

Catch up: Scholz loses confidence vote; Canada's finance minister resigns



Olaf Scholz, Germany's chancellor, lost a [confidence vote](#). It came about after Mr Scholz [ended](#) his dysfunctional three-party coalition last month, leaving his Social Democrats leading a minority government. The outcome is not a surprise; Mr Scholz had asked the Bundestag to kick him out of [the job](#). Germany now faces a snap election in February.

Chrystia Freeland, Canada's finance minister, resigned from Justin Trudeau's cabinet. Ms Freeland said she had rejected the prime minister's attempt to move her into another cabinet role, adding that they were "at odds" over the path forward for Canada. Mr Trudeau faces [probable defeat](#) in next year's general election. Meanwhile Donald Trump has threatened to introduce 25% [tariffs on Canadian exports](#).

A social-media account connected to the Syrian presidency posted a statement reportedly authored by **Bashar al-Assad**. In the unverified message [the ousted dictator](#) claimed he had not planned to leave **Syria** and said the country had "fallen into the hands of

terrorism”. Meanwhile Binyamin Netanyahu, **Israel’s** prime minister, vowed to expand Israeli settlements in the occupied [Golan Heights](#).

South Korea’s top court began reviewing the [impeachment](#) of **Yoon Suk Yeol**, the country’s president, following his attempt to impose martial law. The court has up to six months to decide whether to remove him. Earlier **Han Dong-hoon**, who had supported Mr Yoon’s impeachment, resigned as leader of the ruling People Power Party, saying his position was untenable.

At least 54 people were killed and 203 wounded during Israeli strikes on **Gaza**; a “terrorist meeting point” in Beit Hanoun was among the targets, the Israel Defence Forces said. Meanwhile Gaza’s health ministry reported that the total death toll in the enclave had passed 45,000. Israel has previously claimed that 17,000 of those deaths were [Hamas militants](#).

Vladimir Putin accused the West of pushing **Russia** towards its “red lines” and warned that his country could lift self-imposed restrictions on the development of short- and medium-range missiles. Moscow is watching America’s possible deployment of the same [weapons](#) abroad. Meanwhile the EU adopted new sanctions against Russia; its targets include 52 “[shadow](#)” vessels used to transport oil, weapons and grain.

The parent company of **Royal Mail**, Britain’s state-owned postal service, was sold for £3.6bn (\$4.5bn) to EP Group, which is owned by [Daniel Kretinsky](#), a Czech billionaire. The British government approved the deal on Monday after the bidder agreed to “legally binding” concessions related to Royal Mail’s ownership and delivery schedules. The government will retain a “golden share” in the company.

Figure of the day: 3%, Spain’s expected economic growth this year, almost four times the euro-area average. [Read the full story.](#)

Correction: An earlier edition incorrectly stated that **Han Dong-hoon**, the former leader of South Korea's ruling People Power Party, was an MP. Sorry for the error.

Reviving China's lacklustre economy



At their annual Central Economic Work Conference, which finished on Thursday, China's leaders promised to “vigorously” boost consumption. New economic figures released on Monday illustrated the size of [the task](#) ahead of them. Retail sales grew by only 3% in nominal terms in November, compared with a year earlier. That was much slower than the previous month, which was boosted by an early start to the “ Singles’ Day” shopping festival. Consumer-price inflation, released last week, was only 0.2%, another symptom of weak spending.

To revive consumer spirits, China's rulers have promised a looser monetary policy and a more “proactive” fiscal policy, including higher pensions and, perhaps, an expansion of schemes that encourage households to trade in their old cars and appliances for new ones. To help finance these proposals, the central government has promised to increase borrowing. The work conference is over. Their work is not.

Facing down Russia



Sir Keir Starmer, Britain's prime minister, joins leaders of other north European countries in Tallinn, Estonia, on Monday to discuss the future of the [Joint Expeditionary Force](#). The ten-country grouping, a decade old, is intended as a vanguard force within 32-member NATO, to be deployed quickly to confront an external threat. Faced with hostility from Russia, NATO has positioned more soldiers in the Baltic, including hundreds of British troops in Estonia.

The leaders gather amid anxiety that a new administration in America, eager to contain China, will reduce focus on Europe and may even shun NATO. They will discuss whether JEF countries can offer spine-stiffening European leadership for the broader alliance, encourage [defence spending](#) above the current target of 2% of GDP (met by all in the group), and provide more effective military help to Ukraine. Much depends on the effort Sir Keir wants Britain, the weightiest power in JEF, to devote to the force. Talks in Tallinn could provide first answers.

Germany's election campaign kicks off



On Monday Olaf Scholz, Germany's chancellor, asked the Bundestag to kick him out of a job. He got his wish. The confidence vote was made necessary after Mr Scholz **ended** his dysfunctional three-party coalition last month, leaving his Social Democrats (SPD) leading a minority government. It paves the way for an election next February.

On Tuesday the SPD, the Greens and the opposition centre-right Christian Democrats (CDU), along with their Bavarian CSU allies, will publish their respective manifestos. This week therefore marks the unofficial beginning of Germany's campaign. And unless the SPD stages an astonishing comeback Friedrich Merz, the CDU/CSU candidate, will enter the chancellery atop a fresh coalition, perhaps with the SPD or Greens.

Yet there is a wild card. Donald Trump takes office one month before Germany votes. If he **slaps tariffs** on EU exports or attempts a peace settlement in Ukraine, it will colour the final days of the campaign. Do not rule out a February surprise.

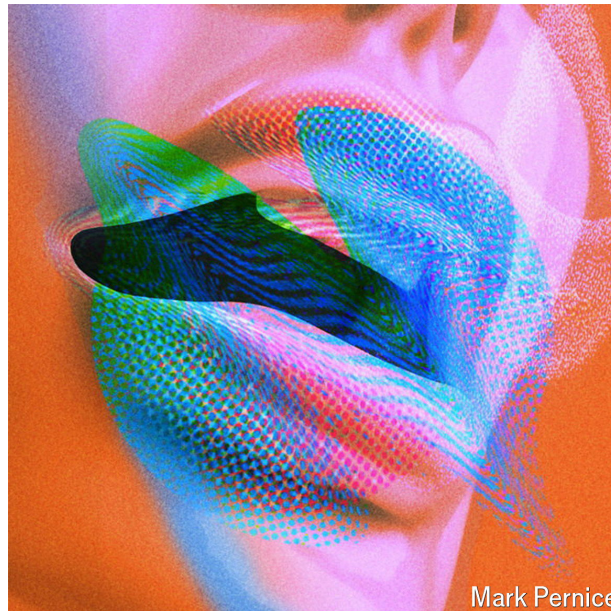
Paddington's London listing



Canal+, the French media company behind the “Paddington” film series, listed on the London Stock Exchange on Monday. Its flotation is part of the break-up of its parent company, Vivendi, a Paris-based media conglomerate with interests in everything from movies to magazines. On the same day Vivendi will float its advertising group, Havas, in Amsterdam, and its publishing arm, Louis Hachette Group, in Paris. Shareholders hope the companies will be worth more separately than they were together.

This crossing of the channel by Canal+ is a fillip for the [LSE](#), which has had a flat spell. Last year Arm, a celebrated British chipmaker, decided to go public in New York rather than in London. Since then British regulators have loosened rules in a bid to make London more attractive to companies. Canal+ is expected to be valued at around £7bn (\$8.9bn), making it the city’s biggest listing in two years. Marmalade sandwiches all round.

How AI helps with motor neurone disease



When Pedro, a former IT security specialist with advanced motor neurone disease, speaks, his lightly accented English flows with ease. His voice is generated by an artificial-intelligence model, trained on clips recorded before he lost his speech. His words, too, are generated by a large language model fine-tuned on his writing.

A [smartphone app](#) sits between Pedro and his interlocutors, transcribing what they say. It then generates three possible responses for him, playing them through headphones. A monitor resembling a sweatband sits on his forehead, waiting for an eyebrow twitch that he uses to select a response.

The system, dubbed Halo, is a project at Unbabel, a tech company based in Lisbon. Pedro's normal eye-tracking computer is bulky and finicky. In contrast, the Halo band can be worn on the go, giving him speech where he had none. Even when using eye-tracking to type, he says, he prefers to use the Halo voice—his own voice—to speak the answers.

Daily quiz



The Economist

We will serve you a new question each day this week. On Friday your challenge is to give us all five answers and, as important, tell us the connecting theme. Email your responses (and include mention of your home city and country) by 1700 GMT on Friday to QuizEspresso@economist.com. We'll pick randomly from those with the right answers and crown three winners on Saturday.

Monday: Which famous singer died on Christmas Day 2016?

**No matter how many communes anybody
invents, the family always creeps back.**

Margaret Mead