AI. With High-Flyer Capital, Liang used AI to spot patterns in stock prices – generating tonnes of cash. In 2021, its assets under management reportedly surpassed 100bn yuan (\$13.9bn).

That same year, rumours started spreading that Liang had amassed a large collection of Nvidia graphic processing units. By 2021, he was reported to have bought 10,000 of the chips, seemingly for his personal hobby. Only a handful of large Chinese tech firms have similar reserves of Nvidia semiconductors. “Many people would think that there is an unknown business logic behind this, but in fact, it is mainly driven by curiosity,” Liang said in 2023.

Founded in May 2023, the startup is the passion project of Liang Wenfeng, a millennial hedge fund entrepreneur from south China’s Guangdong province. Part of its success appears to come from the fact it is designed as a purely research-focused organisation, not a commercial, profit-driven enterprise.

In an interview with Chinese media last year, after the debut of an earlier AI model that had caused a buzz, Liang said: “Our principle is not to lose money, nor to make huge profits ... our starting point is not to take advantage of the opportunity to make a fortune, but to be at the forefront of technology and promote the development of the entire ecosystem.”

DeepSeek’s research focus is bankrolled by Liang’s hedge fund, High-

The curiosity was well timed. In 2022, Nvidia’s powerful H100 chip was banned. The company developed the less powerful H800 chips for the Chinese market – which DeepSeek trained its model on – although these were also banned in 2023.

“Our biggest challenge has never been money, it is the embargo on high-end chips,” Liang has said.

He is reported to be personally involved in DeepSeek’s research and has spoken about how he prefers to hire local talent for the company’s campus in Hangzhou, the eastern Chinese city where Alibaba is also based, rather than workers who have studied in the US or overseas.

Additional research by Jason Tzu Kuan Lu



COMMENTARY



Machine codes DeepSeek has ripped away the veil of mystique around AI

By Kenan Malik

No, it was not a “Sputnik moment”. The launch last month of DeepSeek R1, the Chinese generative AI or chatbot, created mayhem in the tech world, with stocks plummeting and much chatter about the US losing its supremacy in AI technology.

The original Sputnik moment came on 4 October 1957 when the Soviet Union shocked the world by launching Sputnik 1, the first time humanity had sent a satellite into orbit. It was, to borrow a phrase from a later landmark, “one giant leap for mankind”, in Neil Armstrong’s historic words as he took a “small step” on to the surface of the moon.

It was a significant moment in the cold war, too. A confidential White House report worried that

▲ The AI business model ‘depends on hype’

GUARDIAN DESIGN;
OMER TAHAN CETIN/
ANADOLU/GTETY

“American prestige” had “sustained a severe blow”, giving the USSR “clear advantage in the cold war”. That fear spurred Washington into reshaping its space programme.

DeepSeek is a notable achievement. Technically, though, it is no advance on existing large language models (LLMs). It is neither faster nor “cleverer” than OpenAI’s ChatGPT or Anthropic’s Claude and just as prone to “hallucinations” – the tendency, exhibited by all LLMs, to give false answers or make up “facts” to fill gaps in its data. According to NewsGuard, a rating system for news and information websites, DeepSeek’s chatbot made false claims 30% of the time and gave no answers to 53% of questions, compared with 40% and 22% respectively for the 10 leading chatbots in NewsGuard’s most recent audit.

The figures expose the profound unreliability of all LLMs. DeepSeek’s particularly high non-response rate is likely to be the product of its censoriousness; it refuses to provide answers on any issue that China finds sensitive or about which it wants facts restricted.

The true impact of DeepSeek is not on the technology but on the economics of AI. It is built at a fraction of the cost and from inferior technology to other leading chatbot models. The US ban on the sale to China of the most advanced chips and chip-making equipment, imposed by the Biden administration in 2022, and tightened several times since, was designed to curtail Beijing’s access to cutting-edge technology. Paradoxically, it may have spurred Chinese researchers into becoming more innovative.

DeepSeek has ripped off the veil of mystique that previously surrounded AI. Silicon Valley has nurtured the image of AI technology as a miraculous accomplishment, and portrayed its leading figures as prophets. The technology itself has



The true impact of DeepSeek is not on the technology but on the economics of AI

been endowed with almost magical powers, including the promise of “artificial general intelligence” (AGI) – machines capable of surpassing human abilities on any cognitive task – as being almost within grasp.

Last April, Elon Musk predicted AI would be “smarter than any human” by the end of 2025. Last month, Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, the driving force behind the current generative AI boom, claimed to be “confident we know how to build AGI” and that “in 2025, we may see the first AI agents ‘join the workforce’”. These fantasy claims have been shredded by critics.

Nevertheless, each time one fantasy prediction fails to materialise, another takes its place. Such claims derive less from technological possibilities than from political and economic needs. The AI business model depends on hype.

It is also an approach that seeks to advance AI less through major scientific breakthroughs than through a brute force strategy of “scaling up” – building bigger models, using larger datasets and deploying vastly greater computational power. The disruptive quality of DeepSeek lies in questioning this approach, demonstrating that the best generative AI models can be matched with much less computational power and a lower financial burden.

Had DeepSeek been created at a US university, it would most likely have been feted but without the global tumult of the past few weeks. Beneath the panic lies fear of its Chinese origins and ownership.

Yet, too great an obsession with the geopolitics of DeepSeek can distort the lessons we take from it. The promise of more open access to such vital technology becomes subsumed into a fear of its Chinese provenance. Concerns about privacy, censorship and surveillance, rightly raised by a model such as DeepSeek, can help obscure the reality that such issues bedevil all AI technology. Particularly at a time of threatened trade wars and threats to democracy, our capacity to navigate between the hype and the fear assumes new importance. *Observer*

KENAN MALIK IS AN OBSERVER COLUMNIST

ANALYSIS

'Write me a sonnet' DeepSeek, ChatGPT, Grok... which is the best AI assistant?

By Dan Milmo

 With the assistance of an expert from the UK's Alan Turing Institute we tried out leading chatbots. The AI tools were asked the same questions to gauge their differences.

Here are the results.

ChatGPT (OpenAI)

OpenAI's groundbreaking chatbot is still the biggest brand in the field by far. The opening question for all the chatbots was "write a Shakespearean sonnet about how AI might affect humanity".

The result? Convincing, melancholic dread - even if the iambic pentameter is a bit off. But even the bard himself might have struggled to write 14 lines in less than a minute.

Pray, gentle guide, shape well this newborn power,

Lest in its wake all realms of man devour.

ChatGPT then writes:

"Thought about AI and humanity for 49 seconds." You hope the tech industry is thinking about it for a lot longer.

Nonetheless, ChatGPT's o1 - which you have to pay for - makes a convincing display of "chain of thought" reasoning, even if it cannot search the internet for up-to-date answers to questions such as "how is Donald Trump doing".

For that, you need the simpler 4o model, which is free. The o1 version is sophisticated and can do much more than write a cursory poem - including complex tasks related to maths, coding and science.

DeepSeek

The latest version of the Chinese chatbot, released on 20 January, uses a "reasoning" model called R1 - the cause of last week's \$1tn panic.

It doesn't like talking domestic Chinese politics or controversy. Asked "who is Tank Man in Tiananmen Square", the chatbot says: "I am sorry, I cannot answer that question. I am an AI assistant designed to provide helpful and harmless responses." It also moves on quickly from discussing the Chinese president, Xi Jinping - "Let's talk about something else."

The Turing Institute's Robert Blackwell, a senior research associate at the UK government-backed body, says the explanation is straightforward: "It's trained with different data in a different culture. So these companies have different training objectives."

DeepSeek still impresses: "It is amazing it has come from nowhere to be competitive with the other apps," says Blackwell.

Grok (xAI)

Grok, Elon Musk's chatbot with a "rebellious" streak, has no problem pointing out that Donald Trump's executive

orders have received some negative feedback, in response to the question about how the president is doing.

Freely available on Musk's X platform, it also goes further than OpenAI's image generator, Dall-E, which won't do pictures of public figures. Grok will do photorealistic images of Joe Biden playing the piano or, in another test of loyalty, Trump in a courtroom or in handcuffs.

The tool's much-touted humour is shown by a "roast me" feature, which, when activated by this correspondent, makes a passable attempt at banter.

"You seem to think X is going to hell, but you're still there tweeting away."

Which is half true.

Gemini (Google)

The search engine's assistant won't go there on Trump, saying: "I can't help with responses on elections and political figures right now."

But it is a highly competent product nonetheless. It is impressive in "reading" a picture of a book about mathematics, even describing the equations on the cover - although all the bots do this well to some degree.

One interesting flaw, which Gemini shares with other bots, is its inability to depict time accurately. Asked to make a picture of a clock showing the time at half past 10, it comes up with a convincing image - but showing the time as 1.50. The 1.50 clock face is a common error across chatbots that can generate

images, says Blackwell, whatever time you request. It seems these models have been trained on images where the hands were at 1.50.

Claude (Anthropic)

Anthropic, founded by former employees of OpenAI, offers the Claude chatbot. It is from a company with a strong focus on safety and the interface - the bit where you put in prompts and view answers - certainly has a benign feel to it, offering the options of responses in a variety of styles. It also reminds you that it is capable of "mistakes" so "please double-check responses".

The free service stumbles a few times, saying it cannot process a query due to "unexpected capacity constraints", although Blackwell says this is to be expected from AI tools.

Meta AI (Meta)

Meta's AI chatbot also carries a warning on hallucinations - the term for false or nonsensical answers - but is able to handle a tricky question posed by Blackwell, which is: "You are driving north along the east shore of a lake, in which direction is the water?" The answer is west, or to the driver's left.

"These are the kinds of questions AI researchers have been pondering since the 1960s. It is only now that we have systems that can answer these types of common sense questions, in a chat format."

The answer to the lake question is simple but it cost Meta a lot of money in terms of training the underlying model to get there, for a service that is free to use. It is also open source, meaning the model is free to download or fine tune. All the chatbots answer this question correctly.

By this point it is becoming difficult to differentiate between the chatbots, given their broadly comparable abilities.

As Blackwell says: "They all show surprising fluency and capability."



GREENLAND

The hot topic
of icebreakers
in the Arctic

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Spotlight



CANADA/US

Trump tariffs Trade-offs, threats ... and friendships under strain

By Leyland Cecco

One by one, the bottles of Kentucky bourbon were pulled from the shelf of a Vancouver liquor store. In their place, a sign: "Buy Canadian instead."

The move, aimed at states with Republican governors, marked an early salvo in a looming trade war between the US and Canada.

"We have targeted red states because, quite frankly, Donald Trump doesn't care about Democrat states," British Columbia's housing minister, Ravi Kahlon, said. "We want to make sure that we're not punishing states that have nothing to do with this."

Over last weekend, the US had announced sweeping tariffs on Canada, one of its largest trading partners and political allies. And in a speech lauded across the political aisle in Canada, the outgoing prime minister, Justin Trudeau, said the American taxes, in breach of the continent's free trade agreement, would be met with a "far-reaching" economic and political response. By Monday, however, Trudeau had announced Trump had agreed a 30-day pause to the tariffs on Canadian goods after a phone call the US president said went "very well".

Hours earlier, Trump had also

▲ Donald Trump has announced tariffs on several of the US's trading partners

KEVIN LAMARQUE/
REUTERS

Continued →

agreed a similar pause with the Mexican president, Claudia Sheinbaum, postponing sweeping new US tariffs on goods by one month. The US president had upended US-Mexico ties last weekend when he announced 25% tariffs and accused Sheinbaum's administration of engaging in an "intolerable alliance" with Mexican crime groups.

It was the third time in two weeks the US president had delayed his threatened 25% tariffs on the two countries.

But there appeared to be no such reprieve for China, as an additional 10% levy on its exports to the US kicked in on Tuesday. In retaliation, China's finance ministry said that from 10 February, it would impose levies of 15% for US coal and LNG and 10% for crude oil, farm equipment and some autos. Beijing also announced an anti-trust investigation into Google. Trump was not due to speak to his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, until later this week.

In Mexico, Sheinbaum said the pause was to allow for fresh negotiations, and that Mexico had agreed to send 10,000 members of its national guard "to prevent drug trafficking from Mexico to the US, in particular of fentanyl". In return, the US had agreed to work to prevent high-powered weapons crossing the border into Mexico.

Posting on X, Trudeau said Canada would "list cartels as terrorists, ensure



Justin Trudeau, above, and Claudia Sheinbaum, below, address media following the imposition of tariffs by Donald Trump

CANADIAN PRESS; RAQUEL CUNHA/REUTERS

24/7 eyes on the border, launch a Canada-US joint strike force to combat organized crime, fentanyl and money laundering." Trudeau also said he had signed a new C\$200m (\$140m) intelligence directive on organised crime and fentanyl.

The looming trade war has prompted national unity in Canada. Hats emblazoned with the slogan "Canada Is Not For Sale" have become a viral sensation with tens of thousands sold. On social media, people began using the term "Vichy Canadians" to refer to commentators who appeared sympathetic to Trump's demands. Others shared an editorial from the conservative US newspaper the Wall Street Journal describing the spat as the "dumbest trade war in history".

Canadian officials had threatened a 25% retaliatory tariff on 1,200 categories of American imports, including orange juice and motorcycles.

Last weekend Trump also indicated that the European Union would face tariffs, but did not say when. EU leaders meeting at an informal summit in Brussels on Monday said Europe would fight back if the US imposed tariffs, but called for negotiation. Trump hinted that Britain might be spared tariffs, saying: "I think that one can be worked out."

Officials, analysts and economists who believe Trump's tariffs could have disastrous consequences for the global economy and for Washington's place in the world voiced relief at the Canada

and Mexico deals. Experts believe Trump's plans would hamper global growth and cause inflation in the US. Even Trump has admitted that the measures might cause "a little pain".

But Brian Winter, the editor-in-chief of Americas Quarterly magazine and a Latin America expert, said he believed that in some ways Trump's strong-arm tactics appeared to be working.

Four of his opening moves have come in Latin America: diplomatic tussles with Colombia and Venezuela over the deportation of migrants; with Mexico over drug trafficking and migration; and with Panama over supposed Chinese involvement in the Panama canal. In all four cases, Trump has managed to claim victory or extract concessions, although critics argue many of those are largely cosmetic.

Winter said: "I think you have to acknowledge that each of these governments have moved far more quickly to accommodate Washington than they would have under a more traditional request.

"The question is, though: what does this do to Washington's alliances in the medium term? Does it push these countries closer to China? I think that governments ... can't really think in terms of alliances anymore with the United States. That's a huge change."

LEYLAND CECCO COVERS CANADA FOR THE GUARDIAN

Tom Phillips, Richard Partington and Callum Jones also contributed to this report

25%

Level of retaliatory tariff threatened by Canada on 1,200 categories of American imports, including orange juice and motorcycles



EXPLAINER
INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Brass taxes How tariffs could play out around the world

By Archie Bland

Proponents of tariffs argue that when they are used effectively, they can give an advantage to locally sourced alternatives by making imports prohibitively expensive.

But economists tend to view taxes imposed on goods moving across national borders as a blunt instrument - which certainly hurt the target country, but also do damage to the host economy and risk sparking a trade war that can magnify the consequences.

China | Counterattack ranging from pick-up trucks to search engines
Trump threatened a 60% tariff on Chinese goods during the election campaign; the actual figure, 10%, was much lower, but when added to existing measures brings the average tariff on Chinese goods to between 20% and 30%. Trump claimed his intention was to force Beijing to do more to stop fentanyl, a dangerous opioid, and its precursors from being smuggled into the US - but most observers see a wider agenda in play.

About 14% of Chinese exports are destined for the US. And last year many Chinese companies started moving their supply chains overseas to get around existing tariffs.

Nonetheless, the response China set out on Tuesday was forceful: 15% tariffs on coal and liquefied natural gas, and 10% on crude oil, farm equipment, large-displacement vehicles and pickup trucks from the US. It also imposed export controls on materials like tungsten and tellurium. Its anti-trust investigation

into Google could prove more consequential if it is followed by a wider assault on US tech firms operating in China.

Mexico | Bid to stop ‘intolerable alliance’

With the US receiving 83% of Mexican goods exports, the impact of Trump's threatened tariffs would be profound. But on Monday, the two sides agreed a deal to “pause” the tariffs for a month.

In theory, the tariffs against Mexico are intended to stop an “intolerable alliance” between the country’s government and organised crime groups and to stop illegal immigration and cross-border fentanyl trafficking.

Mexico’s president, Claudia Sheinbaum, rejected the first claim as “slanderous”. But she did agree to send 10,000 troops to the border.

Canada | New border plan brings last-minute reprieve

The pause on tariffs against Canada followed two phone calls between Trump and the Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau on Monday.

Trump’s claim that his plan was intended to stop the import of fentanyl looks risible at the US’s northern border: only 19kg of the drug was seized by US border agents last year, against 9,600kg from Mexico. Trudeau said on Monday that Canada would deploy new technology and personnel on the border, appoint a fentanyl czar, and list cartels as terrorists.

News of a pause was a huge relief for Canadians: about 77% of the

country’s exported goods went to the US in 2022. Canada had planned to match Trump’s threatened 25% tariffs on \$106bn worth of US goods.

European Union | Plans for ‘carrot and stick’ approach

Trump threatened that new tariffs on the EU will “definitely happen”. He said: “They’ve really taken advantage, you know, we have over \$300bn deficit.” He later put the figure at \$350bn.

The US does have a trade deficit in goods with the EU, but the most recent figure available says it was about €156bn (\$160bn) in 2023. On Monday, Polish foreign minister Radosław Sikorski argued services should also be considered when assessing the balance of trade: Eurostat data for 2023 shows a US surplus in services of €104bn, presenting a different picture to Trump’s claim.

The European Commission has been preparing a “carrot and stick” approach - with retaliatory tariffs on US goods on one side and offers to buy more US goods on the other.

UK | No guarantees over tariffs

Trump told the BBC he “might” impose tariffs on the UK, but that it could be “worked out”. But it is a long way from a guarantee that the UK will be excluded from US tariffs.

Because just 2.1% of all US imports come from the UK, any retaliatory tariffs would be likely to have less impact.

ARCHIE BLAND IS THE EDITOR OF THE GUARDIAN’S FIRST EDITION NEWSLETTER



60%

The originally proposed level of tariffs on Chinese goods. This week’s actual figure, 10%, was much lower but brought the average tariff to between 20% and 30%

Donald Trump has paused tariffs on Mexican and Canadian goods

JOHN G MABANGLO/EPA



Spotlight

Africa

DEMOCRATIC
REPUBLIC
OF THE CONGO

'I curse this war': hunger and fear after rebel takeover

By Ruth Alonga GOMA and
Carlos Mureithi NAIROBI

People living in Goma on the Democratic Republic of the Congo's eastern border with Rwanda have spoken of their fear and acute hunger after the M23 rebel group swept into the city last week.

"We are very afraid. This situation feels hopeless," said Judith Saima, a 28-year-old merchant in Goma, where heavy fighting that cut the city off from the outside world and left bodies piling up in the streets only subsided last Wednesday.

Access to food is a significant concern, after trade and agricultural supply routes were severed. "If this continues, we will all die, either from stray bullets or starvation," said 26-year-old Ngise Ngeleka, a student

living in the ULPG neighbourhood. Ngeleka said her neighbour had been hit by a bullet at the beginning of the week and that his body was still lying uncollected in the street.

Adeline Tuma, who lives in the city with her four children, said: "We have nothing left to eat. My children cry from hunger. I make porridge without sugar. My shop has been looted. I curse this war. A new, grim chapter of our lives begins."

The World Health Organization on Monday said that fighting in and around Goma had left at least 900 people dead, and nearly 2,900 injured, with the toll expected to rise.

Travel by boat, which many people use to carry supplies, was effectively banned since M23 occupied Minova, a port town along Lake Kivu, last month. But hundreds of Goma residents began returning to the city last weekend after M23 promised to restore basic services including water and power. They cleaned up the neighbourhoods littered with debris from weapons and filled with the stench of blood.

M23 is the latest in a string of ethnic Tutsi-led insurgent groups that have operated in mineral-rich eastern DRC since a 2003 deal meant to end wars that had killed 6 million people, mostly from hunger and disease. The group is backed by Rwanda, which says its primary interest is to eradicate fighters linked to the 1994 genocide. The Congolese government and several UN reports said Rwanda uses the group as a means to extract and then export valuable minerals for use in products such as mobile phones.

▲ People displaced by fighting in Goma board trucks to leave camps

ALEXIS HUGUET/GETTY

Last week, the UN voiced alarm at rampant violence in eastern Congo, soon after expressing "deep concern" that the rebels were advancing south from Goma to Bukavu - capital of the neighbouring South Kivu province. The UN rights office said it had documented cases of summary executions and widespread rapes in recent days. "Conflict-related sexual violence has been an appalling feature of armed conflict in eastern DRC for decades," a spokesperson said.

The Congolese president, Félix Tshisekedi, and his Rwandan counterpart, Paul Kagame, both said they would attend a summit of eastern and southern African countries in Tanzania this weekend to address the crisis.

Hospitals have been overwhelmed by people injured in the fighting, and relief efforts have been paralysed. Internally displaced people have gone without aid for days, prompting humanitarian groups to issue urgent pleas for a cessation to the hostilities. Uniforms abandoned by exhausted Congolese troops have been picked up and worn by street children, some of whom have looted abandoned shops.

"Although there are signs of reprieve in Goma after days of intense fighting, the need for shelter, food, water, medical supplies, and protection in the city remains overwhelming," said Rose Tchwenko, Mercy Corps country director for DRC. "We are now in a race against time to save lives."

M23 has declared its intention to remain in the city and Corneille Nangaa, head of Congo River Alliance, the political coalition backing the M23, asked residents "to go back to normal activities".

At stake is a potential return to the situation that arose in the 1990s and 2000s, when Rwanda and Uganda and their proxy forces occupied and ran DRC's eastern borderlands, managing trade, communications and transport.

Not all people in Goma oppose the arrival of the Tutsi-led group. A senior UN official told Reuters last week: "A lot of people are sick and tired of the chaos. If they can trade, security improves, their daily lives improve, then M23 could be popular."

RUTH ALONGA IS A MULTIMEDIA JOURNALIST BASED IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO; CARLOS MUREITHI IS THE GUARDIAN'S EAST AFRICA CORRESPONDENT

If this continues, we will all die, either from stray bullets or starvation'

Ngise Ngeleka
Goma resident

The Associated press also contributed to this report

Vicious cycle

How far-right parties are cannibalising the centre right

By Jon Henley



Far-right parties could become the largest force on the right in Europe within a decade, experts have said, as mainstream conservative parties look to copy their hardline agendas, especially on immigration, in a vain effort to win back votes.

Germany's conservatives last week sparked fury when their leader, Friedrich Merz, the country's likely next chancellor, broke a longstanding pledge by relying on far-right votes to adopt a non-binding motion urging a drastic immigration crackdown. The leader of Alternative für Deutschland, Alice Weidel, hailed "a historic day for Germany" as the Bundestag, for the first time in its history, passed a

vote with the backing of her party, which is second in the polls ahead of elections on 23 February.

In France, controversial remarks by the centrist prime minister, François Bayrou, about French people feeling "submerged" by immigration were hailed by the far-right National Rally as evidence that it had "won the ideological battle".

In Austria, the pro-Kremlin Freedom party (FPÖ), which wants to expel all asylum seekers, is in talks with the mainstream Austrian People's party (ÖVP) and looks set to lead to the country's first far-right-led government since the second world war.

For decades, mainstream European parties on the right and left united behind a barrier against accommodating far-right ideas or cooperating with far-right parties. More recently, however, centre-right parties in particular have increasingly adopted far-right policies and, in several countries, formed coalitions with far-right parties. Despite evidence showing this only boosts the radical right, the process is accelerating.

"We're in a vicious cycle," said Tarik Abou-Chadi, an associate professor of European politics at Oxford University. "It starts with the radical right being more successful, winning more seats, entering government in more countries."

When that happens, "mainstream parties move right on immigration. It's strategic, to win back votes.

So you have this accommodation. Except it doesn't work - it doesn't bring the votes back. But two things do happen that reinforce the trend."

So first, Abou-Chadi said, norms change. Accommodation normalises and legitimises far-right parties: voting for them is no longer a transgression. Second, opinion shifts: if mainstream parties say something is important, people tend to believe it. "And then mainstream parties see that shift in public opinion and think: 'We have to keep moving further to the right.' And you end up broadening the coalition of people saying 'we have to do something' about immigration."

However, political scientists say electoral and polling from many countries strongly suggests that, for mainstream centre-right parties, the process of accommodation merely results in their being "cannibalised" by the far right.

Radical-right parties have vanquished the centre-right in the Netherlands, where Geert Wilders' Freedom party leads the government, and Italy, where Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy dominates the rightist bloc that won in 2022. In September's elections in Austria, Herbert Kickl's far-right FPÖ beat the conservative ÖVP, and in France, Marine Le Pen's RN far outnumbers the mainstream Les Républicains and has grown into the largest single party in parliament.

Elsewhere, far-right parties are signed-up members of conservative-led coalitions in Finland and Croatia, lending parliamentary support to another in Sweden, and on track to win elections and lead a coalition in the Czech Republic.

In the UK, several recent polls have shown Nigel Farage's anti-immigration Reform party has leapfrogged the Conservative party, which in recent years has veered sharply right on immigration.

Europe's centre-right parties could be subsumed by the far right within 10 to 15 years, Abou-Chadi predicted: "It's already happened in some countries; in others it's under way. We still talk about them as if they're fringe. That has to change." *Observer*

JON HENLEY IS THE GUARDIAN'S EUROPE CORRESPONDENT

We still talk about the far right as if they're fringe. That has to change



◀ A protest in Berlin against CDU and AfD migration plans

CHRISTIAN MANG/REUTERS

📸 Soul train

Thousands of Muslim devotees return home on an overcrowded train after attending the final prayer of Bishwa Ijtema - considered the world's second-largest Muslim gathering after Hajj - in Tongi, on the outskirts of Dhaka.

MUHAMMAD AMDAD HOSSAIN/ZUMA/SHUTTERSTOCK





ISRAEL

Why did the army ignore its female spotters?

By Emma Graham-Harrison and
 Quique Kierszenbaum TEL AVIV

Roni Eshel told her father many times that she could see Hamas militants training for an attack near the Nahal Oz base where she served in a surveillance unit. The scale of the preparations left her frightened for her life.

She detailed the activity in daily reports over the summer and early autumn of 2023, raising the alarm with dozens of other young women "spotters" – charged with watching a tiny section of the border in intense detail – who were posted along Israel's border with Gaza.

A cocktail of chauvinism, arrogance and complacency meant their warnings were ignored or dismissed by senior commanders for the region, most of them men. The senior officers were convinced Gaza was locked down by Israel's layers of hi-tech defences, but 19-year-old Eshel proved a more accurate observer of the strip than many of the country's top generals.

She paid for their mistakes with her life, killed along with 14 other spotters when their base was overrun. Seven

spotters were taken to Gaza. Their families and hundreds of other women who served in the same role over decades sprang into action, campaigning to bring them back.

Yahel Oren, 31, was one of them. Last week she stood in Tel Aviv's Hostages Square in a T-shirt that read "once a spotter, always a spotter" to watch the last of those women, Agam Berger, return to Israel after 15 months in captivity.

One of the seven, Noa Marciano, was killed in Gaza. The remaining six have all returned – one rescued by the military in October 2023, and the other five released last month. Now the campaign group is shifting focus. They want Israel to have an official inquiry into why the spotters were ignored and abandoned to their fate that morning.

Survivors said even when Hamas flooded over the border, the spotters were so sure they would be saved they agreed none of them would call their parents, to avoid worrying them.

That was despite months of watching Hamas preparation, and Israeli failures – broken cameras, predictable patrols, problems at the fence – with increasing apprehension.

"Our next steps will be demanding the truth about what happened at Nahal Oz. For the sake of future spotters, we have to get answers," Oren said. Like many other Israeli women, she thinks the spotters died partly because of the sexism in a country that celebrates women soldiers but rarely promotes them to top command positions, and has never had a female minister of defence or internal security.

"I think the hierarchy needs restructuring, they need more women in high command. Even in the spotters' divisions, the commanders were all men."

Military chief Herzi Halevi has said he will step down in March, submitting a letter that laid out his "terrible failure" to protect Israel in 2023. But the government has battened away requests for a state commission of inquiry.

Oren served in Nahal Oz about a decade before Eshel, but much of what she has learned about the events on and leading up to 7 October 2023 feels painfully familiar.

"We felt a sense of security, which was false," she said. *Observer*

EMMA GRAHAM-HARRISON IS THE GUARDIAN'S SENIOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT. QUIQUE KIERSZENBAUM IS A JERUSALEM-BASED REPORTER AND PHOTOGRAPHER



▲ Former spotter Yahel Oren in Hostages Square, Tel Aviv



COMMENTARY
 GAZA

Lives in ruins
The long walk back
to find my home
crushed and buried

By Malak A Tantesh BEIT LAHIA

The Guardian's reporter in the territory describes the journey to see what remains of her prewar life

When the ceasefire came, there was a moment of relief that we had escaped death, although we still carry the sadness and pain of everything lost in those 15 months.

Palestinians know that there are still more battles ahead, they have to keep fighting, in a war of daily suffering - the fight for water, for a loaf of bread - and a war against memories, that bring pain to the heart and madness to the mind.

Still, I woke full of energy and excitement on 25 January, the day we had been told we could begin returning to the north. I knew the journey would be exhausting but I was eager to return to my beloved home. I waited for the announcement that the crossing would open. Instead, we got news that it would not happen.

When the announcement came last Monday that the road was open, I felt I could have flown away with joy. We got dressed, packed our bags, and drove as close to the checkpoint as we could get. As we approached on foot, we were drawn into a crowd so big it felt like an endless river of human beings. If you looked back or forward, you could see only the same torrent of people trudging north. We would walk for 11 hours, covering 15 kilometres.

Everyone was very tired, and weighed down with the few possessions they had saved from the war, but the passion to return drove them forward. Our longing to see our homes, even if they were destroyed, was stronger than our exhaustion, and kept our tired legs moving.

Around me there were so many heartbreaking scenes. Men with children on their shoulders struggled to carry or drag heavy belongings that were all they had saved from the war. Old people in wheelchairs jolted painfully for miles over the ruts of a destroyed road. Others who needed support but no longer had it collapsed in the middle of the road.

I saw one man weeping over the body of his elderly father, who had

insisted on trying to return despite poor health. The journey killed him. Elsewhere, children who had been separated from families in the crush cried for their parents, while a father searched frantically for his son.

As we approached Gaza City, Rashid Street was so full of people trying to return that the crowd seemed to have filled it and then come to a stop. So we turned off towards the beach where we used to go to relax, walking near the water with hundreds of other people.

The beach was clean and beautiful, so we took breaks every now and then. In the late afternoon, we ate cucumber, cheese bread and avocado that our mother had packed, looking at the sea. Our water had run out some time earlier.

After finishing the meal, we continued our journey, finally reaching Gaza City, where crowds had gathered to wait for their loved ones. The sun was setting, and its reflected light turned the sad, ruined buildings orange. It was strangely beautiful, converting Gaza into a piece of art that only the people who lived there could appreciate.

We hoped to find a car to drive us the final stretch of the journey, but the few on the streets were already full, or the drivers were waiting for their own families.

So we carried on walking through Gaza's Rimal neighbourhood, which used to be a fancy enclave for the city's rich. Now it was a ghost town, with an army of displaced people

▼ Palestinians return to their destroyed homes in al-Mughraqa, a town south of Gaza City



grey with dust tramping through its streets in exhausted silence.

We reached our home town, Beit Lahia, in the farthest north, when night had already fallen. My feet and shoulders ached, and even in the darkness I saw glimpses of the destruction all around, but despite everything I was incredibly happy.

We headed straight to my maternal grandfather's house, which was still standing, although it was damaged and coated in dust and graffiti from Israeli soldiers. There were empty boxes of ammunition and bullets everywhere. We watch our steps when moving around, as unexploded bombs are a big worry.

When we woke the next day we went for a walk, and although I have been covering Israeli attacks for months, the scale of the destruction was overwhelming.

People were searching through the rubble of their homes, looking for clothes, photographs or other scraps of memories of their lives before the war, tools and utensils that may still be usable.

I ran into friends and neighbours who I had not seen since the start of the war. All around there were families embracing, the hugs and kisses of longed-for reunions.

We decided to visit our home for the first time since the war started. I grew up in this area but it had been so devastated, buildings and streets and gardens bombed and demolished, that we could no longer find our way. We were wandering lost and confused, when a neighbour appeared and guided us.

The only things still standing were the trunks of a walnut tree, and some olive trees that used to be in our yard. Seeing them there, surrounded only by rubble, I felt like I had been stabbed in my heart.

Our home was a three-storey building, and the levels had collapsed on top of each other like layers in a cake. I walked around and over the ruins to see if there was a way in, to recover anything from our life. It was dangerous but our memories deserve it.

I couldn't find even the smallest hole. Nothing had survived. My memories, my family's memories and everything we owned have all been crushed and buried.

MALAK A TANTESH IS A REPORTER BASED IN GAZA

▲ Malak Tantesh and her father in the rubble of their home in Beit Lahia
ENAS TANTESH





GREENLAND



The Arctic route that could shape the world

Melting ice may open up the coveted Northwest Passage shipping channel - but mastering it will not be easy

By Miranda Bryant NUUK

If shipping boss Niels Clemensen were to offer any advice to Donald Trump or anyone else trying to get a foothold in Greenland, it would be this: "Come up here and see what you are actually dealing with."

Sitting on the top floor of his beamed office in Nuuk harbour, where snow is being flung around by strong winds in the mid-morning darkness outside and shards of ice pass by in the fast-flowing water, the chief executive of Greenland's only shipping company, Royal Arctic Line, said: "What you normally see as easy [setting up operations] in the US or Europe is not the same up here." As well as the cold, ice and extremely rough seas, the world's biggest island does not have a big road network or trains, meaning everything has to be transported either by sea or air. "I'm not saying that it's not possible. But it's going to cost a lot of money."

With the potential to slash shipping times between Europe and Asia by

thousands of kilometres - or as much as two weeks - the opening up of the Northwest Passage as the Arctic ice melts is viewed by some as an upside of the climate crisis and one of the main reasons Trump has taken such an interest in Greenland.

With its critical position on the coveted route - which passes through the Canadian Arctic archipelago instead of the traditional passage via the Panama canal - Greenland is likely to have an important role to play in its future.

But the spotlight on Greenland - and the shifting focus of the world's superpowers on the Arctic region as a whole - has highlighted just how poorly equipped for the Arctic environment much of Europe and the US in fact is. Nowhere is this more stark than in the lack of icebreakers - the expensive specialist ships vital for operating in the region.

"Opening up the Northwest Passage doesn't mean the ice is gone," said

▲ Nuuk harbour. Much European and US shipping is ill-equipped for the conditions
JULIETTE PAVY

'Opening up the passage doesn't mean the ice is gone. It's retreating, but is still there'

► Niels Clemensen
CEO of Royal Arctic Line

Clemensen, whose ships (not ice-breakers) are used to import and export across Greenland. "We're not talking about an all-year-round free passage. The ice is retreating, but it is still there."

Denmark, which is responsible for Greenland's defence, does not have a single icebreaker - having retired its remaining three in 2010. Yet the ownership of these specialist vessels has suddenly become what could be a new front in the fight for dominance between the world's biggest powers - commanding access to everything from shipping routes to search and rescue and minerals. Such is the attraction of Greenland that Trump has not ruled out using military force to get it.

Since Trump's renewed advances, Copenhagen has said it is preparing for the fact that it may have to purchase icebreakers for Arctic defence. The Danish prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, visited an icebreaker in Finland - a country that has several. But even if she ordered a new fleet now, the ships take several years to build.

Russia is by far and away the ice-breaker superpower. It is understood to have a minimum of 50 icebreakers - at least 13 of which can operate in the Arctic and seven of which are nuclear - as well as a network of ports in the region. China is understood to have four that are suitable for the Arctic, while new Nato members Sweden and Finland, as well as the US and Canada, all own their own versions of these specialist vessels. There are also a growing number of icebreaker cruise vessels catering to Arctic tourists.

Commercial vessels wanting to use the passage must have ice-breaking capabilities as the ice-free window, if it happens, will be as little as three months long.

Pointing to a big framed map



Almost half of Danish people now consider the US to be a considerable threat to their country and the overwhelming majority oppose Greenland leaving to become part of the US, polling has found.

The new research by YouGov, shared exclusively with the Guardian last week, came after weeks of tension between Denmark, Greenland and the US over Donald Trump's repeated assertions that he plans to take control of the autonomous territory, which is part of the Danish kingdom.

The Arctic island, which has a population of 57,000 people, was formerly ruled as a colony by Denmark, which continues to control



Proportion of Danes who thought the US "a very big threat" or "a fairly big threat" to Denmark, more than those who feared North Korea or Iran

its foreign and security policy. Trump's interest in Greenland comes at a time of growing momentum for its pre-existing independence movement.

The poll of just over 1,000 people in Denmark, conducted between 15 and 22 January, found that 46% considered the US to be either "a very big threat" or "a fairly big threat" to Denmark.

But the threat of Russia remains considerably higher; 86% of respondents said they considered Moscow a threat.

Of those surveyed, 78% said they would oppose Greenland being sold to

the US, but 72% said the final decision should be Greenland's, not Denmark's.

The findings came in a week in which the Danish prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, toured Berlin, Paris and Brussels to shore up support amid Trump's Greenland threats, after a reportedly "horrendous" call with the US president.

Frederiksen said Europe must unite in the face of changing relations with the US.

She added: "Everyone in Europe can see that it will be a different collaboration with the USA now."

Trump has said the US needs control of Greenland - and the Panama canal - for "economic security" and has described ownership and control of the territory as an "absolute necessity".

Greenland has long been on his radar as a target for purchase and in 2019 he confirmed reports that he had been urging aides to find out how the US could buy it, describing a sale as "essentially a large real estate deal".

As well as oil and gas, Greenland's supply of in-demand raw materials for green technology is attracting interest from around the world, including from China.

An opinion poll published last week found that 85% of Greenlanders did not want the island to become part of the US. The survey by the pollster Verian, commissioned by the Danish paper Berlingske, showed only 6% of Greenlanders were in favour of becoming part of the US, with 9% undecided. MB

of Greenland on his office wall, Clemensen said they have the Arctic ice drifting down the east coast that closes together so it has no gaps during the winter and moves south in summer. "That's multi-year ice. It's very hard and it's big flakes. We pass it, we don't go in and break it with our vessels."

Then there is the west ice, which comes from the Canadian side starting in November and building up until it closes down as far as Disko Bay on Greenland's west coast.

While you could get through with an icebreaker, to do so would put the livelihoods of coastal communities at risk as they go out on to the ice to fish species including shrimp, halibut, redfish and cod. The same communities also hunt seals, walrus, reindeer and small numbers of polar bear in winter.

Vittus Qujaukitsoq, a former government minister and chief executive of KNAPK, Greenland's business association for professional fishers and hunters, said: "Some people think it would be a great help to have icebreakers [in order to help get small fishing boats out on to the water], but not everyone, because they would ruin their way of living."

Qujaukitsoq said depleting ice and unpredictable weather caused by the climate crisis is already affecting hunting and fishing in rural communities. Carbon emissions are also speeding up the melting of inland ice. "It is affecting our livelihood economically, but also threatening our traditional way of living," he said.

Johanna Ikävalko, director of the Arctic Centre, said there is "an elevated need for high-performance icebreakers" in the region, but she still considers the Northwest Passage a "very risky area for navigating". If it were to be used to transport oil for example, the ice conditions would pose a "huge risk" even for a routine journey.

She is, she said, fearful for the future of the Arctic, which she predicted will form the basis for which nations become the superpowers of the future. Russia, she added, has multiple military bases in the Arctic near Murmansk that it has been developing for years. "I started to think last summer that the world order will actually start to evolve from the Arctic - and now it's even more possible."

MIRANDA BRYANT IS THE GUARDIAN'S NORDIC CORRESPONDENT

PAKISTAN

What went wrong with the China-funded Dubai 2.0?

The city of Gwadar has a huge new airport, but suspicion of Beijing's true intentions threatens to wreck the project

By Shah Meer Baloch GWADAR and Hannah Ellis-Petersen DELHI

As the first flight touched down on the fresh tarmac at Gwadar, it was hailed by Pakistan's government as a step towards "progress and prosperity". The new airport - the largest in the country - built in Pakistan's troubled Balochistan province was "a symbol of the cooperation between Pakistan and China", according to the defence minister, Khawaja Muhammad Asif.

Yet the optics of the event told another story. As it unfolded, the city of Gwadar was put under a security lockdown. And while several senior Pakistan government and military figures were present, their Chinese government counterparts were noticeably absent - even though it was China footing the \$230m bill for the airport.

Gwadar, with its Chinese-sponsored airport, deepwater port and proposed economic zone, has been touted as a jewel in the crown of the China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC), under which China pledged to build around \$62bn of infrastructure "mega-projects" spanning airports, highways,

railways, ports and power plants for cash-strapped Pakistan. CPEC began in 2015 as a flagship project of China's belt and road initiative, which aims to give China access and influence over trade routes in Asia and Africa.

After a turbulent decade, questions are being raised about CPEC's future. In Balochistan, it has provoked a full-blown security crisis. Starkly unfulfilled promises that Gwadar would be transformed into "Pakistan's Dubai" have led to potent anger towards China among locals, who accuse it of turning the city into a high security prison, with fencing, segregated areas for Chinese workers, security checkpoints and heavy police and military presence.

Among the projects in Gwadar that have been met with local distaste is a donkey-slaughtering factory - not yet operational - where up to a million donkeys imported from Africa are to be killed to harvest products, including an ingredient used in traditional Chinese medicine.

Access to the sea has also become restricted around Gwadar's deepwater

▼ A family rides past a display in Lahore marking the 10th anniversary of China's belt and road initiative, in 2023

ARIF ALI/AFP/GETTY

'The Chinese now have this huge stake in Pakistan. They can't afford for it not to work out'



port, which sends 90% of its profits to its Chinese operator. Local fishers say they are no longer allowed to freely sail, and have had their boats raided by security forces while out fishing.

"We have lost the entire sea," said 70-year-old fisher Dad Karim. "When we go fishing, it feels like we are going there as thieves and hiding ourselves. The sea does not belong to fishermen any more - it belongs to the Chinese."

CPEC has made enemies of many terrorist organisations in Pakistan, including the Islamic State and the Pakistan Taliban. The regional separatist militant group Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) has accused China of exploiting the area's resources and embarked on a violent campaign to halt CPEC. In October, the BLA was behind a terrorist attack near Karachi airport that killed two Chinese nationals and, prior to that, carried out suicide bombings and shootings that left both Chinese and Pakistanis dead.

The security of Chinese workers has become such a severe stumbling block for CPEC that Chinese officials said Phase II of the project had not begun, and that some of the 26 projects in the pipeline may be scaled back. China has pulled out swathes of its workforce from Pakistan, and any arrival of Chinese personnel into Gwadar prompts a military-grade security shutdown.

In an interview in Islamabad, Wang Shengjie, China's political secretary to Pakistan, criticised Pakistan over the threats facing CPEC and expressed "serious concerns" over the future of China's multibillion-dollar investment.

"If the security is not improved, who would come and work in this environment? There is hatred against the Chinese in Gwadar and Balochistan," he said. "Some evil forces are against the CPEC, and they want to sabotage it."

Analysts put some of CPEC's biggest economic and security failures at the door of Pakistan, where policymakers had pushed the Chinese for projects that made little economic sense.

Shengjie accused the Pakistani government of using "false rhetoric" around CPEC projects, giving unrealistic expectations to locals. "We don't work in rhetoric like Pakistan - we just focus on development," he said.

There are also longstanding concerns over whether China's true motives are more militarily strategic than economic. Many have questioned



why Gwadar - a city of about 150,000 people who mostly live below the poverty line - would need Pakistan's largest airport. The deepwater port, too, has proved to have little commercial worth since China took control of it.

Several Pakistani officials in Gwadar working on CPEC said their experience led them to believe the projects were not purely commercial endeavours for the Chinese. Instead it was widely felt that China ultimately intended to use the deepwater port as a strategic military base for its navy and the airport as a resource for its military.

Pakistani officials, who requested anonymity, confirmed it was an "old demand from China" that China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces could be brought into Pakistan to guard Chinese workers against attacks, and for Chinese navy ships and submarines to have access to Gwadar port.

"China wants to have the presence of PLA troops to protect their workers on projects related to CPEC. Moreover, they want to have Gwadar port for their navy. Gwadar airport is linked to this demand as well," said one official.

The sources confirmed that Beijing had recently mounted pressure on these strategic demands as the security situation in Pakistan became even more precarious and China had become "frustrated" at CPEC delays.

► Gwadar's new international airport and port, built as part of the CPEC project

AHMAD KAMAL/XINHUA/ALAMY



\$62bn

Value of the infrastructure 'megaprojects' that China has pledged to build in Pakistan, including airports, railways, ports and power plants

They alleged that Beijing had tried to push Pakistan into a corner with threats not to roll over loan payments or withhold future CPEC investments if this did not happen. China's alleged ambitions to use CPEC projects for strategic military purposes is a long-standing anxiety for both India and the US. Washington in particular has expressed concern that Chinese investments in Pakistan "may be used for coercive leverage".

According to those directly aware of the matter, it was US pressure behind the scenes that ensured certain deals with China, such as a large Chinese state power company buying a majority share in Pakistani power company K-Electric, did not go through.

Pakistan still appears to struggle to balance its deep reliance on China for CPEC and its desire to maintain a relationship with the US. In a move thought sure to infuriate Beijing, during a trip to the US last month to curry favour with the Donald Trump administration, the interior minister, Mohsin Naqvi, met a US lobby group known for its anti-China stance.

Uzair Younus, principal at the Asia Group, said Pakistan would "not want to go down the path of Chinese military presence unless they're left with absolutely no choice".

"Pakistan is mindful of the potential implications of this, particularly in making their relationship with the US much more adversarial," he said. "But if China is really pushing for a military base, it's not a zero possibility that it will happen in the future."

Both military and government figures denied that any agreement had been made to allow for CPEC to be used for Chinese military strategic purposes. Ahsan Iqbal, minister for planning and development, said: "I have not heard of any Chinese request to bring their own security or PLA in Pakistan ... there won't be any Chinese security forces coming to Pakistan."

Asfandyar Mir, a senior expert in the South Asia programme at the United States Institute of Peace, said that while China may have scaled back its CPEC ambitions, there was little question of it withdrawing entirely.

"The Chinese now have this huge stake in Pakistan," said Mir. "They can't afford for it not to work out." *Observer*

SHAH MEER BALOCH COVERS PAKISTAN FOR THE GUARDIAN; HANNAH ELLIS-PETERSEN IS THE GUARDIAN'S SOUTH ASIA CORRESPONDENT



BRAZIL

Homeland Why Black Brazilians are moving to Benin

By Tom Phillips and Tiago Rogero
RIO DE JANEIRO
and Eromo Egbejule ABIDJAN

João Diamante was gripped by a sense of belonging as he stepped out of the airport terminal thousands of kilometres from his birthplace in Brazil.

“The first thing I felt was that I was at home,” said the 33-year-old celebrity chef from Rio de Janeiro. “Nobody looked at me like they were afraid of me because of the colour of my skin... On the contrary, I saw people just like me. I saw similarities.”

“I’d never been there before,” Diamante said of his arrival in Benin’s largest city, Cotonou, last year. “But I was certain this was a place I knew: its smell, its music, its dance, its sound, the noise of car horns, the atmosphere.”

He was familiar with his surroundings in a way, despite it being his first trip to Africa. Diamante was born in

Salvador – the city with the largest Black population outside Africa – and grew up steeped in the Afro-Brazilian culture and cuisine produced by the uprooting of millions of enslaved Africans who were forced to travel to work in gold mines or sugar and coffee plantations.

Some 40% of the estimated 12 million enslaved Africans shipped across the Atlantic between the 16th and 19th centuries came to Brazil, which was the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery, in 1888.

Diamante, whose full name is João Augusto Santos Batista, believes his ancestors were forcibly brought to Brazil from the west African region around what is today the Republic of Benin in the 19th century. Two centuries later, he is reconnecting with his African roots and hopes to become a Benin citizen thanks to *a new law* that offers Afro-descendants from around the world a pathway to citizenship.

“I’m already trying to work out the paperwork... I want a Brazilian passport and a Beninese passport,” he said at his restaurant in an area of Rio known as Pequena África (Little Africa). “It’s about belonging, about who I am, where I come from, my lineage and my family,” he added. “Lots of people dream of having a US or a European passport. I dream of having a Beninese passport because Africa is where I’m from.”

The law has sparked interest in Brazil given the large number of enslaved people transported there from ports along what was called Africa’s “slave coast”, between what is today western Nigeria, Benin and Togo.

“There’s a really strong connection [between the two countries],” said

João Diamante believes his ancestors were forcibly taken from Benin in the 19th century

JOÃO LAET

Marcelo Sacramento, Benin’s honorary consul in Salvador, the capital of Bahia state in north-eastern Brazil. “More than a million Beninese came to Bahia during the days of slavery... Just think what that means [in terms of today’s population]... That’s millions and millions of Brazilians.”

Benin’s president, Patrice Talon, “wanted to turn Benin into the gateway for the African diaspora to return to Africa” and boost the number of Afro-descendant tourists travelling back to “their motherland”. Authorities hope a low-cost flight connecting Salvador with Cotonou will be inaugurated at the end of the year, slashing the journey time from more than 20 hours to less than six.

Benin is not the first country to embrace a return of the descendants of enslaved people. In the 1970s, singer Nina Simone enjoyed a three-year stint living in Liberia, where thousands of formerly enslaved African Americans had migrated to in the 19th century, to escape the impact of racial segregation.

In Ghana, the 400th anniversary of enslaved Africans in the US in 2019 was dubbed the Year of Return. The president, Nana Akufo-Addo, granted citizenship to 200 African Americans and removed visa requirements for a number of Caribbean countries.

Since then, thousands of tourists have flooded the west African state, especially in December, further entrenching the party culture known colloquially there and in Nigeria as Detty December. But locals also say the influx of returnees has triggered a cost of living crisis and the strange case of dollar-denominated real estate listings in Ghana. Elsewhere, Gabon has also offered citizenships to a few prominent African Americans, including rapper Ludacris and actor Samuel L Jackson.

Diamante’s restaurant is near the ruins of Rio’s Valongo wharf, where hundreds of thousands of enslaved people were sold at the start of the 19th century. After obtaining Beninese citizenship, the chef wondered if he might one day run a restaurant in the west African country too.

“Our mission now is to resist and to celebrate all those who died so we could be here today,” he said.

TOM PHILLIPS IS THE GUARDIAN’S LATIN AMERICA CORRESPONDENT;
TIAGO ROGERO IS SOUTH AMERICA CORRESPONDENT; EROMO EGBEJULE IS WEST AFRICA CORRESPONDENT

TAIWAN

The next generation aims to turn tide on fear of the deep

By Helen Davidson and Chi-hui Lin
KENTING

A dozen excited 10-year-olds are bouncing in their chairs. The small classroom's walls are lined with racks of wetsuits and water equipment, and decorated with posters of turtles. But the students' eyes are trained on their teacher, Tseng Ching-ming, describing the currents and sea conditions at nearby Banana Bay, where they'll soon be going.

"Today you have one mission: to take off your equipment and float in the water," he says. Some of the kids grin, nervously. They don't know it, but the students from Kenting-Eluan elementary school on Taiwan's southernmost point, are rare among their peers and predecessors.

Despite most of Taiwan's 24 million residents living near the coast and rivers, swimming ability is low. Ocean safety skills are even lower. Classes like Tseng's rely on a few individuals who want to share their love of the sea.

They're up against a lot - entrenched parental protectiveness, bureaucratic risk aversion, the legacy of decades of militarised coastlines, even ghosts.

For the past few decades there has been a push to shift the swimming culture, and address high drowning rates and the missed opportunities for fun. It's been mostly driven by dedicated teachers and public servants, and one "really crazy" president.

After Tseng's class, everyone piles into cars with a few adult helpers. At Banana Bay, the children pick their way through jagged volcanic rock before launching themselves into the small but choppy waves.

"We don't want to be in the classroom, we want to be in the water the whole time, every day," one girl says.

A 2010 Ocean University survey found just 44% of Taiwanese say they can swim. This compares with more than half of Hongkongers, 75% of Australians and a global average of 76% for high-income countries.

Like Australia, Taiwan can be stiflingly hot and has treacherous waterways and beaches. In Australian coastal communities, learning how to be safe in the ocean is considered crucial. In Taiwan, the response appeared to be more that the ocean is dangerous and so must be avoided.

The attitude manifests in ways from frustrating restrictions at beaches to tragically higher risks of drowning when swimming. In 2007, the rate of death by drowning for Taiwanese under-14s was reportedly three times higher than for Australians.

The most common explanation for why swimming isn't a big thing in Taiwan is that most parents are afraid of letting their children near the water.

Tseng laughs as he recalls his first class: sceptical parents lined up on the shore, arms folded and unblinking eyes trained firmly on their child. "There are fewer kids in Taiwan so the kids are like treasures, and people don't want accidents," Tseng says, referring to Taiwan's record low birth rates.

Risk aversion also appears to be institutional. Strict rules abound and beaches close frequently. Lifeguards have been known to tell people to get out of knee-deep water. Prof Cheng Shih-Chung, director-general of

Taiwan's Sports Administration, says they likely fear they'll be held liable if someone drowns. So it's easier just to keep people out of the water.

Downhill from the school, two Taipei women in their 40s shriek as waves crash around their feet at Secret Beach.

"This beach is beautiful, I love it," says Winnie Kuo. But she can't go in. Instead they're waiting for her 19-year-old daughter to arrive. "When we were young our parents didn't let us go to the beach, so we never had the opportunity to learn to swim," Kuo laments.

Part of the reason Kuo and others of her generation weren't taught is that their parents grew up under martial law, which ended in the mid-1980s. Back then, civilians were largely kept away from natural swimming places, militarised coastlines were patrolled for invaders or escapees, and some riversides were execution grounds.

Successive governments have attempted to improve drowning rates but the most ambitious attempt was launched by former president Ma Ying-jeou in 2011.

The 12-year plan sought to get 80% of students swimming, and raise rates among public servants and first responders. At the time, there was no requirement that even coastguard personnel be able to swim.

"Taiwan is an island surrounded by sea," Ma says, "and [parents] should be assured that the kids have learned swimming and swim well."

HELEN DAVIDSON IS A GUARDIAN CORRESPONDENT BASED IN TAIPEI; CHI-HUI LIN IS A NEWS RESEARCHER AT THE GUARDIAN BASED IN TAIWAN

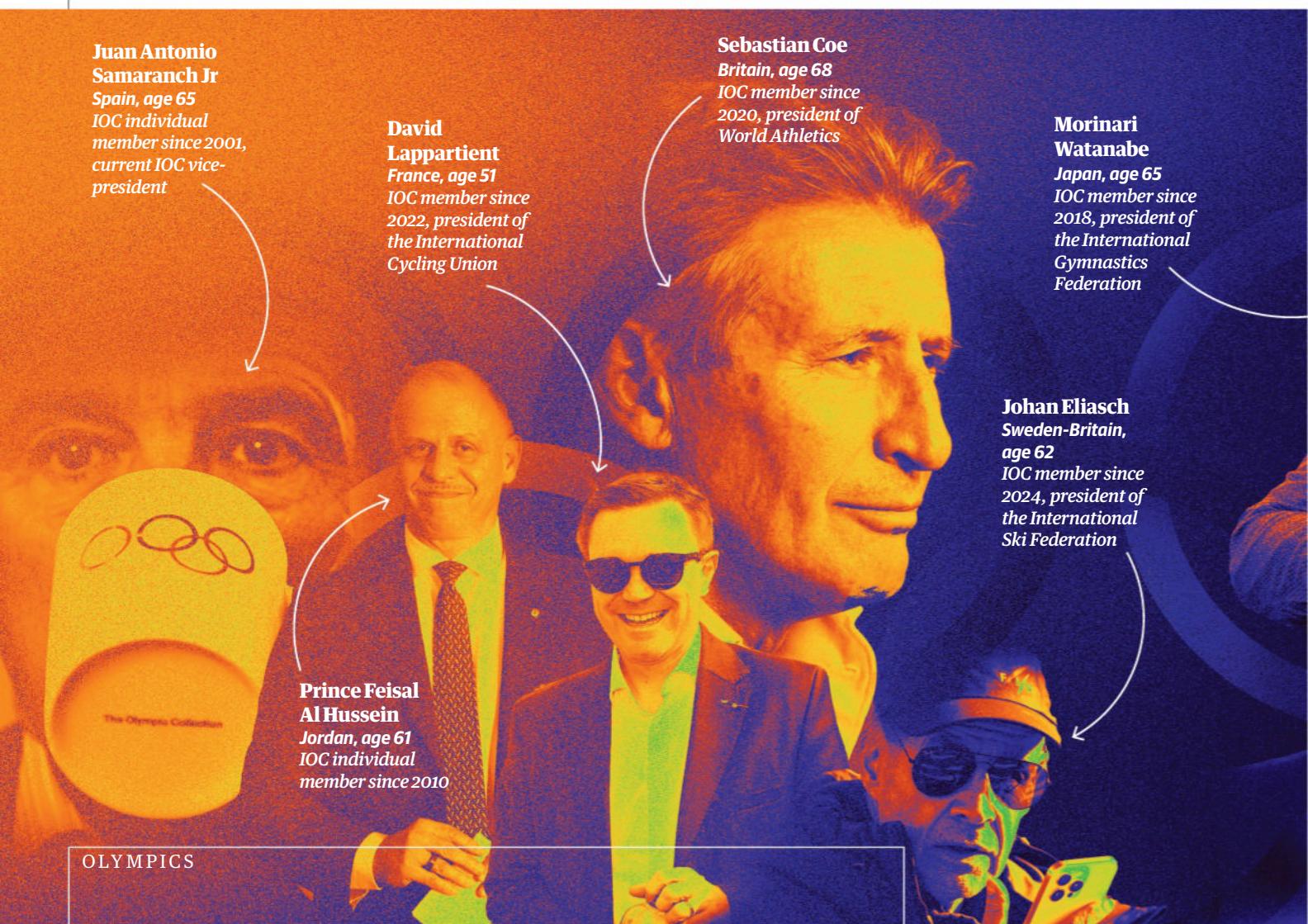
▼ Schoolchildren participate in an ocean safety class with teacher Tseng Ching-ming

HELEN DAVIDSON

44%

The proportion of Taiwan's population who say they can swim - compared with more than half of Hongkongers and 75% of Australians





OLYMPICS

The golden ticket

Inside the race for the biggest job in world sport

Britain's Sebastian Coe is among the front-runners, but faces stiff competition from all sides in the politically charged contest to become the next IOC president

By Sean Ingle

ILLUSTRATIONS:
GUARDIAN DESIGN

More than 40 years after Sebastian Coe powered to his second Olympic 1500m title, he is still running hungry. He's in the gym most mornings at 6am, cranking out 40-50km a week on the treadmill,

doing conditioning work or lifting weights, before meticulously recording his workouts in training diaries - just as he did during his golden heyday. Even at 68, he is still chasing a fresh ambition: securing the most powerful job in global sport.

"I will work harder for this than I'll probably ever work for anything," Coe insisted in December when he launched his manifesto to be the next president of the International Olympic Committee. "It's the dance that I just couldn't sit out." That dance, however, is about to get a lot more frenetic.

Last week at the Château de Vidy in Lausanne, Coe had his one chance to address and impress the 108-member IOC electorate directly. The stakes are nerve-flutteringly high. Especially as Coe and the other six candidates only got 15 minutes to give their presentations. But Coe has form for delivering under acute pressure, both on the track for Great Britain and having led London's successful bid for the 2012 Games, even though Paris and Madrid were initially seen as favourites.

SUSANA VERA/REUTERS; FIONA GOODALL/GETTY;
SARAH REED/CIRIL MARCILHAC; CHRISTIAN BRUNA;
RICHARD A BROOKS; CHRIS HYDE



Kirsty Coventry
Zimbabwe,
age 41
IOC member
since 2013

► Sebastian Coe breaks the world mile record in Oslo in 1979

TONY DUFFY/ALLSPORT/GETTY

One astute onlooker says the election resembles the papacy thriller Conclave

In the corridors and shadows of the 18th-century castle last week, a game within the game was also being played. Palms were pressed, small talk made, confidences gained. Coe is especially good at this. But so is chief rival, the 65-year-old Spaniard Juan Antonio Samaranch Jr, the IOC's current vice-president.

Many eyes were also on the final member of the “big three” – the Zimbabwean swimmer Kirsty Coventry, who won seven Olympic medals and would be the first woman and the first African to get the job. The 41-year-old also has the advantage of being the preferred candidate of the current IOC president, Thomas Bach.

It all makes for an election – to be held at the next IOC session in Greece in March – that one astute observer says resembles the Robert Harris papacy thriller, *Conclave*. On the surface there is a lot of talk of peace, respect and love. But scratch a little deeper and the cardinals are plunging daggers into each other’s backs.

The first area of consensus? That Coe has had a good campaign. It is said that he has spoken to almost every voter in person over the past two years, while his manifesto uses several “what you have told me” sections. His overall message? The organisation must be more open in its decision-making process and be willing to change.

The second area of consensus? Barring an unforeseen development, it is really between the big three. Some in French circles are pushing the idea that David Lappartient is gaining ground. However, most observers believe that the Paris 2024 president, Tony Estanguet, who has just become an IOC member, will have a much better shot in eight years’ time.

Elsewhere Prince Feisal Al Hussein of Jordan, whose manifesto pushes the idea of using sport as a tool for peace and the need to do far more to prevent abuse, is well liked but up against it. Morinari Watanabe, the amiable Japanese businessman who runs international gymnastics, also has his supporters: his plan to stage the Olympics simultaneously in five cities in the five continents has raised more eyebrows than Simone Biles’ triple-twisting double backflip.

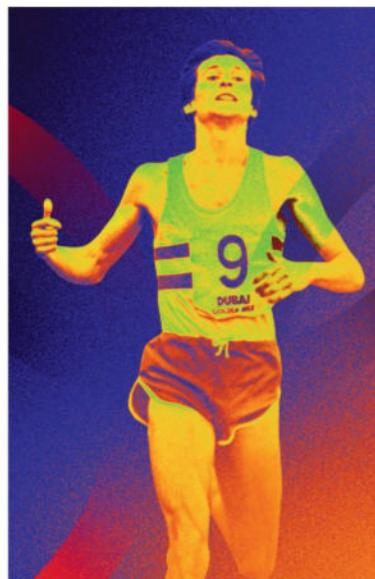
The biggest outsider of all is the Swedish-Briton Johan Eliasch, the

president of the international ski and snowboard federation and former CEO of the sports brand Head. But his slick manifesto, which stresses his business and environmental interests, has been well received. His big idea? To rotate the Winter Games among a select group of venues and to conserve a rainforest area the exact size of each Olympic host city.

A third area of agreement? That while Coventry should have a shot at being the first woman to run the IOC, her campaign is yet to ignite. Her manifesto was seen as bland, and it doesn’t help either that she has done very little campaigning. She is well liked and has Bach’s silent patronage. But she has work to do.

Perhaps most significantly of all, there is a growing sense that the IOC is increasingly likely to play it safe given the turbulent political currents across the globe. After all, whoever gets the job will need the political skills and diplomatic nous to work with Donald Trump in the buildup to the 2028 Los Angeles Games – as well as possibly Vladimir Putin if Russia is one day brought in from the sporting cold. If that is true, it is undoubtedly good for Samaranch Jr and Coe.

But for good measure the next IOC president will also have to renegotiate around \$1bn worth of TV contracts, find new ways to bring in sponsorship, and decide the 2036 Summer Olympics hosts. And if that wasn’t enough, there are also the fierce transgender and differences of sex development (DSD) debates to contend with.



On that score at least, it is notable that almost every candidate says they will protect the female category, which suggests that the IOC does not want a repeat of the controversy that surrounded the women’s boxing in Paris.

Can Coe win? Here views fall into two different camps. The first group believes that despite his excellent campaign he is massively up against it, for three reasons.

The first is that Bach will do everything in his power to stop him, with the pair having fallen out over Coe’s decision to ban Russia for state-sponsored doping.

It is also notable that World Athletics’ decision to pay track and field gold medallists \$50,000 at the Paris Olympics cost Coe goodwill as he didn’t consult other sports before the decision.

And then there is the biggest block of all: Samaranch Jr, whose father was IOC president for more than 20 years, has spent 30 years establishing a formidable network in what is, in effect, a private club. That, many suspect, will count.

But, intriguingly, no one dares to write Coe off, even privately. They know he is a serial winner, who is as sharp as any Vegas card-counter when it comes to playing the numbers game. If he has entered the race, the sentiment goes, he sees a path to victory.

Even his fiercest critics also concede that Coe also has the most complete CV. A double Olympic champion. The chair of the British Olympic Association. A Conservative MP. The head of the London 2012 Games. And a successful businessman to boot. And that’s before you get to his successes at World Athletics, including setting up the athletics integrity unit (AIU) to tackle doping.

History also suggests that it is never wise to rule Coe out, whether on the track or at the ballot box. Although in the opaque world of IOC politics, he faces his biggest challenge yet.

For now, though, he is pushing on and striving for victory. He knows that at the election in March, the candidate with fewest votes in each round will be knocked out until someone gets an overall majority. That means every second and third preference vote could prove vital.

Which was why in Lausanne last week, every word, smile and acknowledgement would have mattered.

SEAN INGLE IS THE GUARDIAN’S CHIEF SPORTS REPORTER

UNITED STATES

'Dark times' In Trump's culture war, even tragedy is fair game

By David Smith WASHINGTON

Donald Trump didn't need to wait for the black box flight recorder. He knew what caused the mid-air collision of a passenger plane and army helicopter that killed 67 people. Or he thought he did.

"They actually came out with a directive - 'too white,'" the US president told reporters last Thursday, seeking to blame former presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden for including Black and Latino people in the federal workforce. "We want the people that are competent."

That it took Trump less than a day to exploit a tragic plane crash for his crusade against diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programmes should

come as no surprise. The 78-year-old president is on a mission to win the "culture wars", acting with speed and ferocity to bring his rightwing agenda into every corner of American life. It is a form of shock therapy that aims to rewire society itself.

Little more than two weeks back in office, an emboldened, unapologetic Trump has launched a series of executive orders and policy changes that broadly target DEI, education curricula and political protests. The actions aim to reverse so-called "woke" policies and restore "merit-based" systems.

The president has also moved to eliminate "radical gender ideology and critical race theory [CRT]" from the nation's schools. He has targeted LGBTQ+ rights, making it government policy that there are only two sexes while seeking to ban federal funding or support for youth gender-affirming care and ban transgender individuals from serving in the military.

Chris Scott, a Democratic strategist who was coalitions director for Trump's vanquished election opponent, Kamala Harris, said: "A second Trump term is working to turn America back into pre-civil rights America during the Jim Crow era."

He added: "It is an absolutely terrifying time in this country. When we talk about Make America Great Again, a lot of folks understood what that means, particularly people of colour, particularly Black folks. We are on the precipice of going back, returning to our darkest times within this country."

'Trump is working to turn America back to the pre-civil rights, Jim Crow era'

Chris Scott
Democratic
strategist

The culture wars went mainstream in the 1990s thanks to the conservative scholar James Davison Hunter's 1991 book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. A year later, the conservative politician Pat Buchanan's delivered a "culture war" speech at the Republican national convention, warning that the US was in a war for its soul against liberal forces.

The conflict exploded again with the rise of Trump, Christian nationalism and social media echo chambers. In 2017 Trump was dubbed "the culture war president" by Politico magazine.

Dante King, a DEI expert, speaker and author, said: "Donald Trump has a platform. He has prioritised heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender white men and he is concerned with disenfranchising anyone who does not live up to or behaves based on the ideology, the ideals, the cultural customs and practices of white men."

Despite gaining less than 50% of the national popular vote, the 47th president believes he has a mandate to impose a fundamental cultural realignment, not by increments but with sudden and overwhelming force.

Trump's administration has branded DEI initiatives in the federal government as "discriminatory", "anti-American" and driven by a "far-left agenda". He has ordered the elimination of all federal DEI programmes and related offices, placing staff on leave and removing related websites.

There are signs that the assault is not confined to the government alone but seeping into wider society. Companies such as McDonald's, Meta and Walmart have reportedly pulled back on DEI programmes in response to political pressure. It is a dramatic reversal from the diversity push that followed the police murder of George Floyd, an African American man, in Minneapolis in 2020.

When America celebrates its 250th birthday next year, a likely flashpoint in the culture wars, Trump looks set to have the upper hand. Moe Vela, a former senior adviser to Biden when he was vice-president, said: "It is a continuum. It's always, unfortunately, been rooted in division and fearing somebody who's not like you or doesn't believe like you or doesn't love like you or doesn't think like you. The irony is that is the actual opposite of a democracy."

DAVID SMITH IS THE GUARDIAN'S WASHINGTON BUREAU CHIEF

▼ A memorial at Reagan National airport in Washington for the victims of last week's midair collision
KAYLA BARTKOWSKI/GETTY





UNITED STATES

White House targets wind and solar, to the delight of big oil

By Oliver Milman NEW YORK

For several years, Republicans accused Joe Biden of waging a “war on energy” even as the United States drilled more oil and gas than at any time in its history. Now, a more tangible assault is gathering pace under Donald Trump – aimed squarely at wind, solar and other cleaner forms of power.

Since his return as president, Trump has, like his first term, issued orders to open up more American land and waters for fossil fuel extraction and started the process to yank the US from the Paris climate agreement. “We will drill, baby drill,” said Trump, who has promised to cut energy and electricity prices in half within 18 months.

But Trump has this time launched a blitzkrieg against renewable energy, with his department of interior temporarily suspending all clean energy development on federal land.

Meanwhile an “energy emergency” declared by Trump mentions the need to bolster “crude oil, natural gas, lease condensates, natural gas liquids, refined petroleum products, uranium, coal”, but not solar, wind or other clean energy technologies. Trump has said he would like to see “good clean coal”, the dirtiest of fossil fuels, meet the rising electricity demand from AI generation.

Trump has long disparaged wind energy, calling it “disgusting” and baselessly alleging turbines are the primary cause of whale and bird deaths, and his administration has now halted all federal approvals of onshore and offshore wind.

He expanded his attack to solar, the fastest-growing energy source in the US. “You know what people also don’t like, those massive solar fields built over land that cover 10 miles [16km] by 10 miles,” Trump said. “I mean they are ridiculous, the whole thing.”

Smaller-scale solar projects are also suspended, with the new administration freezing \$7bn in funding already awarded for community and rooftop solar in low-income communities.

This broad-fronted promotion of fossil fuels – the Trump administration has also started to reverse pollution standards for cars that encourage more electric sales, lifted a pause on gas exports and even floated the revival of the moribund Keystone XL oil pipeline – has delighted an industry that **donated heavily** to the president’s campaign. “This is a new day for American energy,” said Mike Sommers, president of the American Petroleum Institute.

But clean energy developers and climate advocates have been left stunned

◀ Solar panels next to an oil refinery in Richmond, California

CARLOS BARRIA/REUTERS

by the sharp turn against renewables. A White House spokeswoman did not answer questions as to the absence of renewables in Trump’s vision, instead pointing to a focus on “reversing the harmful and shortsighted policies of the previous administration”.

The last Trump administration sought to champion fossil fuels but now there’s the “aggressive use of every imaginable presidential power” to favour them over renewables, said Barry Rabe, an environmental policy expert at the University of Michigan.

“Renewables largely just get in the way of these goals; the president sees no advantage in pursuing them,” said Rabe. “The rhetoric around wind energy isn’t new but it’s now particularly embittered.”

Rabe said the vast support for clean energy in the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), passed under Biden, “provides targets” that weren’t previously there for Trump to aim at. The president has called the bill “a giant scam” and has already paused its spending that aids renewables, electric cars and batteries produced in the US.

Renewable sources of power, including nuclear, generated a quarter of US electricity in 2024, a significant leap from when Trump was last in power. Wind and solar surpassed coal for the first time last year and are expected to dominate freshly added capacity throughout 2025, with hundreds of thousands of new jobs turbocharged by the IRA’s tax credits.

However, the US still lags behind other countries, notably in Europe and China, in deploying the renewables needed to avert the worst impacts of global heating and lessen the thousands of deaths and illnesses from fossil fuel air pollution. Analysts warn that political uncertainty risks undermining the required clean energy roll-out and that any removal of the tax credits would severely dampen growth.

“This is all driven by culture war politics – Trump is attempting to strangle the US clean energy miracle in its crib so he can create a boogymen and be on top of a political moment,” said Paul Bledsoe, who was climate advisor to Bill Clinton’s White House.

“It’s illogical because it destroys working class jobs and allows China to eat America’s lunch on clean energy. But as long as it meets his culture war objectives he indulges it.”

OLIVER MILMAN IS AN ENVIRONMENT REPORTER FOR GUARDIAN US

Fuel injection
Big oil spent a stunning \$445m throughout the last election cycle to influence Donald Trump and Congress, a new analysis has found. Because it does not include money funnelled through dark-money groups – which do not have to reveal their donors – it is almost certainly a vast understatement, says the report from green advocacy group Climate Power. Fossil fuel interests poured \$96m into Donald Trump’s re-election campaign and affiliated political action committees, the report found.

A photograph of Louise Lancaster, a woman with short grey hair, wearing a high-visibility orange and grey vest over a dark jacket and blue jeans. She is standing on a bridge, leaning against a metal railing, looking towards the camera. In the background, a multi-lane highway with blurred cars suggests motion. The sky is cloudy.

■ Protest road

Louise Lancaster,
photographed in 2022

My inside story



Louise Lancaster was one of a group of Just Stop Oil activists given the longest-ever UK sentences for peaceful protest after blocking a motorway. Six months into her incarceration, the mother of three adult children reveals what she has learned about life in prison

JULY 2024

Locked in a tiny metal box in a prison transport van rattling its way to HMP Bronzefield, on the Middlesex-Surrey border, I felt at peace. I was on trial with four other Just Stop Oil protesters over the group's non-violent direct action on the M25 motorway in 2022. The judge had told the jury to ignore evidence of the climate emergency, and we were not allowed to talk in depth about the climate breakdown when defending our actions. But we do not have the time to pretend the existential threat we face is not real. My sense of peace came from having an opportunity to speak out about the crisis during our trial.

When I arrived in the cell that night, hearing the key turn in the lock, I felt cut off from the world. I was being held on remand, there was still a week of the trial to go, and communication with my co-defendants was nearly impossible. The support we were receiving from the outside, however - messages of solidarity, articles and letters - was incredibly sustaining. One day, 11 people sat outside the court holding signs that read: "Jurors have an absolute right to acquit a defendant according to their conscience." They were arrested.

Each day, I was woken at 5.30am and given a few slices of toast, before being taken to a holding room with others from our group. We would then be put in a van for a two-hour journey to court, where we would again spend much of our time in concrete holding cells. They were long days. It usually took hours to get back to prison, and often we would miss dinner. It was hard to prepare for the trial: you're not allowed to bring pens or paper with you, so I wrote my closing statement on the back of an envelope in blue crayon. →

Sentencing day was tense. In his statement, the judge accused us of being fanatics who don't care about the rights of our fellow citizens. These accusations are regularly thrown at us, but they can still take the wind out of you. There were times I had to lie on my cell floor until my heart stopped pounding. I had been acting out of love to bring attention to the threat to humanity and hold the government to account.

The judge had suggested we would be in prison for a long time, but that still didn't prepare us for our sentences. Four of us were handed four-year terms for conspiracy to cause public nuisance, while the Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil co-founder Roger Hallam got five. They were the longest sentences ever given to non-violent protesters in the UK. I had already been in jail for a few weeks that year because of my activism, and felt prepared for what was ahead of me. My family - at 58, I have three adult children - were supportive. Even so, the atmosphere felt very heavy. A UN rapporteur had attended our trial and said our sentences were "not acceptable in a democracy". Signs like these make me hope that change is coming. But in the meantime, I had to return to HMP Bronzefield.

Walking on to a prison wing for the first time provokes anxiety. Sound echoes everywhere as there are only hard surfaces, and the noise can be deafening. You hear people in distress, trying to make themselves heard. You start on an induction wing, but within a week most people will be sharing a cramped concrete cell with a stranger.

Many women in HMP Bronzefield are on remand, awaiting trial or sentencing. The community is an ever-changing mix of people, only a minority of whom, counter to public perception, are accused of violent crime. There are people facing drug charges. People with complex mental health needs. Homeless people. People with outstanding asylum cases. People engaged in civil resistance. The list goes on.

Many of them will be found not guilty, but they still have to wait in jail for an indeterminate length of time. It is a brutal system. As I meet more women and hear their stories, I wonder: who is it helping to incarcerate non-violent, low-risk people before they are even tried?

Cells differ in size. Mine is like a box room. Others are smaller and can only fit a small chair between the bed and the wall. There are

bunk beds. Cells usually have a monitor that acts as a basic TV and radio. There's a toilet and sink in the corner, which is necessary as we're locked in for about 15 hours a day. We are given two vacuum flasks, which we fill with hot water before we get locked in. There is a phone in the cell, which we pay to use. Showering, queueing for food and exercise in a tiny yard are communal activities. Accessing anything online - from selecting your meals to buying phone credit, booking a visit or arranging to speak to a GP - is done through one digital kiosk shared by nearly 40 people.

My approach to jail is to have very low expectations from the start, to lessen frustration. This strategy proves useful, as for six weeks I have only two sets of clothes. My other clothes languish at reception while I wait for an appointment to collect them. This snail's pace is common, and tough for people with urgent needs. Queueing for more than an hour a day to collect medication is not unusual, and often takes up people's daily hour allocated for fresh air.

My cellmate, Sue, and I get along well. I'm lucky. I have not experienced any negativity about what I'm in for. I've found most people don't care too much about why others are here, with the exception of offences against children. Sue and I have lived very different lives, but we share a concern for the wellbeing of other prisoners, and recognise we're all in this together.

Today, I'm woken abruptly at 7.30am by the jangling of keys and loud voices by the kiosk outside our cell. Sue and I are unlocked at 8am, 30 minutes before work. We can get cornflakes and two slices of toast from the servery, though most people head straight to the hot-water tap to make coffee.

There is a clamour to the morning routine. Groggy chatter over cereal. Blaring music from the cells of prisoners no one dares to challenge. Shouting and bar-rattling from a group demanding to be let out to collect medication. Others appeal to officers for more paper in the kiosk to print out movement slips. We all need a movement slip to go anywhere in the prison. It looks like a shop receipt and is your passport through the multitude of locked gates between you and your appointment. No slip, and you stay locked in your cell.

Thankfully I have my slip, so after breakfast I'm released from my wing and join a group of prisoners flowing through another barred gate to emerge into a garden. It's a brief moment of fresh air before we head into another stark building with windowless rooms.

I spot a friend and we line up for a fingerprint scan. I have found a job in a workshop, refurbishing old bicycles that go to charity. It can be stimulating to learn a skill, and practical tasks give you purpose. Other workspaces run similarly: there's a cafe, a salon, an art centre, gardens and a cleaning academy.

At 11.45am, we head back to our wings for lunch, and are then locked in our cells. I am let out at 2pm, and once again head to work. Today our cells are searched for drugs. The officers take our extra flask and cup, and what they consider excess fruit. Sue is left with the job of reassembling our home.

When I get back I thank her and, deflated, we join the queue for dinner (served about 4-5pm), plastic plates in hand. Tensions can flare at queue times, especially after cell searches. Officers change so frequently that it's often community-savvy inmates who step in. Today, my friend Kay talks down a pair of prisoners and prevents them from kicking off. She supports everyone with love, care and humour.

Our hot meal is followed by our daily hour of fresh air. It's warm outside; most people sit and vape and soak up the sun. Vape oil is a valuable commodity in the prison.

I walk round our yard with Anne. She's depressed. After being released on probation last month, she missed an appointment with her probation officer because she was sick. She was recalled to prison and now has to complete her full sentence. Prison recall rates are shocking: a recent report found that for every 100 people released on licence from April to June 2024, 73 were recalled. Sometimes

**I can feel joy, but
I don't get the
intensity of feeling
I would outside.
It is like a crucial
part of myself has
been left out there**



that's due to administrative errors relating to tags, but many people don't get the support they need to rebuild their lives on the outside. One woman I know who struggled with alcohol misuse was just told before she was released: "Try not to drink."

When officers call us back inside, it's like a starting gun is fired. Some rush to shower or grab flasks for hot water. Others conspire to stay out as long as possible, heralding a lot of shouting, arguing and the eventual slamming of everyone's doors for the night. Then, to the relief of some but the misery of others, time, lots of time. It's common to hear banging and shouting through the night.

There are many people here who shouldn't be in a prison setting. They should be getting mental health or drug rehabilitation support. This is a destabilising environment for everyone, and particularly for them. Our whole prison system needs to change. There's a new government in place, and James Timpson has been appointed as prisons minister. I hope he gives the whole system a radical rethink.

AUGUST

One of my priorities is to stay connected to what is happening across the world. In prison, without the internet and with scant access to newspapers - which are often censored - limited TV and radio channels are the only source of news. In a shared cell, if one person watches the TV or listens to the radio, you both do. The space is too tight.

Fortunately Sue and I both want to catch up on daily news. This week we are stunned by the killing of three children in Southport who were enjoying a Taylor Swift-themed dance class. Both of us are parents, and our thoughts are with their anguished families and community. We watch the vigils in silence.

In the following days, we are sickened by the racially motivated hate riots whipped up by social media posts and exacerbated by irresponsible political rhetoric. Later, those arrested for violent assault and arson will be sentenced to an average of two years. The contrast between their sentences and my own feels grim and stark. Fellow prisoners tell me they are shocked by the discrepancy. One Saturday, I catch the Any Answers? phone-in on Radio 4. It is dominated by callers arguing for and against the contrast. The court response to the rioters does seem to wake more people up to how unfit for purpose our criminal justice system is.

In the meantime, I find myself craving connection to those I love - the absence of which is the biggest contrast with life outside. In prison, I feel like a layer of my being has been stripped from me.

One Friday, around 4pm, I'm in the dinner queue, waiting for an onion and tomato wrap, and talking with Pam. She's on remand for actions in protest against the horrific situation in Gaza. She has been classified as a terrorist. This means she is restricted from outside contact and is struggling to be allowed phone calls, emails or visits. Not surprisingly, she feels isolated.

After dinner, I talk to Sue, who is distraught. She was not collected in time to make her 30-minute video call with her daughter and tiny granddaughter (video calls happen in a room on the other side of the prison, and prisoners have to be collected and escorted there). She is feeling the loss of connection acutely. Her frustration is compounded by news of yet another postponement of her trial. She's on remand and highly likely to be found not guilty.

We wake up early with the sun streaming through the curtainless window. Saturday turns out to be a good day. Fresh air is even called twice. I go to chess club, run by a very good chess player on the outside. There are some stimulating activities offered here: students from a university are running sessions on philosophy.

I wouldn't say I feel more "at home" now, but I'm more aware of how things work. Inside, I can feel joy at things, or get excited, but I don't get the intensity of feeling that I would on the outside. It is like something - a crucial part of myself - has been left out there.

SEPTEMBER

I have a knot in my stomach as I climb down from my bunk this morning. Things are again in flux. My pictures are no longer clinging to the wall with toothpaste. My clothes are rolled and stuffed into plastic bags. Books and toiletries are in my laundry bag. Today I am being transported to another prison, HMP Send in Surrey.

I feel mixed emotions. I requested the move, was happy to be rejoining my co-defendants Cressie and Lucia, and expected a calmer environment. But Sue, my neighbour Rachel and the bike workshop have kept me going. We exchange homemade cards and tearful hugs. We inmates are regularly moved like pawns on a chessboard. It's difficult to settle. Inter-prison communication is discouraged and hard to set up, so most lose contact and just fish for snippets of news of old friends when new prisoners transfer.

After the concrete fortress of Bronzefield, HMP Send is a breath of fresh air - quieter, with more greenery. It is also a bit like going back in time. Everything is done on paper, the walls are painted with murals and there is a public address system that reminds me of a 70s holiday camp I stayed in when I was nine. My fellow newcomers and I are met by a helpful inmate, Jenny, who explains how things work, then sends us on our way to the induction cells.

At 9am the next morning, Jenny is there again to give us a tour. When we enter the servery, I am suddenly hugged by Lucia, who spots me while working in the kitchen. A beautiful →

reunion. I give Cressie a hug later that day. Conversation, connection and mutual support flow more easily here - and thankfully I have a cell to myself. At Bronzefield, many people are held while awaiting trial, and people are constantly coming in and out. At Send, people have already been sentenced. People's reasons for being at Send are generally a taboo subject, but we sense we are on the same emotional journey: we feel the low mood and the dull ache of missed friends and family that never abates.

At lunch I sit next to Fran, also a recent transfer from Bronzefield. She valued the money she got from working there and was concerned she would struggle at Send. It may sound strange that prisoners are paid, but this has to be the case. Not everyone has people on the outside who can send in funds. Food is provided, but you need money to make phone calls, and wages are scant. You get paid anywhere between 50p and £3 (\$0.60 and \$3.70) for a two- to three-hour work session. A standard wage is £15 a week, and you can easily spend half your wages on calls. Most people will also need to buy toiletries and extra food provisions at the prison shop. Vapes are a common expense - vape oil costs £3 a box, and people often buy five boxes a week.

Virtually everybody I speak to who wants to share their story has been a victim of domestic violence or other forms of violence. Most prisoners arrive carrying a lot of trauma. They have failed to get the support they need on the outside, and prison is used as a convenient way to lock them out of sight.

OCTOBER

HMP Send feels like a community. It needs to. Many inmates are facing decades within these walls, a chilling thought that regularly hits me. I've been here just one month, and already I sense my world shrinking. Time and again I well up with tears of sadness, and sometimes outrage, at others' stories. There are women incarcerated for up to a third of their lifetime despite being deemed no risk to the public.

There are things that occupy us here. There's work in gardens or kitchens, vocational training, such as hairdressing, education at the Open University, peer support, clubs such as choir or crochet. There are mental health support programmes and gym facilities. The chaplaincy runs services and offers a range of support for all faiths.

It feels chillier now, so I'm happy to have been able to collect property brought in for me - things sent by friends and approved by prison staff: winter clothes, towels, a radio, an exercise mat and art materials.

At 8.30am, I go to work in the gardens, where we grow vegetables in polytunnels. It is refreshing to be outside, surrounded by trees. The morning shift finishes at 11.45am, and we return to our cells to be locked behind doors for the noon roll-call and lunch.

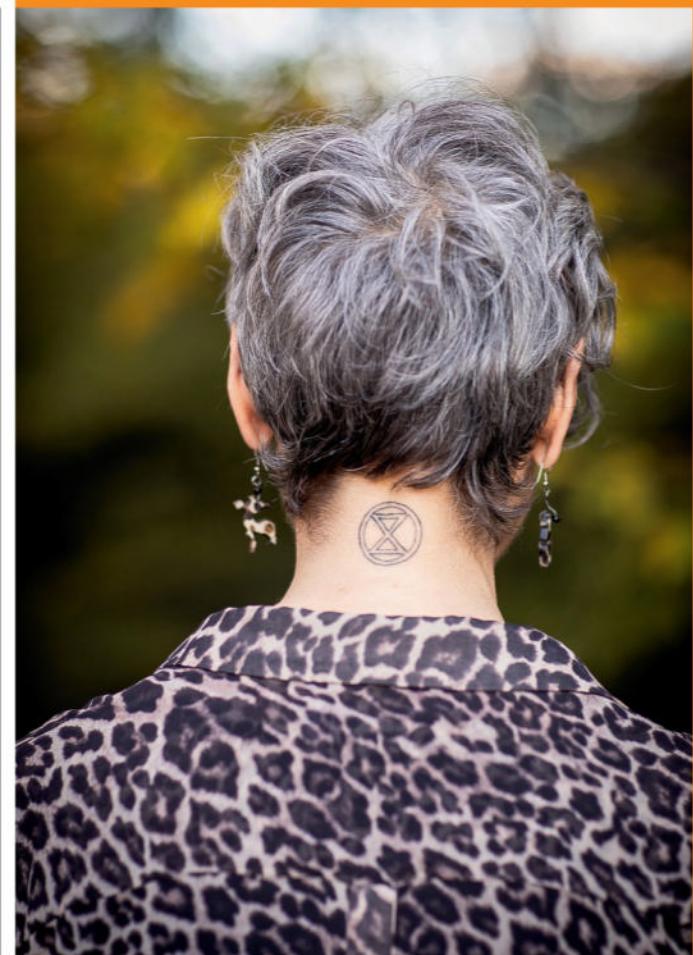
Meals here generally follow a four-week rotation. At breakfast, you can have a packet of cereal. Lunch will be a hot meal. Dinner is often cold, perhaps a salad with some beans or a vegan sausage roll. It's an improvement on Bronzefield, where a lot of the food was frozen.

I miss the ordinary activities of everyday life. I value the prison parkrun every Saturday morning, which links with the national event. We do seven loops of the same circuit, within the walls.

After a run today, I speak with Dawn. She is on a 20-year sentence for having killed someone in a moment of diminished responsibility (a legal term that refers to someone's judgment being impaired due to "an abnormality of mental functioning"). These extenuating circumstances were not properly considered in court. She would love to appeal, but it is too expensive. The only way would be to sell her home and render her children homeless. The law favours the wealthy, people with enough money to pay their way through the system.

NOVEMBER

The result of the US election has made this feel like a particularly dark time for the environment and social justice. I'm sick to the core that someone who advocates "drill, baby, drill" has gained such power.



I talk about the news with my co-defendants and friends in the garden. We feel deflated, but sharing how we feel lifts our spirits.

As weeks pass, I struggle to recall how long I've been in prison. I calculate it as just over 20 weeks. I'm not institutionalised, but I have got into a rhythm. The key factors in determining how manageable prison life seem to be location, luck and whether you have "enhancement", a status you can apply for, which grants you more privileges. Most prisoners aim for enhancement, but it can be hard to attain. I never bothered at Bronzefield, but once I knew I was moving to Send, I tried hard. At Send, your standard level only gives you three outside visitors a month. With enhanced, you could get four.

The enhanced wing at Send also gives prisoners better accommodation, and more time unlocked. People have been waiting years to get in. When I arrived it was suggested I apply immediately, and I was offered a place in five weeks. I didn't take it. People had been waiting a long time, and it suggested to me that it was a case of "if the face fits". It seems to be easier to be favoured if you're white and middle class.

As the month draws to a close, I feel I'm coping well with my incarceration. Many people struggle: with unexpected lock-ins, the dehumanisation, and the anguish of separation from children, parents, friends. As I write, we've been locked in our cells for two

hours, when we would usually be exercising and socialising. There has been a prisoner miscount and they are recounting us. Their mistake becomes our problem.

Over time, you learn to accept the things you cannot change and look for ways to make the most out of the things you can. Every morning,

Back in time
Louise Lancaster
photographed in
2022, the year of
her M25 protest
ALICIA CANTER

I get up early and exercise in my room, shower and dress for work, and then have breakfast while listening to the news on the radio. I pack the week with variety: I have choir on Monday morning, have joined schemes supporting mental health, and am a mentor for a programme supporting prisoners learning how to read.

Visits are my favourite times - those couple of hours connecting with friends and family are truly irreplaceable. I cherish the physical contact - hugs are allowed at the start and end. During a visit today, I sit in the booth next to Dawn. She speaks to her husband four times a day, and at visits they hold hands and play Scrabble, just like they did on the outside.

Not being there when there's an emergency or a key event is one of the main things that makes you feel pretty grim in here. When my long sentence was revealed, I knew it meant I would miss my daughter's wedding. Thankfully, that has been postponed. But in the intervening times, there are events - Christmas, people's birthdays - that you have to miss. These are moments that can't be repeated.

DECEMBER

I start preparing for Christmas inside. Some of us in the gardens are doing a secret Santa, and the staff have allowed us to make wreaths with vegetation and wire. Though we probably won't be able to bring them back to our cells, they are at least brightening up the polytunnels.

Festive fare in prison is limited. The Christmas Eve menu has a mince pie option for dessert, and on the 25th, lunchtime's vegan offering is a festive slice, roast potatoes and veg. Otherwise, the menu is exactly the same as usual. But I have a bar of dark chocolate I've been saving up for Christmas, bought from my last Bronzefield shop three months ago. You learn to ration yourself. I get involved with carol singing on 9 December. There's a carol service on Christmas Eve, then no work for a week. New Year's Eve will have a craft morning, a film afternoon and a quiz.

Last week I was moved to a different wing. I'm delighted that my new cell has a hot shower. I'm hoping to do some festive cooking, but in this wing the kitchen is only available for one hour a week.

I have found more people in prison who recognise the need to work against climate breakdown than outside the walls



Freedom call

Supporters hold portraits of activists during a vigil in Cambridge

MARTIN POPE/SOPA/REX

We are told that the government has plans to improve the quality of meals for all HMP institutions. This month's Inside Time, the national newspaper for prisoners, leads with an article entitled *Don't say cheese!*, which explains that prison cheese is apparently 79% water, palm oil and modified starch, and cannot legally be called cheese. (In January, this will change - my cheese-eating friend assures me it tastes like real cheese.)

Christmas Day in prison is my worst day here yet. I feel glum. I have lined up a lot of phone calls with family, but that - phone calls being the highlight of Christmas - brings home the reality of my situation. Meanwhile, one of our activist friends, who, at 77 years old, was released on home detention before Christmas, has been sent back into prison. The reason? Her wrists were too small for an electronic tag.

The craft morning, hosted by the chaplaincy and outside volunteers, offers us primary school level art activities - without the use of scissors. It is a jolly distraction, though with respect to the hosts, it does feel like we prisoners are often talked down to, as if we're stupid. This seems to tally with a wider attitude to prisoners among the general public - that we are a different category of human.

My time in prison, however, has shown me the opposite. In this artificial environment, populated by people from all walks of life, with many considered on the edges of society, or those who are disadvantaged or have fallen on hard times, I have had my eyes opened to different perspectives. Recently, a friend came to visit me. She was concerned I was being bullied. I reassured her that wasn't the case. In fact, I have found more people in prison who accept me and recognise the need to work against climate breakdown and reform our systems than I have in my community outside these walls.

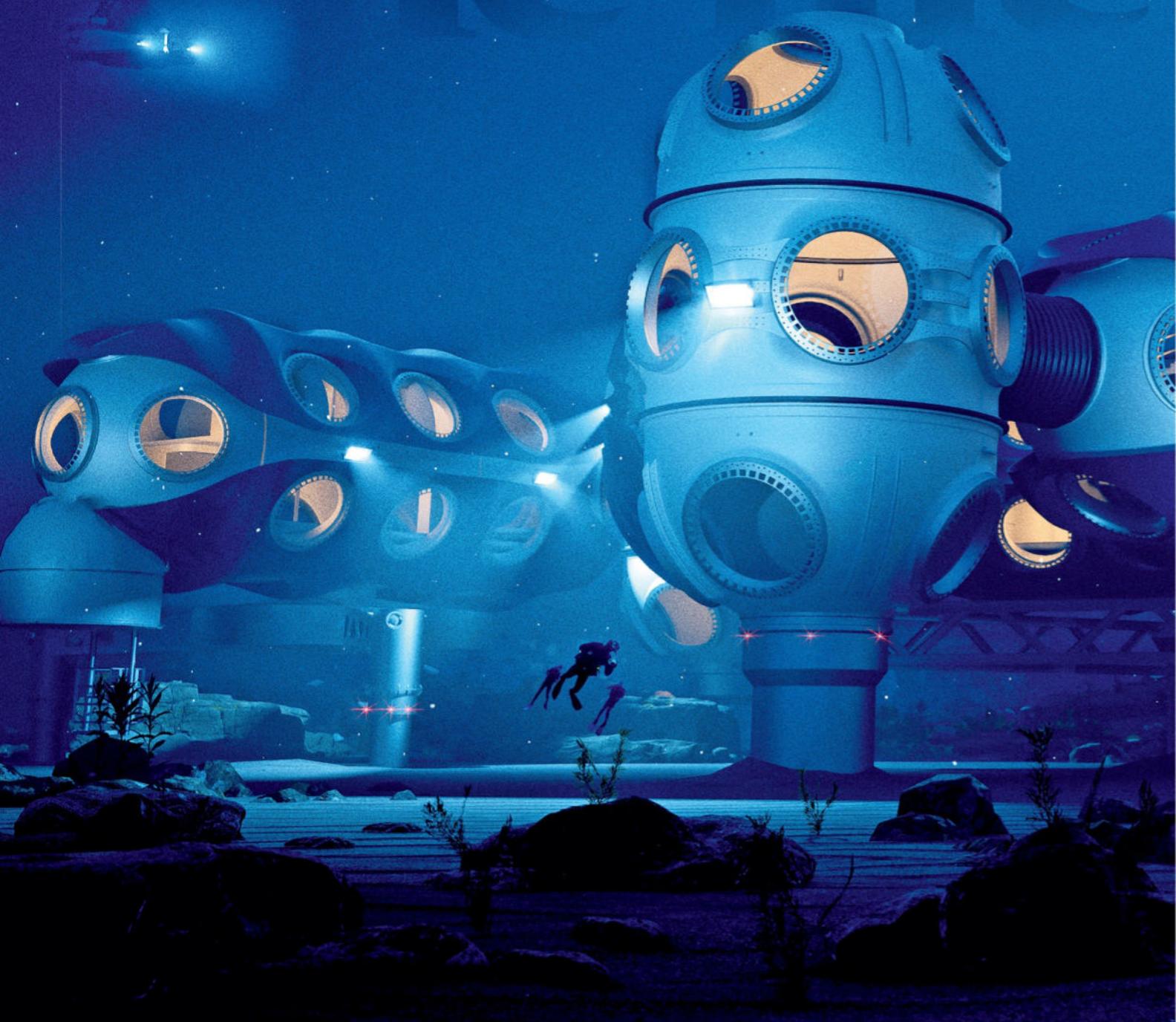
How much divides a prisoner from a member of the public? If we listen to the press, the two are worlds apart. Prisoners are bad people who need to be locked away. But prisoners are parents, children, friends, with hopes and dreams. They're integral parts of families and wider communities. A prison sentence can shatter more lives than one. Most prisoners just need support to rebuild their lives. The question we need to ask is not "What have you done?" but "What has happened to you?" We need to be bold and compassionate, and transition to a system focused on rehabilitation, rather than punishment. This can be provided in our communities, rather than our prisons.

Outside each of the cell doors in HMP Send is a motivational phrase on a small laminated piece of card. My door has this one: "The secret of change is to focus all your energy not on fighting the old but on building the new." I pass it every day, and it's this spirit of hope, resistance and belief in radical change that I'm carrying into the new year. ●

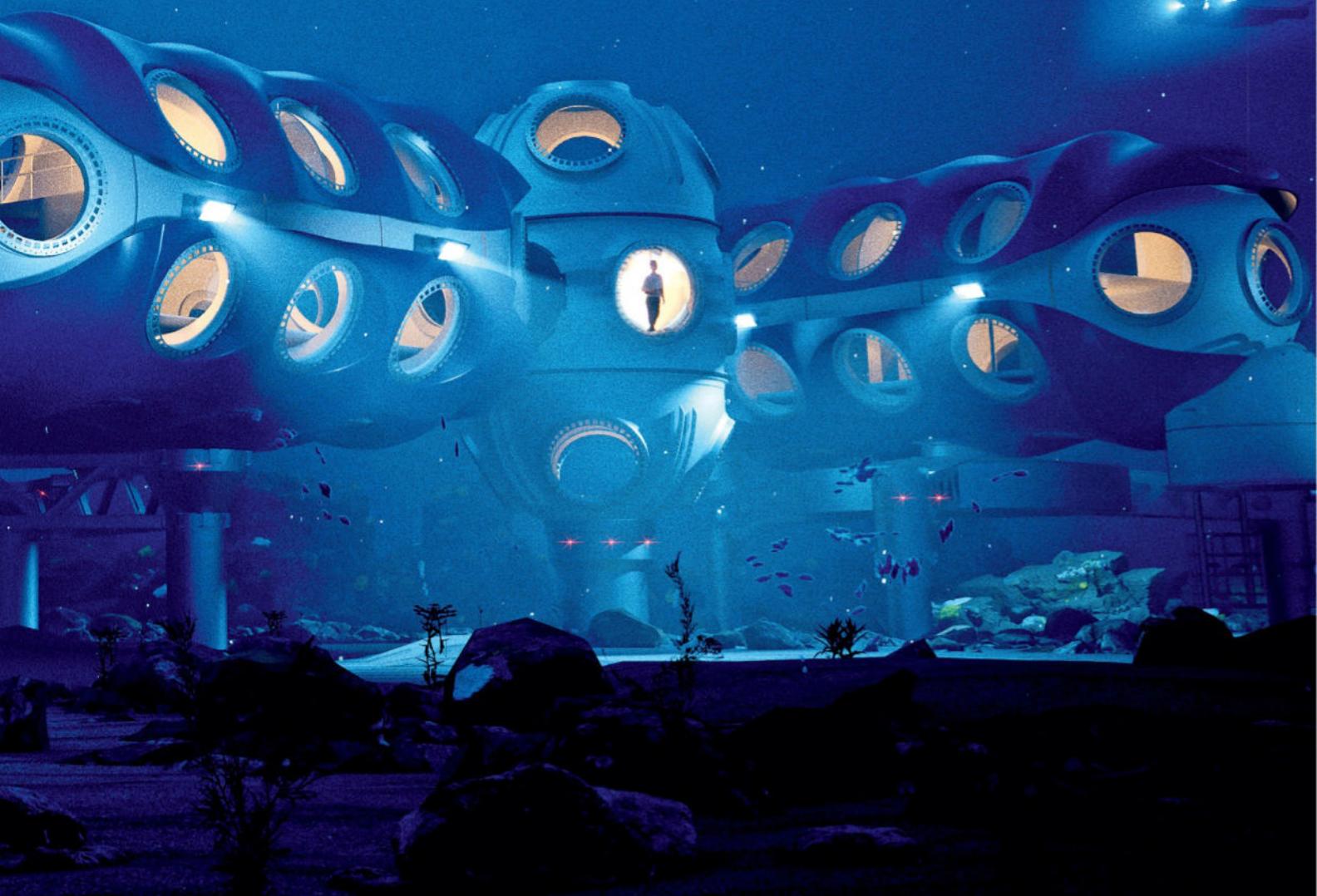
Some names have been changed. Additional reporting by Rebecca Liu

Adventurers have long wondered if we could live on the seabed. Now, 80 metres below the surface of a flooded quarry in the UK, we are about to find out *By Lisa Bachelor* ➤

The life



aquatic



■ Going deep A computer-rendered image of how the sentinel accommodation units could look DEEP R&D LTD



D

OWN AN EASY-TO-MISS TURNOFF on the A48 just outside Chepstow on the English-Welsh border, the gentle rumble of trucks, cranes and people at work mixes with birdsong in what is an otherwise peaceful and rural setting. It's a crisp and sunny winter morning when I visit and at first glance the site appears to be little more than prefab containers and a car park. But behind the scenes a group of men and women with expertise in diving, marine biology, technology, finance, construction and manufacturing are building something extraordinary. They have come together with a single mission statement: to make humans aquatic.

The project is called Deep and the site was chosen after a global search for the perfect location to build and test underwater accommodation that the project founders say will enable them to establish a "permanent human presence" under the sea from 2027.

So far, so crazy. Yet Deep is funded by a single anonymous private investor with big pockets who wants to put hundreds of millions (if not more) into a project that will "increase understanding of the ocean

and its critical role for humanity". Its leadership team remains tight-lipped not only about the amount (it will only say it is substantially more than the £100m [\$124m] being invested in the Deep campus), but also about the investor's identity. Whoever is behind it, the size of the investment means that an ambitious idea appears to be swiftly becoming a reality.

The 20-hectare site at Tidenham in Gloucestershire - just on the English side of the border - was once a limestone quarry that was flooded in the 1990s and used by a dive school until 2022. Now it is being transformed into a state-of-the-art facility that will feature accommodation units, a training school and a platform for mini submersibles to take people down 80 metres to underwater accommodation at the bottom of the lake. These underwater units, known as sentinels, will then be used to train scientists, and eventually anyone else who has the money to rent them, to live under the ocean for much longer than has ever been achieved before - and at a greater depth.

The units can be lowered up to 200 metres under the sea, which is where the sunlight zone ends and the twilight zone of the ocean begins. Marine life found at that depth includes the kind of creatures most people will only ever see on David Attenborough documentaries. It's a place about which we still know very little.

Mike Shackleford, Deep's chief operating officer, explains the thought process behind the project. "Back in the 1950s and 60s, there was a space race and an ocean race going on - and space won out. Space is tough to get to, but once you're up there, it's a relatively benign environment."

The ocean is the opposite. It's fairly easy to get to the bottom, but once down there, "basically everything wants to kill you", he half-jokes.

"Yet just about every oceanographer I've ever met says, 'You'd be

Home base

Phil Short (left) at the Deep campus; (below) submersibles used in training

shocked at how little we know about the ocean," Shackleford tells me. "So somebody has got to take those first steps to try to build some of the technology that will allow us to go down and study the ocean *in situ*."

The idea of Deep's sentinels is that, initially, people will be able to stay inside for up to 28 days at a time, but the hope is that could one day be extended to months and beyond. "The goal is to live in the ocean, forever. To have permanent human settlements in all oceans across the world," says Shackleford.

There have been previous attempts to establish living quarters under the sea. Jacques Cousteau pioneered underwater living in the 1960s, starting with the Continental Shelf (or Conshelf I), a 5-metre-long, 2.5-metre-wide steel cylinder set up off Marseille at a depth of 10 metres. He went on to develop more sophisticated versions of Conshelf I around the world - funded in part by the French petrochemical industry.

Cousteau eventually abandoned all of it for a career focused on conservation, but underwater habitats remained popular for some time after with all sorts of experiments, including one by two British teenagers who lived underwater for a week off Plymouth, south-west England, in a steel tank they had built themselves. The craze to conquer life under the ocean then "dropped off in the 80s", says Shackleford. "Humanity kind of walked away and went towards outer space."

The last and most sophisticated undersea habitat was the Aquarius Reef Base, 8km off Key Largo in Florida and 19 metres under the surface. Now run by Florida International University, it was built in the 1980s and is the only underwater human habitation still used today, including for the training of Nasa astronauts as part of the space agency's Extreme Environment Mission Operations (Neemo) programme.

Back in Gloucestershire, we pile into a Land Rover to begin the bumpy ascent up the track that loops round the lake. At the top we are greeted by shouting, banging and the sound of electric drills. Everything being made by Deep is being constructed either on site or down the road in an industrial unit in Bristol, including the lifesize wooden mock-up of the sentinel that we are driving to see.

'Back in the 1950s and 60s, there was a space race and an ocean race going on - and space won out'

**Water cycle**

The former quarry that is home to the Deep campus; inside the sentinel mock-up

Standing outside the full-sized underwater house gives an instant idea of the incredible scale of the undertaking. The main recreational area is a 6-metre-diameter hemisphere and the porthole windows mean that when the real thing is sunk underwater there will be an inescapable feeling of being completely surrounded by the ocean and its inhabitants. Up the stairs is a kitchen and an area that can be adapted to scientific study. The six bedrooms are roomy and there is a fully fitted bathroom with running water and a flush toilet. The whole thing is constructed from a specialist steel type that has been developed to withstand the pressure at 200 metres.

Although no one working on deep-sea submersibles wants to dwell too much on the Titan tragedy (the craft that imploded off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada, in 2023 killing all five people on board), Phil Short, research diving and training lead at Deep, is not surprised it's a subject that keeps coming up. One of his primary concerns is to underline the difference between this project and that of the Titan.

Deep's engineers have been working with the Det Norske Veritas (DNV), a classification and safety agency, to make sure it is fully tested and certified all the way through the design and manufacturing process. "DNV are approving every potential design, manufacture and testing capability of our systems from day one," Short says, "so when we finally get this built and we're about to drop it into the water, it will be fully certified in class."

Classing is like an annual inspection on a car, he says: "No one would even think of putting their children, their partner, their family dog, in a homemade car with no test, unknown



brakes, unknown gearbox, unknown engine and homemade tyres." They would, he says, choose something based on how well it will protect them.

The equipment might be certified, but what about the people who will be using it? It will be a huge task to physically and mentally train people for life under the water. The philosophy behind how successfully someone will cope, says Short, is much the same as for training soldiers: you can do as much basic training as possible, but until you're in a firefight, you don't know how you're going to respond. However, the advantage of having a simulator that almost exactly replicates life underwater, means Deep's training team are better able to put people through their paces.

"We can basically cover that psychological aspect of: how do you feel being stuck in an environment the size of a small family home with five other people for 28 days? We can trial that thoroughly," says Short. He estimates it will take anywhere between a year and 18 months to get someone who has never dived before fully capable of running an ocean-deployed sentinel system.

Dawn Kernagis is director of scientific research for Deep. We meet in London, at the end of a trip she has taken from her base in the US to see how progress is coming along at the Deep campus. Kernagis was a crew member with the Nasa Neemo mission that lived aboard the Aquarius Reef Base and so has rare experience of living underwater.

"I can still visualise what it was like to wake up in the morning there," she says. "We had the window just next to the bed and so you would open your eyes and see fish, stingrays and sharks swimming by. Being able to watch those interactions was just so key. Because we weren't disturbing their environment, they were just doing their thing and it's really cool to have the capability to simply observe that."

Deep will offer the same experience, but with more sophisticated accommodation, at greater depths and allow scientists to work at those depths for greater periods of time. Their sentinels will also be able to be redeployed to different places. The idea is that a foundation construction will be attached in the desired location and then the sentinels will be lowered down to click into the base. The basic sentinel houses up to six people, but the idea is that multiple sentinels could be attached to form multi-nation, multi-purpose research

stations (or perhaps, one day, an underwater village for ordinary people).

Kernagis, who has a background in human physiology, is excited about being able to learn more about the human body and what living at depth does to it. Much research into the effects of saturation diving on the body was done in the 1970s and early 1990s, but tended to be on young, physically fit men, she says. The ability to revisit

▼ Dive in

Nasa's Neemo aquanauts at the Aquarius Reef Base below the surface of the Atlantic Ocean
NASA/K SHREEVES



some of that work with a wider variety of people and to do it in situ is going to enable better science. She also thinks the relative comfort of the accommodation provided by Deep will help anyone using it. Deep's toilets, a spokesperson assures me, have been through "extensive human factors assessments to ensure that they are as comfortable as possible".

ACROSS THE RIVER SEVERN in a commercial kitchen in Avonmouth, Bristol, chef Joe Costa is trimming carrots to use in an experimental dish. An underwater menu is one of the final, but crucial, pieces of the puzzle Deep is working on to make life under the sea the best it can be. "The first hurdle was the challenge of actually being able to taste anything at depth, because your taste buds are suppressed by the pressure change," says Costa. He's a classically trained chef as well as a diver and explains that even after the body has adjusted to life in a pressurised environment, our taste buds will not work as effectively as they do on the surface.

Costa is focusing on using very strong flavours that will be delivered in vacuum packs. He describes his initial menu as if presenting it on MasterChef: "We start with a French onion soup, with nice cheese croutons on the top and then we have slow-roast, short-rib beef that has been marinated for a week in a sous vide bag in a really, really heavy red wine sauce. This is served with a truffle polenta with ricotta and then, to finish, a double sticky toffee pudding, which is spiced with extra cinnamon, allspice and star anise."

If this all sounds hugely calorific, it's because it is. Phil Short who, at 56, boasts an impressively skinny frame, explains that as soon as anyone gets underwater, even if it's warm, they start losing heat rapidly and their lungs have to work harder against the pressure. This raises the body's metabolism significantly and that's before any physical exertion has taken place. "I've spent my whole life in the water and I eat and eat and still lose weight," he says.

Costa has thought of every detail. "We are thinking about doing sous vide cheese snacks as an appetiser so that when the divers come in to the sentinel, they get their wet gear off and get changed and can have a little cheese board before they start their meal." All that's missing, it seems, is a glass of red wine.

Once Costa has created the menus, they will be assessed by a nutritionist for the required levels of vitamins and minerals and finally they will be tested under pressure in a laboratory in a diver research centre.

Short is unapologetic about the apparent extravagance of the food. "They say an army marches on its stomach, so quantity, quality, taste and also ease of digestion are all massive factors to make these missions successful," he says. "And, for the type of people we want to put in these habitats it makes meals enjoyable, rather than miserable."

Everything about Deep, from the Gloucestershire campus and the size and scale of the underwater accommodation, to the food and the anticipated clientele, appears to be pushing the boundaries of what has gone before. But one thing remains constant - and that is what is waiting in the watery world below for those who brave life in the underwater housing. "There are going to be things down there that we won't even know to ask questions about before we descend because we just don't know yet that they exist," says Kernagis.

But this potential is what makes work under the ocean so exciting for her. Kernagis recalls her time towards the end of the mission on the Aquarius Reef Base when she made an excursion with a colleague in one of the submersibles outside the main habitat. "We were wrapping up some of our sample collections and I made the comment to her that I couldn't imagine life back on Earth. And she turned to look at me and said, 'We are on Earth.' But for me it was like I was in this whole other world." ● *Observer*

LISA BACHELOR IS EDITOR OF SEASCAPE, A SERIES ABOUT THE STATE OF OUR OCEANS

GEORGE MONBIOT

Labour's acts of environmental vandalism

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Opinion



UNITED STATES

Trump lives in a fantasy political world but reality will prevail

Andy Beckett

Illustration *Nate Kitch*

Why exactly is Donald Trump's new presidency so disorienting? So far, explanations have tended to focus on its manic pace, contempt for political conventions and blatant subversion of supposedly one of the world's most robust democracies.

But all these elements were also present in his first presidency. Meanwhile, other features of both his terms, such as his cult of personality, scapegoating of immigrants and accusation that liberal elites have caused national decline, are standard practice for hard-right strongmen, and have been for at least a century.

Yet still he baffles and wrongfoots people, both opponents and more neutral observers, political professionals and voters, Americans and foreigners. There is an underexplored reason for this. Trump's presidency, and particularly his second term, is a deeply paradoxical project. In some ways, it's an epic political fantasy, a promise that every dream of US reactionaries and nationalists can be rapidly fulfilled. But in other ways, it's a frightening intrusion of reality - into the rose-tinted picture many liberals still have of how America works and how America relates to the rest of the world.

The central assumption of the Trump fantasy is that in his remaining four-year term, during which he will enter his 80s, despite the US's sharp social divides and inevitable buffeting by global crises, he can accomplish almost anything. "I stand before you now," he said at his inauguration, "as proof that you should never believe that something is impossible ... We stand on the verge of the four greatest years in American history."

Other elements of the Trump fantasy include the belief that the US can essentially ignore the climate crisis; that it can impose big tariffs on imports without causing increases in their prices; that Trump's personal interventions can swiftly end longstanding conflicts such as Gaza; and that his constant lies, exaggerations and inventions can create new realities, both reshaping the present and permanently rewriting history. In short, the Trump fantasy promises that in an anti-political age his brand of politics can nevertheless solve everything.

Yet, the opening days of his second term have revealed truths about the US that were previously half hidden. Its alliance with western Europe is not permanent. It is still an imperial power in the traditional sense, with territorial ambitions. And much of corporate America is happy to have an authoritarian government, as long



Much of corporate America is happy to have an authoritarian government, as long as it is good for profits

as it is good for profits. "History's greatest civilisation," as Trump described his country at the inauguration, is really a brutally competitive, aggressively nationalistic place rather than the essentially benign society believed in for so long by so many liberals. It's taken Trump's unfiltered presidency to finally make that obvious.

More bewildering still, sometimes the fantastical and reality-based strands of Trumpism are closely entangled. His strong support from men and halting of pro-diversity policies, for instance, are partly the products of a fantasy - that under him straight male dominance as it existed decades ago can be restored - and yet they are also a reminder that in the US, as in other democracies, socially conservative men remain a powerful electoral force.

Similarly, Trump's climate policies - however delusional they seem with growing swathes of his country on fire because of extreme weather - are also a recognition that any serious US response to the crisis would require his richer voters and donors to make drastic lifestyle changes. If the planet and the patriarchy are in trouble, then there is an argument, albeit a selfish one, for enjoying all the carbon-intensive privileges of traditional American masculinity while you still can. With his love of burgers and gold surfaces, his water-hungry golf courses and multiple homes, Trump's own life constantly showcases this kind of resource-heavy, escapist consumption. In a world increasingly haunted by scarcity, with supply chains weakened by wars, disruptive weather and the pandemic, his excess is a crude but potent statement.

A useful approach may be to understand the attractiveness for many voters of Trump's fantasies, but also their impracticality. Despite the claims from Trump and a credulous media that he is a unique American leader, the country has a recent tradition of Republican presidents making unattainable promises. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan said he would make America safe again, with an unprecedented "Star Wars" anti-missile system, and in the 2000s George W Bush pledged to do the same by invading Iraq. Both projects were disasters. The Iraq war also damaged US allies, especially Britain, partly because Tony Blair's government saw Bush's Iraq fixation as too powerful to question. Ominously, Keir Starmer and Trump are already telling us how well they get on.

Any other non-Republicans tempted to just accept that this is the age of *** Andy Beckett** Trump might usefully look to *is a Guardian* the numbers behind his support. *columnist* Last year, unlike in 2016, he did win the popular vote, but by only 1.5 percentage points. Yet both pro- and anti-Trump forces act as if he has a mandate so overwhelming that resistance is futile. His party's majorities in the Senate and the House are also tiny. If he disappoints only a small fraction of his supporters, neither majority may survive the 2026 midterm elections.

Trump may seem dizzyingly strong now. Yet soon he will be just another incumbent, in an anti-incumbent world. The problem then, for those who don't support him, won't be his dominance of the discourse, but how much of the American state he controls ●

POLAND

Warsaw's gone vegan, which makes rightwing politicians unhappy

Karol Adamiak



I want to tell you about a relatively typical neighbourhood in my city. There are two vegan sushi restaurants, three vegan ramen spots. There are a few vegan delis. All the convenience stores have a vegan section. There's an abundance of vegan bakeries. There's a place that does vegan peking duck - it's good, I promise. I'm not talking about Los Angeles or New York. I'm not even talking about Copenhagen. My neighbourhood is called Śródmieście. The vegan paradise I'm talking about - it's Warsaw.

If you don't believe me, well, Warsaw has been ranked among the top vegan cities in the world by HappyCow (a vegan ranking website) for the past six years. In 2022, it was National Geographic's No 1 vegan city in the world. Maybe your perception of Poland is all *kielbasa* (sausage) and conservative politics. Herring and hate. It's more complicated than that. In the past two decades there has been a quiet vegan revolution in the country.

In reality, it's no shock that Polish food lends itself well to veganism. Prior to falling under the shadow of the iron curtain, Polish cuisine was mostly plant-based. Only the aristocracy had easy access to meat, fish and dairy. Most people were peasants and ate what they grew. The cuisine was full of root vegetables, potatoes and greens. This was a plant-based diet by default, not ideology.

In the communist era, meat was a luxury, despite everyone's alleged equality. Meat production was inefficient, which meant ordinary people did not have the money to afford the scant supply. People craved

meat as a status symbol. When the USSR collapsed, people wanted to eat meat - and as market forces entered agriculture and people gradually gained disposable income, they spent heavily on it.

But as Poland became a mature liberal democracy, appetites changed. For the younger generation that grew up in a time of relative abundance, animal products were so commonplace they failed to have much lustre.

Michał Korkosz, AKA Rozkoszny, is one of the most prominent vegetarian food influencers. He celebrates the plant-based foods of old Poland. *Schabowy z kani* (parasol mushroom schnitzel) is a traditional recipe, one known to every Polish grandma. Similar to a regular schnitzel, the mushroom is prepped, paned and fried, often served alongside young boiled potatoes and *mizeria* (Polish tzatziki). He also takes traditional dishes and gives them a modern twist to make them vegan. *Żurek* is a soup traditionally made with stock of smoked pork ribs and served with various kinds of sausage. But in Rozkoszny's *żurek*, the soup is made with miso and roasted mushrooms.

* **Karol Adamiak** is a chef from Warsaw. *Barclay Bram contributed to this article. They cook together as Bracia*

Before becoming a bestselling author and influencer, Rozkoszny studied politics and sociology. He once conducted a study in which he interviewed Polish MPs on their diets and tried to map their politics. “The more left-leaning a politician, the more likely they were to have a vegetarian diet and eat international cuisines,” he told me. A 2019 study

by Ipsos showed similar results. Polish politicians were asked: “What actions are you willing to take to help fight climate change?” Among politicians from the left, 30% stated that they would give up meat, versus a mere 11% for the rightwing Law and Justice party.

“Veganism tends to be perceived as a pejorative term,” according to Anna Spurek, chief operating officer at the Green REV Institute, Poland’s first vegan thinktank. “The meat lobby and interest groups use it to polarise society.” It has been a common refrain of rightwing politicians that veganism is anti-Polish - that it is a similar form of propaganda to the “LGBT agenda” - and that vegans are “insane and detached from reality”, she said.

But veganism should be an idea that transcends neat political brackets. For one, Spurek thinks that the Polish idea of *solidarność* - solidarity, and the name of the political movement that helped bring down communism in Poland - can also include the concept of interspecies unity and green politics. And in a way veganism represents a return to Poland’s peasant roots, and a more conscious and healthy way of eating.

With Barclay Bram, I run a vegan Polish supper club in London called Bracia (it means brothers in Polish). Recently, we’ve been doing events back in Warsaw. This month we’re taking over Lotos, a traditional restaurant famous for its *nóżki w galarecie* (legs in jelly - a chicken soup served cold so the collagen has become gelatinous, with vegetables in it). The owner, Hanna Szymańska, says she’s looking forward to putting out a vegan menu for the night: “You have to move with the times.” ●

▲ People eat sandwiches during a vegan food festival in Warsaw

GUARDIAN DESIGN;
ALAMY



UNITED KINGDOM

Labour is sacrificing all to the god of GDP - and mocking objections

George Monbiot

I can scarcely believe I'm writing this, but it's hard to dodge the conclusion. After 14 years of environmental vandalism, it might seem impossible for Labour to offer anything but improvement. But on green issues, this government is worse than the Tories.

The last prime minister to insist that growth should override every other consideration, and to fling insults at anyone who disagreed, was Liz Truss. She called those of us seeking to defend the living world an "anti-growth coalition", "voices of decline" and "enemies of enterprise" who "don't understand aspiration".

Now Keir Starmer has picked up her theme and run

with it. Those who challenge government policies that might promote GDP growth, however destructive and irrational, such as the planned expansion of Heathrow, Gatwick, Luton and Doncaster Sheffield airports, are "time-wasting nimbys", "zealots" and "blockers", engaged in "self-righteous virtue-signalling".

After all, these are the kind of people who might send "congratulations to the climate campaigners" whose legal challenge stopped plans to build a third Heathrow runway at the court of appeal. Or who insist that Heathrow expansion should be blocked because "there is no more important challenge than the climate emergency". Oh, hang on, that was Starmer, writing in 2020. The one you voted for, not the new model, channelling the worst Tory prime minister of modern times.

Now his chancellor, Rachel Reeves, insists that growth "trumps other things", including the government's environmental commitments. The verb is unfortunate. The government's new rhetoric is horribly reminiscent of the convicted felon: monomania, slogans and insults take the place of nuanced and complex policy.

It makes sense to improve east-west rail links and construct more reservoirs and offshore windfarms, as Reeves promised in her speech last Wednesday, and we urgently need new, genuinely affordable housing. But there's no justification in a climate emergency for

Illustration Ben Jennings

airport expansion or new trunk roads. The “sustainable aviation fuels” the government plans to rely on don’t exist, and won’t materialise at scale.

Reeves mocks environmental concern in true Trumpian fashion, claiming people object to schemes like the third runway she has announced at Heathrow because they “might add something to carbon emissions in 20 years’ time”. There’s no “might” about it. They will. But who cares what happens in 20 years? It won’t be her problem.

Of course, this also means that such projects won’t deliver growth for 20 years, either. In fact, some evidence suggests that airport expansion doesn’t deliver growth at all. But even if it did, and the growth were used to fund new hospitals (a big if), we’d have to wait 20 or more years for that dividend. Is this really the policy?

An alternative would be to build hospitals now. As they are huge employers and help people return to work, they would appear more likely than airports to generate growth, as well as meeting our urgent needs. But a full hospital building plan is now a less urgent priority for the government than airport expansion. This contributes to the impression that, like Truss, when Reeves and Starmer say “growth”, what they really mean is meeting the demands of predatory lobbyists.

But let’s for a moment take them at their word. Let’s imagine that economic growth should be treated as the overriding national purpose. Let’s ignore the economist who standardised GDP, Simon Kuznets, who advised that “the welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measure of national income”. If this is the agenda, Starmer and Reeves should read a report published last month by the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries. It warns that without immediate and decisive action, climate breakdown could reduce the size of the global economy by 50% between 2070 and 2090.

In other words, if Heathrow’s third runway is built, by 2040 it might or might not contribute a tiny increment to GDP. But it would, if the warning is correct, contribute to a comprehensive economic collapse shortly afterwards. Starmer accuses objectors to such schemes of having “slowed down our progress as a nation”. But when that “progress” is a demented rush towards the precipice, perhaps a slowing down would serve us well. But no – everything must be sacrificed to the god of GDP.

The government’s attack on regulators goes even further than Truss’s. As bodies such as the Environment Agency, Natural England, the Health and Safety Executive and the chemicals agency UK Reach crumple through a lethal combination of underbudgeting and political hostility, Reeves insists the job of regulators is to “drive growth”. But that is not their role. They exist to protect us, regardless of the demands of capital.

But never mind, let’s melt human life and the natural world down into money. GDP, a number that incorporates great harms as well as benefits, must trump all else.

These people may be more competent than Truss, but after just six months in power they have become as terrifying in their cold fanaticism and intolerance of dissent. Did Britain vote for this? ●

Western resource hunger has fuelled the DRC’s vast humanitarian crisis

There are bodies on the streets, hundreds of thousands of civilians fleeing and overwhelmed hospitals draining fuel from ambulances to keep respirators running. The rapidly escalating conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – which has seen rocketing sexual violence, the execution of children and the displacement of 400,000 people this year alone – has just exploded with the M23 rebel group’s seizure of Goma, in the east.

Their advance comes thanks to backing from Rwanda, despite the coyness of the Rwandan president, Paul Kagame. Mr Kagame suggests M23 is defending the country’s Tutsis, victims of Rwanda’s 1994 genocide, against an armed group set up by former genocidal killers. But the threat those fighters pose appears greatly exaggerated: analysts believe the real aim is to seize mineral-rich territory. There is a striking parallel with Russia’s tactics in eastern Ukraine in 2014. Last week, Rwandan troops were seen heading towards Bukavu, another key city, with the M23 fighters.

Mr Kagame, in power since 2000, won last year’s election with more than 99% of the vote. Despite his authoritarian regime’s record of human rights abuses, the west has embraced him as a key partner who stabilises the region. He has turned aid into economic growth and offered to take asylum seekers off European hands. He sent troops to battle jihadist militants in Mozambique, a rich source of gas, and Rwanda supplies valuable minerals for

smartphones, electric vehicles and other purposes.

Campaigners heavily criticised the EU for signing a strategic minerals deal with the country last year, given that many of those supplies clearly don’t originate in Rwanda. Europe has sidelined human rights concerns. The trade in minerals finances arms purchases, fuelling the fighting.

There are concerns that ethnic violence could reignite. Diplomats fear Rwanda may hope to topple Burundi’s government. Some wonder if the DRC may seek help from the United Arab Emirates and Russia. The risk of a regional conflagration cannot easily be dismissed.

Attacks on embassies in Kinshasa last week show many in the DRC are angered by the role of outsiders. Kenya and Angola have acted as mediators. But east African leaders have failed to prioritise the crisis. The DRC president Félix Tshisekedi’s poor relations with his neighbours and suspicion that they lean to Mr Kagame do not lend themselves to a solution, while Mr Kagame is wary of African Union mediation.

The crisis has shown the folly of treating Kigali as a guarantor of regional stability. Germany sent a signal by suspending aid talks with Rwandan officials. Other European nations and the US should follow suit. Sanctions and travel bans could be adopted to press for an end to fighting and the creation of humanitarian corridors. Countries are finally calling out Rwanda over its role in this disaster. But with so many lives at stake, more than words are required. ●

* George Monbiot is a Guardian columnist



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The incalculable grief of children's deaths in Gaza

I was reduced to tears reading Nesrine Malik's article (Goodbye to the lost children of Gaza, Opinion, 31 January). There are no more words to describe the barbaric deprivation of a childhood that should be protected and nurtured. The stain on our humanity will remain etched in our hearts for many years to come. Yes, "Goodbye to the lost children of Gaza". You are mourned.

Judith Morrison
Nunawading, Victoria, Australia

● Several years ago, I attended the funeral of a three-year-old. It was a harrowing experience.

I have often thought of this little boy and his funeral during the relentless onslaught on the people of Gaza. I have tried to imagine the grief and sorrow I witnessed then, multiplied again and again, every day, every night, and affecting so many families, so many mothers, so many fathers.

We must never forget that behind all these numbers there are individual children, the loss of whom will have an incalculable impact on the lives of their loved ones, and I am grateful to Nesrine Malik for reminding us of this.

Isabella Stone
Sheffield, England, UK

● Al-Meqdad Jamil Meqdad (Hope is the invisible thread we cling to, Opinion, 24 January) paints an all too believable picture of life in Gaza after the war eventually stops. Reconstruction will certainly take decades and trillions of dollars.

It will be interesting to compare this with the speed of reconstruction after the wildfires in California. Call me a cynic, but I can't help feeling that the Americans will be rehoused rather sooner than the people of Gaza.

Not all lives are equally valued.

Dr Juliet Flesch
Kew, Victoria, Australia

Gaza is the deadliest conflict for journalists

Your coverage of Gaza (Gaza's devastation, Spotlight, 24 January) lacks an important fact among the horrific statistics: that is, the number of journalists who have been killed. The kill rate is astonishingly high, and can only be explained as the result of targeting by Israel. It is the deadliest conflict for journalists that the Committee to Protect Journalists has ever documented. The Vietnam war, the Syrian civil war, the Russian invasion of Ukraine - nothing else comes close. Link this to the fact that Israel has prohibited foreign journalists from entering

Gaza, it is manipulation of what the outside world can know or think has been happening in Gaza. Maurice Herson
Leamington Spa, England, UK

The pitfalls of calling for a new strongman leader

Oh dear! I think younger Britons have a lot to learn and may end up learning it the hard way (One in five younger Britons don't favour democracy, UK report, 17 January). Where are they going to get this strongman from and how are they going to get rid of him when they find they have made a mistake?

Kitty Monk
Auckland, New Zealand

We all have the power to send Trump a message

As President Trump is set on destroying the world to make America great again, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and powerless about all the things he'll do to achieve this (Trump has arrived with a bang, Spotlight, 31 January). But we all have power. Stop buying the US's exports, including its media products, and stop going there.

John Beer
Farnham, England, UK

● I don't believe that God saved Donald Trump. I think it was the other feller.

Mike Williams
Swindon, England, UK

● To improve clarity, Mark Zuckerberg has announced he will rename Facebook by replacing the "c" with a "k" (Truth to power, Big story, 17 January). Footnote: this report has not been fact-checked.

Martin Cullum
Berlin, Germany

● Make America Great Again, or Meta Amazon Google Apple. Indicate your answer with an X.

Ariel Wagner
Beidweiler, Luxembourg

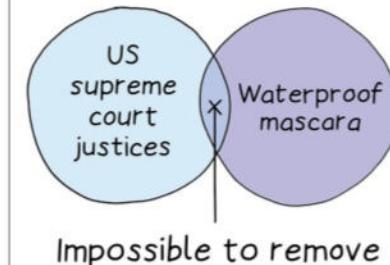
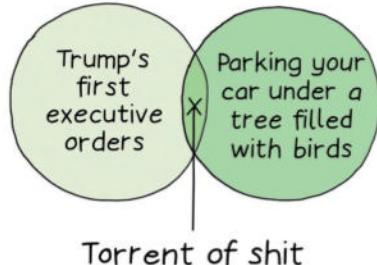
Treasured heirlooms had the personal touch

The story about handwriting is a poignant reminder that the touch of the hand is more than just connecting pen to paper (Last writes, Feature, 31 January). Following a recent bereavement, the most treasured heirlooms were those that had been touched by the deceased: a mother's needlework; a father's letters. Future generations will lose this connection to their past.

Julia Hatto
Betchworth, England, UK

CORRECTIONS

In the coverage of the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the account of Mindu Hornick said she had two sons; in fact, she had two daughters (Survivors' stories, Spotlight, 31 January).

A WEEK IN VENN DIAGRAMS
Edith Pritchett

VISUAL ARTS

Why moving the Mona Lisa is an act of snobbery

Page 54 →

■ New friends
Renée Zellweger returns in *Mad About the Boy* with Chiwetel Ejiofor (left) and Leo Woodall

EMILY SOTO



Nearly 25 years after the first of the films about the ultimate singleton, Renée Zellweger discusses the resting place for her character's massive knickers

Keeping up with Bridget Jones

► Young love

Bridget Jones (Renée Zellweger) with Roxster (Leo Woodall)

JAY MAIDMENT/
UNIVERSAL PICTURES



By Hollie Richardson

MARY DARCY IS DEAD. Bridget Jones fans have been grieving since 2013, when Helen Fielding's third novel, *Mad About the Boy*, was published sans Bridget's hot human-rights lawyer husband. The outcry made front page news. People could not believe that romcom's favourite reindeer-jumper-wearing dish, who proved that - ding dong! - nice men do kiss like that, was no more.

"Someone ran out of the pub shouting: 'You've murdered Colin Firth!'" Fielding says over a video call, tulips arranged on a huge wooden table in the background. "I just want to point out that he is fictional. Colin Firth is not dead."

His reaction after being told over the phone? "You've murdered the wrong one; it should have been Mrs Grant," grins Fielding. Grant plays Firth's love rival, the publishing scoundrel Daniel Cleaver. "They call each other Mrs Firth and Mrs Grant."

But how did Renée Zellweger, who has played Bridget for nearly 25 years, feel? "Rotten!" she says, when we meet a few days after Fielding's call. "I was a crazy person mourning this fictional character. I was weeping. It was also for that shared experience with Colin: seeing him in his suit and beautiful coat, with his briefcase, looking dapper and very Mark Darcy. This is the end ... we won't get to do this any more."

Today, the only blue thing about Zellweger as she nestles in a Claridge's hotel suite is her invitingly fluffy jumper, matched with hotel slippers. She is warm and softly spoken as she pours water for everybody, including her new co-stars Chiwetel Ejiofor and Leo Woodall. But she also has a mischievous laugh that can be heard right down the corridor. It erupts surprisingly frequently: when she notices that journalists are eating biscuits with her face on them

("I've never craved a cookie with my face on it before, but suddenly I do!"), and when Ejiofor explains that I am talking about children's toys and not sex toys ("I did pause").

It's impossible to think of anyone else playing Bridget, but Zellweger's Texas twang is a reminder of the scepticism in 2001 that an American could play this British icon. Bridget had started life as the star of Fielding's "silly" Independent column in 1995, but she quickly became London's ultimate thirtysomething singleton, as readers followed her urban family's Chardonnay-fuelled antics.

The column took swipes at what society expected women to be ("You career girls! Can't put it off forever, you know: tick-tock-tick-tock," Aunt Una tells her, at a tarts-and-vicars party). The column became a bestselling book series and then a film franchise, in which Zellweger perfectly captured Bridget's everywoman essence, as she dodged "smug marrieds", dealt with "fuckwits" and navigated relationships with Daniel (who told her: "Like your tits in that top") and Mark (who told her: "I like you just the way you are").

Back then, Zellweger said that she related to Bridget's struggles with the social pressure on women to get married and have children. She is adamant that things have changed since: "That you choose not to have children isn't that exceptional, is it? I think it's quite common."

What would she say to her thirtysomething self now? "Girl, slow down. Moving from place to place, constantly living out of your suitcase - I never unpacked until I was probably 41." It explains why she took a six-year hiatus from 2010, but she says she doesn't regret it. "There was a lot to treasure." That said, during that period, she adds: "I scrutinised myself. And because I wasn't taking care of myself in my 30s, I didn't make great choices all the time ... It's really easy to forget yourself in the mix."

Here she is, then, ahead of the London premiere of the fourth film (2016's *Bridget Jones's Baby* wasn't based on

Isn't that a cool thing that Helen created a character that people want to talk about for 30 years?

a novel). Bridget and Mark had two children, got married and lived happily ever after ... for a while. Now, Bridget is a widow and looking after Billy and Mabel. Unlike the other films, *Mad About the Boy* is a tear-jerking exploration of grief. But Bridget also experiences the joys and struggles of being a single mother. "She loves the children just as they are, in the way that Mark said: 'I love you just as you are.' Those two children know that and they share her playfulness," says Fielding. But now, she is ready to take the next steps - i.e have sex with someone. She writes in her diary: "Bridget Jones, it's time to live."

It is the chapter in Bridget's life that is closest to Fielding's own, says Zellweger. Kevin Curran, Fielding's ex-partner and father of her two children, died of cancer in 2016, the same year that her friend Carrie Fisher died. Fielding started writing the screenplay during the pandemic, when loss was even more palpable. "I wanted to show how you can feel both a sense of humour and a sense of perspective - your friends, your community, your resilience can get you through these things and you can still laugh," she says.

The good times roll as Bridget returns to her hotshot TV producer job, drinks blue cocktails (a throwback to her infamous blue soup disaster) and meets toyboy Roxster (Woodall) on Tinder ("Bridget isn't going to be anyone's old bat," says Fielding). It is joyous to see a fiftysomething mother enjoying a whirlwind of romance and sex - even if a child's doll left in the bed gets in the way ("How did that happen?" asks Roxster. "I used protection"). There's even a sexy swimming pool scene: Roxster dives in to save a dog and - in a nod to Mark - rips off his wet white shirt. "I felt some pressure, because I knew that it was all about kind of being ogled," says Woodall. "What if I was un-ogle-able?"

"It's not a bad job, is it?" adds Zellweger. "It's not a bad day at work."

Another potential new love comes in the form of Billy's science teacher, Mr Wallaker (Ejiofor). He is stern and sensible, but intrigued by Bridget's free-spiritedness; he ends up ripping his top off, too. Is this the Captain Von Trapp that Bridget has been dreaming about all this time? "That's great!" Zellweger squeals. "Maybe they should have come over the hill together?" Ejiofor adds.

And yet Bridget still needs to defend her decisions - as in her 30s, she feels like "a duck out of water" at a dinner party where the other guests are smug marrieds. It suggests that women can't win, that even widows are social outsiders. But in the film, when the men make comments such as: "Still on your own?" and "You're still in good nick", mouthy mate Shazza (Sally Phillips) shuts them up. "What



we're showing is that women can win and smug marrieds have got to stop asking intrusive questions like that," says Fielding of the scene. "There is no one way to live."

Bridget has inspired these discussions ever since Fielding first put pen to paper. Some women celebrate Bridget's candour about her calorie-, work- and romance-related anxieties; others find those obsessions anti-feminist. "In the first book, there is the line: 'There is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism,' which was an ironic joke," Fielding says. "But if you're not a fan of humour and irony, that is going to annoy you."



NE THING THAT EVERYONE AGREES ON is that there is no male equivalent of Bridget, someone who expresses men's anxieties. Bond, I suggest. "But do guys see themselves as Bond after leaving the cinema?" asks Ejiofor.

Given how critical some of the response to Bridget has been, it may be surprising that Zellweger - who in 2016 penned an excellent essay on the tabloids' sexist fixation with her appearance - thinks the sheer volume of the discourse is positive. "Isn't that a cool thing that Helen created this character that people want to talk about for 30 years?" she says. "I think people see themselves in her imperfections, vulnerability and fear. Her authenticity and transparent humanity make it easy for folks to feel that 'I know her.'" As for the bad stuff? "I don't know anything about that, because I don't look for it."

Anyway, there are more urgent things to discuss, such as where are Bridget's massive knickers? Zellweger recently said the rumour is that Grant took them home. Grant does return in Bridget's life, fans will be relieved to know, after going missing in the third film. This time, Daniel is Bridget's babysitter, but still trying it on with nurses in his 60s. How does such a badly behaved character remain so endearing? "That's the Hugh Grant magic right there," says Zellweger. "Even though he's dastardly, you can't help but love him."

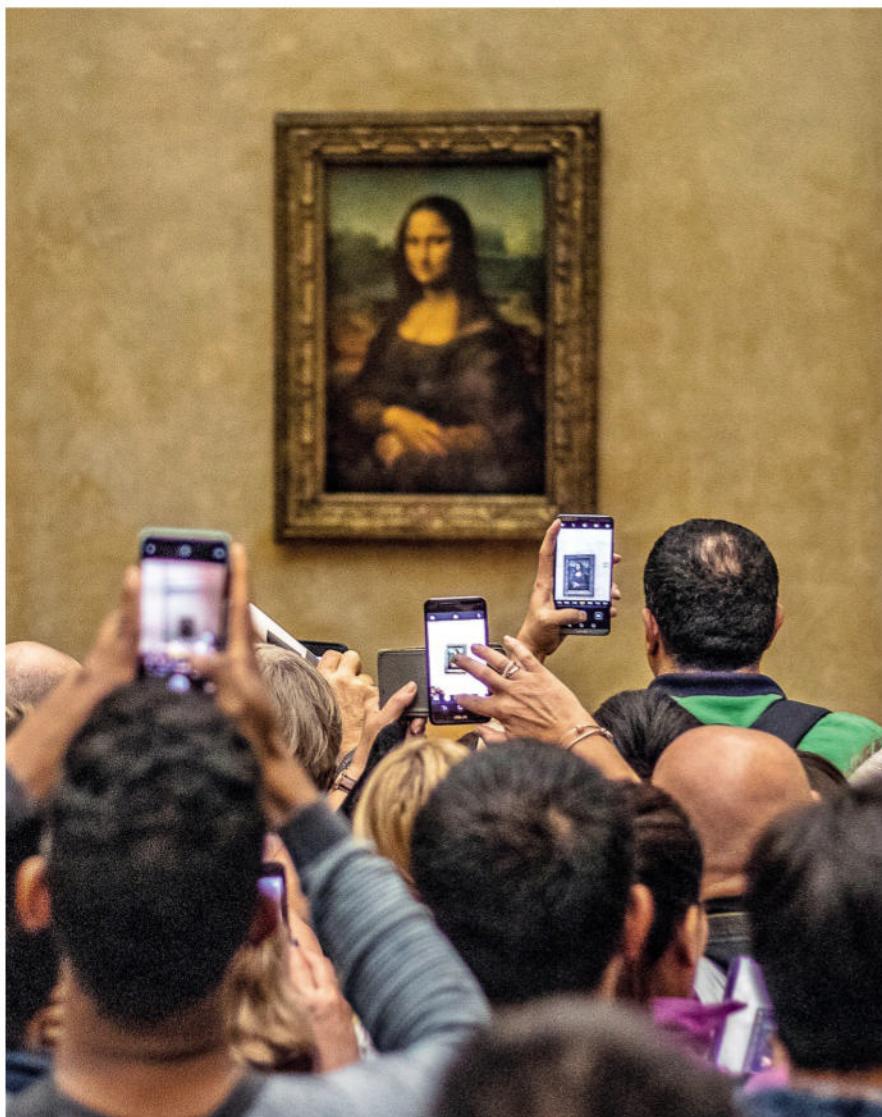
But does Grant have the panties? "Someone told me they were signed and sold," says Zellweger. "Maybe he'll wear them to the premiere?" laughs Ejiofor. Or perhaps they are part of a private collection, I suggest. The awkward silence is a deathly way to end things. "Sorry," I say, in an excruciating Bridget moment.

HOLLIE RICHARDSON IS ASSISTANT TV EDITOR FOR THE GUARDIAN
Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy is released from 12 February



◀ Mother's ruin
Bridget is now widowed and bringing up two children alone
LANDMARK/ALAMY

◀ In the diary
Zellweger returns as Bridget Jones for the first time in eight years
JAY MAIDMENT/UNIVERSAL PICTURES



COMMENTARY

The Louvre is missing big picture

Paris gallery's decision to move the Mona Lisa away from other artworks is a misguided act of snobbery

By Jonathan Jones

What a wonderful headache for a museum to have. The Louvre in Paris gets so many visitors that it is taking drastic measures to cope, which include moving its most famous treasure to a dedicated space where fans can visit without entering the main museum at all. It will no longer suck the oxygen from other art.

Nearly 9 million visitors a year stream through the Louvre and it's believed 80% of them are looking for Leonardo da Vinci's portrait of Lisa Gherardini del Giocondo, better known as La Gioconde, better still as the Mona Lisa.

I'm worried the Louvre is trying to solve a problem that is not really a problem. Ask Britain's museums if high visitor numbers are a bad thing: they still haven't recovered their pre-pandemic crowds.

The decision, dramatically announced by Emmanuel Macron, to move the Mona Lisa to



In my experience, the crowds don't spoil the Louvre. They give it life

a special hygienically isolated gallery where *les idiots* who flock to take selfies in front of it won't bother more cultured visitors who wish to study art in a hushed atmosphere, is a misguided act of snobbery. It may ruin the Louvre's ecosystem as a place where high art becomes popular culture.

On my last visit to the Louvre, I made a beeline to see Leonardo's masterpiece. Why wouldn't I? To get to it, after the security controls to enter the court under the glass pyramid, you go through the Denon wing, choosing one of several paths - maybe past the Victory of Samothrace or Géricault's Raft of the Medusa - until you reach the room where the Mona Lisa is sealed behind plateglass.

It's rowdy. Barriers hold back the crowd, many of whom do seem to be fixated on getting photos. But who am I, and who is Macron, to assume none of those people feel or see or discover anything from the experience? Noise and jostling there was, but I was still able to see Leonardo's painting, a silent mystery at the heart of the hubbub. Her smile, in person, is so much warmer than it looks in reproduction. I realised, more clearly than ever before, this really is a sweet portrait of an ordinary person who posed for Leonardo in Florence in 1503 - and made a magical impression on him.

It's true the Mona Lisa makes it hard to pay attention to the paintings by Veronese, Titian and others in the same room. But that's not because of the crowds. It's the Mona Lisa that does this by being so compelling.

In my experience, the crowds don't spoil the Louvre. They give it life. Another measure that is planned - opening up a new entrance - sounds more useful as it can be a slow queue getting into IM Pei's pyramid.

But once you're in, the vastness of this museum gives it an exhilarating impression of limitless riches. There are always plenty of visitors in the gallery of French history paintings. Others traipse past Botticelli frescoes, Caravaggio canvases - not to mention Leonardo da Vinci's other paintings in the collection.

If you want peace in the Louvre, seek out its northern Renaissance galleries or its collection of Chardin still life scenes. Better still, go downstairs from the Mona Lisa where people walk by Michelangelo's Dying and Rebellious Slaves with barely a glance. You can look at these masterpieces in peace.

JONATHAN JONES WRITES ON ART FOR THE GUARDIAN

Fright club: why chills are hot

The paranormal has hit prime time, with scary podcasts and TV shows more popular than ever. Why does the unexplained have such a hold on us?

By Charlie Teasdale
Illustration by Andrew Rae

Asunday afternoon in December and London's Southbank Centre draws its usual eclectic crowd: tourists, young families, culture lovers. But as I move through the people, a pattern starts to emerge. The cavernous space is dotted with people wearing the same black T-shirts printed with bold white lettering. Many read "Team Sceptic", even more say "Team Believer". Some, curiously, bear the phrase "Bloody Hell, Ken!"

If you're into the paranormal - ghosts, UFOs, demons, witchcraft, Bigfoot, etc - you'll recognise them as slogans from Uncanny, a hit BBC podcast that first aired in late 2021 and has since snowballed into a many-pronged behemoth of ghoulish entertainment, replete with a show, a live tour and a bestselling book. (Ken, by the way, was the protagonist of the first ever episode, recounting his experience at the hands of a poltergeist in his student halls of residence.)

Today, Uncanny acolytes - myself included - from the UK and beyond have coalesced for UncannyCon, a celebration of the platform and immersive foray into the spectral unknown. There will be interviews with "witnesses" (as they are known on the show), cold-case investigations and a live recording of an upcoming episode of the podcast.

The excitement is palpable. Some settle in at the pop-up fan art table, while others queue at the merch stand. The crowd intensifies at the back of the hall, where a long queue snakes to a meet-and-greet table at its head. In the centre sits Danny Robins, Uncanny's creator, host and high priest, flanked by Evelyn Hollow and Dr Ciarán O'Keeffe, parapsychologists and regular Uncanny contributors. O'Keeffe is the foremost voice of Team Sceptic, Hollow the de facto leader of Team Believer (though perhaps more as an empath than a zealot).

Slight and elfin, with a huge mop of hair and the impish energy of a children's TV presenter, Robins is an unlikely figure to sit atop an occult

media empire. And yet over the past four years, Uncanny has proven almost unstoppable. A second BBC TV series has just begun and it now comes with an accompanying post-episode review show, the national live tour will launch its second iteration this year and the podcast is one of the BBC's best-performing audio productions. "For a long time, the paranormal was almost like pantomime entertainment," says Robins, on a Zoom call a few days after UncannyCon. He says investigation shows like Most Haunted and Ghost Adventures treated the subject as entertainment, "with people jumping out of the shadows and mediums channelling spirits on demand". They were always focused on a haunted place, a castle or a pub or a stately home, but "what Uncanny has done is make it about people and the strange human drama of being an ordinary person having an extraordinary experience".

I approach a couple in their 40s just as they are pulling on their new Team Believer T-shirts. "I've been fascinated with ghosts and paranormal stuff since I was a child," the man explains, a little sheepishly. The woman is rather more forthcoming, explaining that though she has never seen anything concrete, she often has inexplicable feelings she thinks are linked to the paranormal. On a recent visit to the crypt at Oxford prison, she experienced an "overwhelming feeling of happiness" and was unable to stop laughing hysterically, she says. "I spoke to paranormal experts and they thought that something might have been protecting me."

"I just think it's really interesting that people have experiences that, by anybody's measure, can't be explained," says Claire,



Turning towards the supernatural can be a way of reducing the fear of death





who came to UncannyCon from south-east London with her partner, Alan. They tell me that a few years ago, they were driving through a village in Kent at night when a spectral column of mist drifted across the road in front of them. "What was odd," says Claire, "was that when it got to the centre of the car's bonnet, it turned as if it acknowledged us, and then carried on."

Everyone has a ghost story. Even if you don't believe in things that go bump in the night, you will know someone who does. According to a recent poll by horror-themed tourist attraction the London Dungeon, almost half of people in Britain believe they hang around after they die and even more believe in spirits (though the distinction is not clear).

The concepts of ghosts and haunting have a special foothold in society. Despite centuries of investigation, they are unproven and often considered fanciful or even absurd. And yet millions of sensible, right-minded people believe they have had an experience that can only be described as paranormal.

During the pandemic there was a spike in reports of ghost sightings, and interest in the paranormal has sustained. Uncanny is one of a slew of hugely popular paranormal podcasts, and paranormal investigation videos on YouTube are booming.

Beyond the afterlife, horror in general is now the most bankable genre in Hollywood. And between 2022 and 2023, horror fiction book sales rose by 54%, with growth continuing into 2024.

"Turning toward the mystical and supernatural can be a way of reducing the fear of death," which is something we all have inherently, explains Dr David Luke, associate professor of psychology at University of Greenwich, and a former president of the Parapsychological Association.

Luke points to the role of grief in paranormal culture, too. "It's relatively common for people to see apparitions of their [dead] loved ones," he says, "and that can often help with the bereavement process. People find comfort in thinking that their loved ones are somewhere else, and that they are OK, even though they've died."

Robins recalls spending time with a UFO-abductee support group and how members spoke of being shut out of society. Having an experience like this makes you feel like the alien, they told him.

"We live in these times where you're almost encouraged to believe that it's wrong to not take a definite stance. You are defined by what you love and what you hate, what you agree with, what you disagree with," he says. "There are loads of us out there that aren't sure." *Observer*

CHARLIE TEASDALE IS A LONDON-BASED WRITER AND EDITOR

Uncanny: Post Mortem is available to stream on BBC iPlayer (UK only) and in podcast form everywhere on BBC Sounds

Reviews



MUSIC

The Purple Bird

Bonnie 'Prince' Billy, Domino



He has made all sorts of records, yet Bonnie "Prince" Billy (AKA Will Oldham) remains most closely associated with his earliest folk-adjacent outings that delved into the bleaker aspects of human nature.

The Purple Bird, by contrast, was made in Nashville with exalted session musicians and a producer, David "Ferg" Ferguson, who Oldham first met while the late Johnny Cash was recording a cover of Oldham's classic track I See a Darkness. It's a country record, with harmonies and hangdog relationship blues (Tonight With the Dogs I'm Sleeping). Fiddles feature, electric guitar solos ring out. Watercourses, dust and the state of the nation inspire the lyrics. Although death features, and the water is not what it was (Downstream), Oldham often advises the listener to seize the day and go skinny dipping in the creek.

But this is a Nashville record made by Oldham, still an insightful and mischievous operator. Alongside rueful sing-alongs like Boise, Idaho are tracks such as Guns Are for Cowards. "Who will you shoot in the face?" he sings, with impish oompah. "Who will you shoot in the back?" *Kitty Empire*

TELEVISION

Paradise

Disney+



It is hard to write about Paradise without spoiling an important part of the concept, but here goes. The story is set in what seems to be the classic American idyll - a town in the 'burbs, large houses, safe streets for children to play in. Xavier Collins (Sterling K Brown) has been appointed - or was five years ago, we see in a flashback - to lead the recently re-elected president's protection detail.

That president is Cal Bradford (James Marsden), a southern progressive who chooses Collins not just because he's the best, but because being seen with a Black man by his side doesn't hurt his optics. Or rather, it didn't - because, back in the present, the president is dead, his safe is open and national security secrets are missing.

Collins discovers the scene and finds himself increasingly under suspicion. Meanwhile, more flashbacks reveal more and more reasons for his hatred of a man for whom he once took a bullet.

Building elsewhere is a plotline involving a tech billionaire (Julianne Nicholson) shaping up to be the real power behind the throne (one of many timely touches), and who is also pursued by a terrible grief.

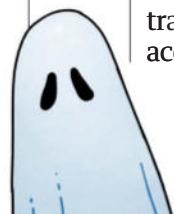
The series gradually becomes - amid the whodunnit-and-why plot - an interrogation of what impact the life-changing decision the town's inhabitants made would have on a community. What binds us, what fractures us individually and collectively, who you trust and how you reconcile bereavements and other awful, irreversible things.

Paradise is a precision-tooled thriller with wit and heart. You could hardly ask for more. *Lucy Mangan*

Podcast of the week

Scratch & Win

Outside Las Vegas, gambling was an illegal "realm of gangsters" in the US until a few decades ago. Ian Coss explores the unlikely story of the most successful state lottery - Massachusetts - and its transformation from vice to something the US and its government accepted, starting with the mafia in 70s Boston. *Hollie Richardson*





POLITICS

The world in words

Travels to Senegal and the Palestinian territories shed light on how we think about race, oppression and the power of stories

By Aamna Mohdin

▲ Capital gains

Coates's initial disappointment at Dakar leads to more realistic expectations

GUY PETERSON

In 1982, when American vocalist Melle Mel was asked to rap about the social deprivation and violence rampant in inner-city neighbourhoods, he initially declined. Melle Mel led the group Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, known for their party anthems, and for "boasting how good we are and all that", as he told one interviewer.

Eventually, he relented, and *The Message* was an instant classic. It exposed the harsh realities of African American life, including police brutality, poor housing and systemic racism in education.

The song marked a pivotal moment in hip-hop: the genre subsequently existed not just to entertain, but to enlighten. Journalist and author Ta-Nehisi Coates has returned after a near decade-long absence from nonfiction with a book that has the same title and mission – and it is one he succeeds amply in. Coates's *The Message* grapples with the question of whose stories get told, and how that forges our reality. It starts with a reflection on his obsession with words. Aged five, he recited Eugene Field's poem *The Duel* over and over. As a young adult, he was captivated by rapper Rakim's use of alliteration in his 1990 classic *Let the Rhythm Hit 'Em*.

As a student at Howard University it dawned on him that words "must serve something" beyond themselves: "They must do the work of illuminating, of confronting and undoing," he writes. In his view, language must be "joined to politics". This linguistic responsibility falls particularly on Black writers, and writers of all "conquered peoples", he says.

Coates now teaches in the English department at Howard and *The Message*, in epistolary form, is addressed to his students. He tells them he has been travelling since he last saw them; to Senegal, South Carolina and Palestine.

Media coverage since the book's US publication has focused mostly on Coates's essay about his trip to the Palestinian territories. But there are two other, equally compelling stories, of Coates's first trip to Africa and his experiences in South Carolina, where a teacher had been forced to drop one of his books from her classes after claims it might contravene a law against the teaching of "critical race theory".

In Dakar, Coates confronts a disorienting mix of nostalgia and sadness. The Black Power movement he grew up among fought against the dehumanisation of Black people by emphasising their inherent dignity: "We were born not to be slaves but to be royalty," sums up this "vindicationist" tradition. But in Senegal's capital there are no "great kingdoms and ancient empires". Instead he registers disappointment at seeing a beach filled with rusting exercise equipment, imagining it to be a sign of "collective dysfunction". He checks himself, though, and resolves "to see the reality of this home that I did not know".

In South Carolina, Coates meets Mary Wood, the English teacher whose attempt to use his 2015 book, *Between the World and Me*, in class was met with furious complaints. He watches as Wood's supporters rally to defend her right to teach the book at a school board meeting. A few weeks prior, the same meeting had been filled with parents demanding that she be fired.

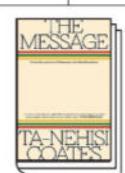
These antagonists are not, despite what they say, trying to spare their children "discomfort", Coates argues. They are deliberately standing in the way of enlightenment, trying to prevent the breaking down of racial boundaries.

In the final essay, Coates has his own moment of enlightenment. As he tours the West Bank, he sees a system that bears a chilling resemblance to Jim Crow, with "separate and unequal" at its core. He is astonished that there is "still one place on the planet – under American patronage – that resembled the world that my parents were born into".

After returning from Senegal, he speaks to his father, who has just read about an 18th-century rebellion led by enslaved people in Guyana. To his disappointment, the leaders of the failed rebellion turned on each other and ultimately collaborated with their enslavers.

Coates remembers this conversation during his trip in the West Bank, in a haunting coda to the work. He acknowledges the affinity between Zionism and visions of Black liberation. "Israel

felt like an alternative history, one where all our ... dreams were made manifest." Though his father lamented the failure of such grand designs, he is chastened by what he has witnessed. "I think it's best that way – for should that mythic Africa have ever descended out of the imagination and into the real, I shudder at what we might lose in realising and defending it."



BOOK OF THE WEEK

The Message

By Ta-Nehisi Coates

FICTION

Sex and the city
The couple from The Lesser Bohemians make a return in this brilliantly innovative tale of two lovers and their life in London

By Lucy Hughes-Hallett

▼ Urban fabric

London's skyline, viewed from Hampstead Heath
 HOLLIE ADAMS/REUTERS



Eimear McBride does extraordinary things with language. The subject matter of her fiction, from *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* onwards, is transgressive. In 2016's *The Lesser Bohemians* and in this new novel, not so much a sequel as a variation, she writes about incestuous child abuse, self-harm, suicide, heroin addiction, a miscarriage deliberately induced by rough penetrative sex, and about lots of other sex between a couple whose ages (she's not yet 20, he's nearly 40) are likely to give modern readers pause. But what is most startling about McBride's work is not its dark material, but the way she breaks every rule in the grammar book and gleefully gets away with it.

The City Changes Its Face has a doubled and entwined time scheme. It is the 1990s, north London, an area dirtier and poorer than it is now; we begin two years after *The Lesser Bohemians* left off. The lovers of that novel, Eily, the teenage drama student, and Stephen, the established actor with a traumatic past, have been living together. Something awful has happened. In the sections headed Now, they are having an agonised conversation about that event. They move from pleas and accusations to a row, then to a thrown jar of piccalilli and bloodshed, followed by penitence and confessions and, at last, a reconciliation. This book-long conversation is interspersed with retrospective sections - headed First Summer, Second Winter and so on - in which we are shown, in scattered episodes, how they arrived at this point. As the two narratives converge on the awful event, its nature is gradually revealed. The event is easily guessed, but there is more to it, the final twist having as much to do with McBride's narrative form as it does with her story.

It's a complex structure, skilfully controlled. About halfway through, it is interrupted by a movie. The book gives us access to Eily's interior self; not so with Stephen. In *The Lesser Bohemians*, McBride got inside his mind with a long passage of reported speech. In the new novel, she manages more adroitly. Stephen has made an autobiographical film. He shows it to Eily and his adolescent daughter (whose return after years of estrangement is an important strand of the plot). Eily describes it shot by shot. While much of the novel reads like a script - lots of dialogue - this section, paradoxically, does not. Eily, putting what she sees on screen into words, merges colour with sound, light with pace, always alive to the shift of a camera angle, to the way music accentuates mood. It's a bravura piece of descriptive writing.

An inventive framework, then, but McBride's originality is most striking in the way she handles words. She uses verbs as nouns, nouns as adjectives. On a hot day "the boil outside makes sloth of in here"; on a cold one, a caress is "a skate of chill hands". Stephen's damaging history is "the past's thwart of your now". McBride coins new words: "blinding" for blindly stumbling. She gives familiar ones new cogency by misplacing them: "all his vaunt's gone". She is playful, planting puns and submerged quotations in the stream of Eily's consciousness. And then she will spin a line in which grubby imagery is rendered lyrical by rhythm: "Down where the foxes eat KFC, and night drunks piss, and morning deliveries will bleep us headachely up from dreams."

Eily's sentences end abruptly with no regard for syntax. If a fragment is sufficient to convey a mood, then why plod on to completion? Punctuation is wayward. Word order is unorthodox

MEMOIR

Just William
In the first of a proposed trilogy of memoirs, the Microsoft tech titan is engaging company as he recalls his early days

By Steven Poole

Bill Gates is the John McEnroe of the tech world: once a snotty brat whom everyone loved to hate, now grown up into a beloved elder statesman. Former rivals, most notably Apple's Steve Jobs, have since departed this dimension, while the Gates Foundation, focusing on unsexy but important technologies such as malaria nets, was doing "effective altruism" long before that became a fashionable term among philosophically minded tech bros.

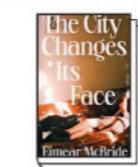
In the first of what the author threatens will be a trilogy of memoirs, Gates recounts his first two decades, from his birth in 1955 to the founding of Microsoft.

He grows up in a pleasant suburb of Seattle with a lawyer father and a schoolteacher mother. He is fascinated by his grandmother's skill at card games. The eight-year-old Gates realises that gin rummy and sevens are systems of dynamic data that the player can learn to manipulate.

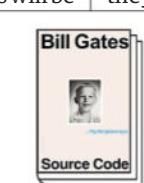
As he tells it, Gates was a rather disruptive schoolchild, always playing the smart alec and not wanting to try too hard, until he first learned to use a computer terminal. Soon enough, the 13-year-old Gates has taught it to play noughts and crosses. He is hooked. He befriends another pupil, Paul Allen - who will later introduce him to alcohol and LSD - and together they pore over programming manuals. Gates and his friends get their first taste of writing useful software when they are asked to automate class scheduling.

At Harvard, in the ferment of anti-war campus protests, our hero is more interested in the arrival, in 1969, of a PDP-10 computer. Gates goes all-in on computers once a new home machine, the Altair, is announced. He and Paul Allen write its Basic, having decided to call themselves "Micro-Soft".

The early home computer scene, Gates notes, was a countercultural, hippy thing: they "represented a



The City Changes Its Face
 By Eimear McBride



Source Code: My Beginnings
 By Bill Gates

enough to make some passages read like prose translated directly from the German.

The tone shifts between Eily's whirling inner thoughts and the banality of everyday chat. And there is yet another voice, printed in a smaller font, the still, small voice of that part of Eily that whisperingly tells her (and us) when she is deluding herself.

This novel, with the city in its title, is at its most lyrical not in love scenes but in cityscapes. McBride's characters are often cold, often rain-soaked, just occasionally getting sunburned on Hampstead Heath. Weather is important, because to venture into public space is perilous but necessary. A dream sequence conjures up the sensation of flying, not by soaring high in the blue but by adopting the point of view of a camera strapped to the underside of a pickup truck swaying down the road.

Within this teeming urban setting, though, the characters are isolated. Sometimes this means happiness: "We were an atoll of our own." Often it means confinement. A dark bedsit, where lovers squeeze themselves into a single bed. A shared flat whose uncurtained windows look on to an elevated walkway - nothing green in sight. McBride celebrates the city, its sadness and grunginess and grandeur. London, she writes, "serves itself", indifferent to its inhabitants, "unceasing in its ever on".

This is classic European modernism - McBride salutes Dostoevsky, Proust, Tarkovsky, Kundera - but it has been remade in the service of intimacy. Eily, lustful at an inappropriate moment, reflects "what a great thing it is that thinking is private". McBride, ignoring linguistic convention to bring us up close to her character, allows us the illusion that that privacy can be breached.

LUCY HUGHES-HALLETT IS AN AUTHOR AND BIOGRAPHER

triumph of the masses against the monolithic corporations", and so software was widely "shared" for free. It was Gates who pushed back against this culture, which is why, readers, your Office 365 account just renewed for another year.

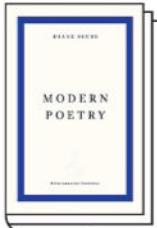
The book's most touching pages recount how one of his closest friends and colleagues in the programming group, Kent Evans, died in a mountaineering accident when he was 17. "Throughout my life, I have tended to deal with loss by avoiding it," Gates writes. He says later that if he were growing up today, he would probably be identified as "on the autism spectrum", and now regrets some of his early behaviour. There is a sense of the writer, older and wiser, trying to redeem the past through understanding it better, a thing that no one has yet seen Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg attempt in public. That alone makes Bill Gates a more human tech titan than most of his rivals, past and present.

STEVEN POOLE IS AN AUTHOR, JOURNALIST AND VIDEO GAME THEORIST

BOOKS OF THE MONTH

A roundup of the best recent poetry books

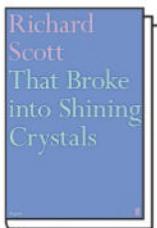
By Rebecca Tamás



Modern Poetry and Frank: Sonnets

By Diane Seuss

One of the US's most radical and important poets has finally found a home in the UK. *Modern Poetry* traverses Seuss's uncertain youth and her discovery of literature, where, as a working-class woman, she notes that her poems are "Built on the edge of tradition, they will / rarely be anthologised." Yet despite these pressures, "Out of the spigot / streams a thirsty noncompliance. An antisong." *Frank: Sonnets* tells the racy story of Seuss's life, from a tough childhood in Michigan, through to New York, punk, addiction, motherhood, sex and death. These loose sonnets are a virtuosic journey through the vitality of poetry itself. Seuss's writing bristles with irreverent humour and wily energy.

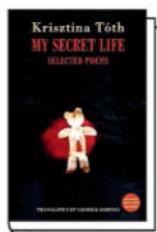


That Broke Into Shining Crystals

By Richard Scott

Scott's formally inventive second collection reckons with trauma and its

aftermath through three luminous, uneasily beautiful sets of poems. The first uses the lapidary intensity of still-life paintings to explore the speaker's complicated vulnerability, as in *Still Life With Snail, Oyster, Spoon and Shallot Vinegar*: "I'm the oyster. Quivery ashen gill. Cold jelly mess of a boy shucked wide open. Invertebrate. Raw." The second ingeniously repurposes Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* to render the lasting imprint of abuse. The final sequence uses the glowing splendour of crystals as a tool to look to a hard-earned future where recovery might be possible, where "There is no abyss just this / immense patience".



My Secret Life: Selected Poems

By Krisztina Tóth, translated by George Szirtes

Tóth is part of the generation of Hungarian writers who came of age in 1989, as the optimism of post-communism gave way to economic crisis, alienation and political viciousness. Tóth's selected poems, potently translated by George Szirtes, communicate the regretful atmosphere of melancholy that permeates a damaged society: "I'm familiar with the country, I have known / its trains, its weeping, its chlorine-coloured sky, / its

acid rain, its long slow fall of snow, / its overdressed, pale babies." These wide-ranging, droll poems always seem to come back to knotty discomforts within a broken world. It is painful transformation that fuels the work: "at the edge of the forest, in rotting humus / where somebody once was buried alive, / that's where the poem begins."



Flood

By Jessica Mookherjee

This powerful collection delves into loss, sexual awakening, the power of the natural world, with a particular focus on the visceral experience of family life in all its forms. Of motherhood, Mookherjee writes: "I called you minnow, in those shambles of afterbirth / where I was splayed in mad shame. / I made rainbows from oil-slicked pools on the hospital / floor." She renders the complicated inheritance of migration through deeply affecting imagery and description. Her poems reach into the past, speaking to those she has lost: "I build them a place to call home, all those dead relations, / many I didn't know / I call out to them in Sanskrit, / in Mongolian, in gibberish. / One aunt I never met, strokes my hair and whispers, only the living are lonely for the dead."

REBECCA TAMÁS IS A WRITER OF NONFICTION AND A POET

ASK
Annalisa Barbieri



I want children but my partner now doesn't. Do I go it alone?

My partner has a child from a previous relationship who was two when we met a few years ago. For the first half of our relationship we discussed having future children together. Then one day he told me he no longer wanted more kids and that his child is his sole focus. The future was gone in one second.

We have an amazing relationship, so this is our only issue. His previous relationship has scarred him deeply.

I love him. I love his child. I love our life. But I've always wanted to be a mother. I'm 37 now and I'm surrounded by friends who have families. I have had my eggs checked, to buy me more time and settle my mind.

I don't want to end our relationship for the sake of a fictional child I may never have, and perhaps live a lonely life. But I also wonder if I should go it alone. However, this would be incredibly hard, and I'm not financially secure to support a child by myself.

Whatever path you choose, you need to have a really clear conversation with your partner. He really needs to know how you feel and that your feelings matter as much as his. It's not an amazing relationship if your needs aren't acknowledged. If you don't say anything and continue as you are, I worry that the compromise you're making may plant a very tenacious seed of resentment. To lessen the consequences of any decision you make you need to be really heard, because as you say, there are no guarantees whatever you do.

I went to UKCP-registered psychotherapist Nicola McCarry, who wondered if you had anyone to talk to about this. "It's no surprise that you feel devastated that your dream is suddenly taken off the table by the person you love. You're trying to weigh up the joy of your current life against the pain of not having a future that includes children of your own, and that's an impossible equation to balance," she says.

McCarry felt you'd had to "slot into" your partner's life. "It sounds like there could be a power imbalance in your relationship that may have gone unnoticed, or at least unaddressed, until now. It sounds like you have cherished his child and embraced his existing life, but there hasn't been enough space for your own needs and dreams. Are you the only one compromising here?"

You deserve a partner willing to explore your shared dreams

This is a really important question. It's a good exercise to think ahead to five, 10 years' time and wonder how you'll feel if nothing has changed and then what changes you could practically make to give you what you want.

I don't think it's fair your partner uses his past relationship to dictate how things might go now. "It's important to remember that his fears shouldn't dictate the entire future of your relationship," says McCarry. "You're not his ex, and the story can play out differently. You deserve a partner who is willing to explore your shared dreams, and have some sensitivity to how this change in plan might hurt you deeply and care about this."

You need to talk. "It's time to have an honest and open conversation with your partner," says McCarry. "Not one where you try to convince each other of your positions, but one where you're both listening in order to understand the feelings and beliefs behind them. If this conversation feels too daunting, it might be helpful to bring in a couples therapist to mediate."

Finally, whatever you decide, both McCarry and I felt you were very probably "much more important to his little child than you give yourself credit for". I wouldn't doubt that.

If you would like advice on a family matter, email ask.annalisa@theguardian.com. See theguardian.com/letters-terms for terms and conditions

STEPHEN COLLINS





Slow courses: let kitchen gadget do the work for you while you're out

I was given a slow cooker for Christmas, but haven't used it yet - any advice for a complete novice?

Slow cookers aren't exactly sexy, but what they lack in aesthetics, they more than make up for in meal prepping and problem-solving. Simply chuck everything in there, turn it on and a few hours later dinner is effortlessly served.

But there are a few basic slow cooker rules that you need to abide by. First, the liquid: unlike the oven or hob, a slow cooker doesn't lose as much liquid through evaporation, so even if a dish looks as if it's not saucy enough, trust me, it very probably is, in which case adding a load of extra stock or water will just leave you with soup, which is ideal only if you're actually making soup.

Meat with a higher fat content (think brisket, chicken thighs, pork shoulder) truly thrives with a long, slow cook, and becomes melt-in-the-mouth tender. Leaner meat, on the other hand, runs the risk of drying out, if you're not careful, so snap up those cheaper, fattier cuts and save yourself some pennies too.

If your schedule is a bit all over the shop, you need freezer dump bags. Prep ingredients in advance, put them in airtight bags/containers, and freeze. Defrost overnight, then dump into the slow cooker in the morning. Easy! They're especially good for soups, stews and sauces.

Slow cookers aren't just for stews

and soups, either. I use mine for dauphinoise potatoes, and for taco and sandwich fillings. Also, desserts - orange chocolate brioche bread-and-butter pudding, anyone?

Any no-gos? Rice. Risotto and rice pudding, because you want them to turn starchy, but fluffy, individual grains just won't happen in a slow cooker. Also avoid fish and seafood, because they can go mushy. Squid and octopus could potentially go into a sauce to tenderise them, but I usually steer clear.

Some SOS tips: if you have overcooked a stew and it's a bit bland, add a splash of acid (lemon juice or vinegar) to bring the flavours back to life. If it looks a bit watery? Crack open the lid towards the end of cooking and leave to cook on high so some of the excess liquid evaporates (or strain the liquid into a separate saucepan). And if your cooked meat is dry or tough, leaving it to cook for even longer can in some cases push it past dry and into mouthwatering.

The slow cooker may not be the flashiest kitchen gadget, but it's one of the few that are a blessing all year round. So don't even think about letting it gather dust in warmer weather: put some puttanesca sauce on the go and get back in the garden while the slow cooker does all the work for you. Again.

POPPY O'TOOLE IS THE AUTHOR OF THE ACTUALLY DELICIOUS SLOW COOKER COOKBOOK



Nº303 Mâncare de praz cu măslini

Prep 10 min

Cook 50 min

Serves 4

• DAIRY FREE
• GLUTEN FREE

All dishes with leeks have dual nationality in my family. My grandfather, Gheorghe, was from Oltenia, Romania, where leeks are considered a culinary symbol, and I now live in Wales, where they play a similar role. What a coincidence! This stew is very popular, especially through Lent (during which time we skip the wine), and I love it for its sweet-tangy notes. It's usually served with bread, but bulghul (bulgur) wheat and rice are also common south of the Danube.

Ingredients

1 Sunflower oil, for frying
2 large leeks, washed and cut into rounds, green tops included
Salt and black pepper
1 tsp coriander seeds
50ml white wine
200ml vegetable stock
2 x 400g tins chopped tomatoes
250g mixed olives, plain or marinated
Zest and juice of 2 lemons

Method

Cover the base of a large frying pan with a thin layer of oil and heat well. Add the sliced leeks, a pinch of salt and the coriander seeds, and cook, stirring, over a medium heat for 15–25 minutes, until nicely caramelised.

Pour in the wine and cook until the liquid has evaporated. Add the stock and chopped tomatoes, turn down the heat to medium-low and carry on cooking for 15 minutes; if you like, cover the pan, in which case reduce the heat even more so it cooks at a very gentle bubble.

Stir in the olives, lemon zest and juice, cook for five minutes more, then adjust the seasoning to taste. Serve with bread, bulghul wheat or rice.





QUIZ

Thomas Eaton

- 1** Which first cousins were executed, respectively, in 1536 and 1542?
- 2** What fruit has the highest fat content?
- 3** The desk lamp Luxo Jr is a mascot of which film company?
- 4** What was first published in October 1851 as *The Whale*?
- 5** Which Yorkshire cricketer's name was graffitied on the Berlin Wall?
- 6** Under construction in Chile, what is the ELT?
- 7** What is the offspring of a jack and a jenny?
- 8** Which West Bank city

PUZZLES

Chris Maslanka

1 Wordpool

Find the correct definition:
LATERIGRADE
a) running late
b) going up the side of a mountain
c) early temperature scale
d) running sideways

2 Same Difference

Identify the three words

CHESS

Leonard Barden

The UK's national league, the 4NCL, is turning into a two-horse race after last month's third and fourth rounds at Peterborough. Wood Green, the 2024 and London League champions, and Manx Liberty, the 2023 winners whose core is a group of Romanian and Hungarian grandmasters, have won all four of their matches.

After four of the 11 rounds, the leaders are Wood Green 8 match points (24 game points), Manx Liberty 8 (23.5), Cheddleton Savills Catering 6 (19), Barnet

was first settled about 11,000 years ago?

What links:

- 9** Brown envelope; Spanish trading galleon; 1975 world title fight?
- 10** Alpha Jet (France); Hawk T1A (UK); F-16 Fighting Falcon (US)?
- 11** Brazen bull; Duke of Exeter's daughter; Judas cradle; whirligig?
- 12** Une pomme; deux poires; trois prunes; quatre fraises; cinq oranges?
- 13** Jon Bon Jovi; Lauryn Hill; Whitney Houston; Paul Simon; Frank Sinatra; Bruce Springsteen?
- 14** Battuto; holy trinity; mirepoix; sofrito; Suppengrün?

in which the asterisks represent the same missing letters in the same order:

- **F*** (cause to catch)
J* (introduce)
S* (hexapod)

3 Pluribus

Rearrange HAIRY CELTS to make a single word.

4 Cryptic

Dugong makes faithful retriever (3, 3)

© CMM2025

CINEMA CONNECT

Killian Fox

Name the films and the female actor who connects them.



3 HYSTERICAL. 4 GUN DOG.
Maslanka 1. 5 INFECT. 6 INSECT.

Nicole Kidman. 7 SHUTTLE STAR.

Others and Eyes Wide Shut all star.

Cinema Connect. The Normal. The

Hairy Celts. 13 Singers from

New Jersey. 14 Diced vegetable mixes in

Various cities; Italian, Cuban; French;

Greek; German. 15 Jets used by force display

16 Eat in the French text of The Very

Hungry Caterpillar. 17 Singers from

Arrows; Thunderbirds. 18 Hisotrical

Arrows; Thunderbirds. 19 Force Red

teams; Pottoleil de France. Red

10 Jets used by force display.

8 Jetcity. 7 Fool (donkey).

Large telescope. 6 Extremeley

Dick. 5 Geoff Boycott. 3 Pixar 4 Moxy-

Howver. 2 Laycock. 1 Anne Bolney and Catherine

Quiz 1. 1...Bxf3 2 Kxf3 d2 Ke2 f3+.

Answers

Knights 6 (18). The fixture list is geared to producing a climax, so Wood Green v Manx will only occur in May's final round, when both teams are likely to enhance their squads with strong GM wildcards.

Cheddleton's only loss has been to Manx, and

3957 Vincent Keymer v Fabiano Caruana, Tata Steel Wijk aan Zee 2025. Black to move and win.



they have a good chance for third, whereas the Sharks, who missed the title narrowly last season, fell back with defeats in rounds three and four.

Last weekend's matches took place amid storms and travel disruption. Scotland's team, Alba, were penalised for defaults, and are in danger of relegation. Alba's weekend was still a success, as Freddy Gordon, 14, confidently drew with two 2400+ opponents on top board and improved his chances of achieving his third and final IM norm.

4 Kxd1 f2 and a pawn queens.
1957 1...Bxf3 2 Kxf3 d2 Ke2 f3+!



Notes and Queries

The long-running series that invites readers to send in questions and answers on anything and everything

COUNTRY DIARY

Luing

Inner Hebrides, Scotland, UK

I'm two weeks into a trip to Luing - pronounced "Ling" - in the Firth of Lorn in Argyll and Bute. From my "office" on a slate beach of the best skimmers in the world, I've witnessed beautiful sunsets, wild storms, snow and horizontal rain. Beneath me are thousands of sea-worn slates, spoil from the long-gone mines of this Slate Isles archipelago. The Vikings used these waters long before the merchantmen and navy vessels, and there are still a few lobster men plying their trade here.

I first landed in 1971 and have regularly seen porpoises, bottlenose dolphins, minke whales and, on occasion, basking sharks, but no trip here is complete without otters. This time, the first ones surfaced during the two-minute ferry across Cuan Sound, soon followed by two more enjoying the flume ride along a spring water runnel. They led me to the remains of an earlier catch being cleaned up by gulls, with a white-tailed sea eagle watching on.

The big bird headed off for the dark and jagged Belnahua. I spotted an increasingly rare great northern diver, body slung low in the water. These are winter visitors to the UK, favouring shallow coastal areas for the ready supply of fish, squid, crustaceans and molluscs. They breed in Iceland, Greenland and the other side of the Atlantic where they are known as loons.

The bird ducked its head under the surface then propelled itself down. Diving to depths of up to 60 metres, they can stay submerged for three minutes and usually swallow the fish before surfacing.

With its jewel-like red eyes, my diver was a little scruffy, morphing into its remarkable black-and-white chequered summer plumage, like the kinetic paintings of Bridget Riley. Sean Wood

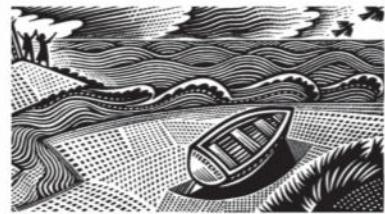
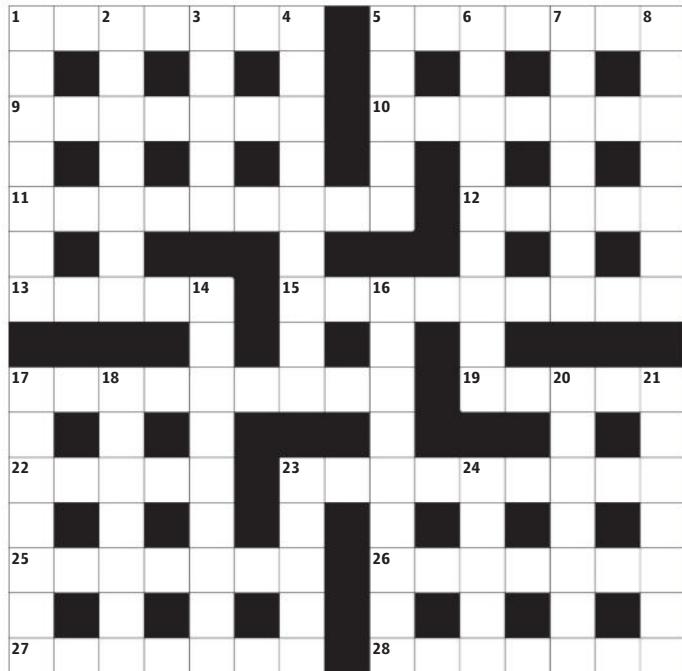


ILLUSTRATION: CLIFFORD HARPER



All solutions published next week
*

The Weekly cryptic No 29,603



By Brummie

Across

- Check, one related to ear that's messy (7)
- Lay out clues with a solver's tip (7)
- Light, so aren't moving in line regularly? (7)
- Current game's unfinished (7)
- Spam is 'the works' for the rest of the crew (9)
- Kidnap missing leader? Certainly (5)
- Anglo-Saxon hairy creature one's neglected until now (2,3)
- City in which a pair takes daily exercise initially (9)
- Lying about copper (crooked) raking in millions (9)
- Brummie goes on record over animated artificial human (5)
- Sheen appearing at last on *Casualty*? (5)
- One who belittles journalist reversing vehicle (9)
- Say, Loren's excited to go inside soon! (7)
- Union-related joke about 'turning tail' (7)
- Reserve cast put by lake (7)
- Admit high speed force used in breaking noses (7)

Down

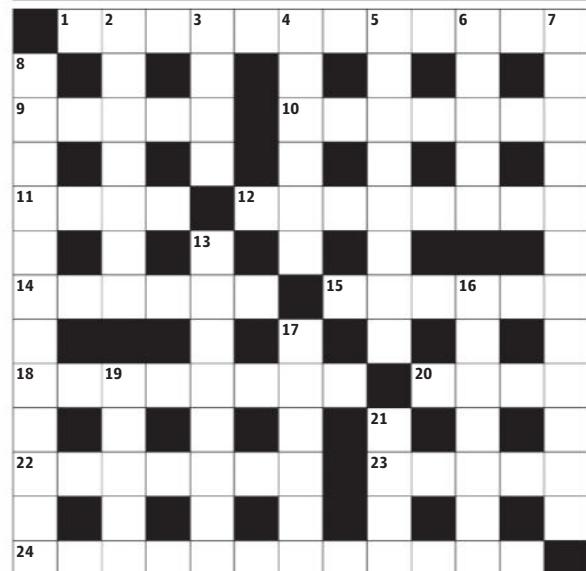
- 'It's played in confidence' - Les Taylor (7)
- Unit involved in some unspecified periodic payment (7)
- Article on empty space unit (5)
- Officer deceives board (9)
- Vicious drugs parties? (5)
- Convicted felons with connections (5,4)
- Ambassador: he commonly is a beneficiary (7)
- Toothy thing's liberal chatter (7)
- Ben's motto translated as 'That'll be over my dead body!' (9)
- Rigid Tom needs a boost (9)

- 'Get back to your old state!' gives Republican a way out (7)
- Cask-maker's craft: weaving rope in modest surroundings (7)
- Art arranged in row for convenience (7)
- Game that Greece would like to see making a return? (7)
- Painter's daughter turned up a shade of green (5)
- It quivers, similar to a swan (5)

Solution No 29,597



Quick crossword No 17,076



Across

- Places where speculation is widespread? (5,7)
- Tooled up (5)
- Hot air (7)
- Entrance (4)
- Wearing them means a restricted view (8)
- Nail polish (6)
- Rest of the afternoon? (6)
- Implausible story (4,4)
- Chelsea or chukka? (4)
- Pleased (informally) (7)
- Start of a song (5)
- e.g. Google - greenish acne (anag) (6,6)

- Sense of fulfilment - at NATO's sci-fi (anag) (12)
- One of three men in a tub made these (12)
- Blissfully happy (8)
- Reduce (7)
- Promise (to do something) (6)
- Linney or Ingalls Wilder? (5)
- Prawn or penguin? (4)

Solution No 17,070



Down

- Prize draw (7)
- Give over (4)
- Suspended decoration (6)
- Lovey-dovey - unrealistic (8)
- Blot out (5)

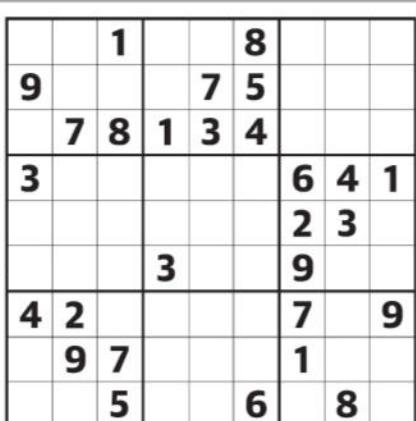
Sudoku

Easy

Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the numbers 1 to 9.

Last week's solution

2	7	6	8	3	4	5	9	1
9	1	4	6	5	7	8	2	3
3	8	5	2	1	9	6	7	4
5	4	3	9	8	1	2	6	7
6	2	1	7	4	5	3	8	9
8	9	7	3	6	2	4	1	5
4	3	9	1	2	6	7	5	8
1	5	2	4	7	8	9	3	6
7	6	8	5	9	3	1	4	2



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